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# The Knowledge Norm of Blaming

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## Abstract

This paper argues that the standard evidence for the knowledge norm of assertion can be extended to provide evidence for a corresponding knowledge norm of blame.

1. According to the knowledge norm of assertion:

**KNA.** One must: assert  $p$  only if one knows  $p$ .<sup>1</sup>

Here are three data points that many of its advocates take to provide support for KNA: first, that assertions of lottery propositions – e.g. your ticket didn't win the lottery – are impermissible, at least when based only on the probabilistic evidence against winning; second, that assertions of Moorean conjunctions – e.g. it is raining but I don't know that it is raining – sound paradoxical; and, third, that assertions can be challenged by asking how/whether the speaker knows and criticised by pointing out that the speaker doesn't know what they asserted.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For defences of KNA see e.g. Benton 2016, Hawthorne 2004, Kelp and Simion 2017, Slote 1979, Sosa 2010, Turri 2016, Unger 1975, Williamson 2000. The above adopts Williamson's (2000, 243) classic statement and to be interpreted accordingly as forbidding asserting what one does not know (alternatively permitting asserting only what one knows).

<sup>2</sup> These data points do not exhaust the evidence for KNA. Most importantly, one recent line of defence, spearheaded by John Turri, stems from experimental philosophy and has marshalled a range of empirical data in support of KNA (see Turri 2017 for a useful overview). In addition, one might wonder about the rationale for KNA, i.e. the question of why we should think KNA holds. One promising answer appeals to assertion's function of transmitting knowledge to or generating knowledge in hearers (e.g. Turri 2017, Kelp 2018). Can a similar answer be given for why KNB holds? One reason for optimism is that the idea that blaming has an epistemic function is growing in popularity (Duff 1986, Fricker 2016, Sliwa 2019). That said, note that a negative answer does not mean a decisive strike against KNB. It might be that the rationale question doesn't have a deep answer for either KNA or KNB, say because both are constitutive of the relevant speech acts in much the same way as rules of games are

2. The reason why these data points are taken to provide support for KNA is that KNA offers a very attractive explanation of all of them. First, one cannot know lottery propositions, at least not when the only evidence one has is probabilistic. By KNA, the relevant assertions of lottery propositions come out impermissible (Williamson 2000, Hawthorne 2004).

Second, here's what going on when one asserts a Moorean conjunction, according to KNA. When one asserts  $p$ , given that KNA holds, one gives one's hearer to understand that one knows  $p$ . However, when one asserts that one doesn't know that  $p$ , one explicitly denies what one has given one's hearer to understand by asserting  $p$ . No surprise, then, that these assertions sound paradoxical (cf. Moore 1963).

Third, norms that forbid one from  $\phi$ -ing unless one satisfies condition  $C$  license criticisms of  $\phi$ -ing by pointing out that one has  $\phi$ -ed even though one doesn't satisfy  $C$  (Kelp and Simion 2017).<sup>3</sup> Since KNA forbids one from asserting  $p$  unless one knows that  $p$ , KNA predicts, correctly, that assertions can be criticised by pointing out that the speaker doesn't know. Moreover, if norms that forbid one from  $\phi$ -ing unless one satisfies condition  $C$  license criticisms of the sort just described, then it is only to be expected that they also license challenges by asking whether one satisfies  $C$  and how it is that one satisfies  $C$ , at least if there are various ways of satisfying  $C$ . In this way, KNA also predicts, again correctly, that assertions can be challenged by asking how/whether the speaker knows.

3. The central thesis of this short paper is to argue that if these three data points do indeed provide support for KNA, then there is also support for what I will call the knowledge norm of blaming:

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constitutive of games (Williamson 2000). Alternatively, it might be that they afford different answers. Perhaps the reason why KNB holds has to do with minimising undeserved injustices for the recipients of blame. Having flagged these issues, I'd like to set them aside here. While both a thorough experimental approach to KNB and a full investigation of the rationale for KNB would be desirable, they are beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Note that for Kelp and Simion there is an important difference between criticism and blame. In particular, to say that norm violations license criticisms is not to say that they licence blaming (see Kelp and Simion 2017 for more details). Note also that Kelp and Simion's claim is not required to explain how KNA predicts that assertions can be challenged and criticised in terms of knowledge: Williamson (2000) offers an alternative that will do just as well for present purposes.

**KNB.** One must: blame X for  $\phi$ -ing only if one knows that it was wrong for X<sup>4</sup> to  $\phi$ .<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly enough, if the above data points do indeed support KNA, there are parallel data points that serve to support KNB. Let's start by looking at the data.

4. First, blame based only probabilistic evidence is impermissible. If the only evidence that X impermissibly  $\phi$ -ed is that Y has is that X is among the 999 out of a 1000 people who  $\phi$ -ed impermissibly, Y cannot permissibly blame X for having  $\phi$ -ed. Consider Cohen's (1981) infamous 'gatecrasher' case in which 999 out of 1000 visitors climbed the fence of a certain rodeo, among them X and suppose Y utters the following:

Y: "I blame you<sup>6</sup> for gatecrashing the rodeo."

It is clear that Y does not permissibly blame X here.

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<sup>4</sup> Can one permissibly blame someone for a suberogatory act? Note that if the answer is yes, KNB should be weakened accordingly:

**KNB\*.** One must: blame X for  $\phi$ -ing only if one knows that it was wrong for X *or bad of X* to  $\phi$ .

<sup>5</sup> Todd (2018) briefly touches upon a justification condition on blaming. Coates (2016) argues in more detail that blaming is governed by the following reasonable-to-believe norm:

**ENB.** It is inappropriate (absent special justification) for A to blame B for x-ing if it is not reasonable for A to believe that B is morally responsible for x-ing. (2016, 458)

Despite appearances to the contrary, Coates's ENB is entirely compatible with KNB. This is because Coates explicitly remains neutral (i) on whether ENB is best stated in terms of 'reasonable', 'justified' or 'warranted' and (ii) on what it takes for a proposition to be reasonable for one to believe (Coates 2016, 458, fn.4,5). Given the possibility of a knowledge first view according to which justification is knowledge (Littlejohn 2013, Sutton 2007, Williamson Forthcoming), it might be that one satisfies ENB if and only if one satisfies KNB.

What's more, there is reason to believe that Coates' argument for ENB is congenial to the central claim of this paper. To see why, note that first that it rests on the parallel reasonable-to-believe norm of assertion:

**ENA.** It is inappropriate (absent special justification) for A to assert that p if it is not reasonable for A to believe that p. (2016, 459)

Second, if ENA is replaced by (or precisified as) KNA, Coates's argument will have KNB as its conclusion. Coates's argument, if sound, entails that if KNA is true, then so is KNB.

<sup>6</sup> X is the contextually determined referent of 'you' here.

Second, one can blame someone for  $\phi$ -ing by saying “I blame you for  $\phi$ -ing.”<sup>7</sup> But now note that uttering the following sounds paradoxical in just the same way as assertions of Moorean conjunctions do: “I blame X for  $\phi$ -ing, but I don’t know that it was wrong of X to  $\phi$ .” Consider:

Y: “I blame you for gatecrashing the rodeo, but I don’t know that it was wrong of you to do so.”

Y’s utterance sounds paradoxical in much the same way as assertions of Moorean conjunctions do.

Third, Z can challenge Y for blaming X for  $\phi$ -ing by asking how/whether Y knows that it was wrong for X to  $\phi$  and criticise Y by pointing out that Y doesn’t know that X did anything wrong in  $\phi$ -ing. Consider:

Y: “I blame you for gatecrashing the rodeo.”

Z-1: “How do you know that it was wrong for her to gatecrash the rodeo?”

Z-2: “Do you know that it was wrong for her to gatecrash the rodeo?”

Z-3: “You don’t know that it was wrong for her to gatecrash the rodeo.”

In Z-1 and Z-2, Z’s contribution clearly constitutes a challenge of Y’s blaming and in Z-3 a criticism.

5. Here is how KNB explains these data. In the gatecrasher case, Y only has probabilistic evidence that X entered the premises impermissibly and so doesn’t know that she did. Since permissible blaming requires knowledge of wrongdoing, Y does not blame X permissibly.

Consider next the case in which Y blames X for  $\phi$ -ing and adds that she doesn’t know that it was wrong for X to  $\phi$ , e.g.: “I blame you for gatecrashing the rodeo, but I don’t know that it was wrong of you to do so.” Here’s what going on, according to KNB. When Y utters “I blame you for gatecrashing the rodeo”, given that KNB holds, Y gives her hearer to understand that Y knows that it was wrong for X to gatecrash the rodeo. However, when Y adds “I don’t know that it was wrong for you to

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<sup>7</sup> I am leaving open the question of whether performatives, like the above, are also assertions. See (Ginet 1979) and (Bach 1975) for positive answers and (Austin 1962) as well as (Reimer 1995) for denials. Note, however, that it is hard to deny that one can blame someone indirectly without even making an assertion. Given the right contextual setup, ‘You’re jerk!’ is a case in point (Coates 2016) as is ‘You jerk!’ or ‘Could you be any more of a jerk?’.

gatecrash the rodeo”, she explicitly denies what she has given her hearer to understand earlier on. No surprise, then, that this utterance sounds paradoxical.

Third, since norms that forbid one from  $\phi$ -ing unless one satisfies condition C license criticisms of  $\phi$ -ing by pointing out that one has  $\phi$ -ed even though one doesn't satisfy C, and since KNB forbids one from blaming someone for  $\phi$ -ing unless one knows that it was wrong for said person to  $\phi$ , KNB also predicts, again correctly, that blamings can be criticised by pointing out that the blamer doesn't know that the person blamed did something wrong. Moreover, recall that if norms license criticisms of the sort just described, then it is only to be expected that one's  $\phi$ -ing can also be challenged by asking whether one satisfies C and how it is that one satisfies C, at least if there are various ways of satisfying C. As a result, KNB also predicts, again correctly, that blamings can be challenged by asking how/whether the speaker knows that it was wrong for the person blamed to  $\phi$ .

6. In sum, many of its champions take KNA to be supported by the three data points for assertion described above and the fact that KNA offers a very attractive explanation of them. What this paper has shown is that there are parallel data points for blame and that KNB offers an explanation of these data for blame that is no less attractive than the explanation KNA offers of the corresponding data for assertion. The moral of the story, then, is that if its champions are right and these data do provide evidence for KNA<sup>8</sup>, the same goes, *mutatis mutandis* for KNB.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Note that this is a conditional claim. Whether the data about assertion support KNA remains hotly disputed – see e.g. (Douven 2006, Gerken 2017, Kvanvig 2009, Lackey 2007 and Weiner 2005) for denials.

<sup>9</sup> Does the argument carry over to other types of speech act? Perhaps. For instance, Buckwalter and Turri (2014) use Moorean utterances and conversational patterns to argue for knowledge norms of showing and telling. Note, however, that even if there further knowledge norms, they need to be argued for on a case-by-case basis. There are at least two reasons for this. First, and most importantly, there are speech acts that are not plausibly governed by a knowledge rule, including guessing that p and lying that p. Second, in other cases, the relevant types of speech act may be governed by knowledge norms, but if they are, their content isn't straightforward. Conjecturing may be a case in point. Here the norm cannot be that one must: conjecture that p only if one knows that p. If conjecturing is governed by a knowledge norm, it must have a different content.

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