

KNOWLEDGEABLE ASSERTION IN THE IMAGE OF KNOWLEDGEABLE BELIEF

*Nick Hughes, UCD
Forthcoming in Inquiry*

§I. Edapsers

Imagine a community – we’ll call them Edapsers – who are just like us in every respect except one. Edapsers have some funny ideas about spades. They have a factory in which they produce spades, amongst other things, but while they categorise most of the objects to come off the spade production line as spades (and call them ‘spades’) just as we do, things are different when it comes to the 347th object to come off the line each day. Despite being no different to all of the other objects coming off the line, they don’t think of 347’ers as spades. They take them to be a different kind of thing, belonging to a different category, and they call them ‘edaps’. They can see that there are similarities between spades and edaps, and they use them in the same way – for digging holes and moving earth – but they insist that edaps are not spades. This isn’t merely a matter of arbitrarily referring to certain spades by a different name. If you put two spades on a table in front of an Edapser and ask them how many *kinds of things* there are on the table, they will answer ‘one’. But if you put a spade and an edap on the table and ask the same question, they will answer ‘two’. Edaps, as far as they are concerned, belong to a *different category of things* to spades.

This is strange, but it gets stranger still. The Edapsers factory also produces footballs. But whilst they categorise most of the objects to come off the football production line as footballs (and call them ‘footballs’), things are different when it comes to the 743rd object to come off the line each day. Despite being no different to all of the other objects coming off the line, they don’t think of 743’ers as footballs. Instead they call them ‘llabtoofs’, and, bizarrely, they categorise them as spades. They can see that there are differences between llabtoofs and other

spades, and they use them in different ways – llabtoofs are kicked around for sport, like footballs, rather than used for digging holes – but they insist that llabtoofs are spades. If you put a llabtoof and a spade on a table in front of an Edapsler and ask them how many kinds of things are on the table, they will answer ‘one’, rather than ‘two’. As far as they are concerned, llabtoofs and spades, despite their differences, belong to one and the same category of things.

There seems to be something very off about this part of Edapsers culture. They are, it seems, getting things wrong somehow. But how? Well, their categorisation of the world is gerrymandered and unnatural (or at least, this particular part of it is). Really edaps *are just spades*, even if they are called by a different name. And really llabtoofs *are just footballs*, even if they too are called by a different name. Each production line only has one kind of thing coming off it, not two, and Edapsers ought to acknowledge this fact. When they do so their ontology will become more natural and more unified. Moreover, benefits will follow. For one thing, some of their explanations will become more simple. As it stands, if you ask an Edapsler how to dig a hole, they will tell you to grab a spade or an edap, thrust it into the ground, remove some earth, and repeat until you have a hole. But they will caution you not to use certain kinds of spades – namely llabtoofs. Once we persuade them that edaps are just spades, and that llabtoofs are not spades, but footballs, they will be able to give you a more simple explanation: grab a spade, thrust it into the ground, remove some earth, and repeat. Their normative theory will also be simplified. The norm for digging holes won’t be: use a spade or an edap. Instead it will simply be: use a spade. And the norm for playing football won’t be: use a football or a llabtoof. Instead it will simply be: use a football. Insofar as simplicity is an explanatory and theoretical virtue, making these changes will be a good thing for Edapsers.

What I want to argue in this article is that, as things stand, we philosophers (or some of us, at least) are a bit like Edapsers when it comes to knowledge. We currently recognise some speech-acts as *assertions*, and we recognise some of these assertions as being *knowledgeable*.¹ According to this ontology, there exists a category of things that we can call ‘knowledgeable assertions’, and someone has made a knowledgeable assertion that P just in case *they have asserted that P whilst having a belief that P that is an item of knowledge* (i.e. whilst knowing that P).² The category of knowledgeable assertions, thus understood, has been thought by

¹ Not everyone accepts this. Cappelen (2011) argues that what philosophers have tried to capture by the term ‘assertion’ fails to pick out an act-type that we engage in, and is of no theoretical interest. Cappelen’s arguments pose a challenge to those who theorise with ‘assertion’, but I won’t take it up here.

² Hereafter I will, for the sake of style, talk about people asserting that P whilst knowing or not knowing that P, rather than whilst having a belief that P that is an item of knowledge. But it will be worth keeping in mind that (rather obviously) this is what knowing that P amounts to.

many to play an important role in epistemological theorising, in particular when it comes to the epistemic norms of assertion and to the transmission of knowledge via testimony. Yet there is a class of assertions – I’ll present a paradigmatic example shortly – which this ontology does not recognise as being knowledgeable, despite the fact that they are *in no important respect* different from knowledgeable assertions, and despite the fact that they find a natural home in knowledge-centric theorising about norms of assertion and the transmission of knowledge via testimony. We treat these assertions in the same way that Edapsers treat edaps. Moreover, there is another class of assertions – again, I’ll present a paradigmatic example shortly – which this ontology classifies as being knowledgeable despite the fact that there *is* an important respect in which they are different from (other) knowledgeable assertions,³ and despite the fact that they do *not* find a natural home in knowledge-centric theorising about norms of assertion and the transmission of knowledge via testimony. We treat these assertions in the same way that Edapsers treat llabtoofs. This classificatory practice of ours, I’ll argue, is flawed in more or less the same way that Edapsers classificatory practices are flawed. The first class of assertions are knowledgeable in the same way that an edap is a spade, and the second class are not knowledgeable in the same way that a llabtoof isn’t a spade. We ought to recognise these facts, and once we do various benefits will follow. In particular, our theories of the epistemic norms of assertion and of knowledge transmission via testimony will be improved.⁴

The plan is this. In §2 I’ll say something about the nature of knowledgeable belief. In §3 I’ll present two ways of thinking about knowledgeable assertion in the image of knowledgeable belief – the ‘orthodox view’ and the ‘isomorphic view’. In §4 and §5 I’ll argue that we should adopt the isomorphic view over the orthodox view. In §6 I’ll show what benefits emerge from doing so.

³ What are these ‘important respects’ that I’m talking about? I’ll provide a full answer in §5, but in the meantime, here’s a teaser trailer: the first class of assertions have epistemic credentials *identical* to those possessed by the class of assertions we currently recognise as knowledgeable, and the second class have *weaker* epistemic credentials than those possessed by the class of assertions we currently recognise as knowledgeable.

⁴ As you’ll probably have already figured out, I’m presupposing a kind of Lewisian realism about metaphysical structure, according to which categorisations can do a better or worse job of ‘carving nature at the joints’. Not everyone accepts this. Some metametaphysicians – Hirsch (1993) and Putnam (1987), for instance – maintain that this presupposition is false, and instead argue that all possible categorisations, no matter how gerrymandered they might seem, are on a par, at least when it comes to representing the way that the world in fact is. Those who are sympathetic to this view will likely be unimpressed by most of what I’ll say in this article. I can’t defend my metametaphysical presuppositions here – that task is far beyond the scope of this paper. See Sider (2011) for an extensive defense of them.

§II. Knowledgeable Belief

To get going we need to think a bit about the nature of knowledge. If you ask a group of epistemologists what properties a belief must have in order to be an item of knowledge, they'll very likely offer you some combination of the following:

Truth: In order to be an item of knowledge, a belief must be true.⁵

Safety: In order to be an item of knowledge, a belief must be safe. That is to say: it must not be the case that the believer could have easily falsely believed that P, or instead believed a relevantly similar false proposition P*.

Sensitivity: In order to be an item of knowledge, a belief must be sensitive. That is to say: it must not be the case that the believer would have believed that P had P been false.

Evidential Support: In order to be an item of knowledge, a belief must be supported by the evidence.

Undefeated: In order to be an item of knowledge, a belief must not be defeated. That is to say (roughly): it must not have any epistemic weaknesses which preclude it from being knowledge.

Rational: In order to be an item of knowledge, a belief must be epistemically rational.

Epistemologists are an argumentative bunch, so it should come as no surprise that they won't all agree which of these are necessary and/or sufficient. Pretty much everyone will agree about *Truth* and *Undefeated*, I take it, but beyond this there won't be a consensus. Some will claim that *Safety* is necessary and/or sufficient, but *Sensitivity* is not. Others will claim the opposite. Some will say that both are necessary and/or sufficient, and some might even say that neither is necessary. *Evidential Support* will have its supporters and detractors, as will *Rational*. There will also be those who maintain that a non-circular account of knowledge in terms of individually necessary and jointly sufficient properties will never be forthcoming, and others who disagree. Some will say that the same properties are necessary and sufficient in every context, others may maintain that the relevant properties change across contexts. It would be nice to have consensus, but the lack

⁵ To be clear, the claim here is that the *content* of the belief – that is, the proposition that is believed – must be true. The claim is not that belief *qua states* can somehow be true or false.

of one won't matter for my purposes. What's important is that whatever properties a belief must have to be knowledge, it's surely going to be some combination of these. Of that much we can be fairly confident.

§III. Knowledgeable Assertion

Just as a belief can be an item of knowledge, so too can an assertion be knowledgeably made. What properties must an *assertion* have in order to be knowledgeable? We've already seen the answer that the current orthodoxy gives us: an assertion that P is knowledgeable just in case the person who asserts that P knows that P:

The Orthodox View: An assertion that P is knowledgeable just in case the asserter knows that P (i.e. has a knowledgeable belief that P)

But there is an interesting alternative to the orthodox view, which we may wish to adopt. Notice – and this will be important for what follows – that just as a belief can have all the properties listed above, *so too can an assertion*. That is to say, an assertion that P can be true, safe, sensitive, evidentially supported, undefeated, rational, and so on. One line to take, then, is that an assertion is knowledgeable just when it has some combination of these properties:

Truth:* In order to be knowledgeable, an assertion that P must be true.⁶

Safety:* In order to be knowledgeable, an assertion must be safe. That is to say: it must not be the case that the asserter could have easily falsely asserted that P (or instead asserted a relevantly similar false proposition P*)

Sensitivity:* In order to be knowledgeable, an assertion must be sensitive. That is to say: it must not be the case that the asserter would have asserted that P had P been false.

Evidential Support:* In order to be knowledgeable, an assertion must be supported by the evidence.

⁶ As with belief, the claim here is that in order for an assertion to be knowledgeable, the *content* of the assertion – the proposition that is asserted – must be true. The claim is not that assertions *qua actions* can be true or false.

*Undefeated**: In order to be knowledgeable, an assertion must not be defeated. That is to say (roughly): it must not have any epistemic weaknesses which preclude it from being knowledgeable.

*Rational**: In order to be knowledgeable, an assertion must be epistemically rational

Which of these will be necessary and/or sufficient? As with knowledgeable belief, it will be a matter of controversy. But an obviously appealing proposal is that whatever the necessary and sufficient properties for knowledgeable assertion are, they are the same as they are for knowledgeable belief.

On this alternative picture, a belief counts as knowledge just when it has a certain set of properties from the first list above, and an assertion counts as knowledgeable just when it has the same set of corresponding properties from the second list. Call this ‘the isomorphic view’:

The Isomorphic View: An assertion is knowledgeable just in case it has the same properties as a knowledgeable belief.

The isomorphic view and the orthodox view may seem at first glance to merely be notational variants on one another, but they’re not. The extension of the set of knowledgeable assertions differs depending on what view one adopts, and as we’ll see later, this will turn out to be important. To see how the two views differ, consider first the following case, due to Jennifer Lackey (2008):

Creationist Teacher: Stella is a devoutly Christian fourth-grade teacher, and her religious beliefs are grounded in a deep faith that she has had since she was a very young child. Part of this faith includes a belief in the truth of creationism and, accordingly, a belief in the falsity of evolutionary theory. Despite this, Stella fully recognizes that there is an overwhelming amount of scientific evidence against both of these beliefs. Indeed, she readily admits that she is not basing her own commitment to creationism on evidence at all but, rather, on the personal faith that she has in an all-powerful Creator. Because of this, Stella does not think that religion is something that she should impose on those around her, and this is especially true with respect to her fourth-grade students. Instead, she regards her duty as a teacher to include presenting material that is best supported by the available evidence, which clearly includes the truth of evolutionary theory. As a result, while presenting her biology lesson today, Stella asserts to her students, “Modern day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*” even though she doesn’t believe this proposition.

Since to know that P is to have a knowledgeable belief that P, and Stella doesn't even believe that P (= Modern day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*) in the first place, it follows, according to the orthodox view, that she hasn't made a knowledgeable assertion.⁷

But according to the isomorphic view, Stella *has* made a knowledgeable assertion. P is true, so her assertion satisfies *Truth**. Stella could not have easily falsely asserted that P or instead asserted a relevantly similar false proposition P*, so it satisfies *Safety**.⁸ She would not have asserted that P had P been false, so it satisfies *Sensitivity**. The evidence supports P, so it satisfies *Evidential Support**. Her assertion has no epistemic weaknesses, so it satisfies *Undefeated**, and it is an epistemically rational assertion, so it satisfies *Rational**. In other words, her assertion has all the properties that a belief might need to have in order to be knowledgeable. Thus, according to the isomorphic view Stella has made a knowledgeable assertion.

That's one way in which the two views differ. I also think there is another (though for reasons I'll explain in a second, this will be slightly more controversial). Consider this case:

Kafka Reader: Asha knows that Franz Kafka is the author of *The Trial*. Stella does not know this. Asha asserts that Kafka is the author to Stella. However, she could very easily have asserted that Thomas Mann is the author. This is because her decision to assert that Kafka is the author was dependent on a random number generator that she just consulted generating a prime number. Had it generated a non-prime, Asha would have lied to Stella and asserted that Mann is the author instead.

The orthodox view delivers the verdict that Asha has knowledgeably asserted that P (= Kafka is the author of *The Trial*). Why? Because she knows that P, and according to the orthodox view to make a knowledgeable assertion is just to assert something one knows to be true. However, according to the isomorphic view – at least as I prefer to think of it – Asha has not made a knowledgeable assertion. This is because her assertion does not satisfy *Safety**: the number generator could

⁷ There are a few philosophers who deny that knowledge entails belief (for instance, Black 1971 and Myers-Schulz & Schwitzgebel 2013). I think they're mistaken, but I won't address their arguments here. To do so would take us too far afield.

⁸ Audi (2006) argues that Stella's assertion is unsafe on the grounds that we may assume that she will teach *anything* the school requires of her, irrespective of whether she believes it to be true or false. But even if that's true, it doesn't follow that her assertion is not safe. That conclusion only follows on the assumption that the school could easily have instructed her to teach falsehoods, and we can simply stipulate that this isn't the case here.

easily have generated a non-prime, so she could have easily falsely asserted P* (= Mann is the author of *The Trial*) instead of P.

I said that it will be more controversial whether the isomorphic view and the orthodox view differ here. That's because the difference depends on the assumption that knowledgeable belief requires safety. Whilst this view is very widely held, there are some detractors, and they will presumably deny my claim that by the lights of the isomorphic view, Asha's assertion that P is not knowledgeable. If a belief need not be safe to be knowledge, and an assertion is knowledgeable just in case it has the same properties as a knowledgeable belief, then the fact that Asha's assertion isn't safe need not preclude it from being knowledgeable. That said, like most epistemologists I accept the safety condition, and I'll assume it here. If you're a safety sceptic, you're welcome to disregard the *Kafka Reader* case in what follows and focus exclusively on the *Creationist Teacher* case.

§IV. The Isomorphic View vs. The Orthodox View

I think we should discard the orthodox view and adopt the isomorphic view instead. I'll say why shortly (a trailer: it concerns naturalness and theoretical utility), but before I do I want to say a bit about what this claim amounts to.

What I'm proposing is that we revise our ontology of knowledgeable assertions. My view is that we philosophers have hitherto not recognised the *kind* that is knowledgeable assertion for what it really is (and always has been). We have mistakenly adopted the orthodox view that a person can only knowledgeably assert that P if they themselves know that P, and that whenever a person who knows that P asserts that P, they have made a knowledgeable assertion. To rectify these errors we should revise our ontology – recategorise what is and isn't a knowledgeable assertion – in a particular way.

What way? It will be useful here to introduce the notion of what we can call a 'paradigmatically knowledgeable assertion'. This is just your ordinary, uncontroversially knowledgeable, assertion by someone who knows that P, and where there's no funny business going on. *N is the author of this article* – that's a paradigmatically knowledgeable assertion. I believe it, I know it, and I wouldn't have asserted it had it been false. Had Asha not relied on the random number generator in coming to assert that Kafka is the author of *The Trial*, but instead asserted it because she knows it, then that would also have been a paradigmatically knowledgeable assertion.

What the isomorphic view claims is that assertions like Stella's in *Creationist Teacher* belong in the same onto-epistemic category as paradigmatically knowledgeable assertions – the category of knowledgeable assertions – despite the fact that Stella does not herself believe or know that P. When we put a paradigmatically knowledgeable assertion like *N is the author of this article* alongside an assertion like Stella's in *Creationist Teacher*, we have two instances of *one* kind of thing, not two kinds of things, as the orthodox view has it. This is just as true as, when we put an edaps alongside a spade, we have two instances of one kind of thing, rather than two different kinds of things.

By contrast, when we put assertions like Asha's in *Kafka Reader* alongside paradigmatically knowledgeable assertions we do *not* have two instances of *one* kind of thing, contrary to what the orthodox view says. Rather we have *two different* kinds of things: one non-knowledgeable assertion and one knowledgeable assertion. This is just as true as, when we put a llabtoof alongside a spade, we have two different kinds of things, rather than two instances of one kind of thing.

What does it mean to *discard* the orthodox view and *replace* it with the isomorphic view? What does the activity of discarding and replacing amount to?

We can draw on a comparison with the metaphysics of marriage here. Until recently the accepted category of marriage in the UK did not recognise marriages between two people of the same sex. Changes in social attitudes and the law led to this categorisation being discarded and a new categorisation, in which it is possible for two people of the same sex to be married, being adopted. When the old categorisation was discarded and replaced with the new one, people's thought, talk, theorising, and action, changed. They stopped treating the marriage relation as only being between two people of different sexes and instead began to treat it as being a relation that can obtain between two people of the same sex. What I'm proposing is that we make a corresponding change in the way we treat knowledgeable assertions. We philosophers should stop treating it in orthodox way in our thought, talk, action, and, most importantly, *theorising*, and instead treat it in the isomorphic way.⁹

Some of my colleagues have expressed confusion about what it is that I'm proposing exactly. Insofar as philosophers recognise a category of things called knowledgeable assertions, they have suggested, it is true *by definition* that they

⁹ The analogy with marriage a useful one, but it has its limits. Prior to the change, there were no same-sex marriages. But I claim that assertions like Stella's were knowledgeable *all along* (and assertions like Asha's never were).

are those things identified by the orthodox view (i.e. they are assertions that are known to be true by those who make them). So, the thought goes, it makes no sense to think that we can revise what counts as a knowledgeable assertion, just as it perhaps makes no sense to think that we can revise, say, what counts as a triangle. A triangle *just is* a shape with three straight sides. We could, if we wanted to, use the word ‘triangle’ to refer to other things, but were we to do so, we wouldn’t have changed what counts as a triangle. Instead we would have simply posited a new category of objects, and used the word conventionally reserved for shapes with three straight sides to refer to it. What my colleagues want to know is: aren’t I doing the same thing when it comes to knowledgeable assertions?

Ultimately I don’t have any objection to this way of viewing the matter. If what I’m doing is proposing that we start theorising with a new ontological category, one which overlaps to some extent with the already recognised category of (orthodox) knowledgeable assertions, then so be it. I still think we should give up theorising with the old category and start using the new one instead. And I think so for exactly the reasons that I’ll give in the next section.¹⁰ That said, I don’t think we’re forced to take the proposal this way. English law and social practice used to have it that, by definition, a husband could not rape his wife. Progressives pushed for the recognition of non-consensual marital intercourse as rape. When they succeeded, what happens wasn’t that a new category of acts was introduced and an old one discarded. Rather, the category of rape-acts was seen for what it always had been. I see no reason to think that the same cannot happen with the category of knowledgeable assertions.¹¹

§V. Motivating The Isomorphic View

So that’s the claim. But why should you accept it? To answer this question it will be useful to compare the isomorphic view to a similarly revisionist proposal put forward by Clark and Chalmers (1998) in the philosophy of mind. Clark and Chalmers argue that a person can be properly counted as believing a proposition even though the proposition is not stored in their brain and they only have access to it through the use of an ‘external’ device like a diary, Filofax, or smartphone.

¹⁰ Michael Hannon and Elmar Unnsteinsson have suggested to me that philosophers haven’t, up until now, used or recognised a category of *knowledgeable assertions* in the first place (just assertions, some of which are known and some of which aren’t). In that case there’s nothing already existing to be revised, and instead I’m just straightforwardly introducing a new theoretical category. If that’s how you also prefer to see it, I’m fine with that too.

¹¹ What I’m proposing sometimes gets called ‘conceptual engineering’. For some recent examples of this kind of activity, see Haslanger (2012), Scharp (2013), and Eklund (2017). For a framework for thinking about what conceptual engineering is, see Cappelen (forthcoming).

This is what they call the ‘extended mind’ hypothesis. To illustrate the idea, they describe the case of a man, Otto, who has Alzheimer’s disease. In order to compensate for his ailing memory, Otto relies on a notebook. When he learns new information he writes it down in the notebook, and when he needs to retrieve some information he looks it up. Otto decides to go to a new exhibition at MoMA. He cannot recall the location of the museum using his ‘internal’ memory, so he consults the notebook, which says it’s on 53rd Street. He proceeds to walk to 53rd Street and go into the museum. Clark and Chalmers compare Otto to Inga, who has a normally functioning internal memory from which she retrieves her belief that MoMa is on 53rd Street in order to get to the museum. Clark and Chalmers argue that “In all *important* respects, Otto’s case is similar to a standard case of (non-occurrent) belief” (their italics) and that “By using the ‘belief’ notion in a wider way, it picks out something more akin to a natural kind. The notion becomes deeper and more unified, and is more useful in explanation” (1998: 14).

I don’t know whether Clark and Chalmers are right about belief, but I think that these kinds of considerations – particularly those of important similarities, naturalness, and usefulness in explanation – speak in favour of discarding the orthodox view and adopting the isomorphic view in its place. Let me explain why.

The only difference between Stella in *Creationist Teacher* and a paradigmatically knowledgeable asserter is that Stella doesn’t believe the proposition she asserts. In *every* other respect her assertion is the same as a paradigmatically knowledgeable assertion. There are two points to attend to here. Firstly, Stella’s assertion has the same epistemic *effect* as a paradigmatically knowledgeable assertion: it puts her audience in a position to know that P. Secondly, it has all the same properties, absent belief, that an assertion must have in order to qualify as paradigmatically knowledgeable – as I have already pointed out it is true, safe, sensitive, evidentially supported, undefeated, rational, and so on. But the fact that she doesn’t believe that P is irrelevant to the epistemic standing of Stella’s assertion. Just as the fact that one believes that P doesn’t in itself give that belief some kind of positive epistemic standing,¹² so too Stella’s assertion would have no greater epistemic standing were she to believe what she asserts. In other words, her assertion has exactly the same *epistemic credentials* as a paradigmatically knowledgeable assertion. Epistemic credentials are, I suggest, the *important* factors when it comes to assessing the appropriate epistemic categorisation of assertions. Since it doesn’t make the slightest bit of difference to the epistemic credentials of Stella’s assertion, the fact that she doesn’t believe that P ought, then, to be of no consequence to the assertion’s categorisation. It’s irrelevant in the same way that the fact that a particular Gorilla – ‘Patchy’ – has a patch of hair missing from her back is irrelevant to the categorisation of her as a Gorilla, the

¹² C.f. ‘epistemic conservatives’ such as Lycan (1988) and Harman (1986)

fact that something is the 347th thing to come off a production line is irrelevant to the classification of it as a spade or an edap, and the fact that two people are of the same sex is irrelevant to the classification of their union as a marriage.¹³

Given that Stella's assertion is no different in any important respect from a paradigmatically knowledgeable assertion, it would be a kind of chauvinism to deny it the status of being knowledgeable. A kind of chauvinism similar to that which Edapsers display towards the 347th objects to come off the spade production line, which the UK used to display towards relationships between people in same sex unions, and which, if Clark and Chalmers are right, we have hitherto displayed towards beliefs like Otto's in our philosophy of mind. There is no good reason to privilege paradigmatically knowledgeable assertions over assertions like Stella's, no good reason to privilege non-347^{ers} over 347^{ers}, no good reason to privilege different-sex relationships, and – again, if Clark and Chalmers are correct – no good reason to privilege beliefs like Inga's over beliefs like Otto's. The natural thing to do, in each case, is to recognise one kind of thing, rather than two.

What about the *Kafka Reader* case? Assuming, as I am, that knowledgeable belief requires safety, the isomorphic view tells us that Asha's assertion that Kafka is the author of *The Trial* is non-knowledgeable. Again, this looks like the right result. Since her assertion is unsafe, it lacks a vital epistemic credential common to all paradigmatically knowledgeable assertions. Moreover, unlike with paradigmatically knowledgeable assertions and Stella's assertion in *Creationist Teacher*, Stella plausibly *cannot* come to know that Kafka is the author of *The Trial* on the basis of Asha's assertion any more than she could were Asha to have asserted it having no clue herself as to whether or not it was true. These *are* important factors for assessing the epistemic standing of an assertion, and so its epistemic categorisation, and they warrant placing Asha's assertion in a different

¹³ That said, I of course don't deny that Stella's situation in *Creationist Teacher* is different in *some* respects from that of a paradigmatically knowledgeable asserter. Most obviously, since she doesn't believe that P, Stella doesn't take herself to be making a knowledgeable assertion, doesn't take her assertion to have the epistemic credentials that it does, and doesn't take herself to be generating knowledge in her audience. But these facts should not affect our classification of her assertion, for they are features also found in some paradigmatically knowledgeable assertions. Imagine that Stella's friend Craig also asserts that Modern day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*. Craig, let's suppose, knows (and hence believes) that this is true, so his assertion is paradigmatically knowledgeable. But Craig doesn't believe that he knows it to be true. Due to a lack of confidence resulting from experiences with a particularly critical science teacher in his childhood, he has an unrealistically negative view of his knowledge of evolutionary theory – he thinks he knows less than he actually does. Since he doesn't believe that he knows that P, Craig doesn't take himself to be making a knowledgeable assertion, doesn't take his assertion to have the epistemic credentials that it does, and doesn't take himself to be generating knowledge in his audience. Yet it remains true that Craig has made a knowledgeable assertion. If these facts about Craig don't make a difference to the categorisation of his assertion as knowledgeable, there is no reason to think they should make a difference to the categorisation of Stella's assertion.

category – the category of the non-knowedgeable, in the same way that the differences between llabtoofs and spades warrants differential categorisation.

In summary, when we adopt the isomorphic view we acquire a more natural and more unified categorisation of knowedgeable assertions. That's why I think we should discard the orthodox view and replace it with the isomorphic view.

§VI. Benefits

But that's not the whole story, since as with Edapsers, and (if it is correct) the extended mind hypothesis, there are benefits to be had from adopting the isomorphic view. The major ones concern two widely endorsed theories linking knowledge and assertion:

Knowledge Norm of Assertion (KNA): S's assertion that P is epistemically proper if and only if S knows that P.

Knowledge Transmission Thesis (KTT): S can acquire knowledge that P on the basis of S*'s assertion that P if and only if S* knows that P.

Let's start with *KNA*. It's an attractive and strikingly simple theory. But if we cleave to the orthodox view, assertions like Stella's in *Creationist Teacher* and Asha's in *Kafka Reader* appear to torpedo it.

On the orthodox view Stella's assertion causes problems for the left-to-right direction of *KNA* (the conditional saying that S's assertion that P is epistemically proper *only if* S knows that P). Even though she doesn't know that P, as Lackey points out there doesn't seem to be anything untoward or epistemically improper about Stella asserting that P to her students, as there would be were she to assert that, say, the Earth is 5000 years old. But if so, the left-to-right direction of *KNA* is, it seems, false.

On the orthodox view Asha's assertion causes problems for the right-to-left direction of *KNA* (the conditional saying that S's assertion that P is epistemically proper *if* S knows that P). Even though she knows that P, there seems to be something epistemically improper about Asha's assertion that P. One's method for deciding whether to assert a true proposition P or a false proposition P* shouldn't be susceptible to the vagaries of a random number generator. So her case appears to refute the right-to-left direction of *KNA*.

According to Lackey (amongst others), Stella's case is indeed a counterexample to *KNA*. One might be tempted to say the same about Asha's case. Lackey rejects *KNA* on the grounds that it clashes with cases like Stella's and instead proposes:

Reasonable To Believe Norm of Assertion (RTBNA): S's assertion that P is epistemically proper only if (i) it is reasonable for S to believe that P, and (ii) if one asserted that P, one would assert that P at least in part because it is reasonable for one to believe that P¹⁴

But if the isomorphic view is adopted, assertions like Stella's and Asha's are no longer would-be counterexamples to *KNA*. Well, actually, that's not *quite* true. Strictly speaking they are, since the isomorphic view accepts that Stella doesn't know that P (again, knowledge entails belief) and that Asha does know that P. But the spirit of *KNA* can be accommodated with only a very minor tweak. All we need to do is to replace *KNA* with:

*KNA**: S's assertion that P is epistemically proper if and only if it is knowledgeable.

I think it's a virtue of the isomorphic view that it can accommodate *KNA* (in spirit, at least). One way in which this *would* be true is if assertions like Stella's and Asha's were the only sticking point for *KNA* (or rather, *KNA**). By adopting the isomorphic view we would rescue a simple and attractive theory in the epistemology of assertion. We would also be in a position to provide a straightforward explanation for why Stella's assertion is epistemically proper but Asha's epistemically improper, since the former, but not the latter, satisfies *KNA**. Moreover, we would make these theoretical gains at absolutely no cost, since, as I have already argued, the isomorphic view is well motivated on independent grounds.

But this may seem too optimistic. *Many* objections have been levelled against *KNA*. Replies to these objections have been offered, as have replies to the replies, and replies to the replies to the replies...and the debate rumbles on. Perhaps *KNA* (*KNA**) is correct, but I don't think we're in a position to be especially confident of that yet. How, then, is it a virtue of the isomorphic view that it saves this theory from certain kinds of would-be counterexamples and provides simple

¹⁴ I should note that assertions like Stella's aren't the *only* reason Lackey rejects *KNA* and proposes *RTBNA* in its place. She has other objections too (as, of course, do others). Nevertheless, assertions like Stella's – 'selfless assertions', as she calls them – are one of her main motivations for the rejection and replacement.

explanations in terms of this theory, if, for all we know, the theory may not even be true in the first place?

The answer lies with the role that simplicity plays in theory construction. We should prefer simple theories to complex ones, *ceteris paribus*. As a result, our methodology should be to see *how far we can get* with simple theories before resorting to more complex alternatives. Since adopting the isomorphic view allows us to ‘get further’ with *KNA* (*/KNA**), that is a reason to adopt it, irrespective of whether *KNA* (*/KNA**) ultimately turns out to be true or false. This is just good methodological practice. The opposite approach – trying to develop a theory that fits every apparent data point whilst paying no respect to simplicity – has a bad track record. The history of post-Gettier analyses of knowledge nicely illustrates the point. Early, simple, analyses of knowledge appeared to be vulnerable to would-be counterexamples. The response of many epistemologists was not to turn a critical eye to the would-be counterexamples – not, that is, to ask if they really *were* counterexamples, or merely had the appearance of being so – but rather to take them at face value and instead offer more and more complicated analyses, each of which avoided some of the would-be counterexamples, but quickly fell prey to new ones. The programme became degenerate.¹⁵

Something similar is, I think, happening today in the literature on epistemic norms of assertion; increasingly complex and baroque proposals emerge every few months – Lackey’s *RTBNA* is only one amongst many¹⁶ – in an effort to avoid the perceived problems with previous accounts, only to be found ‘defective’ themselves. A different approach should be adopted – one that places a greater emphasis on simplicity. We should stick to simple theories provided that adequate explanations can be provided for recalcitrant data. *KNA* is a simple and attractive theory, and *KNA** handles some of the recalcitrant data whilst retaining what is simple and attractive about *KNA*. This is a reason to give it some credence. We don’t need to first know if the rest of the recalcitrant data facing *KNA* can be adequately accounted for to justify taking a step in this direction.¹⁷

¹⁵ Williamson (2016) makes this point.

¹⁶ For instance, McKinnon (2015) proposes the following:

SRN: One may assert that P only if: (i) One has supportive reasons for P, (ii) The relevant conventional and pragmatic elements of the context are present, and (iii) One asserts that P at least in part because the assertion that P satisfies (i) and (ii).

¹⁷ Cameron Boulton has suggested to me that simplicity considerations will only favour *KNA** over rival proposals like Lackey’s insofar as knowledge itself is simple. I agree, but I don’t think this is a problem for my view, since I think that the very same considerations as those just marshalled should lead us to adopt a simple theory of knowledge. My own view is that knowledge is simply safe belief – and so that an assertion is knowledgeable just in case it is safely made – but I won’t argue for that here. Incidentally, a safety norm of assertion, according to which one’s assertion that P is epistemically proper only if it is safe (i.e. only if it satisfies *Safety**), is proposed by Pelling (2013).

What about *KTT*? All the same points apply.

Just as with *KNA*, if we cleave to the orthodox view assertions like Stella's in *Creationist Teacher* and Asha's in *Kafka Reader* appear to counterexample *KTT*. On the orthodox view Stella's assertion causes problems for the left-to-right direction of *KTT* (the conditional saying that S can acquire knowledge that P on the basis of S*'s assertion that P *only if* S* knows that P). This is because there is no reason to think that Stella's students cannot acquire knowledge that P is true on the basis of her assertion that P, despite the fact that Stella herself doesn't know that P. And on the orthodox view Asha's assertion causes problems for the right-to-left direction of *KTT* (the conditional saying that S can acquire knowledge that P on the basis of S*'s assertion *if* S* knows that P), because Stella plausibly *cannot* come to know that P on the basis of Asha's assertion, despite the fact that Asha knows that P.

In addition to taking it to counterexample *KNA*, Lackey also maintains that Stella's case is a counterexample to *KTT*. One might be tempted to say the same about Asha's case. Lackey rejects *KTT* on the grounds that it clashes with cases like Stella's and instead proposes:

Reliability of the Statement-Necessity (RSN): S can acquire knowledge that P from S*'s assertion that P only if S*'s assertion that P is reliable or otherwise truth-conducive

But, as with *KNA**, if the isomorphic view is adopted, assertions like Stella's and Asha's are no longer would-be counterexamples to *KTT*. The spirit of it can be accommodated with only a very minor tweak. We merely need to replace it with:

*KTT**: S can acquire knowledge on the basis of S*'s assertion that P if and only if S*'s assertion is knowledgeable

Again, I think it is a virtue of the isomorphic view that it can accommodate *KTT* (*KTT**), and for precisely the same reasons as with *KNA* (*KNA**). Suppose that assertions like Stella's and Asha's were the only sticking point for *KTT* (*KTT**). By adopting the isomorphic view we would rescue a simple and attractive theory in the epistemology of assertion, just as we would with *KNA* (*KNA**). Similarly, we would also be in a position to provide a straightforward explanation for why Stella's audience can acquire knowledge on the basis of her assertion but Asha's audience cannot, since the former, but not the latter, satisfies *KTT**. Moreover, we would once again achieve these theoretical gains at no cost, as the isomorphic view is already well motivated on independent grounds.

But even if that's too optimistic, the same points about simplicity and theory construction made above apply here too. Adopting the isomorphic view allows us to get further with *KTT* (*/KTT**) in the same way as it allows us to get further with *KNA* (*/KNA**). And that's a reason to adopt it, irrespective of whether it ultimately turns out to be correct.

§VII. Summing Up

The isomorphic view is more natural and more unified than the orthodox view. Moreover, it has greater theoretical utility: once we adopt it we can preserve two simple and attractive theories linking knowledge and assertion and provide straightforward explanations in terms of them. These are, I suggest, good reasons to discard the orthodox view and adopt the isomorphic view in its place.¹⁸

§IIX. References

- Audi, R. 2006. "Testimony, Credulity, and Veracity" *The Epistemology of Testimony* (eds.) Lackey, J. & Sosa, E. (Oxford: OUP)
- Black, C. 1971. "Knowledge Without Belief" *Analysis* 31 (5): 152-158
- Cappelen, H. 2011. "Against Assertion" *Assertion* (eds.) Cappelen, H. & Brown, J. (Oxford: OUP)
- Cappelen, H. forthcoming. *Fixing Language: An Essay on Conceptual Engineering* (Oxford: OUP)
- Clark, A. & Chalmers, D. 1998. "The Extended Mind" *Analysis* 58 (1): 7-19
- Eklund, M. 2017. *Choosing Normative Concepts* (Oxford: OUP)
- Harman, G. 1986. *Change in View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press)
- Haslanger, S. 2012. *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford: OUP)
- Hirsch, E. 1993. *Dividing Reality* (New York: OUP)
- Lackey, J. 2008. *Learning From Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge* (Oxford: OUP)
- Lycan, W. 1988. *Judgement and Justification* (Cambridge: CUP)
- McKinnon, R. 2015. *The Norms of Assertion: Truth, Lies, and Warrant* (Palgrave MacMillan)

¹⁸ Thanks to Elmar Unnsteinsson, Herman Cappelen, Finnur Dellsen, Matti Eklund, Michael Hannon, Cameron Boulton, Robin McKenna, Ed Nettel, and Thomas Hodgson, for comments on earlier versions of this article.

- Myers-Schulz, B. & Schwitzgebel, E. 2013. "Knowing That P Without Believing That P" *Nous* 47 (2): 371-384
- Pelling, C. 2013. "Assertion and Safety" *Synthese* 190 (17): 3777-3796
- Putnam, H. 1987. "Truth and Convention: On Davidson's Refutation of Conceptual Relativism" *dialectica* 41: 41-67
- Scharp, K. 2013. *Replacing Truth* (Oxford: OUP)
- Sider, T. 2011. *Writing the Book of the World* (Oxford: OUP)
- Williamson, T. 2016. "Abductive Philosophy" *The Philosophical Forum* 47: 263-280