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You Gotta Believe

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Increasingly popular nowadays is the *knowledge account of assertion* (‘the knowledge account’ for short), which in its simplest form says that you may assert P only if you know P.¹ Some have objected that the simple knowledge account is too weak because it allows assertions that are intuitively impermissible and fails to fully capture the normative relationship between knowledge and assertion (e.g., Turri 2011a). But a more popular objection is that the knowledge account is too strong because it disallows assertions that are intuitively permissible (e.g., Douven 2006, Hill and Schechter 2007, Kvanvig 2009, McKinnon 2012).²

Jennifer Lackey is one of the foremost critics who argue that the knowledge account is too strong. Her distinctive argument against the knowledge account features cases of what she calls *selfless assertion* (Lackey 2007). I’ll mainly focus on her most plausible case, which is:

(DISTRAUGHT DOCTOR) Sebastian is an extremely well-respected pediatrician and researcher who has done extensive work studying childhood vaccines. He recognizes and appreciates that all the scientific evidence shows that there is absolutely no connection between vaccines and autism. But shortly after his apparently normal 18-month-old daughter received one of her vaccines, she became increasingly withdrawn and was soon diagnosed with autism. Sebastian is aware that signs of autism typically emerge around this age, regardless of whether a child received any vaccines. But the grief and exhaustion brought on by his daughter’s recent diagnosis cause him to abandon his previously deeply-held beliefs regarding vaccines. Today, while performing a well-baby

¹ The knowledge account has been defended extensively elsewhere (e.g., Unger 1975, Williamson 2000, DeRose 2002, Hawthorne 2004, Turri 2010a, Turri 2011a, and Turri 2012a; see also Turri 2010b, Turri 2011b, Turri 2012b, Turri Forthcoming a). It is beside the point to rehearse the formidable case for the knowledge account here.

² For a strategy—different from the one defended in what follows—to easily integrate such intuitions if they are readily or widely shared, see Turri (Forthcoming b). For an experimental refutation that such intuitions are readily or widely shared, see Turri (under review).

checkup on one of his patients, the child's parents ask him about the legitimacy of the rumors surrounding vaccines and autism. Recognizing both that the current doubt he has towards vaccines was probably brought about through the emotional trauma of dealing with his daughter's condition and that he has an obligation to his patients to present what is most likely to be true, Sebastian replies, "There is no connection between vaccines and autism." In spite of this, at the time of this assertion, it would not be correct to say that Sebastian himself believes or knows this proposition. (Lackey 2007: 598–9, with minor alterations)

Here is how I understand Lackey's argument in light of this case. Where 'Q' names the proposition that there is no connection between vaccines and autism:

1. Knowing Q requires believing Q. (Premise)
2. So if Sebastian doesn't believe Q, then Sebastian doesn't know Q. (From 1)
3. Sebastian doesn't believe Q. (Premise)
4. So Sebastian doesn't know Q. (From 2 and 3)
5. If the knowledge account is true, then Sebastian may not assert Q. (From 4)
6. But Sebastian may assert Q. (Premise)
7. So the knowledge account isn't true. (From 5 and 6)

I have three independent responses to this argument.

My first response is a dilemma: either line 3 is false or line 1 is false. As Lackey describes the case, in responding to the patient's parents, Sebastian aims to "present what is most likely to be true." If Sebastian thinks it's most likely that there is no connection between vaccination and autism, then he mostly believes that there's no connection. Plausibly this is enough for him to satisfy the belief condition on knowledge; that is, line 3 is false. But suppose that Lackey objects that partly or even mostly believing doesn't suffice for believing. In that case, proponents of the knowledge account could plausibly maintain that full-fledged belief isn't required for knowledge; that is, line 1 is false. *Mostly believing or thinking it's most likely to be true* is enough to satisfy the relevant requirement for knowledge. This doesn't seem to be too costly a move, especially since Lackey herself seems to have some sympathy for it. She says, "if belief is not a necessary condition for knowledge, then something belief-like surely is" (Lackey 2007: 622 n18). *Mostly believing or thinking it's true* is certainly "belief-like."³

³ Experimentalists have recently argued that belief is not a necessary condition on knowledge, as evidenced by the fact that when asked about many simple cases, most people answer that the protagonist knows P but doesn't believe P (Myers-Schulz and Schwitzgebel Forthcoming, Murray et al. Forthcoming). For a response to Myers-Schulz and Schwitzgebel, see Rose and Schaffer (Forthcoming); for a response to Murray et al. and a demonstration that a certain sort of belief ("*thin belief*") is necessary for knowledge, see Buckwalter, Rose, and Turri (Forthcoming).

But suppose that my first response fails: grant that Sebastian doesn't believe and consequently doesn't know that Q. This brings me to my second response, which is that line 5 is false.

When Sebastian utters "There's no connection between vaccines and autism," some people, such as Lackey, report that they intuit that this assertion is permissible. Others, such as myself, intuit the assertion is not permissible. In order to sort through this dispute, I want to begin by focusing on a slightly different question, namely, *whose assertion?* I grant that this is a rather unexpected question. But upon reflection I think it gets some traction, as I will now explain.

Often times people speak on behalf of a group, community, organization, institution, or other corporate body. When one person speaks on behalf of another, call it a *vicarious assertion*. And when the other is a group, let's call it *corporate* or *communal assertion*. When, in his capacity as a practicing and licensed pediatrician and in order to meet his professional "obligation to his patients," Sebastian says, "There is no connection between vaccines and autism," he asserts *on behalf of the medical community* that there is no connection. This is one main way the medical community has to convey such information to patients, namely, by having its trained and certified members tell patients such things in clinical settings.

Lackey gives two other examples of selfless assertion, and it's instructive that they display similar features. One example, CREATIONIST TEACHER (Lackey 2007: 599), features Stella, a committed creationist and 4th-grade teacher who rejects evolutionary theory but nevertheless says to her students, "modern humans evolved from more primitive hominids." Stella says this because she "regards her duty as a teacher to include presenting material that is best supported by the available evidence," Lackey tells us. Another example, RACIST JUROR (Lackey 2007: 598), features Martin, a committed racist who served on a jury that acquitted a minority defendant on an assault charge. Out on the street one day, Martin bumps into an old friend who asks him about the trial because Martin was on the jury. Martin says, "The guy didn't do it," even though Martin still feels (and felt all along) that the defendant was guilty. In line with our treatment of Sebastian's case, Stella is also plausibly speaking on behalf of a community, namely, the community of science educators, which does indeed know that modern humans evolved from more primitive hominids. Likewise Martin speaks as a member of the jury, which does know that the defendant is not guilty. It's certainly noteworthy that all Lackey's cases of selfless assertion involve a protagonist speaking on a matter related to some official duty incurred in some official capacity: physician, instructor, or juror.

So where does this leave us? Re-focusing for simplicity on DISTRAUGHT DOCTOR, we can grant a great deal about the case without causing trouble for the knowledge account. We can grant that Sebastian permissibly asserts Q, even though he doesn't know that Q, because it's a communal assertion on behalf of a group that *does* know Q, namely, the medical community.⁴

As confirmation of this way of handling these cases, consider how we'd feel about the protagonist's assertion in the three cases if they prefaced their remarks with something to the effect of 'Well, speaking just for myself here.' That qualifier acts as a kind of shield, preventing the protagonist from speaking for the group. For instance, suppose that Stella had instead said, "Well, speaking just for myself here: modern humans evolved from more primitive hominids," or that Martin had said, "Speaking just for me, personally: the guy didn't do it," or that Sebastian had said, "Speaking strictly for myself now: there's no connection between vaccines and autism." With this addition, it becomes much harder to maintain, as Lackey would have it, that the assertion is appropriate. It strikes me clearly as inappropriate.

The approach I'm suggesting has the further advantage of being able to *explain the clash of intuitions* about cases like Sebastian's. Sebastian asserts on behalf of the medical community *by* asserting for himself. It is, in effect, a *double-assertion*: one assertion, the communal assertion, is made *by* making the other, the individual assertion. I submit that the intuition of permissibility tracks the communal assertion, whereas the opposing intuition tracks the individual assertion. Since the community knows but the individual doesn't, this all coheres perfectly with the view that permissible assertion requires knowledge and belief.

Given that communal assertion clearly can and often does occur, and given that we can handle the cases of selfless assertion in the way just described without making any controversial assumptions, the burden now shifts back to Lackey to explain why such cases nevertheless provide good evidence against a belief condition, and thereby a knowledge condition, on permissible assertion.

But suppose that neither of my first two responses succeeds, because knowledge requires full-fledged belief, and Sebastian doesn't believe Q, and Sebastian isn't making a vicarious or communal assertion on behalf of a group who do know Q. Lackey's argument is still threatened because line 6 is doubtful. In support of this, consider the following five data points surrounding the give and take of assertion.

⁴ Perhaps the medical community doesn't know that there is *absolutely no* connection. But they know something close enough, so we can set aside such worries.

First, when I assert *P*, even if *P* has nothing to do with me or what I know, asking me ‘Why do you believe that?’ is appropriate. The view that permissible assertion requires belief nicely explains this. By asserting *P*, I represent myself as having the authority to do so, which authority requires believing *P*, rendering your question appropriate.

Second, an appropriate challenge to any assertion is ‘Why do you believe that?’ More aggressive yet is the response ‘Do you really believe that?’ And more aggressive yet is the response ‘You don’t really believe that!’ or ‘You don’t even believe what you’re saying!’ The view that permissible assertion requires belief handily explains this spectrum of aggressiveness. ‘Why do you believe that?’ implicitly challenges my authority to make the assertion; ‘Do you really believe that?’ explicitly challenges it; and ‘You don’t even believe that!’ explicitly rejects it.

Third, when someone asks you whether *P*, even when *P* has nothing to do with you or what you believe, normally you may appropriately respond by saying ‘I have no opinion on the matter’ or ‘I don’t have a view on that’ or ‘I have no idea.’ The view that permissible assertion requires belief explains this. In such a case, you’re simply informing this person that you lack authority to answer her question.

Fourth, assertions of the form ‘*P* but I don’t believe that *P*’ strike us as inconsistent (Moore 1942). Their content is perfectly consistent, so whence the inconsistency? The view that permissible assertion requires belief explains it. If permissible assertion requires believing, then you may make that assertion only if you believe each conjunct: *P* on the one hand, and *I don’t believe P* on the other. So your believing the first conjunct would falsify the second conjunct. But in asserting the conjunction you represent yourself as believing it (because you represent yourself as having permission to do so). So what you assert is inconsistent with how you represent yourself.

Fifth, it’s all too common to hear things like ‘I can tell you that your paper is still out with the referee.’ Now consider how odd it would sound to say ‘I don’t believe that your paper is still with the referee, but I can tell you that it is’ or ‘I have no opinion on whether your paper is still with the referee, but I can tell you that it is.’⁵ The view that permissible assertion requires belief nimbly explains the oddity of such assertions. The second conjunct states that I have authority to assert that your paper is still out with the referee. But the first conjunct either directly denies or obviously entails that I lack the authority.

The hypothesis that permissible assertion requires belief enables a unified explanation of all these data. This speaks strongly in favor of the hypothesis.

⁵ We get the same effect if we replace ‘I can tell you’ in these utterances with ‘(what) I can say (is).’

Absent a comparably good alternative explanation, we should accept the hypothesis and reject line 6 of the argument.⁶

A related but more direct objection to line 6 asks us to consider how Sebastian's patient's parents might react if they suspected that Sebastian didn't believe that vaccines and autism were unconnected. "Do you really believe that?" they might ask accusingly. How feeble and evasive it would seem for Sebastian to respond, "I'm sorry, but I don't see how it's relevant what I believe or don't believe." And if Sebastian instead sincerely and directly replied, "No, I don't believe it, actually," such a provocative response would very likely be interpreted as a muddled retraction of his earlier assertion that vaccines and autism are unconnected. Absent a commitment to the view that permissible assertion requires belief, it's hard to make sense of our natural reaction to these permutations of the case.

That ends my defense of the belief norm of assertion. In summary, I offered three independent objections to Lackey's argument and in the process provided positive evidence for the belief norm, which took the form of an explanatory argument from linguistic patterns. I conclude that the belief norm emerges unscathed and consequently that this challenge to the knowledge account of assertion does not succeed.⁷

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⁶ Recall that at this point in the discussion I'm granting for the sake of argument that my earlier responses failed, and thus that Sebastian *doesn't* believe Q. In the present context, objecting to my third response by saying, 'But wait, Sebastian *does* believe Q,' amounts to agreeing that my first response to Lackey's argument succeeds.

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