Morally Speaking: Assertion, Blame, And Conversation

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Abstract
What we say impacts what the people around us believe and how they behave. In this dissertation, I look at three speech acts that are essential to our daily lives: assertion, moral assertion, and blame. In particular, I argue that each of these speech acts has an epistemic norm that determines when it is epistemically permissible to perform that speech act. In Chapter 1, I argue that one's assertion that p is epistemically permissible only if one knows that p. I argue that this knowledge requirement follows from the primary purpose of our practice of making and accepting assertions, i.e., to produce knowledge in audiences. In Chapter 2, I argue that, regardless of what epistemic state one must be in to make an epistemically permissible assertion that p, one must also have the ability to share an epistemic reason for p that makes p beliefworthy for one's audience given the conversational context in which one asserts. I argue that this requirement follows from the nature of asserting. In particular, I argue that it follows from the fact that in asserting that p one commits oneself to the beliefworthiness of p for their audience given the conversational context at the time of assertion. In Chapter 3, I argue that the norm of moral assertion is different from that of garden-variety assertion. In particular, I defend what I call The Understanding Why Norm of moral assertion. According to this norm, one's assertion that p, where p is a moral proposition, is epistemically permissible only if one adequately understands why p. I argue that this norm both explanatorily powerful and supported by numerous theoretical considerations about what the norm of moral assertion should be like. In Chapter 4, I argue that in order to have the practical and epistemic authority to blame someone (in the sense I'm interested in) one must know that their action constitutes a moral failing and one must sufficiently understand how much of a moral failing their action constitutes.

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MORALLY SPEAKING: ASSERTION, BLAME, AND CONVERSATION

MAX LEWIS

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in

Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

MORALLY SPEAKING: ASSERTION, BLAME, AND CONVERSATION

Max Lewis

Errol Lord

ABSTRACT: What we say impacts what the people around us believe and how they behave. In this dissertation, I look at three speech acts that are essential to our daily lives: assertion, moral assertion, and blame. In particular, I argue that each of these speech acts has an epistemic norm that determines when it is epistemically permissible to perform that speech act. In Chapter 1, I argue that one’s assertion that \( p \) is epistemically permissible only if one knows that \( p \). I argue that this knowledge requirement follows from the primary purpose of our practice of making and accepting assertions, i.e., to produce knowledge in audiences. In Chapter 2, I argue that, regardless of what epistemic state one must be in to make an epistemically permissible assertion that \( p \), one must also have the ability to share an epistemic reason for \( p \) that makes \( p \) beliefworthy for one’s audience given the conversational context in which one asserts. I argue that this requirement follows from the nature of asserting. In particular, I argue that it follows from the fact that in asserting that \( p \) one commitments oneself to the beliefworthiness of \( p \) for their audience given the conversational context at the time of assertion. In Chapter 3, I argue that the norm of moral assertion is different from that of garden-variety assertion. In particular, I defend what I call The Understanding Why Norm of moral assertion. According to this norm, one’s assertion that \( p \), where \( p \) is a moral proposition, is epistemically permissible only if one adequately understands why \( p \). I argue that this norm both explanatorily powerful and supported by numerous theoretical considerations about what the norm of moral assertion should be like. In Chapter 4, I argue that in order to have the practical and epistemic authority to blame someone (in the sense I’m interested in) one must know that their action constitutes a moral failing and one must sufficiently understand how much of a moral failing their action constitutes.
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INTRODUCTION

What we say matters. It matters morally and prudentially. But it also matters epistemically. What we say impacts what the people around us believe and how they behave. In this dissertation, I look at three speech acts that are essential to our daily lives: assertion, moral assertion, and blame. In particular, I argue that each of these speech acts has an epistemic norm that determines when it is epistemically permissible to perform it.

I argue for the importance of knowledge to epistemically permissible assertion and the importance of moral understanding to epistemically permissible moral assertion and blame. Moreover, I argue for the importance of conversations. I argue that the norms of assertion, moral assertion, and blame all require that the speaker being able to “back up” what they say. All these speech acts should be viewed as moved in conversations, which don’t begin and end with an assertion or a blaming. Speaking with others is interactive by nature and as such the epistemic norms that govern speech acts should reflect this fact.

What unites this project, apart from its focus on epistemic norms of speech acts, is the use of two related methodologies. In arguing for a particular epistemic norm of a speech, I look to the purpose or function of that speech act. In particular, I look at what epistemic purpose that speech act plays in our linguistic practices. I argue that the epistemic norms of these speech acts derive from their purpose in our linguistic/epistemic practices. The epistemic norm of speech acts is such that following it: (a) protects the epistemic or practical benefit of the relevant practice and (2) doesn’t make appropriately performing the speech act so difficult that the epistemic or practical benefit of the practice is undermined. This is
approach is *purpose-first* in two ways: (a) it tells one to determine what the primary epistemic purpose of a speech act is and (b) it tells one that the norm derivates from the purpose.\(^1\)

Second, I argue for the purpose of particular speech acts by looking at how we use these speech acts in our actual linguistic practices and how we describe their purposes upon reflection. For example, in Chapter 1, I show that, upon reflection, asserters seem to view what they’re doing as providing information sufficient for knowledge under normal circumstances to audiences and audiences seem to seek out asserters because they want knowledge. This is also how inquirers and informants interpret what each other are doing. Thus, there is tacit agreement from both sides about the purpose of making and seeking out assertions. These facts give us reason to think that our practice of offering, accepting, and seeking out assertions has the purpose of knowledge production. This is a *reverse-engineering* approach to determining the purpose of linguistic practices, because we start by looking at what our actual practices are and then try to figure out why we have them.\(^2\)

One of the main benefits of the purpose-first methodology is that it illuminates the main phenomena in various ways that other methodologies do not. First, it tells us *why* the norm of assertion is what it is—as opposed to just offering necessary and sufficient conditions for permissible assertion. This helps one assess whether the proposed account is plausible in its own right, e.g., whether it’s the kind of account that makes sense to have. Second, it provides theoretical support for certain norms as opposed to just relying on a norm’s explanatory power. Third, it can explain why people have mistakenly thought that something other than knowledge is the norm of assertion. For example, if the purpose of our practice of assertion is producing knowledge, then it might seem that any set of epistemic

\(^1\) This methodology is also called “function-first” and was popularized by Craig (1990). More recent proponents include: Kappel (2010), Kelp (2018), Kelp & Simion (manuscript), Simion (2018), and Hannon (2019).

\(^2\) This methodology is also used in Dogramaci (2012), Fricker (2016), and Sliwa (manuscript).
credentials that can be used to produce knowledge in others constitutes the norm of assertion. For example, sometimes it seems like the norm of assertion is being in a good position to know the content of the proposition one asserts (e.g., Lackey (2008)). This is because being in a good position to know will make one a reliable asserter and being a reliable asserter will often make one’s assertions a sufficient basis for knowledge.

Fourth, it can explain why hedged assertion and assertives weaker than assertion have weaker epistemic norms: they have a different purpose, but related purpose, that derives from the purpose of flat out assertion. For example, while flat out assertions have the purpose of producing knowledge in others, because knowledge that \( p \) is sufficient for stopping inquiry into whether \( p \), hedged assertion might have the purpose of putting the audience in a better position to get knowledge, e.g., by giving them a justified true belief. Finally, the purpose-first methodology it is compatible with other methodologies in epistemology (e.g., conceptual analysis).

Finally, this methodology entails that the normativity involved in the norm of assertion is of a familiar kind: teleological. Consider the following examples. We criticize people as irrational for failing to take the necessary means to the ends they have. We critique tools, art, and athletes for failing to achieve their intended end. Consequentialists critique actions as wrong if they fail to satisfy what they think the end of action is, e.g., to maximize happiness. The norms of assertion and blame take a similar form: assertions and blamings are epistemically criticized in part because of their primary purpose as a speech type is.

In Chapter 1, I argue that one’s assertion that \( p \) is epistemically permissible only if one knows that \( p \). I argue that this knowledge requirement follows from the primary purpose of our practice of making and accepting assertions: to produce knowledge in audiences (given the right circumstances). I argue that asserting without knowing that \( p \) risks putting the
audience in an epistemic position that is antithetical to acquiring knowledge, i.e., it puts them in a worse position to acquire knowledge that $p$ than they were in before they accepted the assertion (and they would’ve been had they rejected the assertion). Thus, asserting without knowledge risks undermining the purpose of our practice of making and accepting assertions.

In Chapter 2, I argue that, regardless of what epistemic state one must be in to make an epistemically permissible assertion that $p$, one must also have the ability to share an epistemic reason for $p$ that makes $p$ beliefworthy for one’s audience given the conversational context in which one asserts. I argue that this requirement follows from the nature of asserting. In particular, I argue that it follows from the fact that in asserting that $p$ one commitments oneself to the beliefworthiness of $p$ for their audience given the conversational context at the time of assertion.

In Chapter 3, I argue that the norm of moral assertion is different from that of garden-variety assertion. In particular, I defend what I call The Understanding Why Norm of moral assertion. According to this norm, one’s assertion that $p$, where $p$ is a moral proposition, is epistemically permissible only if one adequately understands why $p$. I argue that the Understanding Why Norm avoids problems that plague other accounts and that it’s more explanatorily powerful. In addition, I argue that this norm is supported by numerous theoretical considerations about what the norm of moral assertion should be like. For example, we want the epistemic basis for moral assertions to be higher quality than those of garden-variety assertions. For example, we don’t want moral assertions based solely on someone else’s testimony. When you understand why $p$, you base our belief that $p$ on $q$, where $q$ makes it the case that $p$. This means that the basis of one’s moral belief is something that makes it the case that $p$ as opposed to just evidence that $p$. 
In Chapter 4, I argue that in order to have the practical and epistemic authority to blame someone (in the sense I’m interested in) one must know that their action constitutes a moral failing and one must sufficiently understand how much of a moral failing their action constitutes. One needs both epistemic and practical authority because the speech act of blaming is an assertive-directive hybrid, i.e., blaming someone for some moral failing involves both making a claim about the world and trying to get the addressee to do something. In particular, blaming someone involves claiming that they are at fault for a moral failing and demanding that they engage in a blame conversation in which the blamee must apologize for, explain, or defend her action.
1. Introduction

Assertions pervade our lives. From the food, drugs, and news we consume to the conversations we share with intimates and strangers alike. Our picture of what the world is like is indelibly indebted to other people. But what makes these assertions appropriate to make? There are clear moral requirements for appropriate assertions, e.g., they shouldn’t be rude or deceitful. But are there epistemic requirements on assertion? Most epistemologists think so. These epistemologists think that because our assertions are sources of other people’s beliefs, they must have the kinds of epistemically-relevant properties that any appropriate source of belief must have.

The Knowledge Norm of assertion is currently the view to beat. According to this view:

**The Knowledge Norm of Assertion (KNA):** It is epistemically permissible for one to assert that \( p \) only if one knows that \( p \).

The most common arguments for KNA is that it can uniquely explain various data (e.g., certain lottery propositions, Moorean paradoxical propositions, and “How do you know?” challenges to assertions).

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2 By “epistemically permissible,” I mean that the asserter cannot be blamed or criticized for asserting as she does. And, this blame or criticism is of an epistemic nature. For example, if one makes an epistemically impermissible assertion, then one is justified in weakening their disposition to trust of other asserter’s claims.

3 For example, see: Unger (1975), Slote (1979), Williamson (1996; 2000), Turri (2010), Benton (2011), and Blaauw (2012).
In this chapter, I provide a novel argument for KNA. I argue that one way to figure out what epistemic credentials an asserter needs to make epistemically permissible assertions is to look at the primary purpose of assertion. I argue that the primary purpose of assertion is to produce knowledge in others. This tells us that our assertions must be reliable sources of knowledge. Not only that, our assertions mustn’t put our addressee’s in epistemic positions that are antithetical to acquiring knowledge. I argue that only if our assertions coincide with our knowledge are our assertions reliable sources of knowledge. Moreover, I argue that asserting on the basis of any epistemic position weaker than knowledge constitutes putting our audiences at risk for being in an epistemic position that is antithetical to acquiring knowledge and thus that asserting without knowledge threatens to undermine the purpose of the practice of assertion.

The paper proceeds as follows. In §2, I briefly characterize assertion and the norm of assertion. In §3, I argue that the primary purpose of assertion is to produce knowledge in others. In §4, I argue that only assertions based on knowledge avoid putting (or risking putting) audiences in an epistemic state that is antithetical to fulfilling the purpose of assertion (e.g., producing knowledge). Thus, assertions that don’t express knowledge are reckless or negligent and thus epistemically impermissible. In §5, I briefly conclude.

2. The Terms of the Debate

2.1 Assertion

Assertion belongs to the speech act type assertive. Other assertives include state, report, testify, aver, avouch, tell, etc. The illocutionary point (i.e., the characteristic aim) of assertives is to describe the way the world is. Thus, assertives are successful only if their contents are true.
§2.1 The Norm of Assertion

What kind of norm is the norm of assertion? As I will understand it, it is an epistemic requirement that an asserter must meet in order for her assertion to be epistemically proper or permissible. It is certainly true that assertion, as a kind of act, is governed by many kinds of norms, e.g., moral, rational, social, and so on. However, assertions are also common sources of beliefs for others and so they can have epistemically-relevant properties, e.g., reliability and truthfulness. Moreover, as I will argue, their primary purpose is epistemic, i.e., to produce knowledge. Thus, it should be no surprise that they have epistemic requirements.

Below, I will argue that the norm of assertion can be derived by the purpose of our practice of making and receiving assertion. However, one might wonder whether the norm that derives from our practice of asserting is constitutive of asserting as Williamson (2000) argues it is. That is to say, a speech act isn’t an assertion unless it’s governed by this norm. For example, if our assertion practices were vastly different, would the norm of assertion still be knowledge (as I will argue the norm is for our practice)? I think not. I don’t think that knowledge is constitutive of assertion. Rather, I think having a certain purpose is what is constitutive of asserting. In particular, I think the purpose of assertion (regardless of the linguistic community) is to produce whatever epistemic state provides the audiences with a stable, actionable, and true belief. The belief is stable in that the audience can epistemically permissibly and rationally maintain the belief for some period of time, e.g., they can epistemically permissibly maintain it until they can use it. The belief is actionable in that the audience can use that belief in his reasoning about what to do. And, the belief is true.\(^4\)

\(^4\) This characterization of the constitutive norm of assertion is based on worlds like ours. If there was a strange place in which false beliefs helped people get around, then true belief would not be part of the epistemic state that is constitutive of assertion.
How do I get from the purpose of any practice of assertion being the production of stable, actionable, true belief to the claim that the purpose of our practice of assertion is to produce knowledge? The thought is that given our epistemic situation, we need knowledge in order for our beliefs to be stable, actionable, and true. Our epistemic situation consists of our physical environment and our epistemic abilities, e.g., our abilities to acquire and evaluate evidence. Our world is chock full of misleading information, disagreement, bias, and mendacity, hidden or hard to find evidence, and so on. This sometimes means that true and actionable belief is not stable. It also means that stable and true belief is not actionable, because one can't find good enough evidence. Were we in epistemic Eden where there was no bias, misleading evidence, and so on, true belief would be stable and actionable and thus the norm of assertion in epistemic Eden would be true belief. However, we find ourselves east of epistemic Eden and thus in need of a more stable epistemic state to safely get around and get what we want, i.e., knowledge.

3. The Primary Purpose of Assertion

In this section, I argue that how asserters and inquirers describe (on reflection) what they do when asserting or seeking out assertions gives us evidence that the primary purpose of assertion is to produce knowledge in others. It is common for defenders of KNA to argue that producing knowledge is the purpose/point/function of assertion. I add new evidence for this claim, but also take their arguments as further support. Although he doesn't endorse KNA, Schechter (2017) suggests that knowledge-firsters who endorse KNA would be wise to motivate KNA by arguing that the function of assertion is to transmit or pool knowledge (144).

Because I'm interested in defending a particular view of the primary purpose of assertion, I will only appeal to linguistic data that supports the thesis that knowledge is the purpose of assertion. However, as many have already argued, there is plenty of linguistic data that supports the thesis that knowledge is the norm of assertion.
My background assumption is that a good way of determining the primary function of a social practice, such as assertion, is to look at what most commonly and consistently motivates the participants to continue to engage in that practice as well or what can most commonly and consistently be cited as a motivation for asserting or inquiring. As we will see: (1) asserters regularly indicate that producing knowledge in others is their motivation for asserting, (2) inquirers regularly indicate that they are seeking assertion in order to gain knowledge, and (3) listing the production or acquisition of knowledge is by far the most common and natural way of prefacing and prompting assertions. While other epistemic states can be used as discourse markers, they are only used for a small class of assertions and prompts.

One plausible way of determining the purpose of a particular practice is to look at how participants of that practice describe what they are doing in their tokening of that practice after reflecting on it. I’m not claiming that people have the intention to bring about some effect when they assert or request information. Rather, what I’m arguing is that how individuals describe their token behavior tells us something about how the practice is actually carried out—even if it is not intentionally carried out in that way.

Consider the example of selling and consuming coffee. People would likely explain their selling of coffee as a means of making caffeine available to people—with the ultimate aim of making money. People tend to consume coffee because it has caffeine. Were you to ask someone, “Why do you drink coffee?” many—if not most—people would say, “Because I need it to stay awake or to function.” I think the fact that people would overwhelmingly describe their behavior in this way gives us good evidence that the actual purpose of, for example, consuming coffee is to get energy.7

7 I take this example from Kelp (2018) and Zagzebski (2003).
What is the purpose of our practice of making and “consuming” assertions? As noted above, assertion has a primary purpose, i.e., the purpose it plays as a source of belief. I think we make and seek out assertions because they are a reliable source of knowledge. We can see that this is the purpose of assertion by looking at what our common linguistic practices tell us about our reasons for making and seeking out assertions. We can see that individual asserters and audiences describe their token assertions or their token inquiries as aimed at knowledge. I argue that the thesis that the point of assertion is to produce knowledge best explains the tight connection between assertion and knowledge in our linguistic practices.

3.1 Why Asserters Assert

Linguistic data suggest that asserters, when reflecting on their token assertions, seem to see what they are doing as aimed at producing knowledge in others. Consider the fact that it’s commonplace to preface one’s assertion with, “I (just) want you to know . . . .” 8 For example, “I (just) want you to know: It’s raining now.” In fact, when one prefaces a proposition with “I (just) want you to know that,” I think this is most naturally heard as being (semantically) interchangeable with asserting the relevant proposition without the preface.9 For example, the following assertions sound interchangeable:

(1) “It’s raining outside.”
(2) “I (just) want you to know that it’s raining outside.”
(3) “I (just) want to let you know: it’s raining outside.”

That these are interchangeable is some evidence that the point of producing knowledge is tightly connected to asserting. What the preface does is to make explicit what is left implicit in the first assertion. For example, it would be odd for someone to make the bare assertion, “It’s raining outside,” and then add, “but that’s not something I wanted you to know.”

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8 Turri (2016) notes a similar expression: “Just so you know . . . .”
9 I think this is also true for Turri (2016)’s “Just so you know . . . .”
Relatedly, if the asserter were asked, “Why did you tell me that?”, it would be natural for her to reply, “I (just) wanted you to know” or “I (just) wanted to let you know.” Likewise, it’s common to respond, “I figured you’d want to know.” However, they don’t normally reply in any of the following ways: “I figured you’d want some evidence,” “I figured you’d want to believe,” “I figured you’d want to reasonably believe,” “I figured you’d want to be certain” or “I figured you’d want the truth.” The last sentence is the only natural-sounding one, but this is because it’s elliptical for, “I figured you’d want to know the truth.” We don’t want the truth per se—it’s not even clear what that means. Rather, we want our doxastic attitudes to match the truth. This, again, gives us some evidence that, upon reflection, asserters conceive of what they’re doing in asserting as aimed at producing knowledge in others.

Importantly, explicitly referencing other epistemic positions before an assertion does not sound natural as prefaces to assertions. Upon reflection, asserters do not describe what they are doing as involving any other epistemic state but knowledge. For example:

(4) “I just want you to have evidence that [e.g., it’s raining].”
(5) “I just want you to believe that [e.g., it’s raining].”
(6) “I just want you to believe the truth that [e.g., it’s raining].”
(7) “I just want you to be certain that [e.g., it’s raining].”

These don’t sound like they have the same semantic content as “It’s raining.” Rather, they are more naturally read as expressing the speaker’s desire for the audience to be in a particular evidential or mental state. Thus, there is not the same evidence for the tight connection between assertion and producing these other epistemic positions.

The thesis that producing knowledge is the point of assertion can tidily explain these linguistic data. First, it can explain the commonness and intuitive appropriateness of prefacing assertions with “I (just) want you to know” and “I figured you’d want to know.” Normally, the fact that assertion aims at producing knowledge is left implicit, but in the
above assertions, the asserter is making the point of the assertion (or how she conceives of the point of assertion) explicit. Second, it can explain why “p” and “I (just) want you to know p” are very often interchangeable. If the point of assertion is to produce knowledge in others, then adding “I (just) want you to know” doesn’t add any (semantic) information that wasn’t already conveyed in the act of asserting.

This thesis can also explain the commonness of related prefaces, e.g., “I just want you to be aware . . .” Or “I just want you to remember . . .” The idea is that these epistemic states implicate knowledge. They do so because many think these mental states require knowledge.¹⁰

3.2 Why Audiences Seek Out Assertions

There is also linguistic data that indicate that inquirers are seeking knowledge by asking others for information. We can see this by looking at how inquirers commonly use discourse markers that mention knowledge in their questions. For example, it is common to add that one “needs” or “has” to know or “must” know something:

(8A) “I need to know: have you heard back from her?”
(9A) “I have to know if you are going to be at the party on Friday.”
(10A) “Have you heard back from her? I need to know.”
(11A) “I must know: who are you?”

To be clear, these discourse markers are not meant to be taken literally. The utterers are not claiming that they literally need or have to know. Rather, these discourse markers should be interpreted as conveying that the utterer has a strong desire or want to find out the information.

However, discourse markers mentioning the epistemic positions involved in other accounts of the norm of assertion are most often infelicitous. For example:

¹⁰ Turri (2016), 131. For defenses of the view that remembering that p requires knowing that p, see: Moon (2012).
None of these utterances is felicitous. The only non-knowledge epistemic states that seem felicitous to mention are truth and certainty. For example, the following is felicitous:

(8E) “I need the truth: are you going to be at the party on Friday?”

However, “I need the truth” is only used in a small subset of cases in which the inquirer thinks that the addressee is likely to try to mislead her. Most often, inquirers are not facing such situations and so there isn’t a strong connection between prompting an assertion and truth. Additionally, I say that one needs the “truth” is plausibly elliptical for “I need to know the truth” or “I need you to tell me the truth.” Thus, it’s not clear that 1E supports truth or true belief as the point of assertion.

Mentioning a need for certainty can also be felicitous. For example,

(8F) “I need to be certain: are you going to be at the party on Friday?”

But certainty discourse markers are only used for cases in which one is trying to gather further or better information. However, such cases are only a small subset of cases in which people seek out information from others.

Moreover, one need not mention certainty in order to convey that one is seeking out further or better information. For example, one could utter one of the following:

(8G) “I need to know for sure: are you going to be at the party on Friday?”
(8H) “I need to confirm/establish/verify/check: are you going to be at the party on Friday?”

Thus, there doesn’t seem to be a special connection between prompting assertion and gaining certainty. Rather, seeking out certainty is only for a special range of cases. Importantly, just because seeking out knowledge is the primary purpose prompting assertions it doesn’t follow
that people use it for other purposes sometimes. But the point I want to make is that seeking out knowledge is the primary purpose for prompting assertions, not the only purpose.

We can see that inquirers seek knowledge from assertions by looking at natural ways of prompting assertions from other people. Consider the following prompts:

(12A) “I’d like to know how the cat got into my china-closet.”
(13A) “What I’d like to know is: where did you put my coat?”

These prompts are interchangeable with the following prompts:

(12B) “How did the cat get into my china-closet?”
(13B) “Where did you put my coat?”

Why are these prompts interchangeable? One explanation is that what we are looking for when asking for information is knowledgeable information. Sometimes we make this explicit as in (12A) and (13A) and sometimes we don’t, as in (12B) and (13B). This is some evidence that when we ask for information we’re looking to get knowledgeable information.

However, there aren’t felicitous prompts that mention many of the other epistemic states that serve as the norm of assertion, e.g., belief, justified belief, evidence, and so on. For example, the following are not used as prompts:

(12C) “I’d like a belief about how the cat got into my china-closet.”
(12E) “I’d like evidence about how the cat got into my china-closet.”

While these utterances might work to prompt assertion, none of them is common and thus none of them seems to have a tight connection with assertion.

The following two prompts sound more felicitous than the others (12C)-(12E):

(12F) “I’d like the truth about how the cat got into my china-closet.”

However, as noted above, truth and certainty discourse markers are only used for special purposes while knowledge discourse markers seem to be the standard way to prompt
assertions. One uses “I’d like the truth,” when one suspects that one will not get a truthful answer and one uses “I’d like to be certain” when one is double-checking or seeking out corroborating evidence. Both of these situations are only small subsets assertion prompts.

Another common prompt is to ask or order someone to tell you what they know about something. For example, during an interrogation, a detective might utter the following to a suspect, “Tell me what you know about the robbery of the Manhattan Savings Bank that occurred last week.” Or, a math tutor might utter to her student, “Tell me what you know about differential equations” What these inquirers seem to be doing is prompting assertions by making it clear what their aim is, i.e., to find out what the asserters know.

However, there are no plausible prompts that support other accounts of the norm of assertion. For example, consider the following:

(14) “Tell me what you believe about the robbery of the Manhattan Savings Bank that occurred last week.”
(15) “Tell me what you reasonably believe about the robbery of the Manhattan Savings Bank that occurred last week.”
(16) “Tell me what you truly believe about the robbery of the Manhattan Savings Bank that occurred last week.”
(17) “Tell me what you’re certain of about the robbery of the Manhattan Savings Bank that occurred last week.”
(18) “Tell me the truth about the robbery of the Manhattan Savings Bank that occurred last week.”

The only utterance that sounds truly felicitous as a prompt is (18). But even so, it sounds more like a prompt for an admission as opposed to an assertion. Moreover, the purpose of adding “tell me the truth,” is not to elicit an assertion but, as mentioned above, to communicate that one already knows that the addressee might be inclined or have reason to lie.

3.3 Why Audiences Think They Seek Out Assertions
There is also linguistic data that indicate that, upon reflection, audiences explain their inquiry as being aimed at gaining knowledge. Notice that audiences often prompt assertions by asking questions. Now consider the fact that the following sentences are used interchangeably to answer the question, “Why are you asking?”:

(19) “I want the answer.”
(20) “I want to know the answer.”
(21) “To get the answer.”
(22) “To know the answer.”
(23) “I want to know.”

It’s constitutive of inquiry that it aims to answer a question, but it also looks like what it means to answer a question, for many at least, is for one to come to know the answer. This also gives us evidence that many people seek out assertions/testimony in order to get knowledge.11

Notice, however, that sentences invoking other epistemic positions concerning the answer to a question are not intuitively interchangeable with, “I want the answer to the question” as an answer to, “Why are you asking?”:

(24) I want (to have) evidence (of the answer).
(25) I want to reasonably believe (the answer).
(26) I want to believe (the answer).

Thus, there is no similar evidence that people seek out assertions/testimony because they want evidence, reasonable belief, or belief.

What about: “I want the truth”? After all, isn’t that what Lt. Kaffee demanded from Col. Jessep in the famous courtroom scene in A Few Good Men? Jessep asked Kaffee, “You want answers?!?” and Kaffee replied, “I want the truth.” However, even this demand supports the view that the purpose of assertion is to produce knowledge in others. Notice that there

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11 Goldberg (2015) suggests that, in typical cases, interlocutors want each other’s assertions to be knowledgeable (263).
are two plausible interpretations of Kaffee’s demand: (a) He wants Jessep to tell the truth or (b) He wants to know the truth. The second interpretation clearly supports my view. The first interpretation does as well, but less directly. We must ask “Why does Kaffee what Jessep to tell the truth?” The obvious answer is that Kaffee wants to know the truth and he wants everyone else in the courtroom to know it and Jessep’s asserting the truth in that context is a great way to satisfy this desire.

What about: “I want to be certain”? While it is felicitous to respond to the question, “Why do you ask?” by mentioning a desire to be certain, this is not nearly as common as mentioning a desire to know. While you can generally always answer appropriately with, “I want to know,” answering with “I want to be certain” is only appropriate when one already has some information concerning the topic of one’s question and is seeking more or better information. For example, consider the following exchange:

A: Where were you born?
B: Manhattan. Why do you ask?
A: I wanted to be certain.
B: So, you had some idea of where I was born?
A: No. None whatsoever.

A’s claim that he wanted to be certain about where B was born without having any idea where B was born sounds quite odd. What we can see from this exchange is that seeking certainty is most natural when someone already has some evidence and wants to improve their epistemic position. However, we very often ask people for information without having any evidence about the answer. So, “I want to be certain” cannot be felicitously used in many cases. Moreover, “I want to know” can be felicitously used in almost all cases, even when someone already has some evidence of what the answer is.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{12}\) The most obvious case in which it is infelicitous to utter, “I want to know” or “I wanted to know” is when the inquirer already knows the answer. However, most inquirers don’t know the answer to the questions they ask.
3.4 Addresses Commonly Interpret Inquirers as Seeking Knowledge

In addition to the data about how asserter preface their assertions and how inquirers prompt assertions, there is also data about how people interpret why inquirers are seeking information. First, in response to an inquiry, e.g., “How old are you?” or “Where do you come from?”, it’s natural for the addressee to ask the inquirer, “Why do you want to know?” Second, if an addressee doesn’t want to share information and wishes to express annoyance to the inquirer, she might respond, “Wouldn’t you like to know.” These common responses to inquiries indicate that addressees commonly interpret the reason for an inquiry as being that the inquirer wants to know something. Furthermore, notice that inquirers need not explicitly mention their own knowledge or doxastic states at all. For example, inquirers need not utter, “I’d like to know, how old are you?” or “I want to know something. Where do you come from?” Merely asking for information seems to convey that the inquirer is seeking knowledge.

3.5 Assertion, Knowledge, and Inquiry

Moreover, many inquirers treat assertions that provide complete answers to one’s inquiry as being sufficient for completing/closing that inquiry—at least in the absence of defeaters. Think about all the times you asked for directions, the location of an item, how someone is doing, where someone is going, where someone is from, who won the sports game, etc. In many of these cases, you cease to investigate these questions simply because a relative expert—someone expert relative to you—told you the answer. The same happens in the case of asking full experts. For example, we often complete/close our inquiry into whether \( p \) solely on the basis of testimony from medical doctors, lawyers, carpenters, mathematicians, physicians, real estate agents, reporters, etc.
Importantly, this practice of treating assertions as “inquiry-completers” strikes many as epistemically kosher. This means that whatever epistemic position trusting assertions puts one in, it must be sufficient for completing an inquiry—absent defeaters. Unsurprisingly, I think knowledge fits the bill better than any other epistemic position that can be transmitted or produced by assertion. In fact, regardless of what one thinks is necessary and sufficient for completing an inquiry, most philosophers who work on the epistemology of inquiry grant that knowledge is sufficient for completing an inquiry.\textsuperscript{13} That people treat assertions as inquiry-completers is more evidence that people actually use assertions to get knowledge. This is because, as we saw above, inquirers, on reflection, describe their motivation for inquiry as wanting to know the answer to the question they’re investigating and the fact that knowledge is sufficient for completing inquiry would explain why they want knowledge.

3.6 Assertion as a Type and Token Assertions

In this section, I have argued that the purpose of our practice offering and requesting assertions is to produce knowledge. I argued for this by noting that many asserters make assertions either in order to produce knowledge in their audience or they talk as if their assertions are for spreading knowledge. I also argued for this by noting that many audiences seek out assertions because they want knowledge or they at least talk as if that is the reason they seek out assertion.

I think the ubiquitous use of assertions to reliably produce or reliably gain knowledge is evidence that, as a speech act type, assertion has the purpose/aim of producing knowledge. However, just because a speech act type has a certain purpose/aim, it doesn’t follow that every token will be performed with that purpose in mind. Thus, I admit that there are many occasions when the asserter has no desire to produce knowledge in his audience, e.g., because

\textsuperscript{13} For example, Kelp (2012).
he’s lying or bullshitting. Moreover, I admit that many audiences seek out assertions for reasons other than knowledge, e.g., to rationalize something they already believe.

However, the fact that people make token assertions for all kinds of reasons doesn’t show that the primary purpose of our use of the speech act type is not to produce knowledge in others. As an analogy, consider our practice of offering and seeking out promises. Promises, *qua* speech act type, have the characteristic aim of committing the speaker to some future action. That doesn’t mean that people do not sometimes make promises for other reasons, e.g., to impress people or because they are trying to mislead someone. Moreover, we can seek out promises with intentions other than getting someone to commit themselves to a future action. For example, we may want someone to make us a promise to see if they’re loyal. Nonetheless, the primary purpose of our practice of offering and requesting promises is getting the promiser to commit to some future action.

In addition, just because the purpose of assertion is to produce knowledge, it doesn’t follow that every token assertion *succeeds* in producing knowledge. Likewise, just because the purpose of a command is to get someone to do something, it doesn’t follow that the addressee will follow the command. Assertions reliably produce knowledge only in some set of circumstances just as commands get the addressee to act in a certain way only in some set of circumstances.

4. The Primary Purpose of Assertion and The Norm of Assertion

In the previous section, I argued that the primary purpose of assertion is to produce knowledge in others. If the purpose of some practice is to produce some effect *e*, then it seems plausible that tokens of that practice that actually produce *e* are *good* tokens of that practice while tokens that fail to produce *e* are *bad* tokens of that practices. So, if the purpose
of assertion is to produce knowledge, then assertions that produce knowledge are good *qua* assertion and those that fail to produce knowledge are bad *qua* assertion. Moreover, if an assertion fails to produce knowledge *and* puts an audience in an epistemic position that is antithetical to gaining knowledge (e.g., false belief), then that is worse *qua* assertion than one that puts one into an epistemic position that isn't knowledge, but that isn't antithetical to gaining knowledge (e.g., agnosticism). Thus, whether an assertion is good or bad, better or worse, is completely independent of the intentions, desires, motives, and evidential situation of the asserter.

However, the norm of assertion, as I understand it, is a *prescriptive* norm, i.e., it concerns permissibility. How do we get from assertions being good or bad to assertions being permissible or impermissible? In this section, I argue for two things. First, an assertion that *p* can transmit or produce knowledge *on its own* only if the asserter knows that *p*. This doesn't mean that an unknowledgeable assertion that *p* can't make an important causal contribution to a person's coming to know that *p*. After all, asserting that *p* might inspire someone to research *p* on her own and come to know that *p* on the basis of great evidence. But the purpose of assertion is to *produce* knowledge in others *by itself*. Second, I argue that asserting on the basis of any epistemic state weaker than knowledge imposes much more of a risk on the audience of ending up in an epistemic position that is *antithetical* to gaining knowledge than asserting on the basis of knowledge. Thus, the basic idea is that unknowledgeable assertions are impermissible because: (1) they can't fulfill the primary purpose of assertion, (2) even if they could, in principle, fulfill the primary purpose of assertion, they will fail to most of the time, and (3) in either case, they put audiences at risk of ending up in an epistemic position that is antithetical to gaining knowledge. That is, they risk undermining the purpose of our practice of asserting.
Before looking at the epistemic risks of non-knowledgeable assertions, I want to briefly discuss some important features of the norm of assertion. First, in looking for a norm of human activity, such as assertion, we’re looking for general rules, which if followed, will maximize success without simultaneously making the practice ineffective at fulfilling its purpose. For example, we have certain traffic rules, e.g., don’t drive through a red light and don’t drive over the speed limit. Now, of course, there will be times when it’s totally safe to drive over the speed limit, e.g., if no one’s around. However, the driver in that case is still in violation of the rule and thus subject to citation. Thus, in assertion cases, we want a norm that tells us when it’s “safe” to assert which is such that, if it were generally adhered to, would maximize successful assertion (i.e., the production of knowledge) without simultaneously making the practice of assertion ineffective at spreading knowledge.

Second, the norm of assertion, much like the speed limit, doesn’t eliminate all risk. There will still be circumstances in which knowledgeable assertions fail to produce knowledge just as there will still be a car accident when you are driving the speed limit. However, such failures will most often be explained by the audience. If one is reliably asserting because one is asserting on the basis of knowledge, then one is doing everything right on one’s end. If the audience doesn’t gain knowledge, it will be because they have a defeater (psychological or normative), they are unreliable believers, or the environment in which they receive testimony is inapt for receiving testimony.\(^\text{14}\)

The point is that rules regulating assertion and speeding minimize the relevant risk while at the same not regulating the practice so much that it becomes ineffective at its goal. For example, we could require something more than knowledge for permissible assertion in order to reduce the risk of the audience not gaining knowledge in the same way that we

\(^{14}\) For more on the possible details of such cases, see: Lackey (2008), chapter 5.
could decrease the highway speed limit to 25mph to reduce the number of accidents. However, such strict restrictions would defeat the purpose of engaging in the respective activities. If the highway speed limit was 25 mph, it would be no faster than normal roads and thus not serve its purpose as a faster route. Likewise, if permissible assertions required lots of knowledge or perhaps certainty, it would no longer be an easy and effective way of getting knowledge. Moreover, a stronger epistemic requirement on the part of the asserter wouldn’t make their assertions any more likely to produce than requiring just knowledge. This is because once the asserter is asserting from knowledge, the failure to produce knowledge in the audience will (most often) be explained by some failure of the audience or the environment.

4.1 Producing Knowledge via Assertion Requires Knowledge

I think that an assertion can only produce or transmit knowledge if the asserter knows the content of the assertion. It strikes me as true by definition that one can’t transmit knowledge that \( p \) from an asserter to an addressee unless the asserter knows that \( p \). However, one might think that one can produce knowledge that \( p \) via assertion. While I will not present a positive argument for the claim that one must have knowledge to produce knowledge in others via assertion, I will argue against recent attempts to provide cases where supposedly unknowledgeable assertion result in knowledge. I will take it as evidence for my view that philosophers must present rather elaborate and strange cases in order to argue that one can produce knowledge that \( p \) without knowing that \( p \) oneself.

Lackey (2008), Graham (2008), and Carter & Nickel (2014) all present cases that supposedly show that one can produce knowledge that \( p \) in another person via assertion
without knowing that \( p \) oneself.\textsuperscript{15} I will focus on Lackey (2008)’s case for ease of exposition, but the criticism of this case will apply to those given by Graham (2008) and Carter & Nickel (2014).

Lackey (2008) writes:

**Creationist Teacher:** 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, she fully recognizes that there is an overwhelming amount of scientific evidence against both of these beliefs. Indeed, she readily admits that she is not 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. Instead, she regards her duty as a teacher to involve presenting material that is best supported by the available evidence, which clearly includes the truth of evolutionary theory. As a result, after consulting reliable sources in the library and developing reliable lecture notes, Stella asserts to her students, “Modern-day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*,” while presenting her biology lesson today. Though Stella herself neither believes nor knows this proposition, she never shares her own personal faith-based views with her students, and so they form the corresponding true belief solely on the basis of her reliable testimony.

Lackey claims that the children come to know that “Modern-day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*” because Stella is a **reliable conveyer of this information** and because she doesn’t give them any undefeated defeaters.

I think that Lackey’s case fails to show that Stella’s assertion produces knowledge in her students despite the fact that she lacks knowledge. I argue that Stella’s assertion is hedged either in its content or force.\textsuperscript{16} To hedge a statement is to reduce one’s responsibility for the

\textsuperscript{15} Technically, these authors argue that producing knowledge via *testimony* doesn’t require that the testifier have knowledge. However, Lackey (2008) thinks that her case works for assertion too. Finally, I won’t take a stand on the relationship between assertion and testimony.

\textsuperscript{16} For a very similar tack, see: Milić (2017). While I agree with the structure of Milić’s criticism, I don’t think he’s right about what the hedged content or force is.
truth of that statement.  For example, the more one hedges a claim the less criticizable one is if the claim turns out false.

What is the content of Stella’s assertion? Stella utters the sentence, “Modern-day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*,” but it doesn’t follow from this that her sentence expresses the *proposition*, “Modern-day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*. For example, if I utter the sentence, “It’s cold here,” this sentence expresses the proposition, “It’s cold in Glasgow.” However, if Boris Johnson utters this sentence, it most likely expresses the proposition, “It’s cold in London.” In Creationist Teacher, Stella is speaking as a teacher. She is not sharing her own views. Her job is mainly to teach the curriculum she is given using the sources that the school board approves. Many of us occupy multiple roles from which we can speak. For example, one can speak as a scientist, as a Christian, as a friend, etc. What we’re communicating with such qualifications is that we are basing our assertion on the standards of those professions or roles. We are not basing our assertions of how we think the world *actually is*, but of how it is *given some background assumptions*.

Given her role as a teacher, the content of Stella’s assertion is not “Modern-day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*,” but rather one of the following:

1. “According to the best available evidence, Modern-day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*."
2. “The scientific consensus is that Modern-day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*."
3. “According to the most up-to-date biologist textbooks, Modern-day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*."
4. “According to Darwin’s theory, Modern-day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*."

Why think that one of these is the content of her assertion? Because teachers often teach their students about false theories to either help them understand more complex (and

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17 For more on hedging, see: Benton & van Elswyk (2019).
18 For more on assertion and criticizability, see: Shapiro (2019).
19 Sosa (2010) also makes this point (175-176).
correct) theories or to teach them the history of a subject. But we don’t think that teachers are consistently making false assertions to students. They make true, but hedged assertions.

The second possibility is that Stella is only making a hedged assertion by altering the force of the assertion. What the force of a speech act is is a matter of controversy. However, we can see what it is by considering the fact that one can utter the following content either as a prediction or a promise: “I will be at your party on Saturday.” One clear difference between predicting that one will attend a party and promising that one will is that one takes on different responsibilities. If one promises to attend and fails to attend (without an adequate excuse) the host can justifiably morally criticize you or have a negative affective reaction to what you did. If you predict that you will attend and fail to attend, then they can’t justifiably morally criticize you, have a negative affective reaction to what you did.

Given Stella’s role as a teacher, all of her assertions to her students should be understood as being hedged, but where the hedging is not part of the content of the assertion. We can think of Stella’s assertions as having the following preface, “As a science teacher, I can tell you that . . ..” The fact that she is asserting from a certain adopted perspective means that she is not flat-out asserting anything about modern-day Homo sapiens.

We can see that Stella is not making flat-out assertion by seeing that she is not responsible for the truth of the content of her assertions, but only for their usefulness for the student to do well in her (and other) classes, for their accurately portraying what the curriculum does or would endorse, or for what the scientific consensus is. For example, if her assertion, “Modern-day Homo sapiens evolved from Homo erectus” turned out to be false, she would not be criticizable—as long as this standard was approved (or followed from approved claims) by the curriculum committee. However, she would be criticizable if it was treated as

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20 See McKinnon (2015) for more about teaching false theories.
false on Stella’s tests, by the curriculum committee, in later biology classes, or by the scientific community at large.

When someone asserts that \( p \), they are not speaking as a scientist or as a Christian or as a teacher, they are speaking as themselves, i.e., as a responsible epistemic subject. If they are flat-out asserting, then they are taking responsibility for the truth of \( p \) _simpliciter_ and not just _relative to some standard or worldview_. Or, if they are taking responsibility for the truth _relative to some standard_, it’s a standard that they endorse. Stella doesn’t really endorse the scientific standard for claims about evolution and she asserts from a perspective whose standard she doesn’t personally endorse.

If Stella is only making hedged assertions, how could her students come to know the unhedged content of her assertions? The students can come to know that Modern-day _Homo sapiens_ evolved from _Homo erectus_ on the basis of Stella’s assertion in numerous ways. For example, if one knows or has evidence that most scientists believe that Modern-day _Homo sapiens_ evolved from _Homo erectus_, then one has evidence sufficient for knowledge that Modern-day _Homo sapiens_ evolved from _Homo erectus_. Stella’s assertion supplies her students with evidence for this claim and they use this evidence to form their belief.

If one is still convinced by Lackey’s class, fear not. The norm of assertion is meant to apply to what is _usually_ or _regularly_ the case and even if Lackey’s case involves knowledge production without knowledge, they are _unusual_ cases and thus not a concern for the norm of assertion. For example, even if it is sometimes safe to drive over the speed limit, it _usually_ is not, and like the norm of assertion, the speed limit is concerned with what is _usually_ the case.

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21 I’m not convinced that her students do come to know the unhedged content, because I’m not convinced that they are reliable recipient of testimony or assertion. It strikes me that fourth-graders will believe or accept almost anything their science teacher tells them. If they are not reliable recipients of assertion, then they can’t get knowledge from assertions. For more on this, see: Lackey (2008), 160-163.
4.2 Knowledgeable Assertions are Less Risky

Epistemically proper assertions need to *coincide* with one's knowledge, i.e., one must assert only what one knows.\(^{22}\) One reason for this is that assertions that express knowledge inherit the reliability of knowledge. Knowledge requires some anti-luck condition (e.g., safety or sensitivity) and thus if we only assert that \(p\) only when we know that \(p\), our assertions will also meet parallel anti-luck conditions. However, no weaker epistemic state requires these anti-luck conditions and so asserting on their basis doesn't provide one's assertions with anything close to the reliability of asserting on knowledge.

Another reason that knowledgeable assertions are more reliable at producing knowledge in audiences is that knowledgeable assertions can transmit knowledge from the asserter to the audience. In transmission, the audience's testimonial belief that \(p\) constitutes knowledge that \(p\) partly *in virtue of* the fact that the belief that the asserter expresses constitutes knowledge that \(p\). However, no epistemic position concerning \(p\) that is weaker than knowledge can transmit knowledge to an audience. This is because there is no knowledge to transmit. Nonetheless, weaker epistemic states can reliably transmit those states (e.g., justification).

A second, and related, reason is that, under normal conditions, knowledgeable assertions are sufficient for producing knowledge in others. That is, the audience can gain knowledge simply by responsibly believing the assertion. In order to gain knowledge on the basis of unknowledgeable assertions, the audience will have to have some other source of evidence available. But we rely on testimony in many cases simply because there is no other available evidence. In the absence of further evidence for the audience, unknowledgeable

\(^{22}\) For an extended defense of this claim, see: Turri (2011).
assertions will, under normal conditions, most often just produce whatever epistemic state the asserter possesses.

4.3 The Risks of Trusting Unknowledgeable Assertions

The first problem with making unknowledgeable assertions is that the audience will most often end up being in an epistemic state that makes it irrational for her to inquire and thus irrational for her to seek out knowledge. Consider the following rational constraint on inquiry:

\((\ast): \text{One is rationally required to not: have an interrogative attitude toward whether } p \text{ at } t \text{ and outright believe that } p \text{ at } t.\)\(^{23}\)

The plausibility of this principle can be seen by considering how odd it would be for a person to outright believe that \(p\), that is, to have settled the matter whether \(p\) for themselves and simultaneously wonder whether \(p\). To wonder whether \(p\) seems to be the opposite of being settled with regard to \(p\). And, thus, while it may be psychologically possible to simultaneously hold these two attitudes toward \(p\), it is irrational to do so.

It follows from \((\ast)\) and the above conception of inquiry that:

*Belief-Inquiry:* One is rationally required to not: inquire into whether \(p\) at \(t\) and outright believe that \(p\) at \(t\).

This is because inquiring into whether \(p\) requires having an interrogative attitude toward whether \(p\).

The first risk with asserting on the basis of an epistemic state weaker than knowledge is that one’s audience will most often end up in the epistemic state that the asserter is in (e.g., true belief, justified belief, or justified true belief) and it would then be irrational for them to continue to inquire into whether \(p\) and thus to eventually acquire knowledge. Belief-Inquiry is a wide-scope norm and so could be satisfied by just dropping one’s outright belief that \(p\)

\(^{23}\) For a defense of a very similar principle, see: Friedman (2017).
when one inquires into whether $p$. However, the problem is that we don’t have direct control over our beliefs and the more evidence an audience has for her belief, the harder it’s likely to be to get her to drop that belief. Belief-Inquiry is thus only satisfiable in such a case by not inquiring into whether $p$.

There is a further problem if one thinks one must suspend judgment about whether $p$ in order to be able to actually inquire into whether $p$. If the audience ends up with a justified true belief, it will be epistemically impermissible to suspend judgment in order to engage in inquiry—unless one happens upon defeaters. To be clear, the point is not that it will never be epistemically permissible for one to reopen inquiry and thus suspend judgment. After all, one could happen upon a defeater. Rather, the point is that during the time at which one is justified in believing that $p$, it is not epistemically permissible at that time to continue inquiry into whether $p$. But this puts one in the less-than-ideal position of having to wait for a defeater to come to you as opposed to being able to seek one out on one’s own. Moreover, one might not even notice new evidence against $p$, because one will have already settled the matter.

Why think that having a justified belief that $p$ makes it epistemically impermissible to suspend judgment in order to inquire? Because it would be odd to be justified by the same evidence in believing that $p$ and in suspending judgment about $p$. Rather, it looks like if one has good evidence that $p$, it would be epistemically criticizable to remain agnostic about whether $p$. This is the problem of not following the evidence (or argument) where it leads.

One might object that even if the purpose of assertion is to produce knowledge in others, it doesn’t follow that generating some component of knowledge (e.g., true belief)

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24 For a defense of this view, see: Friedman (2017).
25 For argument that this might not be true, see: Friedman (manuscript b).
shouldn’t be epistemically permissible. After all, what’s wrong with making a contribution to one’s acquiring knowledge? The problem is this: unless an audience gains knowledge from trusting an assertion, she’ll end up in one of the following epistemic states concerning \( p \), each of which is incompatible with having or acquiring knowledge that \( p \):

i. **Belief that is false and unjustified.** Here one would believe that not-\( p \), where \( p \) is true and thus have a psychological defeater for \( p \). In addition, one’s belief that \( p \) makes it irrational to simultaneously inquire into whether \( p \) and thus to later on gain knowledge that \( p \).

ii. **Belief that is true, but unjustified.** Here one would base one’s belief that \( p \) on an unreliable source or bad reason and thus have a normative defeater for \( p \). In addition, one’s belief that \( p \) makes it irrational to simultaneously inquire into whether \( p \) and thus to later on gain knowledge that \( p \).

iii. **Belief that is true and justified but the justification is insufficient for knowledge.** Here one’s belief that \( p \) makes it irrational to simultaneously inquire into whether \( p \) and thus to later on gain knowledge that \( p \).

iv. **Belief that is true and justified but unsafe or insensitive.** For Gettierized beliefs, one needs a new basis for one’s belief because the connection because one’s belief and that basis is too lucky. In addition, one’s belief that \( p \) makes it irrational to simultaneously inquire into whether \( p \) and thus to later on gain knowledge that \( p \).

All of these states contain states that are components of knowledge, but also states that are incompatible with knowledge that \( p \) and states that are antithetical to seeking out knowledge that \( p \). Thus, asserting that \( p \) without knowing that \( p \) puts one’s audience at risk of not being able to acquire knowledge—at least in a timely fashion. Asserting that \( p \) with knowledge, on the other hand, eliminates all these risks—all else being equal—and thus allows assertion to fulfill its primary purpose of producing knowledge in others.

Importantly, asserting that \( p \) without knowing that \( p \) imposes a risk that the audience will end up in an epistemic state that is antithetical to knowing that \( p \). This is importantly different from merely exposing someone to such a risk. Believers are always exposed to the risk of entering an epistemic state that is antithetical to knowing that \( p \). After all, anytime one forms a belief, one risks believing the wrong thing or being gullible. But when one imposes a
risk of being in an “anti-knowledge” state, one is adding a risk that is not always present for the believer.

What is criticizable about unknowledgeable assertions is that they impose the above-mentioned risks on the audience and these risks are antithetical to the primary purpose of assertion. After all, if the purpose of assertion is producing knowledge in others, then putting those people in epistemic positions that are antithetical to acquiring knowledge seems to be a mortal sin from the epistemic point of view.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I provided a novel argument for KNA. First, I argued that the primary purpose of our practice of assertion is to produce knowledge in others. Second, I argued that one must have knowledge that \( p \) in order to either transmit or produce knowledge that \( p \) in someone else. Third, I argued that asserting without knowledge imposes a risk on the audience such that they might end up in an epistemic state that is antithetical to gaining knowledge that \( p \). Thus, asserting without knowledge risks undermining the purpose of our practice of assertion. Thus, we should only assert what we know.
CHAPTER 2

Know and Tell: A Discursive Requirement for the Norm of Assertion

1. Introduction

Most accounts of the epistemic norm of assertion focus on being in a particular epistemic state at the time of the assertion. That is, they seem to assume that the only thing that matters for whether an assertion that \( p \) is epistemically permissible is the epistemic state one is in concerning \( p \) at the time of the assertion. This view of the norm of assertion involves treating epistemically permissible assertion as analogous to epistemically permissible beliefs, i.e., only the epistemic state one is in concerning the proposition matters. Moreover, it seems to treat asserting that \( p \) to another person as being importantly analogous to a single person reasoning from their belief that \( p \) to another belief that \( p^* \), e.g., reasoning from the fact that it’s raining in Glasgow to the fact that I’ll get wet if I go outside. As long as one has the right epistemic state concerning “It’s raining in Glasgow,” and one uses a reliable reasoning process, then one can come to be in that same epistemic state concerning the proposition one reasons to, e.g., “I’ll get wet if I go outside.” In the case of assertion, the thought is that if the asserter is in the right epistemic state concerning \( p \) when she asserts that \( p \) and the addressee uses a reliable reasoning or belief-forming process, then the addressee will end up in the same epistemic state concerning \( p \) as the asserter.

As I argued in the previous chapter, I agree that epistemically permissible assertions require the asserter to be in a particular epistemic state concerning \( p \) at the time of the assertion, i.e., knowledge. However, I don’t think that that is all that is required. The problem with thinking of assertion solely on the model of belief is that while one might have
access to one’s epistemic values and other beliefs, one doesn’t always know the epistemic values and antecedent beliefs of other people. Nor, for that matter, does one have a right to know these things about another person. Moreover, looking at assertions without considering the doxastic and epistemic differences between the asserter and the addressee is tantamount to looking at assertions like they are meters on a machine.\footnote{This is especially true of Hughes (2019).} After all, asserters are epistemic agents: they have epistemic values, can evaluate reasons for and against propositions, and can most often share epistemic reasons for their beliefs. Machines do not have these properties and so their readings do not provide any evidence of epistemic reflection.

I argue that, given the fact that asserters are epistemic agents, when they present propositions via assertion, they present the content of their assertion as beliefworthy for their addressee. Further, in virtue of presenting the content of their assertion as beliefworthy, they take on the commitment to be able to provide an epistemic reason for the content of their assertion that makes it beliefworthy given the conversational context in which the assertion is made. That is, assertions come with a discursive requirement. While many philosophers endorse the claim that asserters are committed to defending their assertions if challenged,\footnote{PropONENTS of defense requirement include: Brandom (1983), 641, Brandom (1994), 171–172, Rescorla (2009), and McKinnon (2015), 30. Watson (2004) has a similar view, according to which in asserting that \( p \) one is committed to the defensibility of \( p \), but not the actual defense of \( p \).} few argue that this ability is part of the norm of assertion.\footnote{See Gerken (2012) for an exception.}

Second, assertions paradigmatically occur in the context of certain kinds of conversations (i.e., information-sharing or information-gathering conversations). As moves in conversations, assertions have a particular aim, i.e., to answer or to serve as a basis for answering the primary question under discussion. However, because conversations are joint ventures in which each participant has the equal authority to reject assertions from being

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\footnote{This is especially true of Hughes (2019).}
accepted into the conversational “common ground,” asserters need to be able to provide an epistemic reason for the content of their assertion if challenged by any of the other conversational participants. This requirement is motivated by the fact that the aim of assertions qua conversational move is to be accepted as making a contribution to or completely answering the question under discussion.

In this paper, I argue that the correct account of the norm of assertion has a particular discursive requirement. In particular, I argue for the following view:

**Ability to Share Sufficient Epistemic Reason(s) Thesis (ASSERT):** One may epistemically permissibly assert that $p$ at $t$ only if, at $t$, one is able to provide epistemic reason(s) sufficient for making $p$ beliefworthy given the conversational context at the time of the assertion, for some period of time thereafter (unless one retracts the assertion).

Because I argued that knowledge is required for epistemically permissible assertion in the last chapter, I will take it for granted in this chapter. I will argue for a complete account of the norm of assertion by defending ASSERT and then combine it with the knowledge requirement to form what I will call the Know and Tell Norm of Assertion.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section 2, I characterize assertion and the norm of assertion. In section 3, I explain ASSERT in further detail. In section 4, I argue for ASSERT by drawing attention to its explanatory power. In section 5, I argue that ASSERT follows from the very nature of the act of asserting. In section 6, I consider and reply to a few important objections that help clarify my argument for ASSERT. In section 7, I briefly sketch what I think a complete account of the norm of assertion looks like. Finally, in section 8, I conclude.

2. The Terms of the Debate

2.1 Assertion
Assertion belongs to the speech act type *assertive*. Other assertives include CLAIM, STATE, REPORT, AVER, AVOUCH, TELL, SWEAR, etc. The illocutionary point (i.e., the characteristic aim) of assertives is to describe the way the world is. Thus, assertives are successful only if their contents are true.

I think speech acts like assertion are essentially interpersonal. I agree that we can utter sentences in the declarative mood when no one is around, but I don’t think this constitutes asserting. I think that asserting is similar to telling in that assertion requires asserting to someone in the same way that telling involves telling someone. In fact, I follow Hawley (2019) in thinking that assertions are paradigmatically attempts to tell someone something. Thus, I will focus on assertions as utterances made to other people—often in response to what the asserter takes to be someone’s explicit question, explicit curiosity, or predicted curiosity.

Moreover, the thought that assertions are essentially interpersonal speech acts has a long tradition. Peirce (1934) claimed that “to assert a proposition is to make oneself responsible for its truth,” that asserting, “consists in the furnishing of evidence by the speaker to the hearer that the speaker believes something,” and that “clearly, every assertion involves an effort to make the intended interpreter believe what is asserted.” Ritter (1971) claims that “Whoever asserts a sentence guarantees its truth, i.e. undertakes to be able, in every case, to defend it vis-à-vis interlocutors who are informed and willing to engage in

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4 Watson (2004) is only interested in this conception of assertion as well.
5 Hawley (2019), 50.
6 This is the conception of assertion that Watson (2004) is interested in as well.
7 The less interpersonal view of assertion seems to have gained popularity in the wake of Williamson (1996, 2000)’s work. He characterizes assertion in terms of constitutive rule (i.e. The Knowledge Norm of Assertion).
8 Peirce (1934), 384. Similar ideas can be found in Searle (1969), 29 and Searle (1979), 12.
9 Peirce (1931-1958), 2.335.
10 Peirce (1931-1958), 5.547.
argument.” Brandom (1983, 1994) argues that, “In asserting a sentence, one not only licenses further assertions on the part of others, but commits oneself to justifying the original claim.” As I understand these views, they characterize assertion as involving a certain kind of responsibility to other people. Audiences can hold asserters liable for making a false assertion or they can request a justification of the content of one’s assertion.

Stalnaker (1978) characterizes the essential effect of assertion as adding a proposition to the set of presuppositions of the participants of a conversation. He also claims that the following are “truisms” about assertion, “[They] are made in a context—a situation that includes a speaker with certain beliefs and intentions, and some people with their own beliefs and intentions to whom the assertions addressed” and they “affect, and are intended to affect, the context, in particular the attitudes of the participants in the situation.” and Bach & Harnish (1979) characterize assertion as involving an intention to get a hearer to believe the content of the assertion. Thus, viewing assertion as an interpersonal speech act fits into the recent historical picture of assertion.

I’m only concerned with flat-out assertions. Assertion in which one commits oneself to the truth of $p$ as much as one can by asserting that $p$. Flat-out assertions are to be contrasted with hedged assertion wherein one weakens one’s commitment to the truth of $p$.

To get a sense of what I mean by hedging, consider the following contrast assertions:

1. “It’s raining now” vs “It’s raining now, I think”
2. “She’s never been to Paris” vs “I believe, she’s never been to Paris.”

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13 For more about these so-called “commitment amounts,” see: Shapiro (2019).
14 Stalnaker (1978), 86.
15 Stalnaker (1978), 78.
16 Bach & Harnish (1979), 42.
3. “Valletta is the capital of Malta” vs “I might be wrong, but I think that Valletta is the capital of Malta.”

By adding “I think,” “I believe,” and “I might be wrong,” one is giving one’s addressee evidence that one is not fully committed to the truth of the content of the assertion.

In the last chapter, I argued that our practice of assertion has the primary purpose of producing knowledge in the addressee. I will be assuming throughout this chapter that this is true.

2.2 The Norm of Assertion

What kind of norm is the norm of assertion? As I will understand it, it is an epistemic requirement that an asserter must meet in order for her assertion to be epistemically proper or permissible. It is certainly true that assertion, as a kind of act, is governed by many kinds of norms, e.g., moral, rational, social, and so on. However, assertions are also common sources of beliefs for others and so they can have epistemically-relevant properties, e.g., reliability and truthfulness.

To say that an assertion is epistemically impermissible is to say that the asserter is epistemically criticizable for making it. Being epistemically criticizable for asserting that \( p \) means that one’s addressee’s (and perhaps overhearers) will often be justified in weakening (to some degree) their disposition to: (a) believe one’s other \( p \)-related assertions, (b) recommend one to others seeking information about \( p \)-related topics, or (c) engage in joint inquiry with one on \( p \)-related topics. That person will also often be justified in making their reduced epistemic confidence in one manifest to one concerning \( p \)-related topics. She might even be justified in making her reduced epistemic confidence in one manifest to others that one is discussing \( p \)-related issues with.

3. Ability to Share Sufficient Epistemic Reason(s) Thesis (ASSERT).
Recall that ASSERT holds that: One may epistemically permissibly assert that \( p \) at \( t \) only if, at \( t \), one is able to provide epistemic reason(s) sufficient for making \( p \) beliefworthy given the conversational context at the time of the assertion, for some period of time thereafter (unless one retracts the assertion). By “epistemic reason(s)” I just mean a reason (or reasons) that counts in favor of the asserted proposition. By “making \( p \) beliefworthy” I mean that addressee’s belief that \( p \) will satisfy the norm of belief if she believes \( p \) on the basis of the reason shared by the asserter. Of course, sometimes the asserter won’t have a single epistemic reason that is sufficient for making \( p \) beliefworthy for her addressee. In those cases, it will permissible for her to share multiple epistemic reasons that suffice for a combined epistemic reason that is sufficient to make \( p \) beliefworthy.

ASSERT gets a bit more complicated by requiring that the shareable epistemic reason(s) be sufficient for making \( p \) beliefworthy given the conversational context at the time of the assertion. What determines the conversational context? While I won’t provide an exhaustive list of what determines the conversational context, the following seem to be plausible candidates:

A. The practical and moral stakes involved (for one or more conversational participants).
B. Previous commitments that the participants have made to one another, e.g., about what counts as good evidence or what topics count as “off-limits.”
C. The kind of conversation being had (e.g., causal, information gathering or sharing, debate, etc.), which may be determined by the purpose (explicit or implicit) of the conversation.
D. The topic of the conversation, e.g., morality, prudence, aesthetics, rationally, etc.
E. The conversational common ground.

The conversational common ground is the set of propositions that all conversational participants are committed to treating as true for at least the duration of the conversation—whether they know it or not.\(^{17}\) These propositions consist of the following:

\(^{17}\) Thus, I have a less subjective picture of the common ground than Stalnaker (2002).
i. All propositions that are explicitly uttered by one of the participants in the conversation and not rejected by any of the other participants.

ii. All propositions that must be assumed for the conversation to occur in the first place, e.g., that each participant is talking to a conscious and intelligent being with the ability to understand what is being said by and to them.

iii. All propositions that are made manifest to all participants during the conversation (e.g., everyone observes that it is raining outside and so the proposition “It is raining” is added to the common ground).

iv. All the propositions that it is reasonable for all parties in the conversation to believe are mutually believed or accepted by all the parties during that particular conversation.

Thus, what counts as an epistemic reason that is sufficient for making $p$ beliefworthy in one conversational context (e.g., a low stakes one) might not be sufficient in another (e.g., a high stakes one).

Why must one’s shareable epistemic reason make $p$ beliefworthy given the conversational common ground at the time of the assertion only? Why not all conversational common grounds? One obvious reason is that a lot of conversational common grounds will conflict with each other, i.e., they have will have numerous inconsistent propositions. Another reason is that all the participants in a particular conversation agree to epistemic standards either explicitly or through what propositions they allow into the common ground. Thus, it would be unreasonable for addressees to expect asserters to be able to provide epistemic reasons for their assertion that make those assertions beliefworthy given any common ground or common ground with higher epistemic standards. Nor would it be reasonable to want epistemic reasons for a proposition that were insufficient for making a proposition beliefworthy.

Finally, what counts as providing epistemic reason(s) for $p$. One can assert that $q$, where $q$ is evidence for $p$. One can provide an argument that is cogent, non-circular with the
conclusion that \( p \). One can draw the challenger’s attention to something that makes it clear (or likely) that \( p \). For example, if I assert that your wallet is on the ground and you challenge me by asking, “How do you know that?” I can simply point to your wallet on the ground beside you. Or, imagine that Sherlock asserts that Smith is the killer and Watson asks him for his evidence. He can point to the bloody knife on the counter in Smith’s apartment. Thus, one can provide an epistemic reason by presenting it via assertion or by drawing someone’s attention to the source of the epistemic reason, e.g., the bloody knife.

4. The Explanatory Power of ASSERT

4.1 The Linguistic Evidence

There is linguistic evidence that supports the idea that asserters are required to be able to provide an epistemic reason for their assertion—at least until or unless they retract their assertion. First, consider the fact that the following are common and appropriate ways of challenging an assertion:

1. “What’s your evidence for that?”
2. “Why do you believe that?”
3. “Why should I believe that?”
4. “Why would anyone believe that?”
5. “How do you know that?”
6. “How could/would you know that?”

These challenges indicate that we seem to commonly and appropriately expect asserters to be able to provide some defense of their assertion. In particular, we most often expect them to be able to do this immediately after they make their assertion.

Second, note that the following assertions sound infelicitous:

1. “Most physicists accept quantum mechanics, but I couldn’t tell you why I believe that.”

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18 For example, see: Rescorla (2009a).
19 For more on showing one’s interlocutor something that makes it (likely) true that \( p \), see: Bronner (2016).
2. “Canberra is the capital of Australia, but I’m not sure what evidence there is for that claim.”
3. “I couldn’t tell you why you should believe this, but the Curler’s Rest is on Byres Road.”
4. “I have no reason in support of it, but the Moon landing took place in 1969.

When one asserts that one can’t give you any evidence or that one isn’t sure of one’s own evidence, at the time at which one makes one’s assertion one seems to be undermining one’s own authority to assert the first part of the sentence. It looks like if one prefaces or follows an assertion by making it explicit that one doesn’t have the epistemic credentials required for epistemically properly making that assertion, then one is intuitively criticizable. This is some evidence that we expect asserters to be able to satisfy something like ASSERT.

One might object that the reason that these conjunctions sound odd is that claiming that one lacks shareable evidence provides the addressee with evidence that one doesn’t know the content of one’s assertion and this means that one violates the Knowledge Norm of Assertion (KNA). That is, KNA can explain the oddity of the above conjunction with appealing to the reasonable defense condition. I think this response doesn’t work. It’s long been noted, for example, that being justified in believing that \( p \) doesn’t require one to be able to justify \( p \) to others. \(^{20}\) Further, notice that the following conjunctions don’t have the same odd ring to them:

1. “I know he’s the killer, I just can’t put my finger on the reason why I think this.’
2. “I couldn’t tell you why, but I know you should move your rook to b8.”
3. “I couldn’t tell you why you should believe that the Curler’s Rest is on Byres Road, but I know it is.”

We see the oddness of the original conjunctions cannot be explained by KNA, because when we conjoin claims that one cannot provide evidence for \( p \) with claims about knowing that \( p \), the conjunctions are not infelicitous.

\(^{20}\) For example, Alston (1989) and Audi (1993).
Moreover, if an asserter is unable to provide an epistemic reason for \( p \) after being prompted by one of the questions above, then she is criticizable for having asserted what she did. For example, consider the following exchange:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Assad:} & \quad \text{“It was common in 18th century Europe for animals to be tried in court.”} \\
\text{Audrey:} & \quad \text{“What’s your evidence for that?”} \\
\text{Assad:} & \quad \text{“I couldn’t tell you.”} \\
\text{Audrey:} & \quad \text{“Then why do you believe it?”} \\
\text{Assad:} & \quad \text{“I’m not sure”} \\
\text{Audrey:} & \quad \text{“Then why did you tell me it?”}
\end{align*}
\]

There are a few things worth noting about this conversation. First, Audrey seems warranted in asking for Assad’s evidence. Second, Assad’s response, i.e., “I couldn’t tell you,” seems unsatisfactory. This is partly what Audrey seems to be expressing by asking him why he told her what he did in the first place. ASSERT provides a tidy explanation of what was wrong with Assad’s response: his admitting that he doesn’t know what his evidence is (or what he bases his belief on) amounts to him admitting to violating ASSERT.

4.2 The Case-Based Evidence

Lackey (2011) presents cases where people make assertions on the basis of knowledge which are not intuitively epistemically permissible. These cases are somewhat surprising given that the asserter knows the content of her assertion and her assertion would satisfy many accounts of the norm of assertion. The unique thing about these suspicious assertions is that they are based on isolated, second-hand knowledge that \( p \). The knowledge that \( p \) is isolated because the asserter doesn’t have other knowledge related to \( p \). The knowledge is second-hand because it is solely based on another’s testimony. In this section, I show how ASSERT can explain the intuitive inappropriateness of such assertions.

Considering the following case of assertion based on isolated, second-hand knowledge:
DOCTOR. Jessica is a seasoned oncologist. Her patient, Brody, was recently referred to her office because he has been experiencing intense abdominal pain for a couple of weeks. Jessica requested that Derek be tested using a new technology that is more accurate than pre-existing tests. Jessica is not familiar with this new technology and how to interpret its results. The results of Brody’s test arrive on Jessica’s day off and are reviewed by Natasha, who knows how to interpret the results of Brody’s test. Jessica arrives late to the hospital on the day Brody’s follow-up appointment and thus only has a short amount of time to discuss the results of Brody’s test with Natasha. All Natasha tells Jessica is that her diagnosis, based on the test is that Brody has pancreatic cancer. Natasha doesn’t share anything else about the test or the test results with Jessica. Immediately after talking to Natasha, Jessica meets with Brody. He asks, “What did the test results say” and Jessica says, “I’m very sorry to tell you this, but you have pancreatic cancer.”

Many people have the intuition that there is something deficient with Jessica’s assertion.21 What explains this intuition?

One plausible explanation of why Jessica’s assertion is intuitively inappropriate is that she is not in a position to provide an epistemic reason for Brody to believe that he has pancreatic cancer that would make that proposition beliefworthy given the current conversational context. After all, the stakes are quite high for Brody because pancreatic cancer is extremely deadly. This means that satisfying ASSERT requires that Jessica provide a particular strong epistemic reason in favor of her assertion. In particular, telling Brody that a medical student told her that he has pancreatic cancer doesn’t seem to be a strong enough reason. Jessica can’t tell Brody anything about how the test works or what the precise results were because she doesn’t know how the technology works.

5. The Nature of Assertion, Beliefworthiness, and ASSERT

In addition to being supported by the data above, ASSERT also has strong theoretical support. In particular, I argue that ASSERT follows from the very nature of the act of asserting.

5.1. The Argument from Beliefworthiness

21 McKinnon (2015, Chapter 10) argues that Jessica’s assertion in this case is not actually deficient.
In asserting, one takes on a commitment to the beliefworthiness of \( p \) for one’s addressee until or unless one retracts one’s assertion. Further, I think taking on this commitment entails that one is able to offer epistemic reason(s) sufficient for making \( p \) beliefworthy in the current conversational context. More formally, I argue as follows:

1. If, at \( t \), one counts as asserting that \( p \) to A, then, at \( t \), one presents \( p \) with (at the very least) the pretense that it is beliefworthy for A.\(^{22}\)
2. If, at \( t \), one presents \( p \) with (at the very least) the pretense that it is beliefworthy for A, then, at \( t \), one takes on the commitment that \( p \) is beliefworthy for A for some period of time (unless one retracts the assertion).\(^{23}\)
3. If, at \( t \), one takes on the commitment that \( p \) is beliefworthy for A for some period of time (until or unless one retracts the assertion), then, one must be able to provide epistemic reason(s) sufficient for making \( p \) beliefworthy given the conversational context at the time of the assertion, for some period of time thereafter (unless one retracts the assertion).
4. Therefore, if, at \( t \), one counts as asserting that \( p \) to A, then one must be able to provide epistemic reason(s) sufficient for making \( p \) beliefworthy given the conversational context at the time of the assertion, for some period of time thereafter (unless one retracts the assertion).

In what follows, I defend each premise.

5.2. **Premise (1)**

I think that presenting \( p \) with the pretense that it’s beliefworthy is a *constitutive requirement* of assertion, i.e., if one fails to meet this condition, one doesn’t successfully assert anything.\(^{24}\)

To see that asserting to someone involves this commitment, it looks like one cannot even

\(^{22}\) More controversially, one might think that asserting that \( p \) to A involves presenting it with at the least the pretense that one cares about whether A believes that \( p \). If one is totally indifferent as to whether A believes that \( p \), then there is a sentence in which A doesn’t assert \( p \) to A, but merely at A. If one thinks that asserting involves the pretense that one cares about whether A believes that \( p \), then one can argue that one must provide a reasonable defense of \( p \) if appropriately challenged as a way of making it clear that one still cares about whether A believes that \( p \).

\(^{23}\) One might think that a counterexample to this principle is actors. Surely, actors present their lines with the pretense that they are beliefworthy. I think this is false. Given the context of the utterance, I think actors shouldn’t be thought of asserting with the pretense that the content of the assertion is beliefworthy. Rather, they are pretending or acting like someone who presents certain propositions are being beliefworthy.

\(^{24}\) Rescorla (2009a) defends a very similar view about maintaining the pretense of sincerity. I prefer to think of it as the pretense of beliefworthiness because sincerity is only concerned with presenting someone as if *you* believe it, but I think asserting something to another person also involves presenting it as worthy of belief *for them*. 

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successfully assert if one doesn’t maintain the pretense that one’s assertion is beliefworthy. In particular, one must maintain the pretense that the content of one’s assertion is beliefworthy for one’s addressee.25

What does it mean to say that $p$ is beliefworthy? It means that it’s beliefworthy for everyone else in the conversational context in which the assertion is made. After all, asserting that $p$ is not just another way of claiming that one is justified in believing that $p$ or that one knows that $p$. Rather, it is a way of sharing one’s belief with other people. For $p$ to be beliefworthy for others means that there are reasons to believe that $p$ that other people can and should accept. Of course, this epistemic reason to believe that $p$ is just that one asserted that $p$. That is, one’s assertion gives others a reason to believe that $p$.

Moreover, in presenting $p$ as beliefworthy, one is not presenting it as beliefworthy just for right now. That is, it’s not as if asserters are claiming that $p$ is worthy of the addressee’s belief at the time of assertion and no other time. Rather, $p$ is presented as beliefworthy until or unless one gets great evidence against $p$. Thus, asserters are aiming to get addressees to believe that $p$ for some period of time. Hopefully, the addressee will be able to justifiably maintain a belief in $p$ forever.

How can one present $p$ with the pretense that $p$ is beliefworthy for the audience? This requires uttering that $p$ is a neutral or sincere tone without presenting the addressee with any evidence (behavioral or linguistic) that one thinks that $p$ is not beliefworthy for the addressee. Examples of how not to present $p$ with the pretense of its being beliefworthy for the addressee will help bring out what this pretense amounts to. First, there are behavioral ways of giving one’s addressee evidence that $p$ is not beliefworthy for them. For example, if one utters that $p$

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25 Here I’m observing the distinction between a proposition’s being beliefworthy for one (e.g., justified for one) and a proposition’s being beliefworthy for another person. One can be justified in believing that $p$ without someone else being justified in believing that $p$. 
while winking, smiling, or shaking one's head, one does not count as presenting that $p$ with the pretense that it is beliefworthy. And, thus one doesn't count as asserting that $p$.\footnote{Rescorla (2009a) thinks that a pretense of sincerity is required. While I will remain neutral on this, I think a more plausible constitutive requirement is that one maintain the pretense of one's assertion being beliefworthy and that maintaining the pretense of beliefworthiness is a constitutive requirement only insofar as it's required to maintain the pretense of the beliefworthiness of the assertion.} One reason for this is that by performing these actions one gives one's audience evidence that one is trying to communicate information in addition to or other than one explicitly presenting. Second, there are linguistic ways of giving one's addressee evidence that $p$ is not beliefworthy for them. For example, if one utters that $p$ in a sarcastic tone or preface $p$ with, “You shouldn’t believe $p$, but” or “There’s no evidence for $p$ that you'd be willing to accept, but.”

5.3. Premise (2)

Premise 2 involves how one presents one's utterance at the time of utterance. The underlying idea is that if one seriously and sincerely presents some proposition as being worthy of an addressee's belief, then one is committed to the beliefworthiness of that assertion for some period of time unless or until one retracts the assertion.\footnote{However, this is not to say that one can retract one's assertion without being blameworthy or criticizable for it. More on this later.} I take this to be an intuitive claim about assertion or testimony in general. If someone tells you something is the case, then, under normal circumstances, it's reasonable to expect that they still think it's the case 5 minutes later, 2 hours later, 1 day, and so on. Of course, if years go by and the person has simply forgotten what they think about the issue or why they thought the claim was beliefworthy at the time of assertion, then she has a legitimate excuse for no longer believing the proposition. How long asserters are committed to the beliefworthiness of $p$ will vary with context. People forget things or get excellent counter-evidence later on. The more
fundamental a belief is to the asserter’s web of beliefs, the longer she’s committed to its beliefworthiness, all else being equal.

A kind of proof of concept for premise 2 is that every speech act that involves presenting $p$ with (at the very least) the pretense that $p$ is beliefworthy for the addressee for some period of time seems to commit the speaker to the beliefworthiness of $p$ for the audience. Examples of such speech acts include: asserting, testifying, assuring, guaranteeing, swearing, reporting, declaring, and promising (that something is the case). Thus, the kind of presentation involved in asserting is not unique to assertion in particular, but to assertives in general.

Presenting a full view of why sincerely and seriously presenting that $p$ involves taking on a particular commitment to the beliefworthiness of $p$ is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, a brief sketch illustrates what I have in mind. In sincerely and seriously presenting that $p$ as beliefworthy for $A$ we give $A$ evidence that we are communicating with her as an epistemic agent, i.e., as a subject that can weigh epistemic reasons for and against $p$ and who has the ability to inquire into whether $p$. In particular, one is inviting the addressee to fully trust one that $p$. And, when you fully trust someone that $p$, you stop inquiring into whether $p$ and refrain from doubting $p$. In other words, sincerely and seriously presenting that $p$ involves inviting the addressee to rely on one in a way that precludes outside inquiry and doubt. If the addressee trusts you that $p$, then they rely on you that $p$ and are thus vulnerable to having and acting on a false belief. Thus, one is committed to the beliefworthiness of $p$ in part because one invited someone else to rely on one that $p$ is true.

One can think of asserting that $p$ as akin, at least in this regard, to promising to $\phi$. If one seriously and sincerely presents oneself as explicitly communicating “I will $\phi$ for you,” then one is committed to the claim, “I will $\phi$ for you.” Promising, like assertion, intuitively
involves inviting another to trust you. What promising and asserting have in common that generates this invitation to trust is the serious and sincere presentation of a proposition.\footnote{Where the “bindingness” of asserting comes from is a larger question that I cannot answer here, but work on why promising creates obligations is certainly suggestive.}

Of course, one can retract one’s assertion and thereby free oneself of the commitment to the beliefworthy of \( p \). However, as I will argue below, this comes at a cost. For example, it would be rational for a person to trust one less if one consistently retracted what one said. It would give addressees evidence that one is a hasty asserter.

\textit{5.4 Premise (3)}

What kind of commitment is involved in asserting? While there might be moral versions of the commitment, I’m only concerned with an epistemic kind of commitment. This means that if one fails to fulfill one’s commitment, then the person to whom you made the commitment is justified in ceasing to believe what you told them and in negatively epistemically appraising you. This person’s negative epistemic appraisal can be manifest in any of the following ways e.g., reducing their disposition to believe what you say or what you believe, reducing their disposition to ask for your testimony/opinion on related matters, reducing their willingness to engage in joint inquiry (on related topics), etc.\footnote{For a more detailed account of what this negative epistemic appraisal might consist in, see: Kauppinen (2018).} Importantly, this negative epistemic appraisal has nothing to do with the appraisee’s moral character. The appraiser isn’t justified in thinking that the asserter is a bad person or a liar or a bullshitter, etc. What they are justified in thinking is that the asserter is somewhat epistemically
unreliable—regardless of whether it is the asserter’s fault that they are epistemically unreliable.\textsuperscript{30}

Why think that the commitment is epistemic in nature? When one asserts, one represents oneself as having the epistemic authority to so assert. To have the epistemic authority to assert is just to satisfy the norm of assertion. Because the norm of assertion requires being able to provide an epistemic reason, one represents oneself as being able to provide such a reason. This means that the addressee can form a legitimate expectation that one will have the aforementioned ability. If this legitimate expectation is unmet, the addressee will have reason to reduce epistemic trust in the asserter.

As an analogy, consider the following case. Imagine that Betty tells Michael that she despises jazz music, but Michael consistently sees her listening to jazz music and attending jazz concerts and talking about jazz with other people. It strikes me that Michael has good reason to reduce his trust in Betty’s claim that she despises jazz and perhaps he also has good reason to reduce this disposition to trust other claims she makes about her music preferences. In this case, the lack of coherence between Betty’s assertion and her actions gives Michael reason to epistemically criticize her. What goes wrong in this case is that by asserting, “I despise jazz music,” Betty presents the world as being a certain way to Michael, but then her actions provide Michael with evidence that the world is not that way. Likewise, when one asserts that \( p \), one represents oneself as having the authority to assert that \( p \), but when one fails to be able to provide an epistemic reason for \( p \), one provides one’s addressees with evidence that one doesn’t have the authority to assert that \( p \).

\textsuperscript{30} An alternative way of spelling out this epistemic commitment to the beliefworthiness of \( p \) for A is in terms of what expectations it would be legitimate for A to have in virtue of you asserting that \( p \) to her. It’s intuitive that she could legitimately expect you to view \( p \) as beliefworthy for her even after you asserted that \( p \). And, this legitimate expectation would be grounded in the fact that she asserted that \( p \) to her in a serious and sincere manner.
What does this commitment to the beliefworthiness of \( p \) consist in? First, one is committed to having been in the correct epistemic position to assert that \( p \) at the time of the assertion. This is because part of presenting \( p \) as beliefworthy for \( A \) is representing oneself as having the correct epistemic credentials concerning \( p \). In particular, one represents oneself as having epistemic credentials such that if the audience were to trust one’s assertion, then they would come to know that \( p \)—at least under normal circumstances.

Second, one is committed to acting with the pretense that \( p \) is beliefworthy for some period of time after the assertion. \(^3\) How long? For as long as one is committed to the beliefworthiness of \( p \). If one is committed to the beliefworthiness of \( p \) for some period of time, then one cannot act as if \( p \) is not beliefworthy during that period of time.

What follows from one’s commitment to not act as if \( p \) is not beliefworthy? First, one is committed to not asserting \( \neg p \) or anything else that impugns the beliefworthiness of \( p \) for \( A \) for some period of time. Second, one must be able to provide an epistemic reason for \( p \) that makes \( p \) beliefworthy given the conversational context at \( t \). Why? First, one cannot plausibly maintain the beliefworthiness of \( p \) if one refuses to provide any reason to believe that \( p \). Moreover, one cannot provide a poor or mediocre epistemic in favor of \( p \) either. This is because offering such a reason is insufficient for maintaining the pretense that \( p \) is beliefworthy. After all, it’s implausible that the asserter would herself find \( p \) beliefworthy given the (poor or mediocre) reason she presents. That is, the defense must be such that the addressee would find it plausible that the asserter actually finds the proposition beliefworthy.

For example, imagine I tell you that Picasso was a suspect in the Mona Lisa theft of 1911. Now imagine you challenge me to defend this surprising claim and I respond in any of the

\(^3\) Exactly how long will vary with context, but will always be vague. As previously mentioned, we can’t expect someone to be committed to a proposition they asserted for the rest of their lives.
following ways: (a) I dreamt that it happened, (b) I read it in The National Enquirer, (c) I read it in my tea leaves, (d) I heard somewhere that an unnamed painter, who was alive in 1911, was a suspect in the Mona Lisa theft of 1911, or (e) Picasso lived in Paris at the time. These are all poor or mediocre defenses of my claim. More important, if I were to present any one of the above assertions as my defense, it would be reasonable for you doubt that I’m actually trying to defend my original assertion or I think my original assertion is actually beliefworthy.

If presenting obviously bad or mediocre reasons for \( p \) undermines my maintaining the pretense that \( p \) is beliefworthy for A, then I must be able to present a reason for \( p \) that is neither poor nor mediocre. Thus, I must be able to present a reason for \( p \) that makes \( p \) beliefworthy.

Because assertions paradigmatically occur in the context of a conversation with certain stakes and a particular common ground, the epistemic reason(s) provided for \( p \) must make \( p \) beliefworthy given that conversational context at the time of the assertion. After all, conversational contexts involve varying presuppositions, accepted propositions, stakes, epistemic standards, etc. that are likely to rule out certain epistemic reasons as sufficient for making \( p \) beliefworthy. Thus, asserters must be mindful of what the conversational context requires if challenged to provide their epistemic reason for \( p \).

5.5 ASSERT and the Norm of Assertion

The debate about what constitutes the norm of assertion seems to be about what epistemic credential one must have at the time at which one asserts to epistemically permissibly assert that \( p \). So, one might wonder, how it is that one’s ability to provide an epistemic reason for \( p \) can be part of the epistemic norm on assertion given that this ability can only be manifest after the assertion is made? That is, how could one be assessed at \( t \) for something they’re
committed to doing at $t+n$? For example, Rescorla (2009a) thinks that even if something like ASSERT is constitutive of asserting that $p$, it doesn’t follow that one violates the norm of assertion if one cannot provide such a defense at the time that one asserts. He notes that one way to interpret Rawls (1971) on promising is as holding that if one promises to $\phi$ at $t$ and one has no intention at $t$ to PHI, one doesn’t violate one’s promise if at $t+n$ one magically becomes able to $\phi$ and one then $\phi$s. In the case of assertion, Rescorla thinks that one doesn’t violate the norm of assertion if one asserts at $t$ without being able to provide an epistemic reason to believe the content of the assertion so long as one can provide such a reason at the time one is asked or challenged to provide such a reason.

What if the addressee finds out that at the time of the assertion (or promise) one lacked the relevant ability or intention? It seems like there is a sense in which one can negatively assess the asserter (or promisor). Rescorla notes that, in the promise case, we could hold the unreliable promisor morally accountable for promising without the intention of keeping the promise. Likewise, we could hold an asserter morally accountable for asserting without being able to provide a reasonable defense of her assertion. However, being morally accountable for something doesn’t entail being epistemically accountable nor does it entail that one violates a constitutive norm (which is what Rescorla is concerned with). And, of course, the norm of assertion is an epistemic norm, so being morally accountable for violating ASSERT wouldn’t support my claim that it is part of the norm of assertion.

I think that Rescorla misses something important here. Asserting that $p$ is not analogous to just any kind of promise. When one promises to $\phi$, there is often a built-in deadline for $\phi$-ing. For example, if I promise to drive you to the airport, I have to be able to drive you to the airport before your flight. However, asserting doesn’t come with this built-in
Asserting is more analogous to a certain kind of promise, e.g., “I promise to help you to φ if you ever need help φ-ing.” When someone makes this kind of promise, one leaves it up to the promisee when she will fulfill her promise. In asserting, one commits oneself to providing an epistemic reason for p if her addressee asks her for a justification of p. When and whether the addressee issues a challenge is completely up to her. Importantly, the addressee can permissibly challenge the assertion immediately after the assertion is made. This means that the asserter must at least have the ability to offer a reasonable defense of p immediately after she is challenged when she is challenged immediately after asserting that p.

What about Rescorla’s case in which one magically or luckily comes to be able to offer an epistemic reason right after asserting that p and being challenged? This kind of case misconstrues how the norm of assertion works. Sure, it’s possible that someone will gain the ability to provide a reasonable defense immediately after asserting or immediately after being challenged, but socio-epistemic norms are concerned with types of behavior, not tokens. In particular, they are concerned with what usually or reliably happens, not with what could possibly happen. That is, the epistemic credentials required for proper assertion are those credentials which, when had, will most reliably produce or maintain the purpose of the practice of asserting, i.e., to produce knowledge in addressees.

Now, here’s the crucial point: if one cannot provide an epistemic reason that makes p beliefworthy at the time of one’s assertion, it’s very unlikely that one will be able to provide one if challenged immediately after asserting. In addition, when we are challenged to defend our assertions, it’s most often shortly after we make them. Thus, if the point of the norm of assertion is to set out epistemic credentials, which when had, will most reliably (or very
reliably) produce or maintain the purpose of assertion, those credentials will include the ability to provide an epistemic reason for $p$ at the time of one’s assertion.

An analogous point can be made about writing someone a check. If you give them a check for some amount at $t$, then you should have that amount in checking account at $t$. Of course, it’s up to them to cash or deposit the check when they want, but they might want to deposit immediately after being given the check. And, most of the time if you write a check at a time when you have insufficient funds, it’s unlikely that you’ll have sufficient funds by the time the check is deposited or cashed if it’s deposited or cashed right after you write it.

What about cases in which the person doesn’t have the ability to provide an epistemic reason that makes $p$ beliefworthy at the time of her assertion, but she knows that she will be able to provide one when the asserter challenges her? Should we alter ASSERT to accommodate such cases? I don’t think we should. Recall that the norm of assertion is about what is usually or consistently the case and it is almost always true that in order to be able to provide an epistemic reason for $p$, one will have to have the ability to provide such a reason at the time of the assertion. Very rarely will someone lack the ability to provide such a reason at the time of the assertion and simultaneously know that they will be able to offer such a reason when they are challenged.

6. Objections and Clarifications

6.1 ASSERT and Challenges to Assertions

Recall that ASSERT requires that asserters be able to provide an epistemic reason for the content of their assertion that makes that content beliefworthy given the conversational context. One might worry that ASSERT is too strong because there are innumerable assertions that intuitively don’t stand in need of an additional epistemic reason. For example, it would be odd to require that asserters have to be able to provide a reason for $p$ if the
asserted the following, “I feel sick today,” “The store you’re looking for is across the street,” “2+2=4,” and so on. I agree that such assertions don’t require one to be able to provide a non-assertoric epistemic reason for them. But, given the conversational context (especially the common ground), the assertion itself constitutes an epistemic reason that is sufficient for making the content of the assertion beliefworthy. After all, many conversations will have the following propositions in the common ground, “People are incredibly reliable about how they feel,” “People who flat-out assert directions to nearby places are incredibly reliable,” and “All basic arithmetic claims are true.” Thus, ASSERT will most often not require that people provide non-assertoric reasons for the content of their assertions.

Of course, there will be conversational contexts in which ASSERT will require that the asserter be able to provide a non-assertoric epistemic reason for these kinds of assertions. For example, if two mathematicians are arguing over simple arithmetic equations, the person who asserts that “2+2=4” might be required by ASSERT to provide a non-assertoric epistemic reason for the assertion, e.g., an inductive proof.

6.2 ASSERT and Retraction

One might worry that the norm of assertion can’t have ASSERT, because one could always retract an assertion for which one can’t share an epistemic reason. However, it strikes me that most often people are intuitively epistemically criticizable for simply retracting asserting. By “simply retracting,” I mean they merely assert, “I take that back” without taking any blame for having made the assertion in the first place. It seems more natural for someone to retract an assertion that one couldn’t reasonably defend by saying something, such as, “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that” or “I’m sorry, I was too hasty.” This is some evidence that they recognize that they have done something criticizable for which they are now taking
responsibility. Thus, I don’t think that one can get out of ASSERT simply by retracting one’s assertion.

I do think that there is a window of time in which one can retract one’s assertion without penalty. How long this window lasts will vary with context based on the relationship between the asserter and the addressee, the stakes involved, the topic of the assertion, etc. While I will remain neutral on exactly when the window closes, here are two plausible options. First, the window might close when the addressee starts to use their assertion-based belief in their theoretical or practical reasoning. Second, the window might close when the addressee starts to act on their assertion-based belief.

Moreover, the longer one waits to retract and the more the addressee (epistemically or practically) relies on one’s assertion, the less likely one can simply retract one’s assertion without warranting criticism and a decrease in trust. In some circumstances, it strikes me that one cannot retract, e.g., if the other person bases their entire life around your assertion. Imagine a case in which one asserts to another person that she should sell all of her worldly possessions and move to Australia. Imagine that as the addressee is leaving for the airport, one says, “I take back my assertion.”

In this way, assertions are similar to promises. Despite what some think, I think that one can retract a promise without criticism during a certain window of time. In particular, one can legitimately retract one’s promise immediately after one makes it. Imagine that I assert, “I promise to help you move next Monday,” and then I immediately follow with, “Oops! I’m sorry. I forgot that I’m flying to Chicago that day.” It strikes me that one has legitimately and excusably retracted one’s promise.

6.3 Is ASSERT Really Part of the Norm of Assertion?
Recall that most accounts of the norm of assertion assume that the only thing that matters for whether an assertion that \( p \) is epistemically permissible is the epistemic state one is in concerning \( p \) at the time of the assertion. Proponents of such a view might object that their view can explain the intuitions and linguistic data considered above by appealing to the distinction between derivative and non-derivative commitments. A non-derivative commitment accrues to a person in virtue of performing some action, e.g., promising or agreeing to do something. For example, in promising to PHI at \( t \), one takes on the commitment to PHI at \( t \). A derivative commitment accrues to a person in virtue of taking on a \textit{prior} commitment. Derivative commitments are commonly commitments that one takes on in order to make sure one can satisfy the prior commitment. For example, in taking on the commitment to PHI at \( t \) via promising, one also takes on the commitment to not intentionally make it impossible for oneself to PHI at \( t \), e.g., by locking oneself in an inescapable room. With this distinction in mind, the proponent of a statist norm of assertion, e.g., KNA, might argue that in virtue of taking on the commitment to the truth of \( p \) or to one's knowing that \( p \), one takes on a derivative commitment to show one's addressee that one knows that \( p \).\footnote{I thank Lisa Miracchi for helping me see this distinction.}

This response allows proponents of such views to maintain their view while also being able to explain the data above. Thus, in order to show that ASSERT belongs to the norm of assertion, I must show that the commitment that one takes on is a \textit{non-derivative} commitment, i.e., that one takes on that commitment \textit{simply in virtue of asserting} and not in virtue of taking on a prior commitment. However, as I argued above, the commitment to provide an epistemic reason for \( p \) sufficient to make \( p \) beliefworthy given the conversational context derives not from any other commitment but from the fact that at \( t \) one presented \( p \).
with the pretense that \( p \) is beliefworthy for the addressee. Thus, ASSERT is plausibly part of the norm of assertion.

7. A Complete Account of the Norm of Assertion

I’m now in a position to state what I think the norm of assertion is, namely:

**The Know and Tell Norm of Assertion (KTNA):** One may epistemically permissibly assert that \( p \) at \( t \) only if, at \( t \), one knows that \( p \) and one is able to provide epistemic reason(s) sufficient for making \( p \) beliefworthy given the conversational context at the time of the assertion, for some period of time thereafter (unless one retracts the assertion).

In addition to being supported by all the arguments for the Knowledge Norm of Assertion and ASSERT, KTNA seems uniquely situated to explain certain data. For example, consider the following responses to an assertion:

(1) “*How do you know that*?”
(2) “*How could you know that*?”
(3) “*Why do you know that*?”

These responses are common and appropriate and yet they seem to presuppose that the asserter both: (1) knows the content of the assertion and (2) is able to provide grounds of their knowledge, i.e., an epistemic reason. In other words, these responses presuppose that something like KTNA is the norm of assertion. This is data that it seems only KTNA (or something close to it) can explain. While I think more can be said in favor of KTNA, it is beyond the scope of this paper to present it.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that the norm of assertion has a discursive requirement, i.e., ASSERT. According to this requirement: One may epistemically permissibly assert that \( p \) at \( t \) only if, at \( t \), one is able to provide epistemic reason(s) sufficient for making \( p \) beliefworthy given the conversational context at the time of the assertion, for some period of time thereafter (unless
one retracts the assertion). I argued that there is both explanatory and theoretical support for ASSERT. In particular, I argued that ASSERT: (1) can explain linguistic data and our intuitions about assertion based on isolated, secondhand knowledge, and (2) follows from the very nature of the act of asserting. Finally, I argued that the once we combine my arguments for the Knowledge Norm from the last chapter with my arguments for ASSERT in this chapter, we get the Know and Tell Norm of Assertion.
CHAPTER 3
The Understanding Why Norm of Moral Assertion

1. Introduction

Think about who you would go to for moral advice or for help resolving a moral dilemma. You would probably go to a friend, family member, or clergy. After all, we want someone who has similar moral beliefs as we do. But we don’t want advice or help from just anyone who shares our moral beliefs. For example, we wouldn’t want moral advice from a psychopath who had merely memorized a bunch of moral facts or from someone who has no moral intuitions, i.e., nothing ever strikes him as being right or as being wrong. So, what epistemic credentials do we want asserters of moral assertions to have? I want to propose a norm of moral assertion that neatly separates the epistemically deficient moral assertions from the epistemically kosher moral assertions. To do this, I introduce to you a cast of characters, some of whose moral assertions are intuitively epistemically impermissible and some of whose moral assertions are intuitively epistemically permissible. What unites the first set of characters, I will argue, is that they don’t “get it.”¹ That is, they don’t understand why the content of their assertion is true. They may know that what they say is true or justifiably believe that it’s true, but they don’t see or grasp why. What unites the second set of characters is that they do get it, i.e., they understand why the content of their moral assertions is true. These observations, I will argue, support what I’ll call the Understanding Why Norm of moral assertion (UWN). According to UWN, a moral assertion is epistemically permissible only if the asserter adequately gets (i.e., understands) why the asserted moral proposition is true. In

¹ I borrow this terminology from Howard (manuscript).
addition, I argue that UWN is good theoretical motivation, e.g., it has the kind of features
we would expect a norm of moral assertion to have.

One might wonder whether there’s something special about moral assertion such that
it has a different norm from ‘garden-variety’ assertion. First, many think that there is
something amiss with moral testimony even when the testifier asserts from knowledge and
the addressee acquires knowledge. Perhaps the problem has to do with the epistemic
credentials of the asserter, e.g., lacking moral understanding explains what is amiss. Second,
as Simion (2018) notes, just because a type of action has a particular requirement, it doesn’t
follow that sub-types of that type don’t have additional requirements. For example, just
because dancing has certain rules, it doesn’t follow that waltzing has all and only the same
rules as dancing in general. There might be waltzing-specific rules in addition to general rules
of dance. Third, some think that the goal of moral inquiry is importantly different from that
of general inquiry. ² Whereas knowledge might be the goal for the latter, some kind of
understanding might be the goal for the former.³ Fourth, some think that other normative
domains, e.g., aesthetics, have special epistemic norms of assertion.⁴ Thus, I think there’s
good reason to think that moral assertion has a distinctive norm of assertion.

Our story goes as follows. In section 2, I will explain what counts as a moral assertion
and introduce the basic idea of a norm of moral assertion. In section 3, I introduce our main
characters and argue that standard accounts of the norm of assertion cannot explain why
their assertions are intuitively epistemically improper.

² See, e.g.: Hills (2009).
³ Following Pritchard (2016), I think that the goal of inquiry or epistemically ideal state and what epistemic
legitimately closes inquiry are different.
⁴ For a special norm of aesthetic assertion, see: Robson (2015), Ninan (2014), and Morgan (2017). To be clear,
Ninan thinks that the norm of moral aesthetic assertion is knowledge, but that aesthetic knowledge requires
first-hand acquaintance with the object of appraisal. Thus, the norm of aesthetic assertion is still importantly
different from the norm of “garden-variety” assertion.
2. Moral Assertion and The Norm of Assertion

2.1 Moral Assertions

I will primarily be concerned with flat-out, pure, moral assertions. These assertions are purely moral because all they do is predicate a thin moral property of some action, event, state of affairs, etc. These assertions are flat-out in that they are unhedged. Familiar ways of hedging include adding “I believe,” “I think,” “might have,” or “perhaps” to one’s statement. For example, instead of uttering, “Chetan moved to Chicago,” one would utter, “I believe Chetan moved to Chicago” or “Perhaps Chetan moved to Chicago.” To be clear, the content of all these assertions is, “Chetan Moved to Chicago,” and what the hedges add is that one is explicit about one’s attitude toward that content or one’s evidence for the content. The overarching idea of what happens when one hedges one’s assertion that \( p \) is that one weakens one’s commitment to \( p \).\(^5\) Exactly what this commitment consists in need not concern us here, but options include whether one is committed to defending \( p \) or whether one is appropriately liable to blame if not-\( p \).\(^6\)

2.2 The Norm of Moral Assertion

What kind of norm is the norm of assertion? As I will understand it, the norm of assertion (for an assertion in any domain) is an epistemic requirement that an asserter must meet in order for her assertion to be epistemically proper or permissible. It is certainly true that assertion, as a kind of act, is governed by many kinds of norms, e.g., moral, rational, social, and so on. However, my interest will solely be with what affects the epistemic propriety or permissibility of assertions.

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\(^5\) For more on hedging, see: Benton & van Elswyk (2019).
\(^6\) For more on such commitments, see: Shapiro (2019).
To say that an assertion is epistemically impermissible is to say that the asserter is criticizable for so asserting. Here, I follow Kelp & Simion (2017) in thinking that a person’s epistemic criticizability is distinct from her epistemic blameworthiness—although we differ on the details. If someone is epistemically criticizable for asserting that $p$, then one’s addressee’s (and perhaps overhearers) will often be justified in weakening (to some degree) their disposition to believe one’s other $p$-related assertions, recommend one to others seeking information about $p$-related topics, or engage in joint inquiry with one on $p$-related topics. That person will also often be justified in making their reduced epistemic confidence in one manifest to one concerning $p$-related topics. She might even be justified in making her reduced epistemic confidence in one manifest to others that one is discussing $p$-related issues with.

On the other hand, if someone is epistemically blameworthy for asserting that $p$, then one’s addressee’s (and perhaps overhearers) will often be justified in treating one the same as if one were criticizable for violating the norm of assertion. However, one will be justified in treating blameworthy asserter in this way, even if their assertions are not criticizable, i.e., even if they meet the norm of assertion. Moreover, when one is epistemically blameworthy, it will also often be fitting for one’s audience to form (or increase) negative attitudes about one’s intellectual character. For example, they might be justified in thinking that one is epistemically lazy, negligent, reckless, careless, self-centered, etc.

Furthermore, certain negative affective responses might be fitting. These will be affective reactions that are responses to epistemic failings. For example, imagine you witness a flat-earther criticizing a NASA astronomer’s view that the earth is round. You might experience a bit of anger or resentment and think to yourself, “What a moron!” Or imagine that your doctor gives you the wrong diagnosis and you find out that it was a big mistake on
her part. You might be indignant and think, “She should have known better!” Here you have a negative affective reaction to an epistemic failing as opposed to a moral one.\footnote{For more on epistemic reactive attitudes, see: Tollefsen (2017).}

The norm of assertion should be understood as a criterion for “right” or “proper” assertion and not as a decision procedure for deciding whether to assert. That is, the norm of assertion lists the conditions that must be met for an assertion to be epistemically permissible or right or proper. However, this norm doesn’t tell us what decision procedure we should use in deciding whether or not to assertion some proposition.\footnote{This distinction maps on the criterion of rightness/decision procedure distinction in normative ethics. For a classic articulation of this distinction in ethics, see: Railton (1984).}

Finally, the norm of assertion should be thought of as a general rule, which if followed, will maximize the chances of fulfilling the purpose of the governed practice—without simultaneously restricting the practice so much that the practice becomes ineffective. For example, we have certain traffic rules, e.g., don’t drive through a red light and don’t drive over the speed limit. Now, of course, there will be times when it’s totally safe to drive over the speed limit, e.g., if no one’s around. However, the driver in that case is still in violation of the rule and thus subject to citation. Thus, in assertion cases, we want a norm that tells us when it’s “safe” to assert which is such that, if it were generally adhered to, would maximize successful assertion (i.e., putting the addressee in a position to understand why the assertion is true) without simultaneously making the practice of assertion ineffective at putting addressees in a position to understand why the claim is true.\footnote{I’m also convinced by Milić (2017) that the cases presented by Lackey and others are cases someone is making a hedged assertion, e.g., “According to the best evidence, evolution is true.” The asserters in these cases know the hedged assertion and thus they are asserting in accordance with KNA.}

Second, the norm of assertion, much like the speed limit, doesn’t eliminate all risk. There will still be circumstances in which assertions fail to put addressees in a position to

\footnote{For more on epistemic reactive attitudes, see: Tollefsen (2017).}
\footnote{This distinction maps on the criterion of rightness/decision procedure distinction in normative ethics. For a classic articulation of this distinction in ethics, see: Railton (1984).}
\footnote{I’m also convinced by Milić (2017) that the cases presented by Lackey and others are cases someone is making a hedged assertion, e.g., “According to the best evidence, evolution is true.” The asserters in these cases know the hedged assertion and thus they are asserting in accordance with KNA.}
understand just as there will still be a car accident when you are driving the speed limit. However, such failures will most often be explained by the audience. If one is reliably asserting because one is asserting on the basis of understanding, then one is doing everything right on one's end.

3. Eliminating the Implausible (Part 1)

Most philosophers writing on the norm of assertion think that one of the following accounts (or something close to it) is correct:

**The Truth Norm (TNA):** One may assert that \( p \) only if \( p \).

**The Justified Belief Norm (JBNA):** One may assert that \( p \) only if one justifiably believes that \( p \).

**The Reasonable to Believe Norm (RBNA):** One may assert that \( p \) only if it is reasonable for one to believe that \( p \).

**The Knowledge Norm of Assertion (KNA):** One may assert that \( p \) only if one knows that \( p \).

Let us refer to the disjunction of these accounts as *The Standard View*. In what follows, I argue that The Standard View fails for moral assertion.

### 3.3 The Inquisitive Psychopath

Cyrus is a psychopath who is intrigued by morality. He's read a lot about morality, but still doesn't *get it*, i.e., understand why any particular moral claim is true. When people make moral assertions, e.g., “You shouldn't lie,” he challenges the asserters by asking:

10 Proponents of TNA include: Weiner (2005) and Whiting (2013).
11 Proponents of JBNA include: Kvanvig (2009 and 2011)
12 Proponents of some version of RBNA (or a nearby view) include: Douven (2006), Lackey (2008), and McKinnon (2015).
(6). “What’s your evidence?”
(7). “Who taught you that?”
(8). “Where did you learn/hear that?”

There is something odd about the way that Cyrus challenges moral assertions. Cyrus is treating moral assertions like assertions about the weather, taxes, answers to problem sets, etc. But moral inquiry works differently. As Coady (1992) notes, “When someone tells me that what I am proposing to do is immoral, I do not react by asking for his credentials but for his reasons.” That is, we want to know why he thinks his claim is true, so that we can assess it for ourselves. We usually don’t want evidence that it’s true, we want an explanation of why it’s true. This is why the primary way of challenging a moral assertion is to ask “Why?” or “Why not?” And, asking for a person’s reasons or asking, “Why?” presupposes that the asserter has an answer and can express it. Given this and the fact that it’s common and intuitively appropriate to ask “Why?” it looks like audiences are justified in believing that the asserter can tell or show them why.

Notice further that it is often odd and uncommon to respond to or challenge non-moral assertions by asking, “Why?” Consider the following examples:

(9). “It’s going to rain today.”
   “Why?”

(10). “Valletta is the capital of Malta.”
   “Why?”

(11). “2 + 2 = 4.”
   “Why?”

14 Perhaps this question could be interpreted as asking, “What is your reasoning?” “Why is this true?”, but that is not the interpretation of these questions that I’m appealing to. Cyrus is meant to be asking the same kind of question that one would ask to challenge a scientific claim or matter of observation, because he doesn’t understand how people come to grasp moral facts.
15 Coady (1992), 71.
16 I think the better contrast is between normative and non-normative assertions. But I will only focus on moral assertions in this context. I will also use non-moral to also mean non-normative.
To be clear, it’s often appropriate to ask a non-moral assertor why they believe what they have asserted, but the why-question above (and involved in responding to moral assertions) should be interpreted as asking, “Why is that true?” I also don’t deny that “Why?” is sometimes an appropriate challenge to non-moral assertions. My point is rather that “Why?” is the primary way to challenge moral assertions, but it is not the primary way to challenge non-moral assertions.

However, The Standard View cannot explain: (1) Cyrus’ challenges are infelicitous and (2) why asking “Why?” the primary way to challenge moral assertions. After all, one doesn’t need to be able to justify one’s belief to others in order for one’s belief to be justified for oneself or in order for one to know something. Even internalists about justification don’t defend such a requirement. Some require being able to access the grounds of one’s belief, but that doesn’t entail that one is able to articulate those grounds.17

3.2 The Deferrer and the Rememberer

Denny Deferrer regularly forms his moral beliefs solely on the basis of what moral experts assert. One day, his friend, Ned, comes to him for moral advice. Ned wants to know whether it would be morally permissible to divorce his spouse. On the one hand, they’ve been together for many years and are raising young children. The divorce will certainly be tough on them. On the other hand, Ned is no longer in love with his spouse and desires to find someone with whom he is in love. Denny tells Ned that he’ll get back to him. The next day, Denny calls Ned and says, “It’s permissible for you to divorce your wife even though it will be hard on the kids.” Ned thanks his Denny and then out of curiosity, he asks, “How did you figure out what to do?” Denny responds, “I asked a moral expert about your case and he told

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17 Gerken (2012) is an exception. According to his Discursive Justification-Assertion account, one’s assertion is epistemic warranted only if one is able to articulate context-appropriate reasons for the content of one’s assertion.
me that it is permissible for you to get a divorce. Don’t worry, they’re reliable; I’ve used them a bunch in the past.” Taken aback, Ned asks, “So you don’t understand why it’s morally permissible for me to file for divorce?” Denny responds, “No. Not at all.” It seems like Denny is criticizable for having given him this moral advice (via assertion) without getting why what he said is true.

Now consider Richard Rememberer. Richard’s friend wants to know if Mayan human sacrifice was wrong and he thinks that Richard is a reliable source for moral information. Richard hasn’t thought about the issue in many years and he can’t remember what the moral reasons for and against this practice are. However, it appears memorially to him that Mayan human sacrifice was wrong despite the fact that he really cannot remember why it was wrong. Thus, Richard’s memorial knowledge that Mayan human sacrifice is wrong is isolated from other of his moral beliefs and beliefs about moral reasons. Despite this, he asserts, “It was morally wrong for the Mayans to engage in human sacrifice.” Despite the fact that Richard asserts from knowledge, it’s intuitive that there is something suboptimal about her assertion.18

What unites Denny and Richard is that their moral assertions are made solely on the basis of opaque evidence or an opaque belief-forming process. A piece of evidence for a moral proposition is opaque just in case it doesn’t tell you why the proposition is true. For example, induction, abduction, and testimony can provide evidence for moral propositions, but they don’t generally tell one why the proposition is true. A belief-forming process is opaque just in case the person who uses it isn’t aware (and has no reason to think) that they’re using it.

The Standard View cannot explain why there is something amiss with Denny’s and Richard’s assertions. This is because it seems that Denny and Richard have knowledge or at

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18 This is based on a case from BonJour (1985, 41).
least justified true beliefs. In fact, these cases cover both internalist (Denny) and externalist (Richard) conceptions of justification.

To be clear, I’m not interpreting the Standard View as providing sufficient conditions for appropriate assertion. Thus, these cases are not meant as straightforward counterexamples. Rather, the thought is that the Standard View has nothing to say at all about these cases. Moreover, the norm of moral assertion is meant as the set of all necessary conditions for epistemically proper assertion and epistemic positions in the Standard View seem too weak. This is at least because it seems like a necessary condition for an epistemically appropriate moral assertion is that the asserter has some idea of why the moral proposition she asserts is true. However, the Standard View doesn’t require that a person have some idea of why the moral proposition is true and thus cannot provide an account of all the necessary conditions for epistemically proper assertion.

3.3 The Moral Amnesiac

Amy Amnesiac has recently suffered a head injury which had the curious effect that she lost her grasp of why certain moral propositions are true. When asks what about her moral views, she makes the following assertions:

1. “You’re morally required to donate at least 10% of your income to charity, but I don’t understand why (you’re morally required to donate at least 10% of your income to charity).”
2. “It’s morally wrong to lie to someone just to avoid an unpleasant situation, but I don’t see or grasp why (it’s morally wrong to lie to someone just to avoid an unpleasant situation).
3. “Punishment should always be proportional to the crime committed, but I don’t get why that is.”
4. “It’s morally good to help the needy, but I don’t know what the morally relevant considerations are or how they bear on the moral goodness of helping the needy.”
5. “Lying by omission is morally wrong. That said, I have no idea why.”

There is something infelicitous about Amy’s assertion here. However, the Standard View cannot explain the infelicity of any of these conjunctions. After all, none of the disjuncts that
comprise The Standard View requires understanding why \( p \) (as in (1)), grasping or getting why \( p \) (as in (2)) and (3)), knowing the moral considerations that bear on whether \( p \) (as in (4)), or knowing why something is true (as in (5)).

3.4 Peer Disagreement and The Moral Maverick

Michael is a moral maverick. He is the son of a slave owner in the antebellum South of the United States. He has lived on the same estate as slaves his entire life. Now twenty-one, Michael’s long-lived doubts about the morality of slavery have come to a head and he now knows that slavery is wrong and he also gets why. For example, he sees that there is no moral difference between his family and the slaves that they own. During an argument with father, he says, “How could you be so blind? Slavery is wrong!” I submit that Michael’s assertion that slavery is wrong is intuitively epistemically permissible, i.e., he has the right epistemic credentials to make this moral assertion.

Michael’s case illustrates a problem for The Standard View (excluding the truth norm). The fact that many equally well-informed people during the antebellum south disagree about the morality of slavery means that each of that Michael has a psychological or normative defeater for his justification or knowledge that slavery is wrong. But his assertion is intuitively epistemically permissible. So, it looks like neither justification nor knowledge is necessary for epistemically permissible assertion.

But the situation is worse for The Standard View (excluding the truth norm). This is because there is massive and systematic peer disagreement about many moral matters, e.g., abortion, euthanasia, contraception, cloning, prostitution, polygamy, stem cell research, etc.\(^{19}\) This suggests that only trivial or obviously true moral propositions (e.g., torture is

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\(^{19}\) Goldberg (2015) uses the fact of massive peer disagreement in philosophy, politics, science, and religion to motivate a context-sensitive norm of assertion in which avoids entailing that many of our assertions are epistemically impermissible.
wrong, killing is worse than lying (all else being equal), 5 deaths are morally worse than 1 (all else being equal)) will be epistemically permissible. But that clearly we make lots of epistemically permissible moral assertions—even able non-trivial matters.

4. Eliminating the Implausible (Part 2)

Recall that The Standard View couldn’t explain: (1) why asking “Why?” is the primary way of challenging a moral assertion, (2) why assertions based on opaque sources were intuitively suboptimal, (3) or why it sounds infelicitous to assert a moral proposition and that one doesn’t understand/grasp/get why that proposition is true. In this section, I will present two plausible accounts of the norm of moral assertion that do better with these linguistic data, but which are ultimately implausible.

4.1 The Knowledge Why Norm

According to the Knowledge Why Norm: it is epistemically permissible for one to assert \( p \), where \( p \) is a moral proposition, only if one knows why \( p \). First, KWN can explain why there is something amiss with Denny Deferrer’s and Richard Rememberer’s assertions: they don’t know why \( p \). Thus, when they asserted that \( p \), they violated KWN. Second, it can explain the infelicity of Amy Amnesiac’s assertion, “Lying by omission is morally wrong. That said, I have no idea why.” This is because if one knows why \( p \), then one often has some idea of why \( p \). Third, KWN can also explain why it’s common and appropriate to challenge a moral assertion by asking “Why?” If challengers are justified in assuming that moral asserters know why the propositions they assert are true, then it wouldn’t be surprising that challenging a moral assertion by asking “Why?” is appropriate.

The first problem with KWN is it can’t explain why most of Amy Amnesiac’s assertions are infelicitous (i.e., (1)-(3). This is because few people think that moral knowledge why \( p \) requires moral understanding of why \( p \) or seeing/grasping/appreciating why \( p \) or
knowing how some morally relevant considerations bear on \( p \). All of this can be seen by the fact that many philosophers (especially those in the debate about moral deference) believe that (a) one can get moral knowledge from testimony and (b) one cannot get moral understanding from testimony.\(^{20}\)

Moreover, there are at least two ways that KWN can be cashed out. First, one can know that \( p \) and know that \( q \) is why \( p \), where these two pieces are isolated from each other. By “isolated,” I mean that one’s belief that \( p \) is not based on \( q \) nor does not grasp that \( q \) is why \( p \). If one’s belief that \( p \) is not based on one’s belief that \( q \), there is a sense in which one’s explanation, “\( p \) because \( q \),” is insincere. After all, if you don’t base your belief that \( p \) on \( q \), why should your addressee?

The second way of cashing out KWN involves basing one’s belief that \( p \) on \( q \), where \( q \) is why \( p \). In this case, one might base one’s belief that \( p \) on \( q \) because one grasps the dependence relationship between them. If this is true, then one has some degree of understanding of why \( p \) and thus KWN will be a version of UWN.

Michael the moral maverick also poses a problem for KWN. If systematic peer disagreement defeats a lot of people’s justification or knowledge that some action is wrong is defeated, then it also defeats their justified belief or knowledge of why that action is wrong. For example, one can’t know that \( p \) because \( q \), but not know that \( p \). This would be like saying, “I know that \( p \) is true because of \( q \), but I don’t know that \( p \) is true.” However, it is clear that one can epistemically permissibly make moral assertions even when one’s knowledge is defeated by one’s awareness of peer disagreement.

4.2 The Explanation Proffering Norm

Another account of the norm of moral assertion that might be able to explain the data above is Simion (2018)’s Explanation Proffering Norm, according to which:

*The Explanation Proffering Norm of Moral Assertion (EPN):*

At a context C, one’s moral assertion that \( p \) is epistemically permissible only if: (1) one knows that \( p \) and (2) one’s assertion is accompanied by a C-appropriate explanation of why \( p \).

Simion doesn’t think that satisfying EPN is sufficient for generating moral understanding or understanding in one’s audience. The audience must participate as well by thinking through the issues themselves and running the relevant considerations “through [their] own rational capacities in order to ‘grasp’ how things hang together.”21 This is why Simion requires moral asserters to provide an explanation of why the asserted proposition is true.

First, EPN can explain why there is something amiss with Denny Deferrer’s and Richard Rememberer’s assertions: they do not and are not able to accompany their moral assertion with a C-appropriate explanation of why \( p \). Thus, when they asserted that \( p \), they violated EPN. Second, it can explain the infelicity of Amy Amnesiac’s assertion, “Lying by omission is morally wrong. That said, I have no idea why.” This is because one must have some idea why lying by omission is morally wrong in order to be able to accompany one’s assertion with a C-appropriate explanation of why lying by omission is morally wrong. Third, EPN can also explain why it’s common and appropriate to challenge a moral assertion by asking “Why?” EPN requires asserters to always accompany their assertions with a C-appropriate explanation of why their claim is true, which is just an answer to the “Why?” question.

However, EPN has some of the same problems as KWN. First, it can’t explain the infelicity of most of Amy Amnesiac’s assertions (i.e., (1)-(3)) because it doesn’t require

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21 Simion (2018), 483.
understanding or a grasp why $p$. Second, because EPN requires knowledge that $p$ for one’s assertion to be proper, it predicts that many intuitively appropriate moral assertions (e.g., Michael the maverick’s assertion) are epistemically improper. After all, systematic peer disagreement seems to defeat many people’s knowledge of moral propositions.

Moreover, EPN has its own unique flaw. EPN entails that it is never epistemically permissible to make a flat-out pure moral assertion, e.g., “It is wrong to lie by omission.” One’s moral assertion must always be followed by a context-appropriate explanation of why the assertion is true. However, we often make flat-out pure moral assertions without immediately providing a context-appropriate explanation of why they’re true. Recall again Michael the maverick’s assertion. There are also cases in which a person is having trouble weighing two or more competing values. For example:

**Moral Advice:** Alex is talking to Ben about a story he read online about a woman who witnessed her friend’s fiancé cheating on her friend. Alex asks Ben, what do you think that person should have done? Ben asserts, “The morally best thing to do in this case is to tell the friend what she saw.”

Neither Ben nor his assertion seems epistemically criticizable, despite the fact that the latter was not followed by a context-appropriate explanation.

Finally, when parents are teaching their children how to behave, they make lots of moral assertions without providing anything like a context-appropriate explanation, e.g., “You shouldn’t hit your brother,” “Lying is wrong” or “You shouldn’t do something you wouldn’t want someone to do to you.” In fact, accompanying these assertions with an explanation will often only serve to confuse children rather than generate moral understanding.
Thus, it seems rather implausible that it’s never epistemically permissible to make a moral assertion without accompanying it with an explanation of why it’s true and so EPN is implausible.

5. The Understanding Why Norm

Now that we’ve seen that a range of accounts of the norm of moral assertion fail, I turn my attention to an alternative norm that can explain all the above data, avoid the pitfalls of the other accounts, and satisfy several theoretical desiderata. In the rest of the paper, I will defend the following norm of moral assertion:

The Understanding Why Norm (UWN): It is epistemically permissible for one to assert that $p$, where $p$ is a moral proposition, only if one adequately understands why $p$.

However, in order to properly defend this account of the norm of moral assertion, I must first explain what I mean by “understand why” and “adequately understand why.” I now turn to those tasks in turn.

5.1 Toward an Account of Moral Understanding

There are two broad camps in the (moral and non-moral) understanding literature: reductionism and non-reductionism. According to reductionists, (moral) understanding can be reduced to pieces of moral knowledge. According to non-reductionists, (moral) understanding cannot be reduced to mere moral knowledge. This is for either (or both) of two reasons: (a) it involves some kind of ability or know-how that can’t be reduced to just more knowledge or (b) it has a non-cognitive component, e.g., one must be disposed to have fitting affective responses. I think non-reductionism is true and will shortly sketch a view

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22 Reductionists include: Sliwa (2014 and 2017) and Riaz (2015).
23 Non-reductionists include: Hill (2009 and 2016), Callahan (2018), and Howard (2018).
about what is involved in moral understanding. However, I think a reductionist could alter some of my arguments to match their preferred view.

In order to see the plausibility of the Understanding Why Norm of moral assertion, I need to explain what I take moral understanding why to consist in. First, understanding why \( p \) is factive, i.e., one can only understand why \( p \) if \( p \) (is true). Second, understanding why \( p \) requires one to believe that \( p \). Third, one must have a view about why \( p \), e.g., \( q \). Fourth, understanding why \( p \) involves a kind of grasp or appreciation of why \( p \). The object of one's grasp is not a proposition, but the relationship between moral properties and the non-moral properties that ground or generate those moral properties. Grasping why \( p \) involves seeing the support, dependence, generative, grounding, or coherence-making relationship between moral property, \( M \), and the non-moral property, \( N \), that grounds or generates \( M \). In other words, you see how these properties “hang together.”

What does a cognitive grasp of why \( p \) consist in? If one cognitively grasps why action \( a \) has \( M \), and \( N \) is why \( a \) has \( M \), then the following conditions hold (where \( M \) is the only moral property of \( a \) and \( N \) is the only non-moral property that bares on \( M \)). First, one is sensitive to the dependence of \( M \) on \( N \), i.e., one would correctly judge that \( a \) no longer has \( M \) if \( N \) were removed. Second, one is sensitive to the dependence of \( M \) only on \( N \), i.e., if non-moral properties that are morally irrelevant were removed from or added to \( a \), one would still judge that \( a \) had \( M \). Third, one is sensitive to the universal relevance of \( N \) to the moral status of actions in general, i.e., one would correctly judge that property \( N \) would

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24 One question that I won’t answer here is whether a grasp consists in, merely involves, or follows from the sensitivities that I mention below. However, I’m inclined to think that one has the sensitivities that I mention in virtue of having a correct mental representation of the support, dependence, coherence-making relationship between the moral property (or properties) and the non-moral property (or properties) that ground or generate them. For a defense of this kind of view, see: Hazlett (2018 and forthcoming).
make a difference to the moral properties that other actions have—at least in the absence of other morally relevant properties. Fourth, if an action similar to $a$, call it $a_2$ had $N$ and no other morally relevant properties, then one would judge that $a_2$ has (or probably) has $M$.

Fifth, one is sensitive to the presence of $M$ in general, i.e., one can correctly judge when other actions have property $M$—for some range of actions. After all, it would strange if one could only recognize wrongness in a single token or type of action, e.g., Paul's lie or lying in general is wrong.

What does a non-cognitive grasp of why $p$ consist in? If one non-cognitively grasps why action $a$ has $M$, and $N$ is why $a$ has $M$, then the following conditions hold (where $M$ is the only moral property of $a$ and $N$ is the only non-moral property that bares on $M$). First, one is affectively or cognitively sensitive to the dependence of $M$ on $N$, i.e., one would cease having the fitting affective or conative reaction to $a$ if $N$ were removed. For example, if $a$ were wrong and the wrong-making property was removed, one would cease having the desire that $a$ not be performed or one would cease being disposed to being indignant if $a$ were performed. Second, one is affectively or cognitively sensitive to the dependence of $M$ only on $N$, i.e., if non-moral properties that are morally irrelevant were removed from or added to $a$, one would still have (or be disposed to have) the fitting affective or conative reactions to $a$'s performance. For example, if $a$ were wrong because it constitutes an act of deception, then one would still hope that it is not performed and feel sad if it were performed even if it was performed on Tuesday instead of Monday. Third, one is affectively or cognitively sensitive to the universal relevance of $N$ to the moral status of actions in general, i.e., one would have (or be disposed to have) the fittingly affective or conative reactions other actions that had property $N$—at least in the absence of other morally relevant properties. For example, if the signing of a policy had the same morally relevant property as an intentional mugging (i.e.,
psychologically harming an innocent person), one would have (or be disposed to have) the same range of fitting affective or conative reactions to each. Fourth, if an action similar to \( a \), call it \( a_2 \) had N and no other morally relevant properties, then one would have (or be disposed to have) the same range of fitting affective and conative reaction to \( a_2 \) as one has to \( a \). For example, if \( a \) is an act of lying and \( a_2 \) is an act of misleading about the same content as \( a \), then one would have (or be disposed to have) the same range of fitting affective and conative reactions to the same degree. Fifth, one is affectively or cognitively sensitive to the presence of M in general, i.e., one would have (or be disposed to have) a range of fitting affective or conative reactions to any (or some range) of actions that have property M. In particular, one would have (or be disposed to have) either the same affective or conative reaction or at least affective or conative reactions with the same valence as one’s reaction to \( a \).

Both cognitive and non-cognitive grasps come in degrees and it is vague exactly to what degree what must have each ability to come as having a grasp. In addition, having a grasp of the relationship between M and N is multiply realizable, i.e., different combinations of different sensitivities to different degrees can equally count as having a grasp.

In virtue of having either a cognitive or non-cognitive grasp, one will most often have some set of active or passive maieutic abilities concerning \( a \), M, and N (where \( a \) has M in virtue of having N):

**Active Maieutic Abilities**

i. One can explain why \( a \) has M (i.e., because of N) in one’s own words.

ii. One can give a metaphorical explanation of why \( a \) has M in one’s own words, where the metaphorical explanation is not the actual explanation, but close to it. For example, one would explain the wrong of manipulating someone for one’s own purposes as being that one treats them *like a tool*.

iii. One can explain whether \( a \) will have M if some range of non-moral properties (e.g., N and morally irrelevant properties) are removed or added.

iv. One can provide examples of other actions (both similar and dissimilar to \( a \)) that have M in virtue of having N.
v. One can provide examples of other actions (both similar and dissimilar to \(a\)) that have M in virtue of having a non-moral property similar to N (e.g., \(a\) constitutes misleading as opposed to lying).

vi. One can provide examples of other actions \((a_{2,n})\) (both similar and dissimilar to \(a\)) that have M, but not in virtue of having N or a non-moral property similar to N (e.g., \(a_2\) is wrong because it constitutes killing an innocent person instead of constituting lying to an innocent person).

Passive Maieutic Abilities

i. One can follow an explanation of why \(a\) has M (i.e., because of N).

ii. One can follow a metaphorical explanation of why \(a\) has M.

iii. One can accurately confirm or deny an explanation of why \(a\) has M.

iv. One can accurately confirm or deny whether \(a\) will have M if some range of non-moral properties (e.g., N and morally irrelevant properties) are removed or added.

v. One can accurately confirm or deny whether other actions (both similar and dissimilar to \(a\)) that have M in virtue of having N.

vi. One can accurately confirm or deny whether other actions (both similar and dissimilar to \(a\)) have M in virtue of having a non-moral property similar to N (e.g., \(a\) constitutes misleading as opposed to lying).

vii. One can accurately confirm or deny whether other actions \((a_{2,n})\) (both similar and dissimilar to \(a\)) have M, where \(a_{2,n}\) do not have M in virtue of having N or a non-moral property similar to N.

Here I differ from Hills (2009 and 2016) in thinking that these maieutic or explanatory abilities are a result of having a grasp of why \(a\) has M as opposed to partly constituting this grasp.

5.2 Understanding Without Knowledge

Below I will argue that an advantage of UWN is that moral understanding is compatible with certain defeaters that moral knowledge is not compatible with and thus the UWN has explanatory power that KWN does not. This means I need to show why it is at least plausible to think that moral understanding doesn't require moral knowledge.

The first kind of case in which moral understanding can come apart from moral knowledge is one involving environmental luck. Consider the following case:

**Factory Farming:** A group of first-year high school students are taking an animal ethics course. The professor assigns a standard animal ethics textbook. However, a pro-meat eating group messed with the textbook and replaced all the good arguments
that factory farming is immoral with bad arguments that factory farming is not immoral. Of the 100 students, Michelle is the only student to get the original textbook with good arguments. Michelle reads how factory farming involves causing millions of sentient creatures (e.g., chickens, cows, turkeys, etc.) extreme amounts of physical and psychological pain and the only reason in favor of it seems to be that people like to eat meat. On the basis of her reading, Michelle comes to truly believe that factory farming is morally wrong and she comes to grasp the support relationship between the fact <factory farming involves causing millions of sentient tremendous pain without a sufficient justifying reason> and the fact <factory farming is morally wrong>. She can also tell that other actions or practices would be wrong if they involved causing sentient beings tremendous pain without a sufficient justifying reason. Moreover, she can tell that if factory farming no longer involves such pain it might be morally permissible.25

Some philosophers think that Michelle’s belief that factory farming is wrong can’t amount to knowledge because it is too lucky that she got the only correct textbook. That is, she could so easily have gotten one of the 99 bad textbooks and come to believe that factory farming doesn’t involve causing tremendous pain to sentient creatures without a sufficient justification and that factory farming is not wrong. However, her grasp of the relationship between the fact that factory farming involves causing tremendous pain to sentient creatures and the fact that factory farming is wrong is not so lucky. We can imagine that she would not easily fail to grasp the relationship between these facts. Moreover, factory farming is wrong and it is wrong because of the tremendous pain involved. So, it looks like Michelle understands why factory farming is wrong without knowing that it’s wrong.

Another kind of case where moral understanding and moral knowledge come apart is when one has a defeater for one’s knowledge but not for one’s understanding. For example, imagine an amended version of Factory Farming where everyone got the correct textbook (including Michelle) and Michelle once again comes to understand why factory farming is wrong, but this time she comes to know it as well. Then imagine that she finds out that a

25 Cases like these can be found in Kvanvig (2003, 197), Pritchard (2009, 35-36), Hills (2009, 104), and Hills (2016, 672).
philosophy professor that she respects a lot thinks the factory farming isn’t morally wrong. It looks like she now has a defeater for her belief that factory farming is wrong. Imagine that she maintains her belief that it is wrong and thus continues to understand why factory farming is wrong. However, because of the defeater, her belief that factory farming is wrong no longer constitutes knowledge.26

Perhaps one will have the intuition that in both cases, Michelle still has knowledge. One plausible explanation for this intuition is that her grasp of the relationship between the wrongness of factory farming and the fact that factory farming involves causing tremendous pain to sentient beings makes her belief that factory farming is wrong safe. That is, in all the nearby possible worlds in which Michelle believes that factory farming is wrong, it is true that factory farming is wrong. Moreover, she can rule out some relevant alternatives to the proposition that factory farming is wrong on the basis of her grasp. This means that her belief has some of the same properties as knowledge (belief, truth, and safety), but, because of the defeaters, her beliefs don’t constitute knowledge.

5.3 The Understanding Why Norm of Moral Assertion

With this account of moral understanding on the table, we can get a better grip on what is involved in the Understanding Why Norm of moral assertion. Recall that according to the Understanding Why Norm: It is epistemically permissible for one to assert that \( p \), where \( p \) is a moral proposition, only if one adequately understands why \( p \). What do I mean by “adequately” understands why \( p \)? I mean that one’s grasp of why \( p \) is such that one has a set of the above maieutic abilities such that one can get a mature moral agent to grasp why \( p \) to some degree if she makes an effort to follow one’s explanation or listen and think about one’s answers to question about the relationship between M and N. A mature moral agent is a

26 This kind of case comes from Hills (2016, 672).
moral agent just like you and me, i.e., they have a stock of moral knowledge, moral understanding, and moral sensibilities. That is, they are somewhere between Huckleberry Finn and Atticus Finch.

6. Explanatory Motivation for The Understanding Why Norm

6.1 The Deferrer and the Rememberer

UWN offers a tidy explanation of why Denny Deferrer’s and Richard Rememberer’s assertions are epistemically improper: neither Denny nor Richard understood grasped why their respective moral assertions are true. Thus, they both violated UWN by asserting.

As an added bonus, UWN can explain why many philosophers find moral deference off-putting, i.e., why there is something strange about forming moral beliefs solely on the basis of some else’s say-so. Many agree that one cannot come to understand why \( p \) simply from testimony that \( p \). So, when one defers about a moral claim, one doesn’t come to understand why the claim is true. However, it’s generally agreed that one can gain moral knowledge from moral testimony.\(^{27}\) This means that while it might be epistemically permissible for one to believe that \( p \), where \( p \) is a moral proposition, it isn’t epistemically permissible for one to assert that \( p \) because that would violate UWN.\(^{28}\)

6.2 The Moral Amnesiac

UWN can explain why each Amy Amnesiac’s assertions were infelicitous. Recall that Amy asserted conjunctions in which the first conjunct was a moral assertion and conjunct was a denial that she understood/grasped/saw/got or had an idea why the first conjunction is true. When we assert that \( p \) we represent ourselves as having the epistemic authority to make that assertion. Because UWN is true, when one makes a moral assertion, one represents oneself as

\(^{27}\) Jones (1999), Hopkins (2007), and Hills (2009).

\(^{28}\) For more on this explanation of what is bad about moral deference, see: Lewis (2020).
understanding why the claim is true. When one adds that one doesn’t understand, grasp, see, or get why the claim is true, one is essentially claiming that one doesn’t have the epistemic authority to make the assertion they just made. In the case of denying that she understands why $p$, Amy is explicitly denying that she has the epistemic authority to assert that $p$. In the other cases, she is denying that she has an epistemic state that is necessary for understanding why $p$, i.e., grasping, seeing, or getting why $p$, or having some idea of why $p$.

6.3 The Psychopath and Appropriate Challenges of Moral Assertions

UWN can neatly explain why the primary way to challenge a moral assertion is by asking “Why?” and why Cyrus the psychopath’s challenges to moral assertions are odd. In challenging someone’s assertion, one is essentially is checking to see if the asserter has the epistemic authority to make the assertion. The best way to check to see if one has moral understanding of why $p$ and some related maieutic abilities is to have them show you that they have some understanding and maieutic abilities. And, asking them “Why?” is the most natural way of inviting them to show you that they have understanding and maieutic abilities.

Recall that Cyrus’s challenges were: “How did you figure that out?”, “Where did you learn /hear that?”, “What’s your evidence?” One can answer these challenges without giving the challenger any evidence that one understands why $p$. These questions are about evidence that $p$ is true, but they are not great ways of getting someone to show that they understand why their assertion is true. One can tell you where and how they learned that $p$ without giving you any indication that they understand why $p$. The same is true with asking “What’s your evidence?” One could respond to this challenge by providing lots of opaque evidence, e.g., lots of smart people believe it, a moral expert told me, a read a good abductive argument
for it. Again, these challenges can be met without giving the challenger any indication that one has moral understanding.

6.4 Peer Disagreement and The Moral Maverick

Unlike many other accounts of the norm of moral assertion, UWN doesn’t entail that Michael the maverick’s denouncement of slavery is epistemically impermissible nor that many of our moral assertions are epistemically inappropriate. This is because the fact or awareness of massive peer disagreement about moral facts doesn’t undermine moral understanding in the way that it undermines some kinds of justification and knowledge. First, one can understand why \( p \) without knowing that \( p \) or why \( p \). Thus, even if (one’s awareness of) the fact that there is systematic peer disagreement about moral matters defeats one’s knowledge that \( p \) or why \( p \), one can still understand why \( p \). Second, it’s not clear that one’s knowledge that others disagree on moral matters defeats the evidence one has for \( p \) on the basis of seeing or grasping the relationship between \( q \) and \( p \), where \( q \) makes it the case that \( p \). In particular, I think one is justified in believing that if other people grasped the relationship between \( q \) and \( p \), and they believe that \( q \), then they would believe that \( p \). This means that if someone disagrees with one and believes that \( q \), then one can disregard their disagreement, because one has reason to think that the disagreeer isn’t an actual epistemic peer. Third, if one understands why \( p \), then one can likely explain away the kind of objections that other people have to one’s belief. Finally, one might take on Hills (2009 & 2016)’s conception of moral understanding why doesn’t require that one’s belief in \( p \) be justified in order to understand why \( p \). Thus, one can still understand why \( p \) even if one is not \textit{ultra facie} justified in believing that \( p \).

UWN can also explain the intuitive appropriateness of Ben’s assertion in Moral Advice, and the moral assertions of millions of parents: these people all understand why the
contents of their assertions are true. That is, they all satisfy at least the most important necessary condition for making epistemically appropriate moral assertions.

7. Theoretical Motivation for The Understanding Why Norm

In addition to being able to singlehandedly explain all the aforementioned data and avoid the flaws of other accounts of the norm of moral assertion, there is also strong theoretical support for UWN.

The norm of moral assertion exists because it (like the norm of assertion in general) serves a socio-epistemic function: it helps us maintain the epistemic usefulness of moral assertion/testimony. Moral assertion (and assertion in general) can be a very efficient way of gaining epistemically valuable states (e.g., true belief, justified belief, and knowledge) and we thus have incentive to regulate what kind of moral speech we “allow.” That doesn’t mean that the norm of moral assertion is a norm that we knowingly follow or try to get others to follow. Rather, it’s a norm that we tend to unknowingly follow and try to get others to follow.

Given this rough characterization of the norm of moral assertion, we should look for a norm of moral assertion (or assertion in general) that helps us get what we tend to want from moral assertions. After all, if the norm of moral assertion wasn’t useful at protecting the epistemic quality of moral assertion/testimony, we wouldn’t follow it. In this section, I will sketch some reasons that we should want moral asserters to have understanding why.

7.1 Moral Assertion and Maieutic Abilities

The reason that asserters of moral propositions need to have the aforementioned maieutic abilities (as UWN requires) is that the (or at least an important) epistemic aim of moral
inquiry is moral understanding.\textsuperscript{29} That is, when we investigate whether some moral proposition is true, what we're after is coming to understand why it's true.

There are two reasons to think that moral understanding is the aim of moral inquiry. First, the thesis that moral understanding is the aim of moral inquiry can explain why moral deference is so rare. That is, it can explain why we very infrequently form our moral beliefs solely on the basis of another person's testimony. Testimony doesn't transmit (and rarely produces) moral understanding, so moral testimony cannot be used to complete moral inquiry, and therefore people don't use it very much. In fact, Hills (2009 & 2016) argues that no amount of moral testimony will \textit{by itself} produce moral understanding.\textsuperscript{30} However, testimony is very often used to complete inquiries into many non-moral/non-normative questions. For example, the following inquiries can very often be solved by accepting the testimony of a knowledgeable person: “Where is Carnegie Hall?”, “What is the atomic number of Einsteinium?”, “Should I submit an i9 tax form?” This is because testimony can transmit or produce knowledge, justified belief, true belief, etc., all of which are plausible candidates for the aim of non-moral/non-normative inquiry.

A second reason to think that moral understanding is the epistemic aim of moral inquiry is that moral understanding is necessary (or at least essential) for reaching the practical aim(s) of moral inquiry: being a good person and reliably doing the right thing for the right reason. As Aristotle notes in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, the purpose of moral inquiry is not to gain moral knowledge, but to become a good person [1103b27–29]. Having the kind

\textsuperscript{29} Hills (2009, 126) thinks that moral understanding is the aim of moral inquiry. Scanlon (1992) seems to have a similar view. He writes, “The aim of this enterprise [moral enquiry] is to gain a clearer idea of which things are right and wrong, just and unjust and, especially, a clearer understanding of our reasons for these judgements: an understanding of what various reasons and conclusions depend on, what their limitations are, and how various apparent conflicts between them should be understood (8)” and “The main task of Moral Enquiry, on the other hand, is to give us a fuller and clearer understanding of the content of our moral beliefs (23).”

\textsuperscript{30} Hills (2009), 104 and Hills (2016), 671.
of cognitive and non-cognitive dispositions that constitute moral understanding seem essential for being a good person and for reliably doing the right thing for the right reason.\(^{31}\)

Of course, an asserter need not always use these maieutic abilities. After all, many inquirers will already have some nascent moral understanding that will be triggered when they come to form a belief on the basis of assertion. For example, imagine that one knows that some version of Kantianism is correct and that whenever an action is wrong it’s wrong because it involves disrespecting a person’s rational nature. Imagine further that one isn’t sure if physician-assisted suicide is morally wrong. One comes to believe that physician-assisted suicide is morally wrong on the basis of a moral assertion. It seems like as soon as one comes to believe that physician-assisted suicide is morally wrong, one also comes to understand why (assuming it’s actually wrong), i.e., it involves disrespecting a person’s rational nature. This is why the norm of moral assertion should only require that an asserter can (if asked) make use of her maieutic abilities.

### 7.2 Moral Assertion and the Basis of One’s Assertion

It’s plausible that we want to have very strong or high-quality evidence for certain of our beliefs, e.g., moral, prudential, medical, religious, etc. That is, we want the epistemic quality of the assertions/testimony we base our moral beliefs on to be greater (\textit{ceteris paribus}) than the epistemic quality of the assertions/testimony we base our beliefs about unimportant things on (e.g., the number of blades of grass on our neighbor’s lawn, the best man at William Howard Taft’s wedding, the best perfumer in France in 1873, etc.). Asserting on the basis of understanding generally provides stronger/higher quality support for the content of the assertion—\textit{ceteris paribus}—than asserting on the basis of knowledge.

\(^{31}\) For more on the relationship between moral understanding and these practical goals of moral inquiry, see: Hills (2009).
The basis of one’s belief that \( p \) when one understands why \( p \) must be more *direct* or *deeper* and thus of higher quality than the basis of beliefs that constitute justified belief or knowledge. Let me explain. Understanding why \( p \) requires that you believe that \( p \) on the basis of \( q \), where \( q \) makes it the case that \( p \). And, what explains why you believe that \( p \) on the basis of \( q \) is that you grasp the relationship between \( p \) and \( q \). However, knowing that \( p \) or knowing why \( p \) doesn’t require that the basis of either belief is something that makes it the case that \( p \) is true. After all, we can come to know some moral claims via testimony or induction. These sources of evidence should *reflect* or *track* what makes it the case that \( p \), but because there is more of a gap between what makes \( p \) true and the basis of our belief that \( p \), these bases of belief are of lower quality than basing our belief on truth-makers of \( p \).

That we expect or want certain kinds of grounds to be the basis of assertion is illustrated in Lackey (2011)’s cases of assertion based on “isolated, secondhand knowledge.” In these cases, the asserter knows what they assert, but the basis of the belief they express in assertion is testimony from other people. Lackey concludes that the source of the problem with such assertions is that they are not based on the right “kind” of grounds.\(^{32}\) What is even more important than the epistemic state that the asserter is in (e.g., justified belief vs knowledge) is the quality of the grounds of the belief. Cases in which we expect or want higher quality grounds are those in which: the stakes are high for the audience (e.g., medical diagnoses), the speaker is asserting as an expert (e.g., a law professor making a prediction about what the Supreme Court will do), or the content of the assertion is about the aesthetic quality of something (e.g., food or film).\(^{33}\)

\(^{32}\) Lackey (2011), 271.

\(^{33}\) In fact, cases like these have motivated Carter & Gordon (2011) to argue that understanding why is the norm of the assertion for the above kinds of assertions. Given that moral assertions often involve high stakes for the audience and involve making a normative judgment like aesthetic assertions, Carter & Gordon (2011)’s arguments seem to support understanding why as the norm of assertion.
7.3 Moral Assertion and the Importance of Resilient Beliefs

Assertion-based beliefs are epistemically fragile in that whether we're justified in maintaining them depends on what (or what we believe) happens to the source of the assertion. First, when one forms a belief solely on the basis of another's assertion and one has no other evidence for or against \( p \) (nor about why the asserter believes that \( p \)), then if one finds out that the asserter no longer believes that \( p \), one is intuitively unjustified in maintaining one's belief in \( p \).\(^{34}\) After all, in trusting someone's assertion, you're trusting that they're competent at assessing their evidence and that their evidence for \( p \) is sufficient for their believing being true, justified, or knowledge, and when they cease believing that \( p \), you must—on pain of inconsistency—also cease believing that \( p \).\(^{35}\) Second, I think that even if you don't find out that they have ceased to believe \( p \), their merely ceasing to believe that \( p \) is epistemically bad for one because it puts one in a bad epistemic position. In particular, their ceasing to believe that \( p \) increases the likelihood that they will assert not-\( p \) or that they don't believe that \( p \) to the audience, which will defeat the audience's justification. Also, it means that the audience cannot double-check whether \( p \) without getting an answer that defeats her justification for \( p \).

Third, some philosophers argue that when you base your belief that \( p \) on someone's assertion, you have entitlement to defer challenges to \( p \) back to that asserter and thus one need not give up one's belief just because one cannot answer a challenge.\(^{36}\) However, if the asserter no longer believes that \( p \), one can longer rely on her to defend \( p \) and thus one must face the challenge oneself, show that the challenge is inappropriate, or drop one's belief that \( p \).

\(^{34}\) Here I’m making the rather uncontroversial assumption that when one asserts that \( p \), one represents oneself as believing that \( p \). Thus, if an asserter ceases to believe that \( p \), then shouldn't flat out assert that \( p \).

\(^{35}\) Of course, there will be cases in which you know that their ceasing to believe that \( p \) was a fluke or a mistake on their part. But, in many cases, we won't have this information.

Finally, if the asserter is prone to changing his belief concerning whether \( p \), it possible that his asserting the truth (i.e., that \( p \)) will involve knowledge-undermining luck. After all, if the asserter is prone to change his mind about whether \( p \) and prone to assertion only what he believes, then it will be lucky if we ask him or hear him when he's believing/asserting the truth. Given this kind of epistemic fragility, we should want our asserters to have stable beliefs about what they assert.

We tend to be especially concerned with asserters having stable beliefs in the case of moral assertions. Some beliefs we don't care about maintaining, because we only need them for a single purpose, e.g., knowing how to get to the center of a city we plan to visit only once. In fact, given our cognitive limitations, it's best that we forget this kind of information. However, we never want to lose our (true) moral beliefs. This means that we want the people whose moral assertions serve as the bases of our moral beliefs to have true and stable moral beliefs.

Understanding why \( p \) tends to make one's belief that \( p \) quite stable.\(^{37}\) This is because understanding why \( p \) puts one in a good position to respond to doubts and objections, which might otherwise lead one to drop one's belief that \( p \). This means that epistemically responsible asserters who assert on the basis of understanding are more likely to maintain their belief that \( p \)---\textit{ceteris paribus}.

Also, when one understands why \( p \), one's belief that \( p \) is often integrated with other of one's beliefs. One's belief that \( p \) is integrated with one's beliefs (to some extent) if at least one of the following obtains:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[i.] One's belief that \( p \) is based on one's belief that \( q \)
  \item[ii.] One believes that \( o \) on the basis of believing that \( p \).
\end{itemize}

\(^{37}\) I'm only concerned here on cases in which \( p \) is true.
iii. One sees or believes that the content of one’s belief that $p$ entails the content of one’s belief that $r$.

iv. One sees or believes that the $p$ and $r$ are on the same topic (e.g., $p =$ “Killing is wrong” and $r =$ “Lying is wrong.”

v. One sees or believes that $p$ and $s$ have the same subject (e.g., $p =$ “Killing is wrong” and $s =$ “Killing is disrespectful.”

vi. One sees or believes that one’s belief that $p$ relies on one’s belief that $q$.

vii. One sees or believes that one’s belief that $p$ coheres with one’s belief that $q$, $r$, $s$, and so on.\(^{38}\)

The more integrated a belief is, the psychologically harder it is—\textit{ceteris paribus}—give up that belief. This is true in part because giving up one belief rationally requires one to give up others that one sees rely on the belief in question.

8. Children and Moral Assertion (An Objection)

One might be concerned that many young children will not be able to epistemically properly assert moral propositions because they will often lack the understanding of why the moral propositions are true. I think this concern shouldn’t worry us, because I think this is the right result.

Insofar as it sometimes sounds fine for children to make moral utterances, I think this is because they are not making moral assertions. First, perhaps the content of the assertion is, for example, “My mom told me that fighting is bad.” After all, before children can come to see the wrongness of actions for themselves, they often believe what their parents tell them is wrong. Second, perhaps they’re engaging in a speech act that is similar, but distinct from assertion. For example, perhaps children are ‘reporting’ that “fighting is bad” where this means that they are not taking responsibility of the truth of the content of the assertion, as one does when one asserts, but are rather communicating that someone else

\(^{38}\) This characterization of belief integration partly overlaps with Gardiner (2012)’s characterization (170).
Moreover, it’s compatible with UWN that while the children’s assertions are epistemically improper, the children themselves are completely blameless for making them.\textsuperscript{40} However, one might object that children’s moral assertions are intuitively epistemically proper, not just blameless.\textsuperscript{41} I also agreed with Simion (2018) that it wouldn’t be surprising if there was a different norm of moral assertion for children. In fact, there seem to be different epistemic standards for belief for children. For example, it seems completely fine for children to defer to their parents on moral matters, but as soon as those children become adults, it will no longer be intuitively warranted for them to maintain those deferential moral beliefs. That is, at some point in people’s lives, what counted as an acceptable source of belief ceases to be one. Thus, what is a necessary or sufficient condition for epistemically acceptable adult moral assertion might be distinct from what is a necessary or sufficient condition for epistemically acceptable child moral assertion.

Finally, I think that proponents of UWN can explain why some people find children’s moral assertions to be intuitively acceptable. In particular, they can note that there are additional epistemic and moral reasons for them to make assertions and that these defeat the epistemic reason for them to not assert. First, children will need practice considering moral claims and asserting them to others in order to learn what kind of epistemic rules govern (moral) assertion. We might allow children to make moral assertions, therefore, not because they are epistemically proper, but because treating them as full participants in this

\textsuperscript{39} This response is similar to Miloć (2017)’s response to Lackey (2007)’s objection to the Knowledge Norm of Assertion.

\textsuperscript{40} This response is also suggested by Simion (2018), 485.

\textsuperscript{41} I thank Sandy Goldberg for pushing me on this.
social practice will help them become acquainted with the rules and eventually full participants themselves.42

Second, making moral assertions will help children get used to speaking their minds and sharing their values with others. Insofar as we think that speaking one’s mind and sharing one’s values is important, we should be inclined to encourage or at least allow children to do so. Third, on the assumption that children will most often be making moral assertions to each other, true moral assertions will help other children develop true moral beliefs. Children, unlike adults, have fewer sources of moral knowledge and so the assertions of other children might play an invaluable role in addressees getting moral knowledge.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we considered the question of what epistemic credential a speaker must have in order for her moral assertion to be epistemically permissible. To answer this question, I introduced a cast of characters, some of whose moral assertions were intuitively epistemically impermissible and some of whose moral assertions were intuitively epistemically permissible. I argued that our intuitions about these characters’ assertions provided evidence against plausible norms of moral assertion (e.g., truth, justified belief, knowledge, knowledge why, and knowledge plus the ability to provide an explanation). Moreover, I argued that UWN could explain what was amiss with the intuitively problematic moral assertions and what with good about the intuitively appropriate moral assertions. I then argued that there is strong theoretical support for UWN based on the kind of features we would expect the norm of moral assert to have. Finally, I responded to an important objection according to which UWN is too strong because it entails that children’s moral assertions are very often epistemically impermissible.

42 Little (2008) refers to this kind of behavior as “proleptic engagement” with children (342).
CHAPTER 4
How to Play the Blame Game

1. A Familiar Conversation

In Jane Austen’s *Emma*, Mr. Knightley calls Emma out for publicly humiliating a less fortunate person (Miss Bates):

“I cannot see you acting wrong, without a remonstrance. How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation?” “Nay, how could I help saying what I did?—Nobody could have helped it. It was not so very bad. I dare say she did not understand me.” “I assure you she did. She felt your full meaning. She has talked of it since.” . . . “Oh!” cried Emma, ”I know there is not a better creature in the world: but you must allow, that what is good and what is ridiculous are most unfortunately blended in her.” ”They are blended,” said he, ”I acknowledge.” . . . “Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance, I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner. Were she your equal in situation but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to . . . Her situation should secure your compassion . . . I will tell you truths while I can . . . and trusting that you will some time or other do me greater justice than you can do now.” . . . Never had she [Emma] felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life. She was most forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates? . . . As she reflected more, she seemed but to feel it more.¹

Emma’s conversation with Mr. Knightley is paradigmatic of a lot of conversations we have when we’ve been blamed for some moral failing. In blaming her, Mr. Knightley is demanding that Emma engage in a particular kind of conversation about her moral failing. Conversations are cooperative ventures, and thus appropriate moves in that conversation are determined by what constitutes cooperating.² For example, blame is often met with attempts to excuse or justify one’s behavior. This is what Emma does. She first tries to negotiate just how bad her action was, but Mr. Knightley rejects this move. She then tries to excuse or justify her action by claiming that Miss Bates is an aggravating person. Mr. Knightley notes

¹ Austen (2000), 245-246.
² Cf. Grice (1975).
Emma’s action might have been okay had it not been directed at a less fortunate person. This conversation ends with Emma reflecting on what’s she has done and how bad it was, but with the understanding that she, in some sense, owes Mr. Knightley a better response.

In this paper, I argue that there is an epistemic requirement for properly performing the speech act that Mr. Knightley does, i.e., direct blame. Blame, in this sense, does two things. First, it makes a claim about the way that the world is, i.e., that the blamee is at fault for a moral failing. In this way, blame is similar to assertion and thus requires that the speaker have certain epistemic credentials. These epistemic credentials give the blamer a certain epistemic “standing,” i.e., a permission to intervene in what the blamee believes. Second, blaming aims to get the blamee to do something, i.e., to engage in a particular kind of conversation about her moral failing. In this way, blame is also similar to advising, recommending, urging, demanding, requesting, etc. Appropriately directing others in this way also often requires some epistemic credentials. For example, you should only follow the advice of someone who “knows what they’re talking” or who knows that what they’re trying to get you to do is not immoral. These epistemic credentials give the blamer a certain practical “standing,” i.e., a permission to intervene in what the blamee does.

What are the epistemic credentials necessary for proper blame, i.e., having epistemic and practical standing to blame? I argue the blamer must know that the blamee is at fault for a moral failing and she must also understand (to some degree) how severe that moral failing is. I will call this the Understanding Norm of Blame. This norm is the set of all the epistemic

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3 For example, see: Williamson (1996; 2000).
4 I view the debate about what epistemic credentials constitute the norm of assertion as being about what is necessary for epistemic standing.
5 Whereas some focus on moral understanding why (e.g., Hills (2009)), I will focus on moral understanding how, i.e., how severe a moral failing is.
necessary conditions for appropriate blame. Thus, for all I will say, there may be practical/moral necessary conditions for appropriate blame as well.6

The plan is this. I first present a speech theoretic characterization of direct blame. Blaming someone in this sense is to call them out for a moral failing (2).7 The blame is “direct” because it is performed explicitly to the blamee’s face.8 I argue that this speech act constitutively involves aiming to get the blamee to engage in a conversation about their moral failing. I then argue that the purpose of such conversations is to contribute to making the blamee a better person by increasing their moral understanding. I conclude that the speech act of direct blame, therefore, has the ultimate purpose of helping to make the blamee a better person by increasing their moral understanding (3).9 I then develop the Understanding Norm of Blame (4). I argue that weaker accounts of the norm of blame are implausible because they don’t require moral understanding. This is because one must have moral understanding in order to be able to communicate the severity of the moral failing in the act of blame (e.g., in expressing one’s indignation or resentment), competently participate in blame conversations, avoid a certain kind of hypocrisy, and satisfy blame’s ultimate purpose (5). I end by offering a brief conclusion (6).

2. The Speech Act of Blame

There seems to be disagreement on how to categorize the speech act of blame. Austin (1962) classifies one sense of “blame” (the sense in which we hold people response by uttering) as a

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6 The literature on the standing to blame focuses on such conditions, e.g., non-hypocrisy and minding one’s own business. For discussions of these conditions, see: Bell (2013), King (2015), and Todd (2019).
7 While I focus on moral blame, I think my account can be developed to blame in other domains.
8 McKenna (2013) and Fricker (2016) take direct blame to be the paradigmatic case of blame.
9 Duff (1983) and Fricker (2016) also argue that the (ultimate) purpose of blame is to make the blamee morally better. Fricker (2016) thinks that this involves getting the blamee to feel remorse and this remorse to both constitute and effect a change in moral understanding (167). However, as I argue below, I think there are numerous ways of increasing someone’s moral understanding without getting them to feel remorse—or any other moral emotion.
declarative (or verdictive) and, in another sense (the sense in which we adopt an attitude toward someone) as an expressive (or behabitive).\textsuperscript{10} Searle & Vanderveken (1985) think of blame as an assertive in the sense that blaming someone (privately or overtly) involves claiming that they are responsible for some bad state of affairs.\textsuperscript{11} Vanderveken (1990) classifies blame as both an assertive and an expressive, respectively. When blaming consists in asserting that someone is responsible for some state of affairs while presupposing that that state of affairs is bad, one is blaming in the assertive sense. When blaming consists in expressing disproval of someone's action, which the speaker judges to be bad, one is blaming in the expressive sense. While these are perfectly common senses of blame, I have in mind a different sense of blame.

I'm concerned with blaming in the sense of calling someone out for a moral failing, i.e., criticizing someone for some action or attitude that constitutes a moral failing and aiming to get them to respond to being called out.\textsuperscript{12} I will focus solely on direct blame, i.e., blaming someone to their face.\textsuperscript{13} Like many authors, I think that direct blame is the paradigmatic case of blame.\textsuperscript{14} In what follows, I will refer to this speech act simply as blame.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{10} Austin (1962), 154, 159. Sbisà & Turner suggest that Austin would consider blame to be a declarative-expressive (verdictive-behabitive) hybrid (8).

\textsuperscript{11} Searle & Vanderveken (1985), 190. They view blaming as very similar to accusing. The main difference for them is that blaming can be done privately.

\textsuperscript{12} I remain neutral on what can appropriately make a person blameworthy. For example, some think that only violating a moral obligation can make it appropriate to blame someone (e.g., Wallace (1994, 69), Wallace (2010, 323), and Darwall (2013, 58). I will focus on the case of wrongful action for the sake of exposition. For an argument that doxastic attitudes can also be the proper object of blame, see: Rettler (2018).

\textsuperscript{13} Blaming as calling someone out is related to what is known in the Catholic tradition as “fraternal correction.” Teachings about this practice can be found in the New Testament and early church teachings. For a history of fraternal correction with a focus on its practice in medieval England, see: Craun (2010).

\textsuperscript{14} For example, see: McKenna (2013), Fricker (2016)

\textsuperscript{15} While I cannot argue for it here, I do not think that we can blame someone (in the sense I'm interested in) to other people. However, we can tell third parties that we blame a certain person for some moral failing. This is because blaming someone involves issuing a directive to them, i.e., it involves aiming to get them to do something. When you “blame” someone to a third party, you are not issuing that directive to the third party and you are not issuing that directive to the intended-blamee just by making an utterance to a third party. You might try to get a third party to blame the wrongdoer for you. But then you're not blaming them to someone else, you're get using the third party as a surrogate.
What unites all these senses of blame is that they are ways of holding others responsible for their moral failings. Where they differ is in how they hold transgressors responsible. In Austin (1962)’s sense of blame, we hold others responsible by letting them (or third parties) know that we know what they did and that it was bad. This lets the blamee know that their moral failing did not go unnoticed and there is at least one person who knows and can tell others about their moral failing. However, blaming as calling out holds the blamee responsible by making them answerable right there and then for what they did. When you blame someone (in the sense of calling them out) you aim to get a particular kind of response from them, e.g., a justification or excuse for what they did.

We’ve seen that some view blame as an assertive while others view it as an expressive and some view it as both. What kind of speech act is blame in the sense of calling someone out? Blame is an assertive-directive hybrid. Assertives have the illocutionary point (i.e., characteristic and internal aim) of making a claim about the way the world is. That is, in uttering an assertive, one makes a claim about the way the world is. Importantly, the illocutionary point of a speech act is not what the speaker intends or aims to do in speaking. Rather, the illocutionary point is an internal and constitutive part of the speech act itself. Blaming someone involves telling them that they are at fault for a moral failing. Why think that blame has the features of an assertive? Notice that it would be weird to say, “I’m blaming you for your action, but I’m not saying that it was wrong for you to do it” or “How could

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16 Fricker (2016) seems to have a similar picture in mind when she writes, “The illocutionary point of Communicative Blame is, rather, to inspire that admixture of judgement and moral emotion that is remorse. It aims to bring the wrongdoer to see or fully acknowledge the moral significance of what they have done or failed to do (172-173).” As I understand her, Fricker is claiming that blame has the aim of inspiring remorse and getting the blamee to see or acknowledge the severity of their moral failing.
you treat her like? Not that I’m saying you morally shouldn’t have treated her like that.” This indicates that in blaming someone one is making a claim about the way the world is.\textsuperscript{17}

Moreover, assertives, as I will understand them, are always moves in a conversation. As a move in a conversation, they are attempts to add a proposition to the common ground of that conversation. The common ground is the set of all the propositions that are mutually accepted by all the participants in the conversation.\textsuperscript{18} If the utterance of a particular assertive isn’t rejected by any participant to the conversation, that propositional content of that assertive is added to the common ground.

But blaming is not just an assertive. That is, one is not just making a claim about whether the blamee is at fault for a moral failing, one is also aiming to get the blamee to engage in a conversation about her moral failing. This is one reason to think that blaming has some features of being a directive. Such speech acts have the illocutionary point of aiming to get the hearer to do something. In particular, it seems that in blaming someone, one is aiming to get the blamee to engage in a conversation about her moral failing.\textsuperscript{19} Here I agree with McGeer (2013) that, “[I]t is a constitutive feature of blame that it aims to engage the wrongdoer in a certain kind of conversational exchange.”\textsuperscript{20}

That blaming is also a directive (of a certain kind) is supported by the idea that the function of directives of a certain kind, e.g., questions, is to set the topic (or question) under

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[17] I use the word “in” to indicate some kind of constitution relation. This seems to parallel Austin (1975)’s usage when he claims that in uttering that \( p \) one can perform an illocutionary act (99-100).
\item[18] For more on the conception of common ground, see: Stalnaker (2012). However, I will remain neutral about other commitments that Stalnaker has in this article.
\item[19] Proponents of the view that there is a tight connection between blame and conversation include: McGeer (2013, 184, 184 fn.14), McKenna (2013), Pereboom (2013, 192), Mason (2019). Proponents of the view that blame paradigmatically includes a conversation include: Bennett (2013, 74). Relatedly, McKenna (2012) develops an account of moral responsibility that is modeled on conversations. Even those that do not explicitly relate blame to conversation sometimes seems to recognize that blame invites the speaker to respond in a particular way. For example, Walker (2006) writes that when we blame someone we “demand some rectifying response” from them (26) and Bennett (2002) argues that blaming a call and response structure.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
discussion. That is, the directive can either initiate a conversation where there was not one before, or it can change the topic of an on-going conversation. That blaming is partly a directive explains a commonsense feature of blame. Normally, blaming someone immediately changes (or sets) the question under discussion in a conversation. This is one reason it is intuitively inappropriate for the blamee to keep addressing the question that was under discussion immediately prior to the blaming. For example, imagine that Phoebe and Claire are sharing their summer vacation plans when Phoebe recalls that Claire had recently mistreated her friend, William. Phoebe then utters, "You shouldn’t have treated William like that. It was cruel!" It would be odd for Claire to then say something about her vacation plan, e.g., "I went to Malta last summer and really loved it." Intuitively, Claire should respond to the blame.

In blaming another person to her face, one changes (or sets) the question under discussion (like a directive would) and one simultaneously attempts to get an answer to that question accepted into the common ground. In particular, in blaming one makes the question under discussion, “Is the blamee at fault for a moral failing?” and simultaneously proposes that the answer is yes. Doing this invites the blamee to respond in various ways.

Blame, in the sense of calling out, is similar to the speech act of advising. As Searle (1969) notes, “Advising is not trying to get you to do something in the sense that requesting is. Advising is more like telling you what is best for you.” I read Searle as claiming that advising involves both describing a way the world is and trying to get the advisee to act in accordance with that description. Requesting, on the other hand, is a pure directive in that

21 For example, see: Roberts (2018).
23 Similar assertive-directive hybrids include: Recommending, suggesting, counseling, and warning.
it just tries to get the requestee to do something. Thus, blame, *qua* speech act, is similar to advising *qua* speech act.\textsuperscript{24}

That blame is an assertive-directive hybrid is also supported by the observation it is common for blame utterances to have the surface features of either an assertive or a directive. Sometimes, they look like assertions, e.g., “You shouldn’t have done that!” or “That was cruel!” Sometimes, they look like questions, e.g., “What were you thinking?” or “How could you do that?”. And, sometimes, they look like commands, “You owe me an apology!” or “Explain yourself.”\textsuperscript{25} The fact that people can use both assertives and directives to perform a speech act, and neither the assertive nor the directive forms seem more fundamental, is best explained by the fact that blaming (as calling out) is a hybrid speech act.

Blame, in the sense of calling someone out for a moral failing, is similar to, but importantly different from, other moral speech acts. Take the speech act of condemning. Condemning involves making it explicit that one disapproves of another person’s behavior. Condemning can even involve calling someone out for a moral failing. However, what makes condemning distinct from blaming is that it doesn’t constitutively involve inviting another person to engage in a conversation. In fact, condemning someone seems to communicate that one has reached a verdict about them and is not interested in hearing justifications or excuses.\textsuperscript{26} A prime example of such condemning is the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg’s recent speech at the United Nations. She told world leaders, “This is all wrong. I shouldn’t be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!”\textsuperscript{27} It is clear from the context and what

\textsuperscript{24} In addition, the paradigmatic case of advising seems to involve performing the speech act to the advisee’s face.
\textsuperscript{25} Sliwa (manuscript) also recognizes that blaming has the surface features of a few types of speech acts (2).
\textsuperscript{26} It is also a way of publicly distancing oneself from the condemned from you condemn someone to a third party
\textsuperscript{27} Thunberg (2019).
Thunberg says that she is not interested in a conversation. Rather, she wants her addressees to change their behavior.

One might worry that there is something strange about hybrid speech acts. First, as I noted, there are related speech acts (e.g., advising or counseling) that are intuitively hybrid as well. Second, there are hybrid speech acts that are not assertive-directive hybrids. For example, take the utterance, “Regrettably, I won’t be able to make it tonight.” This utterance seems to be an expressive-assertive hybrid. I’m expressing an attitude of regret and, at the same time, informing my audience of a fact. Or, consider a case in which the sole judge of a competition utters, “Bill is the winner.” She is informing everyone that Bill won and simultaneously making it the case that Bill won.28 Finally, calling the speech act of blame a “hybrid” assumes the typology of speech acts set out by certain philosophers of language. It may be that there are more speech act types that they initially thought and thus blame is not a hybrid but such a different kind of speech act.

The fact that the speech act of blame (as calling out) involves two kinds of speech acts mirrors many accounts of private blame. After all, many philosophers think that privately blaming someone involves more than just judging them to be blameworthy.29 Blaming, for these philosophers, is a more robust state. Some think it also involves a conative state (e.g., a desire that the moral failing would have never happened)30 Many think it has an affective component.31 Many think it must also involve changes in certain behavioral dispositions.32 Thus, just as privately blaming someone doesn’t involve merely believing them to blameworthy, directly and explicitly blaming someone doesn’t involve merely asserting that

28 For other cases of hybrid, see: Searle (1975), 360, and Hancher (1979).
29 For example, see: Smith (2007, 476-477), Coates & Tognazzini (2013, 10), McGeer (2013, 166), Mason (2019, 101), and the sources therein.
30 Sher (2006).
32 Scanlon (2008), Smith (2013), and Bennett (2013).
they are blameworthy. Moreover, just as privately blaming someone involves changing one’s actions and dispositions, so too directly and explicitly blaming someone involve aiming to change the blamee’s behavior and dispositions (e.g., by trying to get them to engage in a conversation and ultimately, to increase their moral understanding).

Why think that these speech acts are hybrids as opposed to thinking that certain utterances constitute two distinct speech acts? One reason to think this is if these utterances always seem to have the illocutionary points of two distinct kinds of speech acts. If there is this kind of regularity between certain utterances, certain contexts, and more than one more illocutionary point, then it strikes me that we have one distinct speech act with numerous illocutionary points. We also saw that blame is similar to other speech acts (e.g., advising) which seem to be assertive-directive hybrids.

Finally, I will only be concerned with unhedged acts of blame. Because blame is an assertive-directive hybrid, it must be unhedged *qua* assertive and *qua* directive. First, like unhedged assertions, unhedged acts of blame are those in which the speaker is fully committed to the epistemic appropriateness of the content of the blaming. For example, unhedged blaming includes utterances like, “You shouldn’t have done that!” while hedged ones include utterances like, “I think you probably shouldn’t have done that.” What it means to be fully committed to the epistemic appropriateness of a claim is a matter of debate, but some think of it as involving being responsible for providing an independent justification for the content of the claim if asked and others think it means being liable to blame or criticism if the content is false or unjustifiable.

Second, like unhedged directives, unhedged acts of blame are those in which the blamer is fully committed to practical appropriateness of the action that one is directing the blamee to do, i.e., that the blamee has sufficient practical reason to engage in the
conversation. Unhedged acts of blame thus involve demanding or insisting that the blamee engage in a conversation about their moral failing while hedged acts of blame include merely requesting, urging, inviting (etc.) them to engage in such a conversation.\(^3^3\) To be fully committed to the practical appropriateness of the action that one is aiming to get another to perform might involve committing oneself to justify the permissibility of the directed action if asked or making oneself especially open to blame or criticism if it turns out that the blamee didn't have sufficient practical reason to engage in the blame conversation.\(^3^4\)

Thus, I'm primarily concerned with acts of blame in which the blamer is, in blaming someone, fully committing themselves to the epistemic appropriateness of the claim they make and the practical appropriateness of the blamee engaging in the blame conversation.

3. The Purpose of Blame

In order to figure out what epistemic credentials are necessary for appropriate blame, we need to first figure out the purpose of blame. I think we can do this by looking at the purpose of blame conversations. The basic idea is that if blaming constitutively involves aiming to get the blamee to participate in a particular kind of conversation and that kind of conversation has a particular purpose, then blame also has that purpose as its ultimate purpose. I argue that blame conversations have the purpose of helping to make the blamee a better person (e.g., more virtuous or more disposed to do the right thing) by increasing her moral

\(^{33}\) One might be concerned that only the wronged person has the practical authority to demand that the blamee participate in a blame conversation and thus I'm only taking about when it's appropriate for the victim to blame the blamee. I don't think this is correct. First, let me just remind the reader that I'm only interested in what is epistemically necessary for having the practical standing to demand that the blamee engage in a blame conversation. Second, it's intuitive to me that all members of the blamee's moral community could have the practical standing to make such a demand. Finally, I think it's clearer that our friends and family can appropriately demand that we enter into such conversations if they have the proper epistemic credentials.

\(^{34}\) That we engage in both hedged and unhedged blaming can be seen in the variety of locutions we use in blaming. For example, might merely request or ask that the blamee engage in the blame conversation, e.g., “Would you mind telling why you did that?” On the other hand, one might demand that they engage in the blame conversation, e.g., “Explain yourself” or “What were you thinking?”
understanding.\textsuperscript{35} Thus, the ultimate purpose of blaming someone is to try to help make them a better person by increasing her moral understanding.

The reason for thinking that we can find the purpose of a speech act by looking at how it works in conversations is that speech acts are characteristically moves in a conversation. Sometimes we perform speech acts when alone, but the primary use of speech is to communicate with others. Thus, it shouldn't be surprising that we can find the purpose of a particular type of speech act by looking at how tokens of that type tend to work in conversations.

Before arguing that blame has a particular ultimate purpose, it's important to be clear about what I think this purpose amounts to. Just like in the case of the illocutionary point of blame, I'm not making any claims about the intentions of the blamer, e.g., her ultimate purpose in blaming. Rather, I'm only concerned with the purpose of blaming \textit{qua} speech act. Thus, it is compatible with my view that blamers have a variety of intentions in blaming others.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{3.1 Blame and Conversation}

Why think that blaming constitutively involves aiming to get the blamee to participate in a conversation about their purposed moral failing? First, it seems like most blaming is followed by a conversation with certain determined moves. Second, and more importantly, as noted above, blaming someone seems to change the topic under discussion and one plausible way

\textsuperscript{35} This list is non-exhaustive.

\textsuperscript{36} Searle & Vanderveken (1985, 13-14) and Kukla & Lance (2009, 13) both note the importance of not conflating a speaker's intentions with the internal aim of a speech act.

Where does the purpose of the speech act come if not from intentions. I think it comes from the kind of effects that it would be sufficiently useful for a society to be able to bring about with speech. First, we can hold others responsible by blaming them and this is a good reason to have such a speech action. Second, it's particularly beneficial to be able to help increase the morality of our neighbors. I thank Antti Kauppinen for pressing me to clarify this.
of individuating conversations is by looking at the question under discussion.\textsuperscript{37} Thus, it looks like blaming someone involves starting a new conversation (or sub-conversation).

Recall that, on the account of the speech act of blame that I gave above, blaming involves not only changing the question under discussion and thus starting a new conversation, it simultaneously involves making a move in that conversation by trying to get the claim that the blamee is guilty of a moral failing entered into the common ground. This picture, in turn, explains how it is that blaming constitutively involves aiming to get the blamee to engage in a blame conversation. Conversations are turn-taking activities and after one tries to get a proposition added to the common ground, it is the blamee’s “turn” to make a move.

\subsection*{3.2 The Purpose of Blame Conversations}

In what follows, I will argue that we can determine the purpose of blame conversations by looking at when it is intuitive that they are successfully completed. I argue that the common feature of all intuitively successful blame conversations is that the blamee is made morally better because their moral understanding is increased or deepened. The blaming conversation itself, even when successful, will often not transform the blamee. Rather, its point is to push the blamee in the right direction. The kind of moral change that blame conversations will most often produce is an increase in the blamee’s moral understanding. In particular, it will help the blamee get a grasp on the severity of her moral failing. This grasp can be cognitive or non-cognitive (affective or conative). For example, the blamee coming to have the correct degree of remorse for her moral failing can constitute having some grasp on the wrongness of her action—so long as her remorse is based on the morally-relevant features of her wrongful action.

\textsuperscript{37} Roberts (2018).
Before seeing that intuitively successful blame conversations always involve helping to make the blamee better by increasing her moral understanding, I need to first spell out the hallmarks of blame conversations. First, conversations are cooperative ventures. Second, because conversations are cooperative, there are only so many appropriate conversational “moves” that interlocutors can make. In response to being blamed, it seems that one must respond in one (or more) of the following ways: (a) acknowledge one’s failing, (b) apologize, (c) ask for forgiveness, (d) to negotiate just how bad one’s moral failing is, (e) justify one’s action, (f) excuse one’s action, or (g) ask for clarification. Notice that simply ignoring the question or walking away are intuitively inappropriate responses to being blamed—all else being equal. This is because those are uncooperative ways of responding. In walking away, for example, one is giving no weight or consideration to what the other person has said.

Likewise, there are only so many appropriate moves that the blamer can make in response to the blamee. It seems like the blamer must respond in one (or more) of the following ways: (a) express forgiveness (e.g., in response to an apology), (b) thank the blamee for acknowledging their moral failing, (c) accept or reject the blamee’s attempt to negotiate the seriousness of her moral failing, (d) accept or reject the blamee’s justification or excuse, (e) explain why what the blamee did constitutes a moral failing or explain how much of a moral failing their action constitutes, or (f) ask for clarification about the blamee’s proposed justification or excuse.

Now that we know the available moves in the conversation, we can answer the question: When are blame conversations successfully completed? What I mean by “successfully completed” is that the conversation is intuitively finished and there are no loose

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38 I don’t indeed this (or the next) list of appropriate moves to be fully exhaustive. To determine all moves that are appropriate, one would need to explain exactly what constitutes cooperation in conversation. However, doing so is beyond the scope of this paper.
ends. None of the participants are warranted in resenting or having other negative attitudes toward the other participants—at least not on the basis of what happened in the conversation.

First, if the conversation is between the blamee and the victim, then the conversation is successfully completed if the blamee sincerely apologizes (or asks for forgiveness) and the blamer accepts the apology or grants forgiveness. How is the blamee’s moral understanding helped in this case? In order to offer a sincere apology or a contrite request for forgiveness, the blamee will, at the very least, have to appreciate the severity of his moral failing and they will have to act on those appreciated reasons. In calling the blamee out, the blamer will often get the blamee to reflect on the moral reasons for and against what they are blamed for. By considering these reasons, the blamee will often come to cognitively grasp the severity of her moral failing or at least appreciate it more than she previously had. Likewise, considering the reasons for and against her action might result in her having a fitting affective reaction, e.g., regret or remorse. Both responses constitute an increase in moral understanding.

Second, if the conversation is between the blamee and a third-party, then the conversation is successfully completed if the blamee sincerely acknowledges that they acted wrongfully and perhaps promises to apologize to the wronged party. Just like in the above case, the blamee will most likely consider the reasons for and against her action to see if she agrees with the blamer. In order to sincerely acknowledge that she is at fault for a moral failing, she will need to grasp (to some extent) the severity of her moral failing.

Third, blame conversations are successfully completed if the blamee successfully justifies or excuses themselves. However, in order to do this, the blamee must reflect on the moral reasons for and against her action as well as excusing conditions. This reflection is conducive to deepening one’s grasp on the severity of one’s moral failing, because one will
need a grasp of the severity in order to know what counts as a sufficient justification or excuse.

In addition to these cases, there are some blame conversations, which while not completely successful, are not completely unsuccessful. In one case of this kind, the blamee sincerely fails to understand why their action was wrong or how bad it was. In such cases, the conversation is somewhat successful if the blamee sincerely agrees to think more about the moral reasons for and against their action (this is what happens with Emma). In the second case of this kind, the conversation somewhat successful if the blamer and blamee reach an impasse after sharing moral reasons for their positions. These cases are still somewhat successful intuitively. I think the reason for this is that the blamee either promises to continue reflecting on the moral reasons for and against her moral failing or has heard and shared lots of moral reasons for and against her moral failing. Both of these activities are conducive to gaining moral understanding at some later point.

Finally, there are cases in which blame conversations are clearly unsuccessful. Sometimes the blamee refuses to listen to the blame (e.g., they walk away). Sometimes they listen to the blame but don’t take it seriously. A prime example of this is found in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*. Nell is blaming her old friend, Sula, for having an affair with her husband. Nell says, “And you didn’t love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away.” Sula responds, “What you mean take him away? I didn’t kill him . . . If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?”

Here, Sula fails to take Nell’s complaint seriously by explicitly misinterpreting it. In these cases, the blamee doesn’t gain any new appreciation of what is wrong with what she did or how wrong it was. Rather, the blamee seems not to reflect on the content of the blame at all.

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How close the blamee comes to gaining some moral understanding of the severity of her moral failing seems to explain whether (or to what degree) the blame conversation is successful. In the most clearly successful cases, she gains moral understanding. In the somewhat successful cases, she gets closer to gaining some moral understanding either because she promises to take actions that will often lead to moral understanding or she has engaged in an activity (the exchange of reasons) that will often help her gain moral understanding at a later date. Finally, in the unsuccessful cases, the blamee is not even put in a better position to gain moral understanding. In fact, it seems like her position for getting moral understanding of her moral failing is no better than it was before she was blamed.

What do these cases tell us about the purpose of blame conversations? I think it’s plausible that if some activity, A, is successful only if some effect, E, is produced then the purpose of engaging in A is to produce E. For example, one’s moves (as a whole) in a chess game are successful only if one checkmates one’s opponent’s king (and thereby wins). In this case, then, the purpose of making moves in a chess game is to checkmate one’s opponent’s king (and thereby win). One’s moves are somewhat successful if the game ends in a stalemate. This is because one’s own king was not checkmated. Finally, one’s moves are unsuccessful if one’s own king is checkmated (and one thereby loses).

I’m telling an analogous story about blame where a blaming conversation, like a game of chess, is successful only if a certain effect is produced, i.e., the blamee gains some moral understanding. Moreover, the level of one’s success in a blame conversation is explained by the blamee’s position to get moral understanding. Therefore, I think it’s quite plausible that the purpose of blame conversations is to increase the blamee’s moral understanding.

Now that we know what the internal purpose of blame conversations is, we can say what the ultimate purpose of blaming is. I argued that blaming constitutively involves aiming
to get someone to participate in a blame conversation. Now we see that the purpose of such conversations is to increase the blamee’s moral understanding. This, I think, gives us good evidence that the ultimate purpose of blaming someone is to help produce an increase in their moral understanding.

3.3 Moral Understanding and Moral Progress

Why would increasing another person’s moral understanding matter? I think increasing one’s moral understanding is a way of making someone a better person. Having moral understanding helps one do the right thing in a few ways. First, if one believes that \( \phi \)-ing is wrong and one understands why it is wrong or how wrong it is, then, given certain common conditions (e.g., one is rational), then one will typically be motivated to refrain from \( \phi \)-ing. This is because there seems to be a tight connection between judging that one ought not to \( \phi \) and being motivated to avoid \( \phi \)-ing. In fact, the more one grasps or understands why an action is wrong or how wrong it is, the more she will be motivated to avoid doing it—under normal circumstances.

Second, if one is disposed to do the right thing, having moral understanding will help one figure out which actions are permissible and which are impermissible. For example, grasping the severity of the wrongness of the actions one can perform, will help one figure out which action one ought to perform. It will help make someone a person who more reliably does the right thing. Part of being a good person is reliably doing the right thing.

Third, when it comes to being a good or virtuous person, it seems like one must have not only the right motivations but the ability to accurately and reliably judge what is right or

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40 By describing the relationship as a “tight connection,” I mean to be neutral on the internalism/externalism about moral motivation. I am also remaining neutral on what other conditions obtain in order for the understander to be motivated.
wrong, what counts as a moral reason for or against something. Part of what it is to have the ability to accurately and reliably make these judgments is to have moral understanding. In fact, it seems partly constitutive of being a virtuous or a good person that one has some degree of moral understanding and so blaming can help people acquire a constitutive feature of being a virtuous or good person.

Finally, as previously mentioned, I think moral understanding involves both a cognitive and a non-cognitive grasp of moral reasons. Increasing one cognitive moral understanding will help one develop and calibrate the correct non-cognitive moral understandings—and vice versa.

To sum up. Blaming others to their face constitutively involves aiming to get them to engage in a cooperative venture (i.e., conversation) that aims at making them a better person by increasing their moral understanding. We can tell that this is the aim of the conversation, because only once the blamee’s moral understanding is increased is the conversation intuitively successfully completed. Thus, blaming someone to their face constitutively involves aiming to increase a person’s moral understanding.

This picture of the purpose of blame is made more plausible by considering the fact that criticism in any domain seems to have the purpose of making participants in that domain better at achieving the goals of that domain by increasing their understanding. For example, a plausible purpose of teachers is to get students to be better at the subject they are learning, e.g. math, physics, English, history, etc. Thus, it shouldn’t be surprising that the purpose of moral criticism (i.e., blame) is also to make the blamee better at achieving the goals of the moral domain.

41 For more on this, see: Hills (2009, 2013, and 2016).
One might worry about cases in which one blames another person but that blamee fails to gain moral understanding or become a better person at all. After all, how could the purpose of blame be to make people morally better if there are cases in which it fails to do so? It’s certainly true that token blamings will sometimes be unsuccessful, but that does mean that blaming as a *type* of speech act doesn’t have the ultimate purpose of making people morally better. Analogously, notice that the purpose of commands, as a speech act type, is to get commandees to perform certain actions and this is true even though some token commands fail to move commandees.

What about those cases in which the blamee already fully understands what they did was wrong and how wrong it is or where they were already going to apologize with full understanding? What’s the ultimate purpose of blame in those cases? The worry is that the purpose of blame can’t be to make people better by increasing their moral understanding if there are cases in which people already have the moral understanding that would have helped make them better people. I think this worry is misplaced. To see why, consider the following. Commands have the illocutionary point of aiming to get people to do something with the ultimate purpose of getting those people to do the action commanded of them. Imagine that I command someone to close the door. Imagine further that, unbeknownst to me, the door was already closed. It is still intuitive that the illocutionary point of that command is to try to get the commandee to close the door and the ultimate purpose is to get them to close the door.

Analogously, the internal aim of some move in chess might be to check the king and this is so even if the king is already in check. This is because the purpose is determined at the level of the type of speech act and not at the level of individual tokens. Thus, the ultimate
purpose of blame is always helping to make people better—even if achieving that purpose is not possible in all cases.

Finally, even if a blamee understands that their action is wrong and how wrong it is, blaming them provides them with another reason to believe that what they’ve done is wrong and to have the fitting array of affective and conative reactions to what they’ve done. Moreover, how the blamer expresses her blame (e.g., her tone, facial expressions, gestures, etc.) will provide the blamee with evidence of how the blamer was affected by the blamee’s moral failing, which provides the blamee with evidence of how severe his moral failing is. It might be hard to correctly gauge exactly how one’s moral failing negatively affects someone else apart from seeing how they express their blame. Finding out how the blamer was negatively affected, in turn, helps the blamee fine-tune his moral understanding of the severity of his moral failing.

4. The Norm of Blame

4.1 What is the Norm of Blame?

The norm of blame is the strongest set of epistemic credentials that a speaker must possess in order for her performance of the speech act to be epistemically and practically appropriate.\textsuperscript{42} Thus, the norm of blame consists of all and only the epistemic credentials necessary for appropriate blame.

4.2 The Understanding Norm of Blame

In this section, I argue that the following a plausible norm of blame:

\begin{quote}
**The Understanding Norm of Blame:** One has epistemic and practical standing (i.e., it is appropriate) to blame B for $\phi$-ing only if (a) one knows that B’s $\phi$-ing
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{42} Simion (2018), 483.
A few points of clarification are in order. First, this norm is only a necessary condition for appropriately blaming someone. However, it is meant as a list of all the epistemic credentials that are necessary for having epistemic and practical standing to blame. Thus, as noted above, it is compatible with what I say that there are practical requirements that one must be in order for one’s blame to be appropriate. For example, there might be moral requirements on a blamer, e.g., that she is not guilty of the same moral failing or that the matter at issue is her “business.”\textsuperscript{44} Such moral requirements are not my concern. I will assume throughout that the blamer has this moral standing. Second, by “sufficiently” understands, I mean that the blamer understands the severity of the blamee’s moral failing such that she can tell if the blamee’s responses (e.g., justification, excuse, negotiation, etc.) are satisfactory. That is, “sufficiently” understanding the severity of the blamee’s moral failing just means that the blamer can competently engage in the blame conversation that she starts in blaming someone. However, I will argue that moral understanding consists of numerous abilities or sensitivities that one can have to varying degrees. This means that there are numerous ways of sufficiently understanding the severity of the blamee’s moral failing (more on this below).

\textbf{4.3 Moral Understanding}

The kind of moral understanding that I’m most concerned with has to do with understanding the seriousness, severity, or weight of the moral reasons for and against the act or attitude in question.\textsuperscript{45} Thus, instead of talking about understanding why \(p\), where \(p\) is a

\textsuperscript{43} I’m assuming that knowledge is the norm of assertion and because blaming someone involves asserting that they have committed a moral violation, one must meet the norm of general assertion in order to be able to epistemically properly blame. I’m happy to change the first requirement if it turns out that knowledge isn’t the norm of assertion. For arguments that trusting an assertive can be sufficient for moral knowledge, see: Jones (1999).

\textsuperscript{44} For more on the moral standing to blame, see: Bell (2013), King (2015), and Todd (2019).

\textsuperscript{45} Hills (2009 & 2016)’s view focuses on understanding \textit{why} \(p\). Callahan (2018)’s view focuses on understanding \(p\).
moral proposition, I will talk about understanding the wrongness (obligatoriness, suberogatoriness, etc.) of some action or attitude. For ease of exposition, I will focus on understanding the wrongness of some action.

Understanding the wrongness of some action, A, consists in a few parts. First, A must actually be wrong. That is, understanding is factive. Second, one must justifiably believe that A is wrong.\(^{46}\) Third, one must cognitively or non-cognitively grasp (see or appreciate) the wrongness of A (at least partly) in virtue of explicitly or implicitly recognizing the moral reasons for and against A. Fourth, one’s justified belief that A is wrong must be based (at least in part) on one this grasp. Finally, because one’s grasp of the wrongness of A comes in degrees, moral understanding also comes in degrees.

A cognitive grasp of the wrongness of A involves the following abilities. First, one must be able to accurately judge what facts would defeat, intensify, or attenuate any of the reasons for or against performing A—for some range of facts.\(^{47}\) For example, one must be able to accurately judge that if a person’s performance of an action wasn’t under their control, then they are not blameworthy for it. The greater the number of facts that one has this ability with, the better one’s grasp of the wrongness of A is—all else being equal. Although, it will be vague exactly how many of these facts one must have this ability with for one to count as grasping the wrongness of A at all.

Second, one must be able to accurately judge what facts would outweigh the total weight of reasons against performing A—for some range of facts. For example, one could accurately judge that the reasons against lying to someone about an unimportant fact (e.g.,

\(^{46}\) Based on arguments from Hills (2009 and 2016) and Pritchard (2009) I’m inclined to think that while knowledge is incompatible with environmental luck, understanding is not. However, nothing turns on this for this paper. Thus, if one thinks that understanding requires knowledge, one can simply replace this condition with “one knows that A is wrong.”

\(^{47}\) For more of modifiers (i.e., intensifiers or attenuators) of reasons, see: Bader (2016).
when it rained in Spain in 1912) would be outweighed if one had to tell this lie in order to avoid deceiving that same person about an important fact (e.g., when that person will die). Again, the greater the number of facts that one has this ability with, the better one’s grasp of the wrongness of A is (all else being equal) and it will be vague exactly how many of these facts one must have this ability with for one to count as grasping the wrongness of A at all.

Third, one must be able to accurately judge (non-comparatively) the total weight of the reasons against performing A. For example, one would be able to accurately judge that the total weight of reasons against tying one’s left shoe first would be null. The closer that one’s judged total weight is to the actual total weight of the reasons against performing A, the better one’s grasp of the wrongness of A—all else being equal.

Finally, one must be able to accurately judge how the total weight of the reasons against performing A compares with the total weight of reasons for or against other actions. For example, one must be able to judge that the reason constituted by <A causes a human death> would be weightier than the reason constituted by <A causes a mild headache>—all else being equal.48

One has these abilities (at least partly) in virtue of explicitly or implicitly recognizing the reason(s) why A is wrong. When one explicitly recognizes the reason(s) that make A wrong, one can identify both the moral properties of A (e.g., wrongness or obligatoriness) and the morally-relevant properties that constitute or generate the moral properties of A (e.g., that A consists in breaking a promise). When one implicitly recognizes the reason(s) that make A wrong, one can only identify the moral property of A (e.g., the wrongness of A)

48 This ability shouldn’t be confused with the ability to judge which facts would outweigh the total weight of reasons against performing A. Unlike the latter ability, the former requires that one be able to judge which actions have less weighty reasons against them than A. Moreover, just because there is more reason to perform action B than there is to perform action A, it doesn’t follow that B would outweigh the reasons one has to perform A. This is because B might be impossible despite the fact that one would have more reason to perform it if it were possible.
without being able to identify what the morally-relevant properties. For example, if one hears that a fully capable person refused to save a drowning child, one might have the strong intuition that what they did was wrong (or that they had a decisive reason to not do it) without being able to identify the morally-relevant property that makes it the case that what the person did was wrong.

A non-cognitive grasp of the wrongness of A involves having certain sensitivities instead of abilities. These sensitivities are non-cognitive because they involve affective and conative reactions to witnessing or imagining certain scenarios. For example, desiring that wrong actions not occur, or being motivated to save drowning children, etc. Having a non-cognitive grasp of the wrongness of A involves having the following sensitivities. First, one’s reaction is sensitive to what facts would defeat, intensify, or attenuate any of the reasons for or against performing A. For example, one’s anger that someone performed A would be: (a) attenuated if one found out that the person defending themselves by performing A—albeit in a slightly disproportionate way, (b) intensified if one found out that the person intended to do it and enjoyed it, or (c) extinguished if one found out that the person wasn’t in control of her body and had no idea what she was doing.

Second, one’s reaction is sensitive to what facts would outweigh the total weight of reasons against performing A. For example, if one found out that one had to tell a white lie in order to avoid telling a much more serious lie, then one’s initial negative reaction to witnessing the lie would switch values and become a positive reaction. Third, one’s reaction is sensitive to the total weight of the reasons against performing A. In other words, the intensity of one’s negative affective response to the performance of A should be in proportion to the total weight of reasons against performing A. For example, one should be annoyed that a person caused you an inconvenience, angry that someone robbed an innocent stranger, and
outraged that some country engaged in genocide. Finally, one's reaction is sensitive to how
the total weight of the reasons against performing A compares with the total weight of
reasons for or against other actions. For example, one must have a stronger negative reaction
to an innocent person being killed than to an innocent person being given a mild headache.
This sensitivity can also be manifested in one's being more motivated to cause innocents
people mild headaches rather than killing them, when one must perform one of these
actions.49 This is ostensibly the kind of sensitivity that Huck Finn displayed when he was
more motivated to save his friend, Jim, than to turn him in—even though Huck believed it
was wrong to not turn Jim in.50

One has this sensitivity (at least partly) in virtue of being sensitive to the presence of
the moral reason(s) that make A wrong. When one is sensitive to the presence of the moral
reason(s) that make A wrong, one has non-cognitive reactions to witnessing or imagining A
with the correct valence. In the case of a wrongful action, one has negative affective and
cognitive reactions. Had there been no moral reasons against A present, then one would not
have had the negative non-cognitive reaction.

The kind of grasp one has of the wrongness of some action will determine which of
these abilities one has—and to what degree one has them. For example, in general, a
cognitive grasp likely gives one more of these abilities to greater degrees than a non-cognitive
grasp. A non-cognitive grasp, however, of the wrongness of some action will often give one
the abilities to: (a) answer some range of what-if-things-had-been-different questions, (b)
answer some range of question about whether two actions are wrong for the same reason and

49 It is vague to exactly what degree one must have either (or both) of these sets of abilities in order to count as
outright grasping the wrongness of an action.
50 Twain (1999). For more on Huck's moral sensitivity and motivation, see: Bennett (1974), Airplay (2003,
75-76).
to the same degree, and (c) provide examples of similar actions that are wrong to a similar degree.

5. Defending the Understanding Norm of Blame

What makes the Understanding Norm of Blame plausible? I will answer that question by looking at its two conditions individually.

5.1 The Knowledge Condition

The Understanding Norm of Blame requires that the blamer know that the blamee is at fault for a moral failing. This condition is based on the fact that blame (as calling someone out) is an assertive. In particular, it is what I’ll call a “full” assertive (e.g., asserting, swearing, guaranteeing, reporting, etc.). Assertives, as a type of speech, make a claim about the way that the world is, e.g., “The Eiffel Tower was finished in 1889.” Full assertives are assertives, which, when performed, fully commit the speaker to the epistemic appropriateness of the content of the assertion.

In blaming someone, one is making a claim about the moral status of something they did or some attitude they have. Because one’s blame will be a source of belief for the blamee, one’s claim must have certain epistemically-relevant features in the way that a clock or sensory appearance must have in order to be an appropriate source of belief. Blaming another person, when one knows that they are at fault for a moral failing, is probably the most reliable way of getting them to acquire the same knowledge. This knowledge will give her a sufficient reason to reflect on what she’s guilty of and what the reasons for and against her action or attitude are.

While I cannot argue for it here, I think that knowledge is required for appropriately performing any full assertive. Moreover, I think that the norm of assertion just is knowledge and because blaming involves asserting a claim about the moral failing of the blamee, I think
that blame also requires knowledge. However, if one is convinced that the norm of assertion or full assertives is a different epistemic state, then one can just replace the knowledge condition of the Understanding Norm of Blame with their preferred norm. To my mind, the most important epistemic state required for blame is moral understanding. I now turn to that component of the Understanding Norm of Blame.

5.2 The Understanding Condition

Recall that blaming someone involves aiming to get them to engage in a blame conversation. In fact, in unhedged blame, someone demands that the blamee engages in this kind of conversation. Understanding the severity of the blamee’s moral failing is necessary for appropriate blame for a few reasons.

First, sufficient understanding of the severity of the moral failing is necessary for achieving the purpose of that speech act, i.e., making the blamee a better person by increasing their moral understanding—at least in normal circumstances. In other words, the blamer must be able to competently engage in the blaming conversation with the blamee that normally brings about moral understanding. This means, *inter alia*, that one must be able to competently respond to all the moves that it is appropriate for the blamee to make. Thus, one must be able to recognize whether an apology, request for forgiveness, or acknowledgment are sufficiently contrite; one must be able to tell whether the blamee’s justification or excuse is sufficient; one must be able to recognize whether the blamee is correct in their attempt to negotiate down the severity of their moral failing; and one must be able to provide an explanation of or answer questions about why the blamee’s action is wrong and how wrong it is.

Not only is being able to competently participate in the blame conversation necessary for achieving the purpose of blame, but it is also necessary to avoid hypocrisy. When the
blamer demands that the blamee engage in the blame conversation, she demands that the blamee competently engage in the blame conversation. That is, she demands that the blamee not only make the right kind of moves (e.g., provide a justification or excuse, offer an apology, etc.), she demands that the blamee make a competent (or correct) move, i.e., that he provide a good justification or an exculpating excuse or a sufficiently contrite apology, etc. After all, the blamer isn’t looking to be placated by the blamee. However, if the blamer is demanding that the blamee competently engage in the blame conversation, then she too must be able to competently engage in that conversation. That is, she must be able to recognize whether the blamee’s justification is good or his excuse is sufficient or his apology is sufficiently contrite. And, if the blamer cannot recognize these things, then her responses will not be competent. Thus, demanding that the blamee competently engage in the blame conversations requires that the blamer be able to do the same, lest she be guilty of hypocrisy.

Why does it matter if the blamer is being hypocritical in demanding that the blamee engage in the blame conversation? Because many think that hypocritical blame is impotent or defective in some way. Thus, in order to appropriately blame someone, one’s blame must not be hypocritical. However, it should be noted that the kind of hypocrisy I’m appealing to is somewhat different than the kind that most writing on standing to blame appeal to. They are mainly concerned with blaming someone for a moral failing that one is also guilty of or with which one is also involved. Nonetheless, the underlying problem with being hypocritical seems to be the same, i.e., one treats oneself as better than the blamee in some sense.51

51 The details of what is wrong with hypocritical blame are not important for my purposes. All that matters, is that there is something defective or inappropriate about hypocritical blame.
Second, the blaming utterance (e.g., “You shouldn’t have done that!”, “What were you thinking?” or “Explain yourself!”) often conveys—at least partly—the severity of the moral failing. It does so via the person’s demeanor, the tone and volume of their voice, their facial expressions, their hand gestures, and so on. Most often these factors are expressions of emotion and can communicate the severity of a moral failing better than any single assertion can—provided that the emotions are fitting. For example, how indignant a person appears is a good indicator of how severe they think the moral failing is and, provided that they are a reliable judge, their expression of indignation will be a good indicator of how severe the moral failing actually is. However, in order for them to be able to express the correct amount of indignation, anger, resentment, etc., they will have to have some understanding of how severe the moral failing is. Or, more importantly, they will need some amount of moral understanding to ensure that they do not express too much indignation, anger, resentment, etc.

Communicating the severity of the moral failing in the initial act of blame is important, because it gives the blamee a sense of how they ought to respond. It communicates not only whether they should apologize or ask for forgiveness, but how sorry they should feel and how contrite their apology should be. Without a sense of the severity of moral failing, the blamee will not know exactly how to respond to being called out, apart from asking how bad her moral failing is.

Third, it seems inappropriate or criticizable for people to blame others without sufficient moral understanding. Imagine that Judith (a moral expert) tells Adam that Beth’s voting for a particular politician was morally wrong. Imagine further that Adam forms the belief that Beth’s voting was morally wrong solely on the basis of Judith’s testimony. Let us grant that Adam only knows that Beth’s voting was morally wrong. Now imagine that Adam
utters the following to Beth, “How could you have done that? That was morally wrong.” It
strikes me that Adam is not in the right epistemic position to be blaming Beth. To see this,
imagine that Beth asks Adam why he thinks that it was wrong for her to vote for that
particular politician and he says, “Judith told me it was wrong.” It strikes me that Adam’s
defense of his blame is insufficient.

Even if Adam knew it was wrong because, e.g., the politician is racist, there would
still be something intuitively deficient about his blame. Beth could ask, “Do you have any
idea how wrong my voting was?” and Adam’s answer would have to be “No.” She could
criticize Adam for blaming her when he had no idea how wrong it was. After all, the severity
of how one blames (e.g., demanding vs requesting a justification) must be proportionate to
the severity of the wrong and without any idea of the severity of the wrong, the severity of
one’s blame will often not match the severity of the wrong. Moreover, even if the blame
matches the wrong, it will be merely by accident, which strikes me as undermining the
practical authority one assumes when one blames someone else.

Finally, there seems to be a presumption that blamers should have moral
understanding of why the moral failing in question is wrong or bad, or how severe it is. For
example, it would be appropriate for B to respond to A, “Who are you to criticize me? You
don’t even get/grasp/appreciate why my action was wrong” or “Sure, I was wrong, but you
don’t even get how wrong my action is, you’d be blaming me even if my action was mildly
wrong.”

5.3 Is Moral Understanding Really Necessary?

Recall that the norm of blame, just like the norm of assertion, is meant to be the strongest set
of necessary conditions for epistemically permissible blame, i.e., the set of all and only the
necessary conditions for permissible blame. One might think that a weaker epistemic state is
all that is necessary for proper blame. In this section, I argue that an epistemic condition that
doesn't require understanding will be too weak.

Coates (2016) argues that reasonable belief is all that is necessary for epistemically
blame while Kelp (2019) argues that knowledge is all that is necessary for epistemically
permissible blame.\(^52\) While these are distinct views, my objections to them are the same.
However, if these views are meant merely as a necessary condition (and not the only one) for
epistemically permissible blame, then our views are compatible. After all, I think knowledge
is required and that something like reasonable belief is required for knowledge.\(^53\)

Neither account requires a grasp of the severity of moral failing and thus neither
requires that blamers be justified in having the affective states they express in blaming nor
being justified in communicating the severity of the moral failing in one's tone, volume,
facial expression, etc. But, blaming paradigmatically involves expressing one's affective states
or at least communicating the severity of the moral failing in the blame. Perhaps, they only
have "cold" blame in mind. But then their norms are not for paradigmatic cases of blame,
which is a strong reason to reject them.

Moreover, because they don't require moral understanding, they don't require the
blamer to be able to properly engage in a blame conversation. Having only knowledge that
the blamee is guilty of a moral failing, won't allow them to be able to tell if the blamee's
responses are appropriate and adequate. Nor will they be able to explain why or how severe
the blamee's moral failing is. Thus, without moral understanding, there is little hope that a
blamer can satisfy the purpose of blaming.

\(^{52}\) Coates (2016), Kelp (2019), 2, fn.4. In fairness, neither Coates nor Kelp claims to be offering a norm of
blame in the sense of calling someone out. In fact, Kelp seems concerned with blame in the sense of asserting
that someone is blameworthy or that someone did something wrong. Nonetheless, their accounts help illustrate
why moral understanding is necessary for the sense of blame I'm interested in.

\(^{53}\) In fact, Coates himself is agnostic about what reasonable belief amounts to (258, fnn. 4 and 5).
Perhaps all that is required for epistemically permissibly blaming B for \( \phi \)-ing is that one: (a) knows that B’s \( \phi \)-ing constitutes a moral failing and (b) knows why B’s \( \phi \)-ing constitutes a moral failing. I think this too is insufficient. Having these two pieces of knowledge will often be insufficient for grasping or appreciating the weight of the moral reasons relevant to the moral status of B’s \( \phi \)-ing. The weight of moral reason is highly context-sensitive and so knowing an action is, e.g., wrong, and why it’s wrong, will tell you nothing about how wrong it is. Without knowing how wrong it is, one will not be able to justifiably communicate the severity of the moral failing in one’s act of blaming one will one be able to gauge whether B’s responses are appropriate or adequate. For example, knowing that B’s \( \phi \)-ing is wrong and that it is wrong because it has some morally-relevant property, won’t tell you if B’s apology is sufficiently contrite or if B’s justification or excuse is sufficient. This is because whether these things are sufficient is a function of how wrong B’s \( \phi \)-ing was. Thus, one wouldn’t be able to competently assess B’s response to being blamed.

One might suggest that what is required for being able to epistemically permissible blame B for \( \phi \)-ing is that one: (a) knows that B’s \( \phi \)-ing constitutes a moral failing, (b) knows why B’s \( \phi \)-ing constitutes a moral failing, (c) knows how weighty the moral reasons for and against B’s \( \phi \)-ing were. Depending on exactly what is meant by one’s knowing how weighty the moral reasons are, one’s having all the aforementioned knowledge might be tantamount to understanding the wrongness or badness of B’s \( \phi \)-ing. If one just has a sufficient amount of the kind of knowledge that I argued is involved in grasping the severity of the moral property (e.g., wrongness), then, combined with knowing that and why B’s \( \phi \)-ing has that property, one will just have the right kind of understanding.
Sometimes, however, this knowledge will not be enough to be able to communicate the severity of the moral failing in one's act of blaming nor competently participate in the blame conversation. This is because there are degrees of serious wrongness. Cheating on a spouse is seriously wrong, but so is murdering an innocent person for fun. The latter being more seriously wrong than the former. And the fitting affective responses can vary in both kind and intensity depending on the degree of seriousness. Thus, I think it's clear that epistemic credentials weaker than knowledge and understanding (i.e., what the Understanding Norm of Blame requires) clearly do not require enough.

5.4 Too Demanding?

One might worry that the Understanding Norm of Blame is over-demanding because of the kinds of abilities and sensitivities it involves. I think this worry is misplaced. First, what constitutes a sufficient understanding of the wrongness of some action is multiply realizable. One can have sufficient understanding if one has the cognitive abilities to a limited degree, but possesses all the non-cognitive dispositions to a high degree or vice versa. One can have sufficient understanding if one has the cognitive abilities and the non-cognitive dispositions to a moderate degree. One's cognitive or non-cognitive grasp is also multiply realizable. One can cognitively grasp the wrongness of some action by having the ability to accurately judge what facts would defeat, intensify, or attenuate any of the reasons for or against performing A to a high degree, but only have the other abilities to a limited degree. One can non-cognitively grasp the wrongness of some action by being extremely sensitive to what facts would defeat, intensify, or attenuate any of the reasons for or against performing A, but only be mildly sensitive to what facts would outweigh the total weight of the reasons against A. Thus, I should not be read as claiming that understanding the wrongness of an action requires having both kinds of grasps to the highest degree nor having each ability or
sensitivity to the highest degree. All that matters is that the blamer can appropriately respond to the blamee's response to being blamed.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that having the epistemic and practical standing to blame (as calling out) someone requires that one have certain epistemic credentials. I started with a speech theoretic characterization of blaming as calling out in which I argued that blame is an assertive-directive hybrid. I argued that blaming someone to their face constitutively involves aiming to get them to engage in a blame conversation. This kind of conversation has the internal aim of helping to make the blamee a better person—by increasing their moral understanding. From this, I concluded that the ultimate purpose of direct blame is to help make the blamee a better person by increasing their moral understanding. I then argued for the Understanding Norm of Blame, according to which having the epistemic and practical standing to blame someone requires that one know that the blamee is guilty of a moral failing and understand how severe that moral failing is. I argued that meeting this norm is required to being able to reliably achieve the purpose of blame and to avoid being hypocritical.
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