The Knowledge Account of Assertion and Moore's Paradox about Knowledge

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Abstract

Although they endorse different versions of the so-called "knowledge account of assertion", Williamson [8] and DeRose [1] both agree that it can help us account for "Moore's paradox about knowledge". My purpose in this paper is not to deny this. It is to argue that when it gets to explaining the paradox, DeRose's version seems to fare better than Williamson's in one respect: contrary to the latter, the former leads to two conflicting ways of accounting for the very same phenomenon, namely for the contradiction that purportedly underlies the paradox.

1

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' [4, p. 277] *seems* contradictory. Yet, the contradiction does not seem to be between terms located at the level of what is expressed by the assertion itself. For after all, P could be true without my knowing that it is: dogs may bark without my knowing that they do.

Let us call the incongruity to be explained "Moo-re's paradox about knowledge", to contrast it with the better known "belief version of Moore's paradox', which simply substitutes 'believe' for 'know' in the asserted conjunction.

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" [*idem*], 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 P and of how this may lead to a contradiction is needed in order to solve the paradox.

2

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, "to be in a good enough position to assert" a proposition 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 [8, p. 243].

This rule, which is reminiscent of Gazdar [2]'s revised maxim of Quality—viz. "Say only that which you know"—, is meant to provide the key to Moore's paradox about knowledge, since asserting 'P but I don't know that P' requires the fulfilment of conflicting 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'. [8, p. 253]

In other words, on Williamson's account, the contradiction in question is localized as follows. For an assertion by speaker S of 'P but I don't know that P' to be *warranted*, it must be the case that:

$$\text{She knows that } P, \tag{1}$$

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 by the same speaker of 'P but I don't know that P' to be *true*, it must be the case that:

$$\text{She doesn't know that } P, \tag{2}$$

by the truth rule for knowledge (whenever it is known that ϕ, it is the case that 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 (1)—a required condition for making a *warranted* assertion—and (2)—a required condition for making a *truthful* assertion.

3

DeRose [1] agrees with Williamson that the ability of a knowledge account of assertion to explain 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 [7] and Slote [5], 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 [1, p. 179],

leaving rather unquestioned the pseudo-intuitive 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. [1, p. 181]

In other words, on DeRose's account, the contradiction in question is localized as follows. By asserting 'P but I don't know that P', speaker S represents it as being the case that:

$$\text{She knows that } P, \tag{3}$$

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:

$$\text{She doesn't know that } P, \tag{4}$$

by the truth rule for knowledge *plus* the rule of elimination for conjunction. Once again, we get a contradiction, this time between (3)—*what's represented as being the case* when making an assertion—and (4)—*what must be the case* for the assertion to be true.

4

Now, whether we think, with Williamson, that his version of the knowledge rule subsumes DeRose's amended version of it, or think, with DeRose, that both versions are just two sides of the same coin, we can see that Williamson's as well as DeRose's account do not make the contradiction behind Moore's paradox one between terms located at the level of the asserted conjunction.

In fact, for both accounts, the terms that are taken to be in contradiction are not of the same "category". For Williamson, 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*. For DeRose, it is a contradiction between what the speaker who asserts the conjunction *represents as being the case*, and *what must be the case* for her assertion to be true.

This idea that the terms in contradiction are of two different categories may turn out to be troublesome, though. Perhaps not for all proponents of a knowledge account of assertion. But it may for someone like Williamson, I think. For besides enabling us to treat the contradiction behind the paradox as one between terms of *different* categories, Williamson's version of the account also enables us to treat that very same contradiction as one 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:

$$S \text{ knows that } P \textit{ and she doesn't know that } P. \tag{5}$$

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

$$\text{She knows that } P, \tag{6}$$

and:

$$\text{She knows that } \textit{she doesn't know that } P. \tag{7}$$

But now, if knowledge implies truth, then from (7), we can infer that:

$$\text{She doesn't know that } P. \tag{8}$$

This leads us to a contradiction located at the only level of what is required for S's assertion to be warranted, one between the requirement that (6) she knows that P, and the further requirement that (8) she doesn't know that P. We thus have an explanation of what is wrong with asserting 'P but I don't know that P'.

So it seems that Williamson's version of the knowledge account of assertion leads to two very different explanations for the same phenomenon, namely the one mentioned in section 2 and the one just touched upon.

This is where the trouble lies, because the two explanations are not just different, they are conflicting explanations for the same phenomenon: on the one hand, the contradiction behind Moore's paradox is viewed as one between terms of different categories—viz. between a requirement for making a warranted assertion and one for making a truthful assertion—, whereas on the other hand, it is between terms of the same category—viz. between two different requirements for making a warranted assertion. And these are two conflicting ways of viewing Moore's paradox about knowledge.

Let us call this objection to Williamson's version of the knowledge account of assertion the "objection from supernumerary explanation".

5

Now, is DeRose's version of the knowledge account of assertion subject to a similar objection? If it were, the objection would look like this.

From S's assertion, DeRose's amended knowledge rule, and knowledge distribution over conjunction, we would infer that:

$$S \text{ represents it as being the case that } \textit{she knows that } P \tag{9}$$

and that:

$$S \text{ represents it as being the case that } \textit{she knows that she doesn't know that } P. \tag{10}$$

But from (10) and the truth rule for knowledge, we would also infer that:

$$S \text{ represents it as being the case that } \textit{she doesn't know that } P, \tag{11}$$

whereby we would get a contradiction, since by asserting 'P but I do not know that P', S would represent it as being the case that she knows that P (9), and she would represent it as being the case that she does not know that P (11). So, just like Williamson's, DeRose's version of the knowledge account of assertion would lead to two conflicting explanations for the same phenomenon: one involving a contradiction between terms of different categories—viz. between what the speaker represents it as being the case and what must be the case for her assertion to be true—, another one involving a contradiction between terms of the same category—viz. between things the speaker represents as being the case. That would be the intended objection to DeRose's version of the knowledge account of assertion.

However, I am not sure that the objection could work, because the step from (10) to (11) does not seem to me to be a valid one. At first glance, for it to be valid, it would have to be the case that for any ϕ and ψ such that ϕ (necessarily) implies ψ, if one represents it as being the case that ϕ, then one also represents it as being the case that ψ. Were this condition to hold in general—i.e. for any ϕ and ψ—, it would ensure that the appropriate notion of representation is closed under the (necessary) implication from one's knowledge of ϕ to the truth of ϕ—i.e. the truth rule for knowledge—in particular, and more particularly under the (necessary) implication from one's knowledge that one lacks knowledge of P to one's lack of knowledge that P. Nevertheless, that condition seems to hold neither in general nor in particular.

DeRose does not spell out the details of what he means by "representing oneself as being so-and-so" or by "representing it as being the case that this-or-that". However, *prima facie* it seems that the appropriate notion of representation need not be closed under (necessary) implication in general. For instance, one may represent it as being the case that *the star one observed last evening was Phosphorus* without one's representing it as being the case that *the star in question was Hesperus*; and one may represent it as being the case that *there is water in the surroundings* without representing it as being the case that *there is H_2O in the same surroundings*.

But while examples of this kind surely show that one's representation need not be closed under all (necessary) implications, that does not mean that one's representation is never closed under any (necessary) implications. In particular, that does not mean that one's representation is not closed under the implication involved in the step from (10) to (11).

For after all, there is a difference between with the implication involved in the step from (10) to (11) and the ones involved in the Venus and H_2O examples. In the latter case, it is fairly uncontroversial from the start that even if one represents it as being the case that the respective antecedent is true, one *may* very well *not (be able to)* represent it as being the case that the respective consequent is true. If a subject fails to represent it as being the case that the star was Hesperus/that there is water around her while she represents it as being the case that it was Phosphorus/that there is H_2O around her, there is no harm done to her rationality: it is just that she lacks information about an identity between two terms which can only be learnt *a posteriori*, so that her ignorance does not affect her logical competence in that case. By contrast, the implication involved in the step from (10) to (11) has a different status. It is usually taken to be an instance of a logical truth about knowledge, one that is built into our very concept of knowledge, namely the truth rule for knowledge. And as such, not being "informed" about it must bear, of course, on one's rationality and logical competence. So, the aforementioned examples can be suspected of not being relevant to establishing the illegitimacy of the step from (10) to (11).

To establish it, what is needed, and all that is needed, is to show that one's representation need not be closed under implications of the relevant kind, viz. implications that are instances of logical truths such that not being "informed" about their truths would surely affect one's logical competence. Well, it is not difficult to find implications of that kind under which one's representation need not be closed.

Consider, for instance, the implication from *Jones owns a Ford* to *Either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona*[1]; or take the implication from *One's fuses blew* to *If one's fuses did not blow, then all one's electrical appliances failed simultaneously*[2]. In both cases, one may come to represent it as being the case that the respective antecedent is true—e.g. because one could see that Jones

[1]This example of implication, of course, is borrowed from Gettier [3].
[2]This example of implication is inspired by [6].

was driving a Ford earlier that day, because one could see that one's neighbours still had their lights on—, and yet never come to represent it as being the case that the respective consequent is true—e.g. because it would never occur to one that there could be a relevant connexion between Jones' owning a Ford and Brown's being in Barcelona, because it would never occur to one's mind that all one's electrical appliances could fail simultaneously. The implications involved in these two examples are instances of standard non-epistemic logical truths, just as that involved in the step from (10) to (11) is an instance of an epistemic logical truth about knowledge, and yet one's representation need not be closed under such implications.

According to me, this is strong evidence that one's representation need not be closed under the truth rule for knowledge, because we may presume that if representational closure does not hold for non-epistemic logical truths, then it does not hold for epistemic logical truths either, since epistemic logic, at least in the classical—normal modal logical—approach, is an extension of standard non-epistemic logic. As a consequence, it is also evidence that the step from (10) to (11) would not be legitimate.

Thus, there are reasons to think that the objection from supernumerary explanation that holds against Williamson's version of the knowledge account of assertion does not seem to hold against DeRose's version of it.

7

The lesson to be drawn from all this is the following: when considering the merits of the knowledge account of assertion with respect to Moore's paradox about knowledge, DeRose's version of the account seems to fare better than Williamson's, in that the former does not seem to fall prey to the objection from supernumerary explanation: it does not seem to allow, as the latter does, for two conflicting explanations for the same phenomenon.

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