1. Introduction

Leading proponents of a wide variety of contemporary accounts of knowledge assume that knowledge is the norm of assertion. The assumption is central to the debate between contextualists and invariantists about the correct account of knowledge. DeRose (2002) argues that the knowledge norm for assertion favours contextualism, Hawthorne (2004) uses the knowledge norm to support subject-sensitive invariantism, whereas Williamson (2005) combines the knowledge norm and an invariantist account of knowledge. To assess these arguments, we need to clarify the idea that knowledge is the norm of assertion. While much of the literature has focussed on the idea that knowledge is necessary for warranted assertion, here I focus on a different idea, that knowledge is sufficient for warranted assertion.

2. The Knowledge Norm for Assertion

What does the idea that knowledge is the norm of assertion amount to? Some phrase the idea in the form of a necessity claim. For instance, Williamson (2000) argues that knowledge is governed by the constitutive norm, assert p only if one knows that p (241). Others make a bi-conditional claim linking knowledge and assertion. If such a bi-conditional claim could be established, this would enable one to argue from the nature of assertion to the nature of knowledge. For instance, DeRose (2002) uses a bi-conditional version of the knowledge norm to argue for contextualism:

The knowledge account of assertion provides a powerful argument for contextualism: if the standards for when one is in a position to assert warrantedly that \( p \) are the same as those that comprise a truth-condition for ‘I know that \( p \)’, then if the former vary with context, so do
the latter. In short: the knowledge account of assertion together with the context-sensitivity of assertion yields contextualism about knowledge. (147)

This bi-conditional link requires that knowledge is not only necessary for an assertion to be appropriate, but also sufficient. Hawthorne also seems tempted by a bi-conditional version of the knowledge norm. After noting that knowledge is not sufficient for an assertion being appropriate in all senses, he says ‘in so far as we can distinguish the ‘epistemic correctness’ of an assertion from other aspects of propriety, it may be arguable that knowledge suffices for epistemic correctness’ (2004: 23 note 58). In his later discussion of contextualism, he argues that contextualism disconnects facts about knowledge and facts concerning the propriety of assertion (86). So contextualism has the result that statements of the following form may be true:

1. there are things people know but ought not to assert because their epistemic position is not strong enough with respect to those things

2. people often flat out assert things that they do not know to be true but are not thereby subject to criticism (87).

This passage suggests that Hawthorne accepts a bi-conditional version of the knowledge norm for assertion.

In many senses of propriety, that one knows that p is not sufficient for the propriety of asserting p. For instance, even if one knows that one’s boss is bald, it may not be polite, prudent, or relevant to point this out to him. So, one might instead phrase the sufficiency claim as the claim that if one knows that p, then one is in a good enough epistemic position to assert that p. This leaves it open that one’s assertion is incorrect on grounds other than epistemic ones, for instance, that it’s rude, imprudent or irrelevant etc. It merely claims that, if one knows that p, then there is nothing epistemically wrong with asserting that p.

This suggests the following formulations:

NEC: one is in a good enough epistemic position to assert that p only if one knows that p.

SUFF: one is in a good enough epistemic position to assert p if one knows that p.

KN: one is in a good enough epistemic position to assert p iff one knows that p.
A contextualist would need to rephrase these conditions to accommodate the context-sensitivity of ‘know’. Thus, the contextualist version of KN would state, KN©: in a context c, one is in a good enough epistemic position to assert p iff, in c, it is true for one to say ‘I know that p’. I will leave aside this detail in what follows and focus on the invariantist version of the knowledge norm.

Williamson (2000) has provided an influential defence of the knowledge norm. He uses three main considerations to support the knowledge norm, namely data concerning lottery propositions, Moorean statements and the way in which assertions are challenged. However, as I will now argue, these phenomena at best support NEC but not SUFF. An assertion may be challenged by the question ‘How do you know?’ or ‘Do you know?’. The legitimacy of such challenges is easily explicable on NEC. It seems paradoxical to utter a statement of the form, ‘p but I don’t know p’. The absurdity of such statements can be explained by NEC: by NEC, one is in a good enough epistemic position to assert the conjunction ‘p but I don’t know that p’ only if one knows both conjuncts, i.e. knows that p and knows that one does not know that p. Since knowledge is factive, one knows that one does not know that p only if one does not know that p. But that contradicts the claim that one knows that p. Thus, on NEC, one cannot meet the conditions for appropriately asserting statements of the form ‘p but I don’t know that p’. Lastly, consider lottery propositions. Suppose that I have bought a ticket in a fair lottery with many tickets and one winner. The draw has taken place and in fact my ticket has not won although the result has not yet been announced. It seems inappropriate for me to assert ‘My ticket has lost’ even though it is highly likely on the evidence and true. The impropriety of my assertion is explicable on NEC since, in the described circumstances, it also seems intuitive that I do not know that my ticket has lost. (As Hawthorne (2004) notes, the admission that one does not know such lottery propositions contains a sceptical threat, so this explanation of the data may come at some cost.)

It seems, then, that at best these considerations support NEC. Williamson’s arguments for NEC have been the focus of much debate. Some have argued that the phenomena can be explained even if NEC is false and assertion is governed by a different norm, say the norm of truth, or reasonable belief (see, for instance, Douven 2006, Weiner 2006, Lackey 2007, Levin 2008, Kvanvig 2009). Here, I leave aside this well-discussed issue to focus on a different issue which has received little attention, the truth of SUFF (an exception is Brown forthcoming). Unlike NEC, there has been little explicit argument for SUFF. In using the knowledge account of assertion, both DeRose and Hawthorne refer
back to Williamson’s classic discussion but, as we have seen, William-
son’s key data can be explained by NEC alone. It is unclear, then,
what considerations might be thought to support SUFF. In the next
section, I consider whether conversational data favour SUFF. As we’ve
seen, some of the key prima facie evidence for NEC consists in the way
assertions are challenged. Perhaps, then, we can find some prima facie
evidence for SUFF from the way in which assertions are defended and
challenged in conversation?

3. Criticism and Defence of Assertion

As we have seen, the fact that assertions can be challenged by such
questions as ‘How do you know that?’ or ‘Do you know that?’ can be
explained by NEC without appeal to SUFF. However, it may be sug-
gested that a wider examination of the ways in which assertions are
criticised and defended supports SUFF. For instance, if an assertion is
challenged in the suggested way, one can defend one’s assertion by
showing how one knows, e.g. ‘I saw it’. That might be taken to suggest
SUFF – certainly, if knowledge were sufficient for being in a good
enough epistemic position to assert p, then showing how one knows
that p would show that one is in a good enough epistemic position to
assert p. A more telling kind of datum might be the fact that one can
criticise someone’s failure to assert that p by pointing out that she
knows that p. For instance, I may be fairly criticised if I fail to
mention to you a fact which is highly relevant to your projects and
which I know. You may criticise my failure saying, ‘Why didn’t you say
that p? You knew it all along’. This might seem to suggest that knowing
p is sufficient for being in a good enough epistemic position to rely on p
(of course, it wouldn’t be sufficient for my assertion’s being appropriate
in other senses, e.g. morally or prudentially appropriate).

However, it is hard to move directly from facts about the ways in
which we criticise and defend assertions to any claim about the condi-
tions which are necessary and sufficient for appropriate assertion. We
may cite a factor in defending and criticising action even if that factor
is neither necessary nor sufficient for appropriate action. To see this,
consider a different example of the justification of action. Suppose that
in dividing up the stew I give Alison the biggest portion. I might
defend my action by pointing out that Alison is training for a mara-
thon. If, on the other hand, I had instead given the largest portion to
Sarah, Alison might have criticised me saying ‘You should have given
me the biggest portion. I’m training for the marathon’, or ‘You
shouldn’t have given Sarah the biggest portion. She’s not training for
the marathon’. In certain circumstances, the suggested defence and
criticism may seem appropriate. Even so, this doesn’t show that
training for a marathon is either necessary or sufficient for being justified in getting the largest portion of the stew: not necessary since other kinds of factors could justify getting the biggest portion (e.g. Sarah’s pregnant), and not sufficient since other factors could trump training for a marathon (Sarah’s starving). Analogously, that knowledge is cited in the defence and criticism of assertion does not show that knowledge is either necessary or sufficient for being in a good enough epistemic position for assertion.

This conclusion is reinforced when we consider the ways in which we criticise and defend assertions in more detail. Although we sometimes defend and criticise assertions by citing the absence or presence of knowledge, we also do so by citing conditions both weaker and stronger than knowledge. For instance, an assertion may be criticised by asking for the grounds or evidence for that claim (e.g., ‘Why do you think that’s the case?’, ‘What’s your reason for thinking that’s so?’, or ‘What’s your evidence for that?’). If an assertion is challenged, I might defend it by providing reasons, or evidence, for the content of my assertion. For instance, I might defend my assertion that there’s a train at 12.20pm by citing certain facts about the train schedule (‘The timetable says there’s a train at 12.20pm’) or other relevant evidence (‘Peter said there’s a train at 12.20pm’). That we cite factors weaker than knowledge in defending assertion counts against NEC. Similarly, although we sometimes criticise a failure to assert by pointing out that the agent knew a relevant claim, we also do so by pointing to factors weaker than knowledge. For instance, I return home from the supermarket to find there’s no milk for coffee. There was a litre there last night, but my teenage son used up the milk we had when some of his friends came round unexpectedly. I may criticise his failure to say that he used up the milk saying, ‘You should have said we were out of milk. You knew we didn’t have any’. His failure is equally criticisable if it turns out that we do have milk since, by chance, a neighbour happened to bring some over (although, of course, in such a situation, I would phrase my criticism differently, e.g. ‘You should have said we were out of milk. You thought we didn’t have any’). So it is not clear that the conversational data support NEC.

Further, it is not clear that the data support SUFF either. Consider again the fact that one may respond to the challenge ‘How do you know that?’, by showing how one knows the claim in question. We saw that this way of defending an assertion may be explained by SUFF. However, it may also be explained by appeal to NEC. For one may argue that in showing how one knows one defends one’s assertion by showing that one meets a necessary condition for being in a good enough epistemic position to assert that p. In addition,
data concerning how we criticise assertions do not unequivocally support SUFF. We sometimes criticise assertions not by citing knowledge but by citing other conditions. For instance, on discovering that her son told his sister that there would be a bus home as late as 2am, a mother might criticise her son’s assertion saying, ‘You shouldn’t have said there’s a bus at 2am. You weren’t certain there’d be a bus home that late’, or ‘You shouldn’t have said there’s a bus at 2am. You didn’t know for sure that there’d be a bus at that time’. In order to argue that the data concerning criticism of assertion supports SUFF, the defender of SUFF would need to argue that in these criticisms, the expression ‘know for certain’ or ‘know for sure’ is equivalent to the simple ‘know’. For if these expressions instead refer to a standard stronger than, or orthogonal to, knowledge, then these criticisms suggest that knowledge is not sufficient for being in a good enough epistemic position for assertion. However, it is not at all obvious that we should accept the suggested equivalence. On the widely accepted fallibilist view of knowledge¹, one may know that p on the basis of evidence e even if e does not entail that p. Thus knowledge is compatible with a range of strength of evidence including, at the maximum, cases where e entails p and also cases where e does not entail p. This framework makes it natural to suppose that the expressions, ‘know for certain’, and ‘know for sure’ may be functioning so that they are not equivalent merely to the simple ‘know’, but rather to the notion of knowing on an especially strong evidential basis, one which rules out possibilities of error usually considered too remote to bother with. Indeed, in the next section, we will see that there are cases in which it is natural for a person to say that since she, or a third-party, knows that p but does not know for sure, it is inappropriate for her, or them, to assert that p.

Notice that, even if knowledge is not necessary or sufficient for epistemically appropriate assertion, we can explain the practice of criticising and defending assertions by appeal to the presence or absence of knowledge. Suppose that the epistemic standard for assertion varies with context: sometimes the standard is knowledge, sometimes it is less than knowledge, and sometimes it is more than knowledge. This alternative can easily explain the use of knowledge in defending and criticising assertion even while denying both NEC and SUFF. Knowledge is cited in defending and criticising assertions since, in many contexts,

¹ Such fallibilism is not accepted by Williamson. However, I argue that even probability 1 views should accept that someone who knows that p can strengthen her epistemic position (Brown forthcoming).
knowledge is the epistemic standard for assertion. It does not follow that, in all contexts, knowledge is the standard.

4. Knowledge is not Sufficient

In the last section, I suggested that conversational data does not clearly support SUFF. In this section, I strengthen the argument against SUFF by presenting two prima facie counterexamples to SUFF. In each case, it is intuitive that a subject knows that p but is not in a strong enough epistemic position to assert that p.

AFFAIR

A husband is berating his friend for not telling him that his wife has been having an affair even though the friend has known of the affair for weeks.

Husband: Why didn’t you say she was having an affair? You’ve known for weeks.

Friend: Ok, I admit I knew, but it wouldn’t have been right for me to say anything before I was absolutely sure. I knew the damage it would cause to your marriage.

Here the friend admits knowing but claims that it would have been inappropriate for him to tell the husband. Of course, there are a variety of non-epistemic reasons why a friend in this situation might not reveal the affair: perhaps the husband has been under such severe pressure recently that information about the affair might tip him over the edge into suicide or a breakdown; perhaps revealing the affair would involve breaking a promise to a third party; perhaps the friend is simply squeamish. We will stipulate that none of these factors apply to the case in hand. Nonetheless, the friend’s statement seems perfectly intelligible and plausible: he is saying that although he knew of the affair his epistemic position wasn’t strong enough to assert that. He needed to be absolutely certain before proceeding to inform the husband.
RESULT

Two lecturers have been in an exams meeting all morning at which the students’ exam results are determined. After the meeting lecturer B bumps into one of the students and, on the basis of her recollection of the meeting, informs her that she has passed. On discovering this, lecturer A criticises her colleague for giving out information about the results without checking the exam pass list.

A: You shouldn’t have told her she’d passed without having the list in front of you.

B: What’s the problem? I knew she’d passed—I was in the examination meeting this morning.

A: That’s not the point. Think of the damage it would cause if you gave the wrong result. We can’t afford to take that risk.

Note that A doesn’t reply by denying that B knows, but by saying ‘that’s not the point’.

Intuitively these cases put pressure on SUFF: in each one, a subject claims that either she, or a third party, knows that p but that it would be inappropriate for her to assert that p. Further, it seems that the relevant intuition is that the subject is not in a good enough epistemic position to assert p despite knowing p. For instance, in AFFAIR, the friend says, ‘Ok, I admit I knew, but it wouldn’t have been right for me to say anything before I was absolutely sure. I knew the damage it would cause to your marriage.’ In RESULT, the colleague claims that they can’t afford to take the risk of giving a wrong result to a student and thus the lecturer should not have told the student her result on the basis of the recollection of the meeting rather than the pass list. Notice how natural these cases are on the widely held assumption that fallibilism about knowledge is correct. According to fallibilism, one may know that p on the basis of evidence e, even if e does not entail p. As a result, one may know that p even if one’s evidence does not rule out all not-p alternatives. As the risks of asserting p falsely rise, that one’s evidence leaves open certain not-p possibilities becomes more and more important. If the
stake get high enough, then it seems that one is not in an epistemically strong enough position to assert that \( p \) if one knows that \( p \) on the basis of evidence which leaves it open that not-\( p \). In order to assert that \( p \), one needs evidence which rules out some, or perhaps even all, of these not-\( p \) possibilities.

It seems that there are two ways for a defender of SUFF to respond to these putative counterexamples. First, she might argue that, in fact, in the examples, the subject does not know that \( p \). Second, she may accept that the subject does know that \( p \) and attempt to explain away the intuition the subject is not in a good enough epistemic position to assert that \( p \). I will discuss each option in turn.

The defender of SUFF might argue that in all the supposed counterexamples, the subject does not know the relevant proposition. She could do so by arguing that some of the conditions for knowledge are not met. For instance, she may argue that in the counterexamples, the stakes undermine the subject’s belief and so the subject fails to know the relevant proposition. However, this reply is not convincing. While high stakes may sometime undermine a subject’s belief, it is not plausible that they always do so. So, it seems legitimate for it to be stipulated that the counterexamples involve a subject who truly believes the relevant proposition.

While accepting that the putative counterexamples involve a subject who truly believes the target proposition, could the defender of SUFF plausibly argue that this true belief does not constitute knowledge? The kind of situation in which each subject finds herself seems to be just the kind of situation we would ordinarily take to be knowledge yielding. We ordinarily suppose that a lecturer can know whether some student has passed on the basis of an examination meeting. And we can imagine AFFAIR is filled out so that the friend has evidence which would ordinarily be taken to be sufficient for knowledge (for example she may see the couple in a furtive embrace). As a result, a defender of SUFF who wishes to argue that, in each case, the subject does not know the relevant proposition faces a dilemma. If the stakes do not affect whether the relevant subject knows, then it is hard to deny that the subject knows without inviting the sceptical conclusion that we have much less knowledge than we thought. For, on the supposition that the stakes do not affect knowledge, we are committed to claiming that evidence frequently thought sufficient for knowledge is not so. Given this, the obvious way to argue that the subject does not know in each case is by appeal to a view on which the stakes do affect the truth value of knowledge attributions, for
instance contextualism or subject-sensitive invariantism. Contextualists claim that ‘know’ is a context-sensitive term which expresses different properties in different contexts. In particular, the meaning of a knowledge ascription made by an attributor A of the form ‘S knows that p’ depends on the stakes and the salience of error for A. Invariantists deny the contextualist claim that ‘know’ is a context-sensitive term; instead, they say, ‘know’ expresses a univocal property. Subject sensitive invariantism holds that whether a subject knows that p is not only determined by such traditional factors as whether she truly believes that p and her evidence for p, but also the stakes, or how important it is to her that p be true. By contrast, “classic invariantism” holds that whether a subject knows that p is determined only by such traditional factors and does not depend on the stakes for the subject.

Although appeal to either contextualism or subject-sensitive invariantism would enable a defender of SUFF to avoid the counterexamples, this way of doing so comes at significant cost. For, as many have pointed out, both contextualism and subject-sensitive invariantism face serious objections. As Stanley argues, knowledge ascriptions do not behave like any other context sensitive expressions. ‘There is no familiar kind of context sensitivity upon which to base the alleged context sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions’ (2005: 73). He argues in detail that knowledge ascriptions do not behave like gradable expressions, for instance ‘flat’ or ‘tall’ (chapter 2). Further, he argues that knowledge ascriptions do not behave like any other context sensitive expression. In particular, they behave differently in tests involving speech act reports, propositional anaphora, and embedded occurrences (chapter 3). So to accept epistemic contextualism is to accept that ‘know’ is a sui generis context sensitive expression, which does not behave like any other context sensitive expression. While this is not yet to show that epistemic contextualism is false, it does make it significantly less plausible. Further, it has the result that epistemic contextualism has a difficult time explaining the linguistic behaviour of the word ‘know’, for example retraction data, its behaviour in embedded occurrences, and why it satisfies the disquotational schema for ‘know’ (MacFarlane 2005: 201-203, Hawthorne 2004: 198-111).

Since subject-sensitive invariantism holds that the word know is univocal, it avoids many of the difficulties facing contextualism. However, it faces difficulties of its own. To illustrate this, suppose that

---

2 Hawthorne and Stanley 2008 offer such a response to counterexamples to a different sufficiency claim, that if one knows that p, then one is in a good enough epistemic position to rely on p in practical reasoning.

3 This view is also known as ‘moderate sensitive invariantism’ (Hawthorne 2004) and ‘interest relative invariantism’ (Stanley 2005). See also Fantl and McGrath 2007.
two policemen Alice and Bob are investigating a burglary. They both come to truly believe that burglar Bill committed the burglary on the basis of the same evidence. However the stakes differ for Alice and Bob. Bob is in a low stakes situation: he doesn’t care about whether burglar Bill did the burglary or not. By contrast, Alice is in a high stakes situation: whether Alice gets an important promotion depends on whether Bill committed the burglary. Subject sensitive invariantism may have the consequence that Bob, given the low stakes for him, knows that burglar Bill committed the burglary, whereas Alice, given the high stakes for her, does not know this. However, it seems bizarre to suppose that although Alice and Bob base their true belief on the same evidence, Bob’s belief constitutes knowledge whereas Alice’s does not in virtue of their different stakes. According to subject-sensitive invariantism, Alice could come to know who committed the burglary if she could shift herself into a low stakes situation, for example by changing her attitude to promotion. But surely one doesn’t improve one’s epistemic situation by changing one’s attitude to promotion. Commenting on a similar case, Schaffer says ‘one cannot gain a competitive advantage in scientific inquiry, for instance, by not caring about the result’ (2006:96). We may exacerbate the problem for the subject-sensitive invariantist by supposing that Alice’s high stakes lead her to gain more evidence than Bob. Intuitively having more evidence than Bob would place Alice in a better epistemic position than Bob. Nonetheless, the subject-sensitive invariantist may hold that Bob, but not Alice, knows who committed the burglary if the extra evidence in Alice’s possession is still not enough to make her a knower given the high stakes facing her. As Schaffer puts it, the subject-sensitive invariantist conception of knowledge ‘seems to punish the passionate inquirer, and reward the comfortably numb’ (Schaffer 2006: 99). He further points out that subject-sensitive invariantism is at odds with the role of knowledge in the social practices of questioning and testimony. If subject-sensitive invariantism is correct, it seems that in order to rely on another’s testimony, or rely on them to answer a question, one would need to know the stakes affecting them. But this is at odds with our actual practice of relying on others in answering questions and relying on testimony (97-98).

It seems, then, that the first of the two possible strategies for responding to the putative counterexamples to SUFF fails. For there are significant costs of arguing that, in the putative counterexamples to SUFF, the subject does not know the relevant proposition. If the stakes do not affect knowledge, then the price of denying that the subjects know is inviting a more general scepticism. If one appeals to either contextualism or subject-sensitive invariantism in order to argue
that the subject in the examples does not know, then one faces the objections which plague these two positions. This is a price which many will be unwilling to bear.

Let us then turn to consider the second strategy. This strategy accepts that, in each of the putative counterexamples, the agent does know the relevant proposition and attempts to explain away the intuition that the agent is not in a good enough epistemic position to assert that p. One suggestion is that we confuse intuitions about whether the subject is in a good enough epistemic position to assert that p with intuitions about whether she knows that she meets the sufficient condition for so doing. This strategy exploits a failure of luminosity. Williamson (2000) argues that no condition is luminous, i.e. for any condition, C, there are cases in which C obtains but one is not in a position to know that it obtains. According to SUFF, if the agent knows that p, then she is in a good enough epistemic position to assert that p. By the failure of luminosity, there are cases in which the agent knows that p but does not know that she does. A defender of SUFF may argue that the combination of SUFF and the failure of luminosity predicts that in cases in which the agent knows but does not know that she does, our intuitions about the acceptability of the assertion will be mixed or unclear: on the one hand the agent is in a good enough epistemic position to assert that p but, on the other, she does not know that she is. Given this, we may have no simple intuitions about the acceptability of the assertion. As Hawthorne and Stanley (2008) put it in connection with practical reasoning, ‘intuitions go a little hazy in any situation that some candidate normative theory says is sufficient to make it that one ought to F but where, in the case described, one does not know that situation obtains’ (18). In particular, although the agent is in a good enough epistemic position to assert that p, it may seem that she is not because we confuse intuitions about the whether she is in a good enough epistemic position to make the assertion with intuitions about whether she is in a position to know that she is. For instance, consider AFFAIR. The strategy now being considered accepts that the friend knows that the wife is having an affair but attempts to explain away the intuition that the friend is not in a good enough epistemic position to assert that she is having the affair. On this view, since the friend does know that the wife is having an affair, he is in a good enough epistemic position to assert that. However, it seems incorrectly that he is not in such a position because he does not know that he knows that the wife is having an affair and so does not know that he is in a good enough epistemic position to make that assertion.

This reply is persuasive only if there is independent reason to suppose that the relevant counterexamples are cases in which the subject
knows the target proposition but does not know that she does. Williamson’s anti-luminosity argument provides reason to suppose that C fails to be luminous for borderline cases of C, those which are close to the boundary between C and not-C. Suppose that in such a borderline case of C one correctly judges that C obtains. Intuitively, this belief is not knowledge for it’s not safe: it is too near borderline cases in which C does not obtain but in which one would still judge that it obtains. So, Williamson’s anti-luminosity argument provides reason to suppose that the putative counterexamples to SUFF instantiate a failure of luminosity if they concern borderline cases of knowledge. But, the problem for the defender of SUFF is that intuitively the counterexamples do not concern borderline cases of knowledge. For instance, surely one can know that a certain student has passed an exam on the basis of an examination meeting. This does not appear to be a borderline case of knowledge. Given this, there is no reason to suppose that, in all the putative counterexamples, the subject knows the target proposition without knowing that she does. So, the anti-luminosity defence of SUFF fails.

5. Assertion and the Contextualism-Invariantism Debate

The problems encountered defending SUFF have significant implications for the debate between invariantism and contextualism. For, the knowledge account of assertion and, in particular, SUFF has been appealed to in defence of various positions within this debate. If one rejects SUFF because of the considerations put forward here, then one will reject those arguments. We saw that one potential, though problematic, way to defend SUFF against the counterexamples raised here is to appeal to either contextualism or subject-sensitive invariantism. But if SUFF is defended by such appeal then it cannot be used as an independent premise from which to argue for contextualism or subject-sensitive invariantism. In the light of this, let us review the use of the knowledge norm for assertion in the literature.

As we saw earlier, DeRose appeals to a bi-conditional version of the knowledge norm for assertion to defend contextualism. His argument combines the knowledge norm for assertion with the context-sensitivity of assertion to argue for contextualism about knowledge. As DeRose summarises it, ‘if the standards for when one is in a position to assert warrantedly that \( p \) are the same as those that comprise a truth-condition for ‘I know that \( p \)’, then if the former vary with context, so do the latter’. A number of objections have been raised to this argument, that it is equivocates on the notion of warranted assertibility (Leite 2006), and that it supports subject-sensitive invariantism rather than contextualism (Blackson 2004, Brown 2005). In the light of the arguments
here, we can now see that DeRose’s argument faces a further objection arising from its reliance on SUFF. Although some may be tempted to defend SUFF by appeal to either contextualism or subject-sensitive invariantism, this is a price that many would not be prepared to pay. In addition, if SUFF is defended by appeal to either contextualism or subject-sensitive invariantism then it cannot be used as an independently motivated premise in an argument for those positions. In particular, DeRose cannot use SUFF to argue for contextualism; rather, he needs to first defend contextualism in order to defend SUFF.

The idea that knowledge is the norm of assertion also features in Hawthorne’s recent defence of SSI. Hawthorne (2004) presents a number of criteria for an account of knowledge, one of the most important of which is the claim that knowledge is the norm of assertion and practical reasoning (21-31). Hawthorne admits that which account of knowledge the criteria favour is a finely balanced matter, however he suggests that SSI has the edge over contextualism and classic invariantism:

> Put a gun to my head and I will opt for a treatment of the puzzles built around the materials of the ‘Practical Environment’ section above. But I am far from confident that this is the correct way to proceed. Then there is the further question of whether to embed those ideas within an invariantist semantical framework for ‘know’. Here, though more tentatively still, I would opt for invariantism over contextualism. (188)

Appeal to the idea that knowledge is the norm of assertion and practical reasoning is crucial to Hawthorne’s suggestion that SSI has the edge over contextualism and classic invariantism. For instance, without appeal to the idea that knowledge is the norm for assertion and practical reasoning, non-sceptical classic invariantism and SSI perform similarly on Hawthorne’s criteria (149, 185-86). Both respect the Moorean constraint and Single Premise Closure. Neither can honour both the Epistemic Possibility Constraint and the Objective Chance Principle. Whereas non-sceptical invariantism is ‘in obvious tension’ with Multiple Premise Closure, SSI has ‘some prospect’ of maintaining Multiple-Premise Closure. By contrast, Hawthorne claims, SSI is better able to accommodate the idea that knowledge is the norm for assertion and practical reasoning.

Elsewhere (Brown 2008), I argue against the idea that knowledge is the norm of practical reasoning. More specifically, I argue that Gettier cases undermine the idea that knowledge of p is necessary for relying on p in practical reasoning, and that one cannot defend the claim that knowledge that p is sufficient for relying on p in practical reasoning
without prior appeal to SSI. Such an appeal would be illegitimate in a debate about whether the best account of knowledge is a traditional or subject-sensitive version of invariantism. As a result, Hawthorne’s case for SSI turns out to depend on the idea that knowledge is the norm of assertion.

In his arguments, Hawthorne appeals to both directions of the knowledge norm for assertion. For example, against the contextualist he argues that contextualism cannot honour the link between knowledge and assertion (Hawthorne 2004, S2.4). For a contextualist, the truth of an attribution of knowledge by A to S depends on A’s context, whereas the propriety of assertions made by S seems to depend on S’s own context. As a result, the contextualist divorces facts about knowledge and facts about the propriety of assertion. If contextualism is true, an attributor in high stakes may truly say of a subject in low stakes, ‘S does not know that p but S would not criticisable for asserting p’; and an attributor in low stakes may truly say of a subject in high stakes, ‘S knows that p but S is not in a strong enough epistemic position to assert that p’. The first of these problems exploits NEC, and the second exploits SUFF.

Hawthorne uses NEC to argue against classic invariantism. He suggests that the classic invariantist faces difficulties in explaining why it seems inappropriate to assert lottery propositions on a probabilistic basis. Where the draw has taken place and my ticket has not won, it seems inappropriate for me to assert that it has not won even though it is true and highly probable on the evidence. SSI explains the impropriety by exploiting NEC in combination with the claim that one does not know the relevant proposition. The problem for the non-sceptical classic invariantist is to explain the impropriety of asserting lottery propositions while avoiding scepticism. Assuming closure, to avoid scepticism, the classic invariantist must hold that one does know lottery propositions. So, the non-sceptical classic invariantist cannot use the explanation which Hawthorne offers, namely the combination of NEC and the claim that one does not know lottery propositions. (Hawthorne argues that his subject-sensitive invariantist position enables him to explain the impropriety of asserting lottery propositions while holding closure and avoiding scepticism.)

As we have seen, Hawthorne’s arguments against contextualism and classic invariantism depend on both directions of the knowledge norm for assertion. The arguments given here suggest that SUFF is not an independent criterion by which to judge the debate between contextualism and invariantism. The most obvious way to defend SUFF against the problematic counterexamples is by appeal to either contextualism or subject-sensitive invariantism. But, this is a high price that many
would not be prepared to pay. Further, if SUFF is defended in this way then it is not an independent premise to which appeal can be made to settle the issue of contextualism versus invariantism. The other direction of the knowledge norm to which Hawthorne appeals is NEC. The truth of NEC is out with the scope of this paper. However, a range of views offer to explain the data which purportedly favour NEC while denying NEC. (The relevant data include the paradoxical nature of assertions of the form ‘p but I don’t know that p’, the fact that assertions can be challenged by the question ‘how do you know that p’, and the felt impropriety of asserting lottery propositions.) For example, one might attempt to explain the data by appeal to the idea that the norm of assertion is that one should assert that p only if one rationally believes that one knows that p. Others have attempted to explain the data on the rival views that the norm of assertion is truth (Weiner 2006), or justified belief (for versions of this view, see Douven 2006, Lackey 2007, and Kvanvig 2009) or that the epistemic standard for assertion is context sensitive (Levin 2008). If NEC fails in addition to SUFF, then Hawthorne’s case for subject-sensitive invariantism is undermined.

I have argued that SUFF is not an independent premise by which to settle the debate between contextualism and invariantism. However, some might envisage a different relation between these positions and the knowledge norm for assertion. They may suggest that we should view the relevant position and the knowledge norm for assertion as a combined package and assess whether this combined package outperforms a rival package consisting of classic invariantism and an alternative account of the norm for assertion. Nothing I have said rules out this alternative way of viewing the relation between the knowledge norm for assertion and contextualism/subject-sensitive invariantism. However there are serious obstacles to defending such a package since, as we have already seen, contextualism and subject-sensitive invariantism are open to serious objections. Further, the addition of the knowledge norm for assertion to these positions does not mitigate the objections they face.

6. Conclusion

We have been examining the idea that knowledge is the norm of assertion. Much of the literature on the knowledge norm has focussed on what I have called NEC: if one is in a good enough epistemic position to assert p, then one knows that p. By contrast, here I have mainly focussed on a different claim, SUFF: if one knows that p, then one is in a good enough epistemic position to assert that p. I have argued that
SUFF receives no support from the data standardly used to defend the knowledge norm of assertion (data concerning lottery propositions, Moorean claims and the fact that an assertion may be challenged by the question “how do you know that?”). Further, SUFF is not clearly supported by data concerning the way in which assertions are criticised and defended. Lastly, I have argued that SUFF is open to counterexamples. While some may attempt to avoid these counterexamples by appeal to contextualism or subject-sensitive invariantism, others would regard that as too high a price to pay for defending SUFF given the difficulties facing these positions. Further, if SUFF is defended by prior appeal to either SSI or contextualism then it cannot be used as an ‘honest broker’ in the debate about whether contextualism or invariantism is the best account of knowledge.4

References


4 Thanks to Coffman, Dodds, Kvanvig for comments on the manuscript, and to those attending the 2007 Arche Assertion conference, and members of the Glasgow department of philosophy for useful comments on related talks.
Leite, Adam. 2006. ‘How to link assertion and knowledge without contextualism’. *Philosophical Studies*.
——. 2005b. ‘Fallibilism and Concessive Knowledge Attributions’ *Analysis*.