

# Assertion: knowledge is enough

Mona Simion<sup>1</sup>

Received: 6 May 2015 / Accepted: 11 September 2015 / Published online: 21 September 2015  
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2015

**Abstract** Recent literature features an increased interest in the sufficiency claim involved in the knowledge norm of assertion (KNA-Suff). This paper looks at two prominent objections to KNA-Suff, due to Jessica Brown and Jennifer Lackey, and argues that they miss their target due to value-theoretic inaccuracies. It is argued that (i) the intuitive need for more than knowledge in Brown’s high-stakes contexts does not come from the epistemic norm governing assertion, but from further norms stepping in and raising the bar, and (ii) Lackey’s purported quality-driven case against KNA-Suff boils down to a quantitative objection. If that is the case, Lackey’s argument will be vulnerable to the same objections as Brown’s.

**Keywords** Knowledge norm · Assertion · Sufficiency · Brown · Lackey

## 1 Introduction

A widely endorsed view in the literature is that knowledge is the norm governing epistemically proper assertion (KNA). One thing speaking in favour of a knowledge account is that, if there’s such a thing as an epistemic norm for assertion in the first place, it is plausibly there to insure that assertion delivers the epistemic goods we are using it for.<sup>1</sup> Now, I can tell you that *p* with many purposes in mind: I might tell you that the weather is nice to the aim of making polite conversation, I can tell you that you have ugly shoes in order to offend you etc. What we are concerned with,

---

<sup>1</sup> For support for KNA along these lines, see e.g., [Reynolds \(2002\)](#), [Kelp \(2015\)](#), [Simion \(2015\)](#).

✉ Mona Simion  
mona.simion@hiw.kuleuven.be

<sup>1</sup> KU Leuven Centre for Logic and Analytic Philosophy, Andreas Vesaliusstraat 2,  
3000 Leuven, Belgium

however, are the epistemic purposes associated with the practice of assertion: what epistemic goods is assertion meant to deliver? One very plausible answer is this: the characteristic purpose of assertion is generating testimonial knowledge in the hearer. Due to our physical and cognitive limitations, most of the knowledge we have is testimonial; thus, assertion turns out to be one of our main epistemic vehicles.

If that is the case, however, the claim that knowledge is both necessary and sufficient for epistemically proper assertion looks very promising; on most if not all accounts of testimony in the literature, in the vast majority of cases, the speaker needs to know in order to be able to generate knowledge in the hearer. Also, it looks as if a knowledgeable speaker need not do more—regarding his warrant for  $p$ —in order to be in a good enough epistemic position to transmit testimonial knowledge that  $p$  to her hearer. Thus, for the characteristic epistemic purpose associated with the practice of assertion, knowledge seems to be both necessary and good enough.

Much discussion<sup>2</sup> has focused on the necessity claim involved in KNA; that is, roughly, the claim that one is in a good enough position to make an epistemically proper assertion that  $p$  only if one knows that  $p$  (KNA-Nec).

While not enjoying the same degree of popularity, the claim that knowledge is also sufficient for epistemically proper assertion (KNA-Suff) has quite a few supporters too.<sup>3</sup> However, comparatively little discussion has focused on questioning KNA-Suff. Most notably, Jessica Brown has argued that, in high stakes contexts, one needs to find oneself in a stronger epistemic position vis-à-vis  $p$  in order to properly assert that  $p$  (henceforth, the *quantitative objection*). In recent work, Lackey (2011, 2013, 2014) argues that that's not all there is to it. That is, Lackey argues that it's not only the *quantity* of epistemic support that might be at stake, but the *quality* too. More specifically, Lackey identifies cases in which it looks as if the *type* of source of one's knowledge that  $p$  might be defective in making it so that one can assert that  $p$ . Lackey argues that in some cases of expert testimony and testimony involving aesthetic judgements, isolated testimonial knowledge will not be enough to grant the speaker the right to assert (henceforth, the *qualitative objection*).

This paper argues that the case against KNA-Suff rests on value-theoretic inaccuracies. It is argued that (1) the intuitive need for more than knowledge in Brown's high-stakes contexts does not come from the epistemic norm governing assertion, but from further (prudential, moral, etc.) norms stepping in and raising the bar, and (2) Lackey's purported quality-driven case against KNA-Suff boils down to a quantitative objection. As such, I will argue, Lackey fails to establish more than that some contexts require stronger epistemic support for assertion than others. If that is the case, Lackey's argument will be vulnerable to the same objections as Brown's.

I will proceed as follows: the first section will be concerned with showing that the quantitative objection does not affect KNA-Suff (Sect. 2). To this effect, I will put forth a distinction which has been largely overlooked in recent literature; that between epistemic norms and norms with epistemic content. I will argue that, in the light of this distinction, Brown's cases fail to do the intended work.

<sup>2</sup> The locus classicus for the defence of KNA-Nec is Williamson (2000).

<sup>3</sup> E.g., DeRose (2002), Simion (2015) and, more tentatively, Hawthorne (2004).

In the next section (Sect. 3), I will first look at Lackey’s expert testimony cases, and argue that what is essential in triggering the intuition of unassertability is the reliability of the source—thus, again, the quantity of epistemic support—rather than, as Lackey would have it, its quality (isolation and second-handedness). Second, I will briefly argue that cases involving aesthetic judgements afford a Gricean explanation, and thus pose no threat to KNA-Suff. I will also discuss a few possible objections on Lackey’s part. In the last section I will conclude.

## 2 The quantitative objection

What we are interested in is the *epistemic* norm governing assertion; that is, we want to know, roughly, how much warrant is enough for an assertion that enjoys it to be epistemically proper.<sup>4</sup> Let us then formulate the claim that knowledge is sufficient for epistemically proper assertion as follows:

KNA-Suff: One’s assertion that *p* is epistemically proper if one knows that *p*.

At first glance, KNA-Suff looks fairly promising. It looks as if it’s perfectly fine for me, for instance, to tell you that there’s a desk in front of me while I’m writing this paper; the reason why I can do that without rendering myself subject to criticism is because I know there’s a desk in front of me, via perception. If you were to question my assertion, appealing to my knowledge would adequately meet the challenge.

According to Jessica Brown, however, knowledge is not always enough; that is, in high stakes scenarios, more epistemic support is needed for permissible assertion. Consider the following case:

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 (Brown 2010, p. 555).

Intuitively, we find Friend is right on this one; that is, he’s right to not have hastened into telling Husband about the affair before he was absolutely sure. One should definitely not rush into giving this kind of news. As such, Brown takes this case to show that, in high stakes contexts, knowledge<sup>5</sup> is not enough; one needs to find oneself in a stronger epistemic position vis-à-vis *p* in order to properly assert that *p*.

<sup>4</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I will use ‘proper’ and ‘permissible’ interchangeably. One might object to this, due to phenomena related to super- and subrogation. For the purposes of this paper, however, nothing hinges on this.

<sup>5</sup> Note that Brown’s case, as it stands, is somehow under-described; that is, it is not at all clear what could ground Friend’s belief in the affair such that it would intuitively amount to knowledge, but fall short of assertability. Seeing the couple in a fugitive embrace? Seems to fall short of being enough for knowledge. On the other hand, it looks as if anything more than that would come close to providing enough epistemic support for assertability. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will take it that there is a way to fill out the case such that it ends up doing the intended work.

## 2.1 Brown on overriding

Recall, however, that KNA-Suff is supposed to be an epistemic norm, solely concerned with epistemic propriety. As such, one might wonder whether the intuitive unassertability in the case above is not triggered by further norms stepping in and overriding the epistemic norm. After all, assertion is a type of action; as such, we should expect it to be governed both by norms governing its particular type—like the epistemic norm we are searching for—and by norms pertaining to action in general, like prudential or moral norms, for instance. Surely no amount of epistemic support will make it permissible for me to assert any proposition *p* inasmuch as, say, my assertion will trigger the death of millions. In this case, it looks as if the epistemic norm, whatever it may be, is overridden by the moral norm.

Brown acknowledges that, in some cases, other norms might override the epistemic norm, and make the assertion inappropriate even though the speaker has knowledge: “[i]n many senses of propriety, that one knows that *p* is not sufficient for the propriety of asserting *p*” (2010, p. 550). 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 (henceforth, BALD). However, Brown argues, in AFFAIR, it is not the case that further norms step in and override the epistemic norm; this, according to her, is evidenced by the fact that the epistemic standards themselves seem to be higher: Friend just needs more warrant in order to be in a good enough position to assert. Thus, according to Brown, when the quantity of epistemic warrant necessary for proper assertion is affected, what we are dealing with is an epistemic norm at work, rather than an overriding norm of a different nature. Accordingly, inasmuch as we are restricting the discussion to whether one is in a good enough epistemic position to assert, we are safe from letting our intuitions be driven by different norms but the epistemic one. Thus, Brown takes it to be the case that we can individuate the requirements of the epistemic norm we are interested in as follows:

*The Epistemic Support Principle (ESP):* If a norm *N* affects the amount of epistemic support needed for proper assertion, then *N* is an epistemic norm.

Furthermore, she takes the sufficiency claim of the epistemic norm we are talking about to come in the following formulation:

*KNA-Suff-Brown (KNASB):* One is in a good enough epistemic position to assert *p* if one knows that *p* (2010, p. 550).

Importantly, in the light of all this, Brown takes KNASB to be equivalent to our previous formulation of KNA-Suff:

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** (emphasis added). 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** (emphasis added) (2010, p. 550).

Thus, Brown stands behind the following equivalence thesis:

*KNASB—KNA-Suff Equivalence Thesis (ET)*: One is in a good enough epistemic position to assert that  $p$  if and only if one's assertion that  $p$  is epistemically proper.

Further on, Brown finds *KNASB* to be false, as proven by *AFFAIR*; Friend does know that the wife is having an affair, but, intuitively, he is still not in a good enough epistemic position to assert it. If that is the case, naturally, in virtue of *ET*, she concludes *KNA-Suff* is also false; knowledge is not always enough for epistemically proper assertion.

In what follows, I will argue that Brown is right to think that *KNASB* is false; the epistemic position a knowledgeable asserter finds himself in might not be, all-things-considered, good enough for asserting that  $p$ . However, I will also show that both *ESP* and *ET* are false, which will render *KNA-Suff* unaffected by Brown's argument. Inasmuch as what we care about is *epistemic propriety*—that is, propriety by the epistemic norm—rather than all-things-considered propriety, I will argue that, for all Brown has shown, *KNA-Suff* stands.

## 2.2 Epistemic norms and norms with epistemic content

Let us first revisit Brown's motivation for thinking that if a norm  $N$  affects the amount of epistemic support needed for proper assertion, then  $N$  is an epistemic norm (*ESP*). Recall that the thought was, roughly, that the impropriety of my telling my boss that he was bald was plausibly due to other norms (prudential, norms of politeness etc.) stepping in and overriding the epistemic norm. As opposed to this, according to Brown, in *AFFAIR* the epistemic support itself is insufficient.

What is it that distinguishes *BALD* from *AFFAIR*? It looks as if, in the former, but not in the latter case, the assertion becomes altogether improper, no matter the amount of epistemic support enjoyed by it. That is, even if you're certain that your boss is bald, your assertion is still impermissible. As opposed to this, in *AFFAIR*, if Friend had had more epistemic support—closer to certainty—his assertion would have been perfectly fine. From this, Brown concludes that in the former, but not in the latter, further norms step in and override the epistemic norm, while in *AFFAIR* it is the epistemic norm itself that is at work.

Is it true, however, that just because the quantity of epistemic support needed for proper assertion is affected, it follows that we are dealing with an epistemic norm at work?

Let us look at what is the case with other types of action in order to check the plausibility of this claim. Consider driving. Traffic norms are specific to this kind of action; moral norms and prudential norms are not, they pertain to action in general. One important traffic norm is the one regulating speed limit within city bounds. Say you are in Barcelona and you are currently driving your sister's three-year-old son to kindergarten. Your driving will be governed by a traffic norm that forbids you to drive faster than 50 km/h. Now, consider the following situations:

**DRIVE (i)** Say that, as it so happens, your sister's kid has terrible carsickness and asks you to stop the car. According to the traffic norms you're doing perfectly fine, you can continue driving 50 km/h. However, it looks as if the (all-things-

considered) proper thing to do is to stop the car: the moral norm overrides the traffic norm and makes your continuing to drive altogether inappropriate.

DRIVE (ii) Say that your sister's kid has carsickness at that speed, and asks you to drive a bit slower. Again, it looks as if that's the (all-things-considered) proper thing to do in this situation. Still, according to the traffic norm, you can just go on driving 50 km/h. The moral norm, however, overrides the traffic norm and asks you to drive slower.

DRIVE (iii) Say that your sister's kid needs to be at the hospital as soon as possible, his life is at stake. Surely, going a bit faster than 50 looks like the all-things-considered proper thing to do, even though in breach of the traffic norm. Again, moral and prudential considerations step in, override the traffic norm and modify the all-things-considered standards for proper driving.

Thus, it looks as if there are two ways in which further norms stepping in may override the constraints of norms specific to a particular type of action: they can make the action all-things-considered inappropriate (DRIVE (i)), although the standards imposed by the type-specific norm are met, or they can modify the standards for all-things-considered propriety (DRIVE (ii) and (iii)), although, again, the standards for propriety by the type-specific norm remain fixed.

Notice, too, that the case of driving is hardly isolated; similar examples can be construed for many types of action, provided that the type-specific norms in question regulate how much of a gradable property one's action needs to enjoy in order to be permissible. To see this, consider the following contrast cases: if social norms forbid me to wear sports shoes in restaurants, they forbid it altogether. It cannot be that they allow me to wear 'more or less' sports shoes. When there is a gradable property that is at stake—that is, roughly, when permissible action requires more or less of a gradable property  $x$ —norms regulating it can fix the threshold for proper performance lower or higher on the  $x$  spectrum: it can become appropriate to drive faster or slower, to have a better or a worse grade average, to wear a longer or a shorter skirt etc.

Now, notice the analogy between DRIVE (i) and BALD and, respectively, DRIVE (ii) and (iii) and AFFAIR. In the former pair of cases, overriding makes the action in question altogether inappropriate; in the latter, arguably, it only modifies the standards in place. Assertion is a type of action, and justification is a gradable property: one can have more or less of it. Similarly to the case of driving, then, we should expect other norms to be able to influence the propriety of assertion in two ways: first, it might be that asserting that  $p$  becomes all-things-considered inappropriate, even though the epistemic standards are reached—like in BALD. Secondly, it might be that, by other norms stepping in, the amount of epistemic support required by the epistemic norm for asserting that  $p$  is either all-things-considered not good enough anymore, or too strong of a requirement.

If that is the case, however, Brown's ESP is false. Recall that she takes it that the fact that the quantity of epistemic support needed for proper assertion seems to be higher in high stakes situations shows that it is the epistemic norm that is at work. However, in line with action in general, just because a norm  $N$  affects the amount of epistemic support needed for proper assertion, it need not follow that  $N$  is an epistemic norm. Just like in the case of driving, where a moral norm affected how fast one could

go, further norms can override the epistemic norm and decide the proper amount of warrant needed for (all-things-considered) proper assertion. *The fact that a norm has epistemic content does not imply that it is an epistemic norm.*

One objection on Brown's behalf, already voiced by [Lackey \(2011\)](#), would go along the following lines: if the above distinction is correct, how is one to distinguish between requirements pertaining to different types of norms? Here is Lackey:

For now, whenever evidence is adduced that concerns the epistemic authority requisite for proper assertion, it may bear on the norm of assertion or it may bear on these other [...] norms. [...] [I]t will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to tell which is being defended ([Lackey 2011](#), p. 277).

There is a fairly straightforward way to go about it, though; notice that a norm's pertaining to one type or another has to do with the goal it is associated<sup>6</sup> with. Thus, prudential norms will be associated with a prudential goal—maximizing practical utility—moral norms will be associated with the goal of maximizing moral goodness, etc. Epistemic norms will thus be concerned with guiding us in reaching epistemic goals.

Think again about your driving your three-year-old nephew to kindergarten. The moral norm there has traffic-related content: 'Drive slower than 50 km/h because your nephew gets car sickness'. This, however, in no way makes it a traffic norm. Similarly, prudential norms can have epistemic content; take, for instance, the norm: 'Do not jump in the lake unless you know how to swim'. What makes this a prudential constraint rather than an epistemic one is the goal associated with it, which is life preservation.

Given this, it looks as though it is on Brown's shoulders to argue that the norm asking for stronger epistemic support in AFFAIR is not only a norm with epistemic content, but also an epistemic norm as such, associated with an epistemic goal, and concerned with epistemic propriety. By the looks of the case, one might find it more plausible that it is a prudential constraint that asks for a stronger epistemic support here, directed at the prudential goal of protecting Husband from unnecessary hardship, and thus concerned with prudential propriety.<sup>7</sup> Actually, the way in which the case

<sup>6</sup> Notice that the claim needed for this argument is of mere association between norms and goals of a particular type; as such, it does not, in any way, imply any substantive value theoretic commitments. The consequentialist will explain the 'ought' in terms of the 'good'; he will say that the norm is there to guide us in reaching the goal. As opposed to this, the deontologist reverses the order of explanation; he would have it that the goal is only valuable in virtue of the fact that the norm gives us reasons to favour it. Anyhow, the mere association claim holds. Thus, the argument made by this paper can be constructed in both consequentialist and deontological terms; nothing here hinges on this.

<sup>7</sup> One way for Brown to argue that it is for the sake of reaching an epistemic goal that more warrant is needed in this case could go along the following lines: Friend's assertion is aimed at generating knowledge/true belief in his audience—in this case, Husband. If Friend were to assert 'Your wife is having an affair', Husband might plausibly ask 'How do you know?' In this case, Husband might fail to believe the content of Friend's assertion if the latter is not able to back his claims by serious epistemic support. If Friend fails to generate belief in his audience, he also thereby fails to generate knowledge, or true belief, for that matter, so he fails to reach his epistemic goal (thanks to XXX for pressing me on this one).

Notice, however, that a norm of assertion that would be able to accommodate this case would be implausibly strong; not only would it be asking for a high quantity of warrant in high stakes scenarios, but also for the speaker to have access to it, so that he can discursively justify his speech act. This, however, seems to over-intellectualize the practice of assertion. Children, for instance, due to lacking the cognitive sophistication



is put forth suggests as much; recall Friend’s excuse: “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* (emphasis added)” (Brown 2010, p. 555). As McGlynn (2014) rightly points out, “[t]his builds into the case that one is worried about the effect one’s assertion would have on one’s friend’s marriage, which is surely a non-epistemic factor”. Furthermore, McGlynn argues, “[...] if the impropriety that would be involved in asserting in this case would really be epistemic, rather than due to the presence of non-epistemic factors, we would expect that a qualified assertion might be appropriate”. However, it looks as if hedging will not deliver propriety either. For instance, surely, given that Friend knows the wife is having an affair, he has enough warrant to be pretty sure that she *might* be having an affair. Still, it still looks like Friend would better abstain from asserting the latter in the presence of Husband also (2014, p. 126).

In the light of all this, let us now move on to checking the plausibility of Brown’s Equivalence Thesis. Notice that, if ESP fails, ET turns out to be false too. One’s assertion that *p* can be epistemically proper without it being the case that one is in a (all-things-considered) good enough epistemic position to assert that *p*. This is going to be the case when the norm that dictates how much warrant is needed for all-things-considered proper assertion is not the epistemic norm, but a further norm—with epistemic content—stepping in and raising the bar, like in AFFAIR.

Also, one can be in a (all-things-considered) good enough epistemic position to assert that *p* without it being the case that one’s assertion that *p* is epistemically proper. This is going to be the case when further norms step in, override the epistemic norm,<sup>8</sup> and set the threshold for (again, all-things-considered) good enough warrant lower than the epistemic norm. One example of this is Williamson’s (2000) train case (henceforth TRAIN): suppose that I, knowing that it is urgent for you to get to your destination, shout “That is your train” upon seeing a train approach the station. That looks like the right thing to do, even though I do not know that it is your train; I merely believe that it is very likely so.

To sum up: once we make the necessary distinction between epistemic norms and norms with epistemic content, Brown’s ESP and ET both turn out to be false. If this is the case, her argument against KNASB in no way affects KNA-Suff, which is the epistemic norm we were interested in to begin with.

---

Footnote 7 continued

to reflect on their warrant, would never be allowed to assert in high stakes circumstances. And if this still does not look bad enough, consider also the fact that most of our knowledge comes from memory. Now, in most cases of memorial knowledge that *p*, we tend to not recall how we came to know that *p* in the first place. I surely know that Berlin is the capital of Germany, that I was born in January, that the Sears Tower is in Chicago, and so on, but I have no clue as to how I came across all this. Does that mean that I am not allowed to assert any of this in high stakes scenarios? That seems highly implausible. Or, to say the least, I believe it to be on Brown’s shoulders to construct a good case for such a demanding norm.

<sup>8</sup> In this case, KNA-Nec. Notice also that no one in the literature questions the prudential explanation in the TRAIN case. However, TRAIN is for KNA-Nec what AFFAIR is for KNA-Suff: a case in which the quantity of epistemic warrant needed for prudentially proper assertion is not the same as the one needed for epistemically proper assertion. It is, therefore, surprising that AFFAIR is seen as problematic for KNA-Suff, while TRAIN is widely acknowledged to not put any pressure on KNA-Nec.



Here's a last concern I want to briefly address, although it is rather tangential to the discussion<sup>9</sup>: [Brown \(2010\)](#) worries that, given the apparent context-sensitivity of proper assertion, the defender of both KNA-Nec and KNA-Suff might have to either accept contextualism about knowledge attributions, or else settle for one version or another of pragmatic encroachment. However, many people might find such commitments theoretically unsatisfactory.

Notice though that, on the view defended by this paper, this need not be the case. Recall driving, again. The traffic norm is clear and invariant: drive (at most) 50 km/h within city bounds. Of course, as we have seen above moral, social or prudential considerations might step in and override the traffic norm, setting the bar for all-things-considered proper driving lower or higher. Thus, the threshold for all-things-considered proper driving will be context-sensitive. This, of course, does not, in any way, imply contextualism or pragmatic encroachment about what it is to drive in accordance with traffic norms. Similarly, holding the norm for assertion fixed does not imply that we need to accept context-sensitivity about what it is to know in order to account for the context-sensitivity of proper assertion. All-things-considered proper driving varies with context, but proper driving by the traffic norm does not. Analogously, all-things-considered proper assertion varies with context, epistemically proper assertion does not.

### 3 The qualitative objection

We have seen that the quantitative case against KNA-Suff did not stand up to close value-theoretic scrutiny. That is, we have seen that further norms—like prudential and moral norms—can override the epistemic norm and raise the quantity of epistemic support needed for all-things-considered proper assertion. We have also looked at a principled way to distinguish between the constraints imposed by the epistemic norm we are interested in and those sourced in other types of norms, by looking at the goal plausibly associated with the requirement in question. On the face of it, at least, this method suggested that high practical stakes cases like [Brown's](#) are not going to do the intended work in proving KNA-Suff false.

[Lackey \(2011, 2013, 2014\)](#), however, argues that the quantity of epistemic support is not all there is to it. That is, according to [Lackey](#), the *type* of epistemic support might be problematic for permissible assertion by knowledgeable speakers also; in some contexts, [Lackey](#) argues, mere isolated testimonial knowledge is not enough for permissible assertion.

#### 3.1 Expert testimony

Consider the following case:

DOCTOR: Matilda is an oncologist at a teaching hospital [...]. One of her patients, Derek, [...] has been experiencing intense abdominal pain [...]. After

---

<sup>9</sup> I do not claim to even come close to settling this issue here. For a more detailed discussion, see [Simion \(2015\)](#).

requesting an ultrasound and MRI, the results of the tests arrived on Matilda's day off [and were] reviewed by Nancy, a competent medical student in oncology training at her hospital. [...] Nancy communicated to Matilda simply that her diagnosis is pancreatic cancer, without offering any of the details of the test results [...]. Shortly thereafter, Matilda had her appointment with Derek, where she truly asserts to him purely on the basis of Nancy's reliable testimony, "I am very sorry to tell you this, but you have pancreatic cancer" (Lackey 2011, p. 254).

Matilda, Lackey argues, knows that Derek has cancer. After all, her belief is true, reliably produced and, furthermore, internally well grounded—Matilda has good reasons to trust Nancy's assessment of the situation. As such, knowledge would be granted on any standard view of testimony (Lackey 2013, p. 36).

In spite of this, though, intuitively, Matilda's assertion is inappropriate. According to Lackey, this is due to the joint action of two factors: the purely testimonial source—what Lackey dubs second-hand knowledge—and the isolated character of the piece of knowledge—the asserter knowing nothing other than *p* about the subject matter.

Also, Lackey argues, just one of the two factors would not be enough to trigger the intuition; had Nancy given Matilda more information about the test results (non-isolation), or had Matilda, say, seen the result of at least only one isolated test herself (not entirely second-hand knowledge), her assertion would have been just fine.

Now, crucially, recall that Lackey claims that the source of the felt inappropriateness of the assertion in DOCTOR is a qualitative, rather than a quantitative one.

Notice, however, that it is not clear that isolation—that is, only possessing one item of knowledge about the subject matter—would not do the trick and render the assertion inappropriate itself. Telling a patient that he has cancer solely on the basis of one isolated test result looks a bit rushed. Surely, given the high stakes involved, we expect our doctors to have solid evidence before presenting us with such shocking news. Actually, the practice itself consists in not only seeing more results pointing in the same direction, but also having the tests redone at least once more for confirmation before informing the patient. But if that is the case, it looks as if it is quantity rather than quality of epistemic support at play here.

Second, it is also less than clear that non-isolated second-hand knowledge would always be as proper of a source for assertion as Lackey would have it.<sup>10</sup> Of course, if Nancy spends quite a lot of time over the phone with Matilda and tells her everything about the test results in question, which would enable Matilda to draw her own expert conclusion about the case, it might seem fine for Matilda to tell Derek that he has cancer. However, it looks as if the propriety of Matilda's assertion will be directly proportional to the amount of information she gets. Surely, if in addition to the fact that Derek has cancer, due to time limitations, Nancy only gets to tell Matilda that the ultrasound shows a grey shadow on Derek's pancreas, this will hardly enable Matilda to break the news to Derek. More seems to be needed. But, again, it looks as if the quantity of epistemic support is what does the trick, rather than its quality.

---

<sup>10</sup> Lackey (2013, p. 40) acknowledges that the purely testimonial source is enough to trigger unassertability.

And, last but not least, consider what would be the case if the source of Matilda's isolated second-hand knowledge would not be Nancy, but rather Matilda's boss, Dr. Jones, the chief physician of the oncology ward. Surely, then, Matilda's assertion would be perfectly warranted. But, again, this suggests that it is not the nature of the source—that is, its being isolated and second-hand - that does the trick here, but its reliability. Dr. Jones is just a more reliable source than Nancy is. And while the testimony of both of them seems good enough for Matilda to gain knowledge, in the high-stakes scenario we're facing, Dr. Jones's testimony would appropriately raise the quantity of epistemic support to what is required for all-things-considered proper assertion.

In a similar line, it is also worth noticing that, in high stakes situations, it might be the case that even non-isolated first-hand knowledge would not be enough for assertion. That is, plausibly enough, telling Derek that he has cancer only on the basis of two blood test results, even if Matilda saw the results herself, would hardly make for a proper assertion, given the high stakes involved.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2 Aesthetic judgements

Consider:

FOOD: My neighbour Ken is a connoisseur of fine dining. As we were leaving Starbucks this afternoon, he told me that the food at a new local restaurant about which I was previously quite unfamiliar, Quince, is exquisite, though being in a hurry prevented him from offering any details or evidence on behalf of this claim. While talking to my friend Vivienne later in the day, she was fretting over where to take her boyfriend to dinner for Valentine's Day. I promptly relieved her stress by truly asserting, "The food at Quince is exquisite" (Lackey 2011, p. 260).

Again, Lackey argues that what explains the inappropriateness intuition for the assertion in this case is the joint action of isolation and second-handedness.

Lackey's case affords a simple Gricean way out, though. Notice that there are three different things one might mean when making an assertion involving an aesthetic judgement. By uttering:

'The food is exquisite at Quince's',

I might mean to say that I have tried it and I like it, or that it is generally considered good food (by experts, or most people, etc.), or both. However, the most common implicatures are the first and the third on the list. To see this, notice that if I want to say that experts consider it good but I don't like it, or I haven't tried it, I will not merely say 'The food is good', but qualify my statement accordingly.

As such, it is easy to see how making assertions involving aesthetic judgements based on solely second-hand knowledge is less than appropriate, unless, of course, I

<sup>11</sup> For a similar project but a quite different objection to Lackey's expert testimony cases see Benton (2014). Although Benton's case against Lackey goes along quite dissimilar lines to the one made by this paper, Benton too seems to be sympathetic to the idea of further norms stepping in due to the high-stakes institutional contexts. See, for instance, footnote 12, p. 9. For Lackey's reply to Benton's objections, see Lackey (2014).

cancel the implicature and make it clear that it is according to experts, or most people, that the food is good, even though I haven't tried it myself.

One could, of course, argue that just because a Gricean explanation of the intuitive unassertability is available, that does not mean that KNA-Suff is safe. Carter and Gordon (2011) choose this line of defence; they argue that, plausibly, in this case, the Gricean maxim has been broken *due* to epistemic shortcomings:

A natural way for this to happen in everyday discourse will be when someone misleads someone else (thus violating the Gricean norm not to mislead) specifically by implying that they have greater epistemic warrant for their assertions than they actually do (Carter and Gordon 2011, p. 625).

I agree with Carter and Gordon on this; I think that this is exactly the right diagnosis when it comes to the situation at hand. However, this fails to constitute a problem for KNA-Suff, as the relevant broken norm is KNA-Nec,<sup>12</sup> the corresponding necessity claim. After all, all I come to know by testimony in the above case is that my friend likes the food, or, at most, that it is considered good by experts in the field; this, of course, might increase the chances of my liking it too. But I surely do not, in any way, come to know that I like the food myself.<sup>13</sup> So the implicature to the effect that I like it will, of course, render my assertion improper, not because knowledge is not sufficient for assertion, but because it is necessary.<sup>14</sup>

What would help with the propriety of the assertion would be if the case stipulated that Ken and I share the exact same taste in food. The implicature thus generated would not be problematic anymore. But that, of course, would be due to the fact that, in these cases, I would come to know that I like the food myself.

So, in sum, it seems that in order to turn my assertion into an appropriate one, we have to re-describe the case so that I either 1. know that I like the food myself, or 2. cancel the implicature to this effect. But this goes to show that the underlying problem is not that knowledge is not sufficient for proper assertion, but simply that in the original case I assert to more than I actually know, and thereby I break KNA-Nec.

### 3.3 Objections and replies

**Objection 1** Lackey considers a possible reply along Gricean lines, but she argues that it would not stand, as, by Grice's own lights, implicatures are "not carried by what

<sup>12</sup> Weaker norms are broken too: e.g., the speaker is not even justified in believing the implicature.

<sup>13</sup> For further support for this claim, see McGlynn (2014, p. 128).

<sup>14</sup> For an argument against the claim that one has to know the conversational implicatures of one's assertions, see Fricker (2012); while I find Fricker's argument successful, I think that the case this paper is making is not affected by it. Roughly, Fricker takes it that we might not be able to hold the speaker responsible for lack of warrant for the generated conversational implicatures, because in many contexts it is not clear whether the hearer gets the implicature right. However, importantly, Fricker's argument only targets (and, arguably, only goes through for) mere conversational implicatures. The ones this paper is concerned with are *conventional* conversational implicatures, that is, carried by the meaning with which the sentence is *conventionally* (usually) uttered (more about this below). Roughly put, it looks as if, if a sentence is *conventionally* uttered with a particular meaning, the hearer is in a better position to get the implicature right, and therefore in a better position to criticize the speaker for lack of warrant.

is said, but only by the saying of what is said, or by ‘*putting it that way*’” (Lackey 2011, p. 270). In contrast to this, in the discussed cases of aesthetic judgements, it looks as if the impropriety is linked to the content of the assertion rather than to uttering it in one context or another.

*Reply* Grice (1989, p. 25, 37, 39) distinguishes between three types of implicatures:

1. Conversational implicatures (cancellable, and to which the quote above refers to): carried by uttering *p* in a specific context rather than by *p* itself, like in:
  - ‘Are you going to Paul’s party?’
  - ‘I have to work.’ (Implicature: I am not going to Paul’s party.)
2. Conventional implicatures (non-cancellable): carried by the meaning of the sentence itself, like in:
  - ‘He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave.’ (Implicature: His being an Englishman implies that he is brave.)
3. Conventional conversational implicatures (cancellable): carried by the meaning with which the sentence is conventionally (usually) uttered:
  - ‘Some athletes smoke.’ (Implicature: Not all athletes smoke.)

It is easy to see that assertions involving aesthetic judgements pertain to the third category. That is, the implicature is 1. carried by the meaning conventionally associated with uttering a sentence of the type ‘*X* is good’, and 2. cancellable.

**Objection 2** Lackey argues that one can easily imagine cases when the presumed implicature is not cancellable. To this effect, she illustrates with a case she dubs the ‘presumed witness’<sup>15</sup> scenario<sup>16</sup>:

**RECOMMENDATION:** Josie, who was asked to support a philosophy student applying to Ph.D. programs, wrote in her letter of recommendation for his applications, “Mitchell has very polished writing skills.” While Josie does indeed know this about the student, her knowledge is grounded purely in the isolated, reliable testimony of her trustworthy colleague. Josie herself has had Mitchell in class for only a few weeks, and has yet to see any of his writing (Lackey 2011, p. 264).

*Reply* In the light of the discussion in the two previous sections, it might have become transparent already that RECOMMENDATION is but a combination of the above: an aesthetic judgement offered in an institutional context defined by particular stakes. In

<sup>15</sup> Notice the Gricean flavor here.

<sup>16</sup> Lackey (2011, 2013) brings two further cases in support of her view: a case involving someone’s second-hand knowledge that a student cheated in an exam, and a case of moral testimony. In both cases, Lackey takes it that the subjects (i) have the relevant piece of knowledge from testimony, and (ii) still fail to be in a position to make epistemically proper assertions.

Arguably though, both cases fall short of fully driving the point home; the former case fails to trigger a clear unassertability intuition, while the claim to knowledge acquisition in the latter case is disputed in the relevant literature; as such, for the purposes of this paper, I decided to focus on the less controversial cases. For a very convincing case against Lackey’s claim (ii) for the cheating student scenario, see McGlynn (2014, p. 128). For problems with claim (i) for the moral testimony case, see Lackey’s (2013, p. 33) overview of the relevant literature.

virtue of being an aesthetic judgement alone, the assertion will be inappropriate due to generating the false implicature that Josie likes the student's writing style herself (and thus inappropriate due to being in breach of KNA-Nec). Interestingly enough, though, what happens in this particular case of aesthetic judgement is that Josie cannot even properly cancel the implicature, due to the institutional requirements which specifically ask for Josie's own aesthetic judgement on the matter.

Notice, however, that this, again, fails to speak against KNA-Suff. The institution of writing recommendation letters is so designed as to involve the writer's aesthetic judgements, if any, because it is her reputation that's at stake. Josie's addressee wants to know what Josie, the author of the letter, thinks about the student's writing style. Had Josie testified to something not involving an aesthetic judgement in her letter—say, the fact that Mitchell is a student representative the faculty's committee for gender issues—isolated second-hand knowledge would have been just fine.

To see that non-cancellability is due to institutional norms stepping in, rather than to the epistemic norm we are interested in, notice the difference with testifying in court. In these cases, even testimony based on second-hand knowledge about non-aesthetic matters of fact will be problematic— and, conversely, the implicature will be non-cancellable—, due to the fact that this is just how the institution is designed to work.

**Objection 3** Lackey considers a possible appeal to institutional norms stepping in (crediting it to Sandy Goldberg), but she argues that “assertions involving isolated second-hand knowledge are not epistemically problematic because various institutions say that they are wrong; rather, the institutions say that they are wrong because such assertions are epistemically problematic” (Lackey 2011, p. 274). In line with Lackey, Carter and Gordon (2011) also argue that “‘passing-the-buck’ of criticism to the violation of some social role will only lead to having the buck passed right back to the epistemic shortcomings of the asserter who occupies such a role. This is because [...] the relevant order of explanation is backwards” (2011, p. 624).

*Reply* Notice, first, that this paper does not explain the impropriety of the target assertions in terms of institutional norms, but the uncancellability of the generated implicature.

That being said, I trust that Lackey is right on the order of explanation here. Notice, however, that this suggests a quantitative picture again. Plausibly enough, we designed the institutions in line with the stakes usually implied by their target concern. When the institution is in charge with informing you that you have cancer, its representatives should better be sure about it before proceeding. Journalism students are taught to corroborate information from at least three sources before publishing a piece of news, given the large scale impact it might have. In the case of writing recommendation letters, too, both the reputation of the writer and the student's career are at stake.

In contrast, isolated testimonial knowledge from an average source is surely pretty fine for the purpose of assertion in many low stakes environments, like, say, companies providing cleaning services. I doubt that any such service provider would have to double check before telling me that my house has been cleaned, rather than just trusting the word of her employee.

So it looks as if, again, we are just faced with a quantitative issue here; that is, the reliability of the source being in line with the stakes. If that is the case, if Lackey's argument eventually boils down to a quantitative objection, her case is open to the same worries as Brown's.

**Objection 4** Last but not least, [Lackey \(2013\)](#) addresses the worry that the norms being broken in the cases she puts forth might not be genuinely epistemic to begin with. She writes:

It should be emphasized that it is clear that the problem with the agents in the above cases is that it is not *epistemically* appropriate for them to flat-out assert that  $p$  [...]. One reason this is clear is that the criticism of the agents concerns the *grounds* for their assertions [...] ([2013](#), p. 38).

*Reply* Notice, though, that what this paragraph reveals is that Lackey too stands by an incarnation of Brown's ESP. Lackey takes it that if legitimate criticism concerns the epistemic grounds for an assertion, then it concerns epistemic appropriateness. Recall, however, that we have already seen that, just because a norm  $N$  regulates the epistemic support needed for proper assertion it need not follow that  $N$  is an epistemic norm, that is, a norm regulating the epistemic support needed for *epistemically* proper assertion. By the plausible assumption that legitimate criticism signals norm violation, it follows that just because legitimate criticism targets the epistemic grounds for an assertion, it need not be the case that it signals epistemic norm violation, and thus it need not be the case that it speaks about epistemic inappropriateness.

## 4 Conclusion

This paper has argued that, given some fairly plausible assumptions regarding the characteristic epistemic purpose associated with the practice of assertion, knowledge is enough for this speech act's epistemic propriety.

In order to defend the view, I have argued that Brown's quantitative worries regarding the amount of epistemic support needed for proper assertion in high-stakes contexts need not concern the epistemic norm of assertion itself. The variation in quantity of warrant needed for propriety can be explained in terms of other, more stringent norms stepping in and overriding it—like prudential, social or moral norms. We should have expected this to be the case to begin with: proper assertion need not mean epistemically proper assertion.

I have also provided a quantitative explanation of Jennifer Lackey's cases. Lackey thinks that isolated second-hand knowledge will not always warrant assertion. I have argued that in her 'expert testimony' cases, isolated second-hand knowledge from a very reliable source warrants assertion, which suggests that what is at play is quantity (related to the high stakes of the featured context) rather than quality of support. I have then looked at Lackey's cases involving aesthetic judgements and argued that they afford a straightforward Gricean explanation, and thus pose no problem for the sufficiency claim we are interested in.

Furthermore, I have also addressed Lackey's doubts with regard to the comprehensibility of KNA-Suff as such, by putting forth a fairly straightforward way to distinguish



between the requirements of the epistemic norm of assertion and those of other norms with epistemic content stepping in and modifying the all-things-considered propriety of the speech act.

**Acknowledgments** Many thanks to Chris Kelp, Harmen Ghijsen and Jan Heylen for all the help with this paper and to Chris Kelp's 'Knowledge First Virtue Epistemology' project for financing the research leading to its completion.

## References

- Benton, M. (2014). Expert opinion and second-hand knowledge. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 81, 549–566. doi:[10.1111/phpr.12109](https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12109).
- Brown, J. (2010). Knowledge and assertion. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXXXI(3), 549–566.
- Carter, A. J., & Gordon, E. C. (2011). Norms of assertion: The quantity and quality of epistemic support. *Philosophia*, 39, 615–635.
- De Rose, K. (2002). Assertion, knowledge and context. *Philosophical Review*, 111, 167–203.
- Fricke, E. (2012). Stating and insinuating. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary*, 86(1), 61–94.
- Grice, P. (1989). *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hawthorne, J. (2004). *Knowledge and lotteries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kelp, C. (2015). Assertion: A Function-First Account. Unpublished manuscript.
- Lackey, J. (2011). Assertion and isolated second hand knowledge. In J. A. Brown (Ed.), *Assertion* (pp. 251–275). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lackey, J. (2013). Deficient testimonial knowledge. In T. Henning & D. P. Schweikard (Eds.), *Knowledge, virtue and action: Essays on putting epistemic virtues to work* (pp. 30–53). New York: Routledge.
- Lackey, J. (2014). Assertion and expertise. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1–9. doi:[10.1111/phpr.12130](https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12130).
- McGlynn, A. (2014). *Knowledge first?*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Reynolds, S. (2002). Testimony, knowledge, and epistemic goals. *Philosophical Studies*, 110, 139–161.
- Simion, M. (2015). Assertion, Contextualism and Epistemic Goals. Unpublished manuscript.
- Williamson, T. (2000). *Knowledge and its limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.