



The knowledge norm of assertion in dialectical context

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Abstract

This paper aims to show that the Knowledge Norm of Assertion (KNA) can lead to trouble in certain dialectical contexts. Suppose a person knows that p but does not know that they know that p . They assert p in compliance with the KNA. Their interlocutor responds: 'but do you know that p ?' It will be shown that the KNA blocks the original asserter from providing any good response to this perfectly natural follow-up question, effectively forcing them to retract p from the conversational scoreboard. This finding is not simply of theoretical interest: I will argue that the KNA would allow the retort 'but do you know that p ?' to be weaponized in strategic communication, serving as a tool for silencing speakers without having to challenge their testimonial contributions on their own merits. Our analysis can thereby provide a new dimension to the study of epistemic injustice, as well as underscoring the importance of considering the norms governing speech acts also from the point of view of non-ideal social contexts.

KEYWORDS

antagonistic communication, assertion, language and social power, norms of assertion, silencing, speech acts

1 | ASSERTION AS A NORM-GOVERNED ACTIVITY

The study of assertion and its governing norm (or norms) occurs at the intersection of the philosophy of language, epistemology, and social philosophy. It involves the philosophy of language because the norm will articulate a constraint on admissible discourse contributions, i.e., speech acts. It involves epistemology because the constraint in question will make substantial reference to some positive epistemic standing the speaker must satisfy in order

to be warranted in making an assertion. Finally, it involves social philosophy because the act of assertion often takes place in the context of joint deliberation geared toward collective action. That there *should* be a norm of assertion in the first place thus has everything to do with the fact that the practice of assertion plays an important role in our shared lives. As a socio-epistemic collective, we have legitimate reasons for attempting to shield our joint deliberation processes from confusion, misdirection, or outright deception. If effectively monitored and properly internalized, a norm of assertion will act as a minimal mechanism for quality control.¹

This complexity strongly suggests that useful contributions to the study of the norm of assertion can plausibly be made from a variety of angles. For instance, we can approach the question on the idealizing assumption that participants start from a position of rough equality and generally engage in well-intentioned cooperative communication in pursuit of some common good. Or we could approach it in the knowledge that many real-world communicative contexts are precisely not like this: instead, they are marked by significant, often unearned power differentials, where participants often have a vested interest in excluding or marginalizing others' contributions rather than treating them as potentially valuable contributions to a shared pursuit of the truth. Here, arbitrarily empowered participants may be nominally 'playing along with the rules'—presuming a role as 'norm-enforcers'—while really just seeking to secure their own standing and their continued influence over the process of public deliberation.²

In light of this, we can approach our question in a *descriptive* way, drawing on data from actual or imagined speech interactions to form hypotheses about what the norm of assertion *is*. But we can also approach it in a *normative* manner, asking what the norm of assertion *should be* in particular contexts, given the aims that participants bring to the conversation and their background situation. Here, our inquiry can yield an important *ameliorative perspective* on the subject matter: we want to be on guard against the possibility that arbitrarily empowered speakers could covertly use the norm of assertion to sideline the contributions of comparatively disempowered speakers. In other words, we should be open to the possibility that in non-ideal contexts (i.e., contexts marked by significant social inequality and high potential for antagonistic, strategic communication³) we should prefer a different norm of assertion than we should in contexts more closely approximating the ideal of equality and cooperativeness.

This paper argues that a highly influential contemporary account of the norm of assertion—the Knowledge Norm of Assertion (KNA)—is susceptible to a certain kind of weaponization in strategic discourse, threatening effectively to silence already marginalized speakers. This form of silencing is related to but importantly different from forms that have already been described in feminist philosophy of language.⁴ It will be argued that weaker candidate norms of assertion are not similarly susceptible to strategic weaponization. From an ameliorative point of view, then, this gives us reason to favor a weaker norm. In addition to its own intrinsic interest, the argument serves as an illustration of the importance of thinking about speech act theory and other dimensions of the philosophy of language against the backdrop of non-ideal social contexts.

2 | WILLIAMSON ON THE KNOWLEDGE NORM OF ASSERTION

Let us assume, then, that there is a norm of assertion, and moreover, that this norm, by way of introducing an epistemological constraint on assertion, plays the important role of serving as a quality control on inputs to joint

¹Cf. Turri (2017) for a perspective along these lines. In this sense, it is surely also tempting to associate current concerns about 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' with the erosion of a public norm of assertion, or, more specifically, with the loss of an incentive to comply with such a norm.

²For example, consider a norm which said that only people with certain credentials (say a Ph.D. from a leading university) would be warranted to speak on certain subjects. Surely we can imagine contexts in which attaching formal credentials to a norm of assertion would not be inherently unreasonable. The problem, however, would arise in situations where access to the relevant credentials would be arbitrarily restricted, for instance, along lines of ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic status.

³See Camp (2018) for an illuminating exploration of 'antagonistic discourse' operating under the veneer of cooperativeness.

⁴See, in particular, the literature that takes its bearings from Langton (1993).

deliberation. We can agree to this, however, without agreeing on what exactly that epistemological constraint is (or should be).

According to a recently very influential account (Williamson, 1996, 2000), the norm of assertion is, quite simply, knowledge.

KNA: assert p , only if you know that p .⁵

It might be helpful to note that KNA is not a free-standing thesis in Williamson's work, but is one of a number of interlinked theses, often referred to collectively as the Knowledge First program.⁶ This program aspires to turn much of traditional epistemological theory on its head: whereas philosophers have often sought to provide analyses of our concept of knowledge by defining it in terms of other epistemic concepts, such as justification, evidence, and belief,⁷ the Knowledge First approach holds that knowledge is a primitive, unanalyzable concept. Knowledge is, rather, the concept in terms of which we must define these other epistemic concepts. In other words, any attempt to say what justification, evidence, etc. are must make appeal to the concept of knowledge. KNA is an important part of this program.

Williamson acknowledges that assertion may in fact be subject to many norms—such as norms of expediency, relevance, kindness, etc.⁸—which might even come into conflict on occasion. Even so, he argues that the KNA holds pride of place, as the *constitutive norm of assertion*. These other norms may *apply* to assertion, much like they also apply to a range of other speech act types. But assertion alone answers to a norm of knowledge.

To say that KNA is a constitutive norm is of course not to say that every assertion will comply with it. But it is to say that what makes an assertion an assertion, i.e., what differentiates it from any other kind of speech act, is just that it answers to this norm. An assertion which fails to comply with the norm is just a defective assertion. We can briefly note two things about assertions found to be defective in this way: (i) they are liable to be stricken, without further ado, from the 'conversational scoreboard' (i.e., the set of propositions mutually assumed to guide our joint deliberations henceforth); (ii) making a defective assertion renders the speaker potentially liable to various kinds of social sanction. (These sanctions need not be particularly punitive in order to be effective: the loss of face associated with being unable to back up one's assertions under challenge does much to explain why many of us are so diligent in monitoring our discourse contributions.)⁹

The implications of KNA are immediate and important: you might think, for instance, that having *good* or *subjectively compelling evidence* for believing that p would provide you with a warrant for asserting that p . But if KNA is correct, this would be mistaken: your having any manner of evidence for p is consistent with p 's nonetheless being false, and if p is false, you cannot know it. Accordingly, you would be wrong to assert it, no matter what your evidence indicates.¹⁰

⁵See Unger (1975) for an early defense of KNA, and, *inter alia*, Hawthorne (2004), Adler (2009), Benton (2011), and Turri (2016) for further developments.

⁶For discussion, see Carter, Gordon, and Jarvis (2017).

⁷Consider, for instance, the time-honored attempt to define knowledge in terms of justified true belief, or, post-Gettier, in terms of justified true belief plus some further condition (e.g., safety, sensitivity, or similar). On the Knowledge First approach, the problem with these proposals is not simply that they fail to carry out their reductive ambitions: rather, those ambitions are misguided from the start.

⁸For a classic statement, see Grice (1967).

⁹Given the fact that assertion is concurrently subject to a number of different norms, one could certainly think that there may be situations in which one is warranted – on grounds of kindness, say – in asserting what one does not know. However, this sort of 'prudential warrant' could at best provide one with an excuse (i.e., an exemption from sanction). *Qua* assertion it is still defective, and therefore liable to be stricken from the conversational scoreboard.

¹⁰One might think that this conclusion is rendered less dramatic by another of Williamson's signal theses (1997, 2000, ch. 9), namely that one's evidence is restricted to propositions that one knows (i.e., 'E = K'). But this is too simple: even true (and known) propositions can lend compelling support to a false (and therefore unknowable) conclusion. For instance, I can know that Nina is generally knowledgeable about local bus routes and know that Nina said that the bus continues to run after midnight. But if the route was recently cut without announcement and the last bus runs at 23:45, I could not know that the bus runs after midnight, simply because it does not. And so, according to KNA, I would be wrong to assert that it runs after midnight to the next person who asks, even though all my evidence strongly suggests that it does.

3 | KNA WITHOUT KK

Clearly, then, the KNA is a demanding norm of assertion, significantly stronger, for instance, than a norm which would grant permission to assert to anyone holding a well-evidenced belief.¹¹ Nonetheless, it is important to note that it is not *quite* as strong as one might think at first. For, strictly speaking, the KNA requires only that the speaker be in a position of knowledge toward the proposition that they assert. It does not require that they *know* that they are in this position.

In other words, Williamson's approach combines the KNA with a denial of the KK-principle (Williamson, 2000, ch. 5):

KK-principle: if S knows that p , then S knows that S know that p .

While the KK-principle has fallen on hard times in recent decades, this rejection is not entirely uncontroversial.¹² We do not need to linger on this point, however, since the KK-principle itself is not directly at stake in this paper. Instead, what is at stake is simply what happens when the implications of KK-denial combine with the KNA in dialectical context.¹³

Accordingly, my argument turns on situations in which a subject knows that p but does not know that they know that p . Before we begin, it is certainly fair to ask just how common such situations can be. Are they, for instance, just an odd fluke that one might possibly run into a handful of times during the span of one's life, like Gettier situations? Or worse, are they a mere theoretical possibility, such as might arise in a case where one would be duped by an evil demon? To the contrary, taking seriously the denial of the KK-principle suggests that such cases might be very common indeed.¹⁴ That is, one can quite easily find oneself in situations where, for instance, one has in fact processed one's evidence correctly but is in no position to know that one has not exhibited significant bias or neglected potentially significant evidence. For example, after witnessing a violent crime on the street, one might know that the perpetrator was a white male in his 20s of normal height, wearing a red hoodie, at the same time as one is aware that many witnesses to traumatic events give systematically false testimony along these dimensions.¹⁵ One can know these things without being in a position to rule out the possibility that one's eye-witness memories are unreliable. For another example, say one's belief that p is formed by consulting relevant expert testimony. Virtually everyone agrees that testimony can serve as a conduit of knowledge (as opposed to mere justified belief).¹⁶ Likewise, however, it is widely agreed that one's presumption to know by testimony would be undermined in a case where one's testifier did not, in fact, know that p , but was merely, say, engaging in wishful thinking. Does one need to *know* that one's testifier was knowledgeable in order to know that p based on their testimony? Even philosophers who have attempted to revive 'reductionist approaches' to testimony (e.g., Fricker, 1994) tend to stop well short of this requirement, maintaining only that one must have some positive epistemic reason to believe that one's testifier is knowledgeable. Thus, testimony, a ready source of knowledge in many

¹¹Compare Grice's Maxims of Quality (Grice, 1967, p. 27): '1. Do not say that which you believe to be false. 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.'

¹²Hintikka (1962) is a frequently cited focal point of current discussion on the KK-principle. See also Greco (2014) for an attempt to revive a version of the principle in light of recent criticism.

¹³Given that the problem arises from the combination of KNA and KK-denial, one could of course ask whether the right way forward is simply to reinsert the KK-principle. There is reason to think not: the problem is not, per se, whether K in fact entails KK; rather, the problem is that *if* the KK-principle were correct, then KNA would be much too restrictive as a norm of assertion by pretty much anyone's lights. So if KNA cannot be defended without the KK-principle, then it arguably should not be defended at all.

¹⁴See Williamson (2005, p. 232).

¹⁵See, e.g., National Research Council (2014).

¹⁶In fact, Williamson holds (2000, pp. 267–268) that the KNA is uniquely positioned to explain how testimony can involve the transmission of knowledge.

domains of our daily lives (and moreover, a source of knowledge whose explicit mechanism is assertion) seems to require K without KK.¹⁷

4 | ALICE AND BRIGID

In light of this, we should accordingly feel no strain in picturing someone, let's call her Alice, who

(i) knows that *p*,

but

(ii) does not know that she knows that *p*.

Consider now the following conversational interaction between Alice and her friend Brigid:

A: '*p*.'¹⁸

B: 'But do you *know* that *p*?'

The first thing to note is, of course, that Alice's utterance did in fact satisfy the KNA, insofar as she knows that *p* (by stipulation (i) above).

Even so, Brigid's question seems a perfectly reasonable response to Alice's assertion. Williamson himself acknowledges as much (2000, p. 253), and indeed points to the fact that we intuitively recognize Brigid's response as appropriate and dialectically relevant as a reason to believe that KNA is correct: after all, if knowledge were *not* the norm of assertion, then Brigid's question would be strictly speaking irrelevant to Alice's assertion and could be met with a simple shrug of the shoulders; it would no more require an answer than, say, 'are you happy that *p*?'¹⁹ In short, the question 'but do you *know* that *p*?' seems, dialectically speaking, to require an answer in the way that a question about one's affective state toward *p* would not.

So, given that Brigid's question is a good one, and apparently merits an answer, how should Alice answer it? The first thing to notice is that she cannot respond simply by reasserting *p*: Brigid, presumably, is not simply asking Alice to repeat what she said. Instead, she is inviting her to assert a second proposition, to wit, not *p*, but *I know that p*. (That asserting *p* is not in general an elliptical way of asserting *I know that p* should be clear enough²⁰: if it

¹⁷Think about it this way: since knowledge is factive, requiring knowledge that one's testifier knows that *p* is, ipso facto, to require knowledge that *p*, thus rendering the testimony redundant.

¹⁸Examples can run the gamut from mundane to serious: 'Annika wants a kitten for her birthday'; 'the bank will be open on Saturday'; 'it was NN who assaulted me.' I will return to the final example in section 5.

¹⁹Even so, one might take note of the fact that Williamson (ibid.) labels the response 'but do you *know* that *p*?' 'less standard and more aggressive' than its counterpart 'how do you know that *p*?' For the record, I think this is too sweeping: there may be nothing particularly odd or aggressive about Brigid's question. For instance, Brigid might be someone who is not apprised of KNA, and is simply querying for more information concerning the epistemic standing on which Alice asserts that *p*: is it knowledge, justified belief, or mere supposition? Likewise, Brigid might be apprised of KNA, but unsure whether Alice is. Finally, Brigid might be apprised of KNA but also be apprised of collateral discussions in Williamson (cf. 2000, p. 256), according to which KNA (even if it holds pride of place as the 'constitutive norm of assertion') is only one of possibly many norms that might bear on assertion in context. In a variety of ways, then, Brigid might simply be alive to the possibility that Alice might have sincerely asserted *p* even without knowing that *p*. There need be nothing particularly confrontational about her seeking clarification whether by asserting *p*, Alice did in fact take herself to be satisfying KNA. That said, it is certainly correct that 'but do you *know* that *p*?' can *also* be deployed in antagonistic contexts, strategically aiming to undercut the speaker's contribution. I will examine this point in section 5.

²⁰On this, see Williamson's apparent endorsement (2000, p. 252n6) of G.E. Moore's claim that 'by asserting *p* positively you *imply*, though you don't assert, that you know that *p*' (Moore, 1962, p. 277).

were, then any assertion that p would require, by KNA, not just that one knows that p but also that one knows that one knows that p . This would amount to a much more restrictive norm of assertion that even Williamson has in mind, and would also be dubiously consistent with the denial of the KK-principle.)

On the face of it, Brigid's question appears to be a straightforward 'yes'/'no' question. But by now, it should be easy to see that either answer will lead her into trouble with the KNA.

To answer 'yes', Alice must know the proposition she is now asserting (= *I know that p*). But by stipulation (ii), she does not know that she knows that p . So she cannot answer 'yes' without violating KNA.

But the alternative is no better. By answering 'no', she would be asserting that she does not know that p . But by stipulation (i), she does know that p . So answering 'no' to Brigid's question would require her to violate KNA no less than answering 'yes.'

In brief, Brigid's question is a perfectly reasonable one, and does merit an answer, as Williamson himself acknowledges. But apparently, KNA, consistently applied, can leave even a knowledgeable asserter without a sensible response.

Perhaps, though, our initial impressions were misleading, and Alice has a wider range of dialectical options available to her than simply 'yes' or 'no.' For instance, answering 'I don't know' (understood as elliptical for 'I don't know [whether I know that p]') does not seem unreasonable on the face of it. It certainly has the merit of being true to stipulation (ii). But how would such an answer work in this context? The answer would, of course, be fully compatible with Alice's *actually* knowing that p , and therefore satisfying the KNA both in her original assertion and in her follow-up. But dialectically, this response seems dead in the water.

We noted above that the question 'but do you know that p ?' seems to merit a response in dialectical contexts in a way that questions about many other attitudes one could hold toward p might not. Now, then, once this question is asked, can Alice simply decline to give Brigid the further assurance that she seeks but still presume to leave the assertion that p on the conversational scoreboard? Or does the admission that she does not know whether she knows that p constitute a de facto retraction of some kind? Note that Williamson does spend some time discussing a variation of Moore's paradox, ' p and I don't know that p .' On Williamson's view, the non-assertibility of this conjunction is in fact one of our primary reasons for assuming that the KNA is correct (2000, p. 253). What's wrong with ' p and I don't know that p ' is presumably not that it paints an impossible state of affairs. Quite the contrary: there are lots of things that are true that I do not know about. Instead, the problem is entirely internal to the dynamics of the speech act of assertion itself: it amounts to asserting p , and then going on to declare that one does not meet the standard for assertion.

The current variation, ' p and I don't know whether I know that p ', may be a shade better, but it is still not exactly dialectically reassuring: it amounts to asserting that p and then going on to declare that one does know whether one meets the standards for assertion. Brigid will reasonably be left confused as to whether Alice really does mean to leave p on the conversational scoreboard when she admits that she does not know whether her original assertion satisfied the KNA.²¹ It seems that Alice's bid to contribute to their joint deliberations has been effectively nullified at this point: for instance, it would be highly imprudent of Brigid to use p (on the strength of Alice's assertion) as a premise in her own reasoning; nor, it seems, can she responsibly relay it to the next person, in a chain of testimony.

Maybe Alice could attempt to fill in the picture, by saying something like: 'I don't know whether I know that p , but here are my grounds for believing it.' But this is not going to help either. It is, of course, good to be willing to share one's evidence when prompted. But even so, one's having such grounds for believing that p is entirely consistent with one's not knowing that p (as we noted in section 2). If this move would permit one to retain p on the conversational scoreboard, it would essentially amount to substituting well-evidenced belief for knowledge as the

²¹Williamson effectively concedes this point. He writes: 'At any point in such an interrogation [i.e., "do you know that p ?" "do you know that you know that p ?" etc.], anything less than a positive answer seems to destabilize the previous positive answer, and therefore all the earlier positive answers in a domino effect. For what use is an assertion if the speaker is unwilling to stand over it at the next level up? Yet each further question in effect demands a further iteration of knowledge' (Williamson, 2005, p. 233).

norm of assertion. If that is all it came down to on Alice's side, then what she should have said originally was not 'p', but 'here are some grounds for believing that p.' De facto, Alice would now have retracted her original assertion and replaced it with a more qualified one.

Where does this leave us? One possibility is that the problem arises because Williamson puts us in a position where we are supposed to think, on the one hand, that the norm of assertion is very stringent (i.e., knowledge, rather than justified belief), at the same time as the account imposes no apparent restrictions on the subject's higher-order beliefs, i.e., her cognitive attitude toward the question of whether she satisfies that norm. So far as the KNA will have us believe, a speaker can legitimately feign complete indifference on the question of whether they know that *p*, so long as they actually know that *p*.

But in dialectical context, this does not seem right. Whatever the norm of assertion is, it does not seem outrageous to think that any dialectically relevant norm should require not just that one *actually* satisfies the norm, but also that one be rationally non-agnostic toward the proposition that one satisfies that norm.

In light of this, it may certainly be tempting to think that one could simply augment the KNA along these lines: in order to assert that *p*, one must not only know that *p*, but also have some positive (and presumably rational) credence in the proposition that one knows that *p*. So could Alice respond to Brigid's question by saying, 'I think so' (understood as elliptical for 'I believe that I know that *p*') and leave it at that? That sounds dialectically a bit better. But at the same time, it's clear that it does not really give Brigid any new information: if knowledge were the norm of assertion (and this were widely known in the speech community), then it is plausible that asserting *p* would already carry the conventional implicature that one believes one knows that *p*.²² So Brigid is hardly any better off than she was. Apparently, then, Brigid would be entitled to ask 'but do you know that *p*?' but not entitled to expect an informative answer.²³

More generally, if these kinds of maneuvers were successful in meeting challenges like 'but do you *know* that *p*?', it would in fact provide strong evidence that knowledge is not, after all, the norm of assertion. Instead, the norm of assertion might be something like:

Assert *p*, only if you reasonably believe that you know that *p*.²⁴

This type of norm would in one sense be weaker than KNA, but in another sense stronger. It would be weaker in the sense that it would not ultimately require that you know that *p* (since one can reasonably believe that one knows that *p*, even if one does not).²⁵ Yet it would be stronger in the sense that it requires the speaker to maintain *some* kind of higher-order attitude with respect to her epistemic standing to assert. From a theory-neutral point of view, a requirement of this general sort would certainly seem plausible and relevant. No norm of assertion could be effective unless it were properly internalized. But the mechanism of internalization must presumably consist in some such form of higher-order self-monitoring. For KNA, however, introducing such a requirement would be problematic, since it seems that the only relevant alternative would be to reinstate the KK-principle, thereby yielding a norm that is much too restrictive. Weaker candidates for first-order norms, by contrast, can take a stronger stance on this higher-order

²²See, again, Williamson (2000, p. 252n6).

²³Readers interested in the bigger picture of Williamson's Knowledge-First program may also note a further problem here. For Williamson does not just advocate a Knowledge Norm of Assertion; he also advocates, as part and parcel of the same philosophical outlook, a Knowledge Norm for *Belief* (Williamson, 2000, pp. 41–48):

KNB: *believe p, only if you know that p.*

By stipulation (ii), however, Alice does not know that she knows that *p*. And so, if KNB is correct, she presumably should not *believe* that she knows that *p* either. In other words, the dialectical option of answering 'I think so' in answer to Brigid's question of whether she knows that *p* is open to Alice only by violating another of Williamson's philosophical commitments, one closely aligned in terms of its theoretical motivations with the KNA. (See Simion et al., 2016 for critical discussion of the KNB.)

²⁴Williamson discusses and dismisses this norm at 2000, p. 261. For endorsements of variations on this norm, see Douven (2006), Lackey (2007), Neta (2009), and Kvanvig (2011).

²⁵Cf. Williamson (2000, pp. 256–258).

requirement, which is why they are better positioned to handle the back-and-forth of conversational dialectics. As we shall see in the next section, if knowledge is not the norm of assertion, then the question 'but do you know that p ?' can in fact be answered with, 'maybe not, but here are my grounds for believing it', thereby permitting the conversation to continue, now focusing on the quality of the grounds proffered. By contrast, if knowledge is the norm of assertion, the conversation could very well end right there, even though the speaker does in fact have such grounds, and even though those grounds do in fact suffice for knowledge, thereby satisfying the KNA.

5 | WEAPONIZING THE NORM OF ASSERTION: SILENCING BY STRATEGIC NORM-POLICING

So far, we have proceeded on the assumption that Brigid displays a healthy and open-minded attitude in her engagement with Alice, i.e., that their communication is *cooperative*. But things could well have been otherwise: a different interlocutor may have engaged in a covert form of *antagonistic* communication.²⁶ It is my view that KNA allows the retort 'but do you know that p ?' to be strategically weaponized in antagonistic communication, serving effectively as a tool for silencing speakers without taking on the burden of challenging their testimonial contributions on their own merits.

To see how, let us return to the larger perspective suggested in the early sections of this paper. On a standard account, the aim of assertion is to put propositions on 'the conversational scoreboard' (see, in particular, Lewis, 1979, but also Stalnaker, 1978). Most theorists will agree that putting propositions on the conversational scoreboard is not an end in itself: instead, it is something we do in order to redirect shared inquiry, influence collective decision-making, etc. In other words, we assert in order to stake our say in processes of joint deliberation and decision-making. As such, assertion is clearly a power move, and what grounds the relevant power—one's epistemic standing to assert—can be contested in a variety of ways. The idea of a norm of assertion arises quite naturally here as the idea that that we, as a socio-epistemic community and collective deliberation and decision-making body, would do well to exercise a modicum of quality control over the process by which propositions are placed on the conversational scoreboard. The norm of assertion, minimally, incentivizes people to monitor their own contributions, since they risk potentially significant social sanctions if they are found to violate the norm.

Often this is healthy. The practice of joint deliberation thrives on challenges. Challenges are our way of monitoring compliance with the norm of assertion (whatever that norm is). By answering these challenges, speakers are given the opportunity to show that they have met this norm, prompting deeper investigation of their grounds for holding the beliefs that they assert.

But in other cases, the power to challenge can be abused. The potential for abuse can be particularly significant in non-ideal contexts where there is a relevant disparity in socio-epistemic standing ('prestige') between speaker and interlocutor.

Imagine a speaker with relatively low epistemic self-esteem. Their epistemic self-esteem might be low because they belong to a historically marginalized demographic within the community. In such a case, the speaker might have had to dig deep to find it within themselves to assert that p in a public forum in the first place. Their interlocutor, to whom the speaker's assertion that p is an unwelcome contribution, has a strategic interest in bringing p into doubt or removing p from the conversational scoreboard altogether. But the interlocutor has no reason to believe that p is false or any independent evidence to venture against it. In short, *they just do not want to have to deal with it*.

So what can they do? Apparently, the KNA provides a ready resource: the interlocutor can strategically ask, seemingly at no significant dialectical cost to themselves, 'but do you know that p ?' In many cases, they can apparently rely on the speaker being left without a good answer. In such cases, the speaker has effectively been silenced, in a way that may amount to a form of epistemic injustice, and specifically, to a form of testimonial

²⁶For an important deployment of this distinction, see Camp (2018).

injustice.²⁷ Even though the speaker asserted that *p* in full compliance with the KNA, their assertion is now at significant risk of being stricken from the conversational scoreboard. It would be stricken from the scoreboard not in the blunt sense of having been removed altogether from the record of what was said. Rather, it would be stricken in the subtler sense that the speaker's bid to have a proposition entered into the 'common ground'²⁸ guiding the joint inquiry has been effectively undermined. The crucial point to note is that this will have been achieved without their assertion itself, or their epistemic standing to assert, having been directly challenged.

One way to resist this argument would be to concede the point but insist that the problem is not unique to the KNA: any substantive norm of assertion can be strategically weaponized in this way. Let *X* be the norm of assertion; now, for any non-trivial *X*, a speaker might be in a position where they in fact satisfy *X* but do not know that they do. Again, it would seem that they are vulnerable to the same kind of dialectical challenge: that is, they may find themselves unable to provide a good response to the question 'but does your assertion satisfy *X*?' even though, as a matter of fact, it does.

However, a closer look at how different candidate norms would fare in dialectical context provides no support for this strategy. Assume, for instance, that the norm of assertion were something like 'assert *p*, only if you have reason to believe that *p*.' Now, the natural way to meet a challenge along the lines of 'but do you have reason to believe that *p*?' is simply to produce one's reasons (i.e., to make public one's 'evidence,' in a suitably broad sense). Once that is done, the burden switches to the interlocutor, who must now either allow *p* to remain on the conversational scoreboard or make the case that the evidence produced is not sufficiently strong to warrant the belief that *p*.²⁹ By contrast, and as we saw in section 4, producing one's evidence in this way is precisely to fail to answer the question 'but do you know that *p*?', since one's having such evidence is fully consistent with one's not knowing that *p*. In this sense, and unlike other candidate norms of assertion, the KNA permits an interlocutor to strategically deflect the back-and-forth switching of argumentative burden which is key to any good dialectical structure. It does so by permitting us to quarantine the speaker's assertion without even engaging their reasons.

I call this a form of silencing, yet it does not neatly conform to the sort of classification one might derive, for instance, from Langton (1993). It is evidently not a matter of locutionary silencing, since our speaker was not prevented from saying it in the first place, and, moreover, once said, the utterance is permitted to remain on record. Nor is it a form of illocutionary silencing, since the speech act's intended illocutionary force is not in question. (Indeed, the retort 'but do you know that *p*?' would arguably only work on the presumption that the speech act's intended illocutionary force was that of assertion.)³⁰ Finally, though, we may wonder whether it is simply a case of 'perlocutionary frustration,' where the speech act, despite having been understood and properly registered, fails to secure the intended uptake. If an example is wanted, our recent record provides a highly illustrative case. During the 2018 US Senate hearings regarding Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the US Supreme Court, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford offered testimony that Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her in the summer of 1982. Blasey Ford was explicitly asked, 'with what degree of certainty do you believe that Brett Kavanaugh assaulted you?', to which she responded '100% percent.'³¹ History will record that the US Senate nonetheless proceeded to confirm Kavanaugh's nomination without considering significant contrary evidence or even meaningfully casting doubt on Blasey Ford's testimony.

²⁷See Fricker (2007).

²⁸I.e., the set of propositions believed to be mutually accepted by the several interlocutors (see, e.g., Green, 2017; Stalnaker, 2002).

²⁹It is important to acknowledge, of course, that even in a case where the interlocutor nominally accepts this burden, the actual assessment of the evidence could very well proceed in a biased or prejudiced manner. This is a serious concern, but one that aligns more readily with already familiar categories of epistemic injustice, as analyzed, for instance, in Fricker (2007).

³⁰In this sense, what is going on here is also distinct from the phenomenon of 'discursive injustice' analyzed in Kukla (2014), where one's social standing to perform a certain kind of speech act is effectively subverted by one's recipients' understanding of one's utterance as having a lesser performative force (say, an *order* issued by a female manager being routinely understood by her male subordinates as a *request*). Nor, finally, would it be a case of what Dotson (2011) calls 'testimonial smothering,' since it is not concerns about the intelligibility of the asserted content (relative to the testimonial competence of the audience) which forces the speaker to retract.

³¹<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/national/wp/2018/09/27/kavanaugh-hearing-transcript/>

Arguably, no norm of assertion could serve, on its own, to guarantee a speaker's perlocutionary success in this sense. A socio-epistemic community may have good reasons to disregard a person's testimony. Or it may have bad reasons. This is obviously a concern. But our present argument has a narrower focus: to ensure that there is nothing *intrinsic* to the norm of assertion itself that would permit or encourage frivolous challenges leading to groundless dismissals of serious testimony.

In Blasey Ford's case, impartial observers can still maintain that something went wrong at the perlocutionary stage: if her testimony had been given the appropriate uptake, then Brett Kavanaugh would not currently be serving on the US Supreme Court. But notice that Blasey Ford was not asked the question 'do you *know* that *p*?' but rather 'with what degree of confidence do you believe that *p*?' To the former question, no retort citing a degree of confidence can provide a dialectically adequate answer, since one's having any degree of (subjective) certainty is compatible with one's not knowing that *p*. Now, then, consider a different witness, perhaps a witness of lesser social standing than Blasey Ford. They assert, with knowledge, that NN assaulted them. But when confronted with the question, 'but do you *know* that it was NN who assaulted you?' they draw a blank. In all such cases, the hearing panel may have a number of reasons, good or bad, to disbelieve the witness's testimony. But the point to note is that the KNA would apparently permit them to relieve themselves of the burden of even having to engage those reasons, simply by way of pointing instead to the speaker's apparent inability to assert a separate proposition, *I know that p*. Their witness testimony has now been silenced in the sense that they are effectively forced to retract, even though they did in fact satisfy the norm of assertion and have not been directly challenged on this score.

Again, it is worth noting the contrast with less demanding norms of assertion. Imagine the following interrogation:

Witness: It was NN who assaulted me. (*p*)

Interrogator: But do you *know* that it was NN who assaulted you?

Witness: I recognized him from school. (*q*)

The witness has now offered their reasons for believing that it was X who assaulted them. But notice that they have precisely failed to answer the interrogator's question, 'but do you *know* that it was NN who assaulted you?' (As per the argument of section 4, their having such reasons for belief is entirely consistent with their *not* knowing that it was NN who assaulted them.) Instead, they have answered the separate question, 'what are your grounds for believing that it was NN who assaulted you?' To my mind, this answer is entirely appropriate in dialectical context. But if it is, it strongly suggests that knowledge is not after all the norm of assertion: i.e., the question 'but do you *know* that *p*?' is correctly understood in dialectical context simply as a request to cite one's reasons for believing that *p*.

If someone is still under the sway of the idea that weaker candidate norms (e.g., assert *p* only if you reasonably believe that *p*) are equally susceptible to dialectical abuse, consider an interrogator who tried to meet the witness's statement that *q* with a question along the following lines: 'but do you have any reason for believing that *q* is a reason for believing that *p*?' This line of questioning is clearly a dialectical non-starter: recognizing someone as the person who assaulted you *is* a reason to believe that this person assaulted you. It might be fair game to ask specific questions about the quality of this evidence: how well did you know NN? Were you inebriated at the time?, etc. And no doubt, such questioning can be carried out maliciously, with the intention to harass and intimidate the witness rather than to seek the truth. My point is simply that this line of questioning—as sanctioned by a reasonable-belief norm of assertion—would at least require the interrogator to assume the burden of engaging with the evidence on offer, under the scrutiny of public norms of dialectic. By comparison, this is precisely the burden that the KNA would permit them to dodge.³²

³²This also shows that what is at stake here is not whether we should prefer an internalist norm to an externalist norm. As Williamson argues (2000, pp. 262–263), an evidential norm (or any kind of reasonable belief norm) is no less externalist than the KNA. But in dialectical contexts, an evidential norm resolves in an importantly different manner than the KNA. Unlike the KNA, an evidential norm permits one to meet a challenge simply by offering one's (presumptive) reasons for belief. Unlike the KNA, an evidential norm does *not* permit one to force a retraction without due consideration of the reasons offered.

Interestingly, Williamson does briefly consider cases in which a speaker is pressed along the line of 'do you know that p ?' but is not in a position to know that she knows that p : 'In such cases', says Williamson, 'Silence is golden' (2005, p. 233).

What should we make of this advice? Silence may well be golden if one can generally count on having sufficient socio-epistemic standing that one's assertions will remain under consideration even when one refrains from backing them up with further assurances. This can certainly happen. *When* it happens, it is, I think we can agree, a manifestation of social privilege. But under other circumstances, say, if one is an already marginalized member of one's community, such silence would arguably constitute an admission of defeat, of *having been silenced* by the nefarious communicative strategies of others. In this case, the best thing we can say about the strategy of staying silent is that one may at least hope to avoid further self-incrimination and humiliation.

6 | CONCLUSION

For all the philosophical attention that has been lavished on the KNA, comparatively little time has been spent analyzing how the norm would affect ordinary speakers in ordinary conversational interactions. I have argued that, under plausible initial conditions, a speaker who asserts that p in full compliance with KNA can nonetheless be effectively left without a good answer to the perfectly reasonable retort, 'but do you know that p ?'. They would be left without a good answer not because they have nothing further to say on the matter. Rather, they are left without a good answer because, apparently, none of the (otherwise relevant) further things they could say would comply with the KNA.

In cases of cooperative communication, the effect is simply stultifying, preventing discourse from moving forward in a productive way. However, in a case of antagonistic communication, it can take on a more sinister hue: it can provide a tool that may effectively silence even knowledgeable speakers—i.e., speakers who would in fact satisfy the norm in question—, without burdening the interlocutor with having to address the content of the assertion on its own terms, or the speaker's epistemic standing to make it.

This underscores the importance of considering the question of the norm of assertion from an ameliorative perspective. We use language, among other things, in the reasonable hope of securing our fair share of influence over the decision-making processes that affect us. If a proposed norm of assertion should turn out, on arbitrary grounds, to systematically disempower certain speakers (typically speakers that are already disadvantaged in the community), we have a problem. This sort of problem typically does not come into view if we start from certain idealizing assumptions about the composition and background of the socio-epistemic community. But it is brought to salience once those idealizations are lifted, and we begin to consider patterns of communicative interaction in the real world. From this point of view, we are free to ask the question of what the norm of assertion *should be*, in light of the background power differentials. Given the potential for the KNA to serve as a tool for further marginalizing those who are already relatively disempowered, this ameliorative perspective gives us reason to prefer a weaker norm.

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