



The Knowledge Account of Assertion and the Epistemic Version of Moore's Paradox

Franck Lihoreau

► To cite this version:

Franck Lihoreau. The Knowledge Account of Assertion and the Epistemic Version of Moore's Paradox. 2006. halshs-00113478v1

HAL Id: halshs-00113478

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00113478v1>

Preprint submitted on 13 Nov 2006 (v1), last revised 4 Apr 2007 (v3)

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

THIS IS AN EARLY DRAFT: PLEASE, DO NOT QUOTE

The knowledge account of assertion and the epistemic version of Moore's paradox

FRANCK LIHOREAU

Although they endorse slightly different versions of the “knowledge account of assertion”, Williamson (2000) and DeRose (2002) both agree that it can help us deal with the “knowledge version of Moore's paradox”. My purpose in this paper is not to deny this. It is to argue that there is a better way to put the knowledge account of assertion to use to solve the paradox.

There is obviously something incongruous in asserting a conjunction of the form ‘ p but I don't know that p ’. For instance, an assertion of ‘Dogs bark, but I don't know that they do’ (Moore 1962, 277) *seems* contradictory. Yet, the contradiction does not seem to be located at the level of what is expressed by the assertion itself: after all, p could be true without my knowing that it is. Let's call the incongruity to be explained the “knowledge version of Moore's paradox”, to contrast it with the better known “belief version of Moore's paradox”, which simply substitutes ‘believe’ for ‘know’ in the assertion. Moore's own diagnosis of the paradox is that “by asserting p positively you *imply*, though you don't assert, that you know that p ” (Moore 1962, 277), and this “implication” contradicts what's expressed by asserting the second conjunct, viz. that you don't know that p . But a precise explanation of how asserting p “implies” knowing that p is needed in order to solve the paradox.

Some think that such an explanation must proceed from taking into consideration the question what it means for someone “to be in a good enough position to assert” a proposition. According to Williamson this simply means “to know” the proposition in question. He thus puts forth what he calls the “knowledge rule”: “one must: assert P only if one knows that P ” (Williamson 2000, 243). This rule, which is reminiscent of Gazdar (1979)'s revised maxim of Quality “Say only that which you know”, is meant to

provide the key to the knowledge version of Moore's paradox, since asserting ' p but I don't know that p ' requires the fulfilment of contradictory conditions, as Williamson explains:

What is wrong can easily be understood on the hypothesis that only knowledge warrants assertion. For then to have warrant to assert the conjunction ' A and I don't know A ' is to know that A and one does not know A . But one cannot know that A and one does not know A . One knows the conjunction only if one knows each conjunct, and therefore knows that A (the first conjunct); yet one knows the conjunction only if it is true, so only if each conjunct is true, so only if one does not know that A (the second conjunct); thus the assumption that one knows the conjunction that A and one does not know that A yields a contradiction. Given that only knowledge warrants assertion, one therefore cannot have warrant to assert ' A and I don't know A ' (Williamson 2000, 253).

DeRose (2002) agrees with Williamson that the ability of a knowledge account of assertion to explain away the paradox is a powerful motivation for accepting it. But he opts for an amended version of the knowledge rule, which he borrows from authors like Unger (1975) and Slote (1979), and which he thinks to be more in phase with Moore's own diagnosis of the paradox. In DeRose's hands, the knowledge rule becomes: "when one asserts that P , one represents it as being the case that one knows that P " (DeRose 2002, 179), given a rather intuitive and unquestioned notion of what it is *to represent* oneself as knowing. According to this amended version of the knowledge rule, the incongruity behind the paradox is explained as follows:

When one asserts the first half of Moore's conjunction, one is representing it as being the case that one knows that dogs bark. Consequently, when one goes on to say in the second half of the sentence that one does *not* know that dogs bark, one is saying something inconsistent with what one represented as being the case in asserting the first half. (...) The conjunction asserted is itself perfectly consistent, but in trying to assert it, one gets involved in a contradiction between one thing that one asserts, and

another thing that one represents as being the case
(DeRose 2002, p. 181).

Now, whether we think, with Williamson, that the initial version of the knowledge rule subsumes its amended version, or think, with DeRose, that both versions are two sides of the same coin, we can see that Williamson's as well as DeRose's account both satisfy a crucial constraint on any attempt to solve the paradox. For such an attempt must offer an explanation of the apparent contradiction there is in asserting a conjunction of the form '*p* but I don't now that *p*', *provided that the contradiction is not located at the level of what is asserted* (for we can think of cases in which both conjuncts are true at the same time).

On Williamson's account, the contradiction in question is localised as follows. For an assertion of '*p* but I don't know that *p*' by speaker *S* to be *warranted*, it must be the case that:

(α) She knows that *p*,

by the knowledge rule *plus* the distribution of knowledge over conjunction (if it is known that φ and ψ , then it is known that φ and it is known that ψ). But for an assertion of '*p* but I don't know that *p*' by *S* to be *true*, it must be the case that:

(β) She doesn't know that *p*,

by the truth rule for knowledge (if it is known that φ , then φ) *plus* the elimination rule for conjunction (from φ and ψ , one may infer φ). This leads us to a contradiction, viz. a contradiction between required conditions (α) and (β) with respect to *S*'s assertion.

On DeRose's account, the contradiction in question is localised as follows. By asserting '*p* but I don't know that *p*', speaker *S* represents it as being the case that:

(α') She knows that *p*,

by the amended knowledge rule *plus* the distribution of knowledge over conjunction. But for *S*'s assertion to be true, it must be the case that:

(β') She doesn't know that *p*,

by the truth rule for knowledge *plus* the rule of elimination for conjunction. Once again, we get a contradiction between required conditions (α') and (β') with respect to *S*'s assertion.

Thus, both accounts satisfy the above mentioned constraint: the contradiction looked for must not be located at the level of the asserted conjunction but at another level. But on both accounts, the terms that are supposed to be in contradiction are not of the same category: on Williamson's account, the contradiction is between what it takes for the assertion of the conjunction to be *warranted* and what it takes for the asserted conjunction to be *true*; on DeRose's account, it is a contradiction between what the speaker who asserts the conjunction represents it as being the case, and what must be the case for her assertion to be true. The contradictory terms would thus be of two different categories.

My conjecture is that if the knowledge account of assertion is to help us deal with the knowledge version of Moore's paradox, the contradiction it allows us to put forward must be between terms of the same category. For on the one hand, Williamson's and DeRose's respective explanations presuppose that the warranted assertability conditions and the truth conditions of a proposition can very well be different; but then, why wouldn't they contradict each other *without* generating such an impression of incongruity¹? On the other hand, just as there surely is a contradiction between a true and a false assertion of a proposition, it is quite natural to think that there can be a contradiction between what is warrantably and what is unwarrantably asserted, or between what one rightly and what one wrongly represents it as being the case; but why would there be a contradiction between what is *warrantably* asserted and what is *truthfully* asserted, or between *what is asserted* as being the case and *what one represents it as being the case*.

In other words, if the contradiction is to be localised between things of different categories, as on Williamson and DeRose's accounts of the paradox, then why wouldn't this contradiction be even more mysterious (in need of elucidation) than the initial impression of contradiction which one experiences when one considers an assertion of '*p* but I don't know that *p*'?

¹ Cases of irony are widespread examples of contradiction between "what is said" and "what is communicated", or alternatively between what the speaker asserts and what he represents it as being the case. Of course, the conjunction involved in the knowledge version of Moore's paradox is not at all a case of irony. But the fact that there can be an unproblematic contradiction between "what is said" and "what is communicated" seems to underline a partial deficiency in DeRose and Williamson's analyses.

These remarks are accentuated by the fact that the knowledge account of assertion, whether in Williamson's or in DeRose's version, can help us explain what's so incongruous with such an assertion, but in a very different way from Williamson's and DeRose's. Indeed, it allows us to derive a contradiction from the assertion, but a contradiction which holds between terms of the same category.

Suppose speaker S asserts ' p but I don't know that p ', and let us see what we can do with Williamson's knowledge rule. According to this rule, S 's assertion is warranted only if:

- (i) S knows *that p and that she doesn't know that p* .

If knowledge distributes over conjunction, we can draw the conclusion that her assertion is warranted only if :

- (ii) She knows *that p and*
- (iii) She knows *that she doesn't know that p* .

But if knowledge implies truth, then from (ii), we can infer that

- (ii') She doesn't know that p .

This leads us to a contradiction at the only level of what is required for S 's assertion to be warranted, one between the requirement that (i) S knows that p and the further requirement that (ii') S doesn't know that p . We thus have an explanation of what is wrong with asserting ' p but I don't know that p '.

Now, let us see what we can do with DeRose's amended knowledge rule. According to it, from S 's assertion, we can infer that S represents it as being the case that she knows *that p and that she doesn't know that p* . From this, and if knowledge distributes over conjunction, we can draw the conclusion that:

- (a) S represents it as being the case that she knows that p , and that
- (b) S represents it as being the case that she knows that she doesn't know that p .

But now, from (b) and if knowledge implies truth, we can infer that:

- (b') S represents it as being the case that she doesn't know that p .

Once again, we get a contradiction, since by asserting ' p but I don't know that p ', (a) S represents it as being the case that she knows

that p , and (b') she represents it as being the case that she doesn't know that p . To be more precise, it is a contradiction located at the only level of what S represents it as being the case when she asserts ' p but I don't know that p '. Here again, we have an explanation of what's wrong with such an assertion.

These two explanations are to be preferred to their respective counterparts found in Williamson's and DeRose's accounts. For they explain the incongruity of Moore's epistemic assertion as being generated by a genuine contradiction between terms of the same category, located at the same level, that is, respectively, as a contradiction at the level of what it takes for an assertion of the conjunction to be warranted, and as a contradiction at the level of what the speaker represents it as being the case by asserting the conjunction.

Morality: the knowledge account of assertion does help us deal with the knowledge version of Moore's paradox, but not the way in which Williamson or DeRose intend to put it to use; there's a better way. This is not an objection to the knowledge account, but on the contrary, an enhancement of the motivation for its acceptance.

Archives Henri Poincaré

CNRS SHS UMR7117

Nancy, 54000, France

Franck.Liboreau@univ-nancy2.fr

References

DeRose, K. 2002. Assertion, knowledge, and context. *Philosophical Review* 111: 167-203.

Gazdar, G. 1979. *Pragmatics : implicature, presupposition, and logical form*. New York: Academic Press.

Moore, G. E. 1962. *Commonplace Book : 1919-1953*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Slote, M. A. 1979. Assertion and belief. In J. Dancy (ed.), *Papers on language and logic*. Keele: Keele University Library.

Unger, P. 1975. *Ignorance : a case for scepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williamson, T. 2000. *Knowledge and its limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.