

## AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO KNOWLEDGE ASSERTION AND HUMAN ACTION

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### **Executive Summary**

*Human beings engage in different activities daily, the consequences of such activities either attracts praise or blame – the judgment can be an evaluation of the rationality or morality of the action involved. It is common belief among individuals that actions – potential or actual – are often warranted on the basis of knowledge available to the agent. Hence, people ordinarily would refrain from acting in situations where they are epistemically positioned well enough to know that their action will not produce the expected result. Also, in evaluating the action of others, we apportion blames or praise based on how well positioned a subject is to the proposition that warranted their action. This attitude guides our behaviour in the possible prediction and explanation of the action of an agent. Since we are involved in the business of predicting, explaining and passing verdict on the actions of others, this paper tries to critically examine the connection that knowledge assertion might bear to action. The paper further contends that assertoric utterances are not knowledge based, and as such, people do not act because they know that their action is the thing to do – given their situation. Instead, humans act because they are convinced that their action is the thing to do – given their situation.*

**Keywords:** Action, Assertion, Conviction, Evidence, Knowledge.

### **Introduction**

Humans as social beings live in the community with others. This disposes his activities to attract praise or blame and, in some cases, morally neutral, either on the basis of the rationality for acting or morality of the action. When confronted by situations with certain moral characters, he does not engage in reflective activities – argumentation or inference – in other to arrive at the thing to do because rational agents are sensitive to

moral salience of the situations confronting them, in judging, explaining and predicting of an agent's action, the usually adopted technique is to lay emphasis on the epistemically salient features of the situation that confronts the agent. These epistemically salient features are mostly associated with the evidence that forms the agent's choice of action – these are often referred to as the background assumptions for acting.

The influence of a background assumption on an agent's choice of the thing to do varies from context to context. Just as the epistemic salient feature of a situation that confronts an agent influences their choice, the evaluator's evaluation is also influenced by these features. Thus, in recounting their actions, agents make assertions with the aim of showing that their choice is the thing to do by anyone in similar epistemic position confronted by a similar situation. This paper sets out in section 2 by looking at the nature of assertion and what necessitates it. This is important because, when confronted with a situation that demands actions, what is done is not the only option, but what the agent considered the best amongst the choices, all other factors considered. Agents justify their action by asserting that 'their action is the thing to do.' In section 3, tried to show how assertion could generate action. This is due to the connection between conviction and action. Section 4 shows that the context of an agent could influence their assertion and action. In section 5, I conclude that people do not act because they know what they assert – that their action is the right thing to do – rather they act because they are convinced that their choice is the thing to do.

### **Assertion and Knowledge**

As epistemic subjects, we make claims and counter claims by means of expression using language. These acts of expression could be by way of commands, question, recommendations, and claims. Assertion is an affirmative claim, which a subject makes about a given proposition. Views vary on what constitutes the ground for an assertion; this has resulted in the multiplication of accounts/norms of assertion by different schools of thought. One thing which almost all of these accounts of assertion have in common is that they advocate for what rule should govern an assertoric expression. For instance, they insist that:

The Knowledge Rule: Assert that *P* only if you know that *P* (Williamson 243)

Reasonableness Rule: Assert *P* only if (i) it is reasonable for one to believe *P* and (ii) one believes *P* in part because it is reasonable for one to believe *P* (Lackey, 2007)

Truth Rule: Assert *P* only if *P* is true (Weiner, 2005)

Rational Credibility Rule: One should assert only what is rationally credible to one (Douven 2006)

Belief-Expression Rule: To assert that P is to utter a sentence that P and thereby express the belief that P (Hindrik 2007).

Certainty Rule: Assert only what is certain (Stanley, 2007) etc.

Our aim in this section is to object to these accounts of assertion by focusing on the connection between assertion and action. This is because, as competent individuals, we often pass verdicts on human actions on the basis of their epistemic position to the motivation for such action, and how they should have acted given such epistemic position that they occupy. For instance, a student who comes late for an exam is blamed on the ground that he knows that the time for the exam. Hence, we assert something like this: ‘He should be here before 9am if he knows that the exam starts by 9am’, ‘it was irresponsible of him to come by 9:30am, because, he knows that the exam starts by 9am’. Also, we pass verdict like, ‘it was irresponsible of him to drive, because he does not know how to drive’.

All of these accounts of assertion are very plausible; however, they all cannot be accepted on the account of their plausibility as the rule for assertion. This is due to their weakness to satisfactorily address some challenges involving assertion and human action. To reject these rules, one has to propose a better account of what rules govern assertion.

It is not always the case that all of our properly made assertions contain truthful propositions, nor is it plausible to claim that all truthful assertions are properly assertable. For instance, asserting that X killed Z is improper if we have no evidence that correlates our assertion – nevertheless the assertion has a true proposition as the Truth Rule stipulates. Contemporary writers on the norm of assertion, contends that for an assertion to be properly made, the truth of such assertion does not satisfy the condition. Therefore, asserting a proposition on the basis of its truth is often not sufficient for the assertion to be properly made.

Some contends that the condition for proper assertion goes beyond truth, to other condition that ought to be satisfied by the assertion. One of such view dates back to Max Black in his 1952 paper titled “Saying and Disbelieving”, however, it was Williamson who gave a clearer articulation of the view – The Knowledge Rule. According to him, a proper assertion require that one assert a proposition only if they know it (243). For these theorists, an assertion will be improperly made if it expresses the asserter’s belief, because for the knowledge rule account of assertion, a subject should only assert what they know. For them, an assertion of futuristic phenomena cannot be properly made since it violates the rule which tells us to assert only what one knows. The knowledge rule of assertion therefore puts too much of constraint to assertion, thereby limiting what we can appropriately assert about a proposition. For

example, a police officer who following available evidence asserts that: ‘the thing to do is to charge a suspect with a particular crime’ will be violating the norm of assertion which the knowledge rule holds. This is because, evidence for them is not enough for an assertion to be properly made, and the evidence which calls for such assertion is still short of knowledge. Although, the police officer’s claim is true, and he believes it, but he does not know it by any standard. The knowledge rule faults such assertion, however, our intuition tells us that the officer does not violate any rule of assertion, and that his assertion is in fact a proper one.

The knowledge rule of assertion is a plausible account of assertion, however, its implications are too damaging to be ignored. Take for instance; as Douven (2006) pointed out, if the knowledge rule is accepted, then academic progress is in danger. History has shown that academic assertion is upturned over time by better views, this implies that those assertions are not build on the norm of knowledge – as is advocated by the knowledge rule. In academic writings, we engage in assertion about things we do not know. For example, we do not know that our claims in this paper are true, yet we have asserted them – and our assertion seems to be properly made. This shows that knowledge is bad standard for academic writing. If we have to wait until we have knowledge before we could make academic assertion, then, academic assertion may go into extinction – this because, assertion massively out numbers knowledge in academic endeavour. This fact reminds us that for an assertion to be properly made, the subject need not know what he asserts.

Good evidence, even if not evidence beyond any reasonable doubt, or even if not enough for knowledge, suffices for assertion (Maitra and Weatherston 114). In similar note, a subject will be making a proper assertion if such assertion is rationally credible to the subject. This does not imply that every assertion that is rationally credible to the asserting subject is properly made. In this section, we have laboured to show that none of these rules of assertion – by itself alone – proposed by different philosophers adequately satisfy the condition for proper assertion.

It is wrong to insist that there is a hard-end rule that governs assertoric utterances. As we have seen there are cases where we make proper assertion on the basis of the truth of its proposition, while in other cases our assertion are necessitated as a response to evidence, yet in another case, when a speaker makes an assertion, he represents himself as believing what he asserts, and in yet another case, our assertions are knowledge based. What this tells us is that assertion is a complex activity that cannot be governed by one norm as these theorists erroneously hold. The norm of assertion is a complex whole consisting of diverse rule for its appropriateness. Evidence points to the fact that subjects cannot assert what they lack conviction for. A subject who after reading the weather log asserts that, ‘it will rain tomorrow’ cannot be condemned as making an

improper assertion. Although the subject does not know that it will rain, he is convinced that it will. By making such assertion, the subjects represent his self as being convinced that it will rain, and not as being sure that it will.

### **Assertion, Conviction and Human Action**

Most times when humans act, we realize that their choice of action was warranted by the condition surrounding them. This condition also determines if we are to apportion blames or praise to the subject for acting in such manner – given the knowledge available to them about the possible line of action to take. This is mostly the case when we are discussing about how the subject should have acted. This is prominent in answering the main question of the link which knowledge bears to assertion and action. As DeRose rightly points out, “certainly is true that our evaluations of whether or not subjects (ourselves or others) ‘know’ propositions to be the case are often made in connection with, and often in support of evaluation we make about those agents’ action (and potential actions) – including their verbal actions of flat-out asserting things” (241). The verdict which we pass on such actions could be by way of evaluation of the rationality behind the subject’s choice of action, or an evaluation of the moral status of the action.

In passing verdict on a subject’s action, we make reference to the subject’s epistemic position with respect to a proposition. This attitude guides our efforts to predict or explain how a subject acted, should have acted, or is expected to act in a given situation. In a normal circumstance, it is utterly appropriate for a speaker to say something like this: ‘No, I doubt if Emeka will be late. He knows that the interview is scheduled for 8am, as such, he must have left home earlier.’ Or: ‘Emeka probably will be late. He does not know that the time for the interview is 8am, so he will likely leave home late. When we use ‘know in this way, it reveals that most of our evaluation, explanation and prediction of human action are linked to their knowledge about a certain proposition. Imagine another situation involving a crime. Peter – a police officer – is on the phone with his colleague John – a police officer interrogating I crime suspect – their conversation goes like this:

Peter: have you gotten any useful information about the robbery from the suspect?

John: none yet, but very evidence points to him as one of the cuprites, but he has refused to make any self-indicting statement.

Peter: do u think it is right to charge him for the crime since we do not know if he actually carried out the operation?

John: I think the right thing to do is to charge him for the crime with the evidence available to us.

John's response in this conversation seems to show that his assertion is based on the conviction that the suspect is responsible for the crime. However, his resolution to charge the suspect for the crime is not just an act of conviction; rather, it is due to his knowledge of what it takes for evidence to be indicting. If we are right, then there is symmetry between knowledge, conviction and action. On the other hand, if John hadn't the knowledge, his conclusion would possibly be:

John: I think we don't have to charge him yet, maybe he will open up soon, however, at the moment we have to work harder at cracking this case.

If John had no knowledge of what evidence are sufficient to hold a suspect responsible for a crime, then, he would not have been in a strong enough epistemic position to recommend that the suspect be charged to court for the crime. Although, he – John – may have the conviction that, the suspect actually committed the said crime. Implied here, is the fact that conviction alone is not enough for an action to be carried out; rather, it is a proper combination of one's knowledge and conviction that calls for the shot.

The kind of knowledge that warrants an act to be carried out is neither, knowledge of what constitutes an action nor is it knowledge of the consequence of the action – good or bad – instead; it is knowledge denoting a kind of confident true belief by the subject. Conviction is necessary here because people don't just take actions indiscriminately as such. According to Eboh, human action presupposes a kind of consciousness which denotes that it is free deliberate act (4). This shows that it is not every action that proceeds from man that qualifies as human action. We contend that for human action to occur there must be conviction in the subject before they go on to execute the action. It is this conviction that assures the subject of the appropriateness of their action given their situation. Take for instance the case of John the police officer, the assertion:

John: I think the right thing to do is to charge him for the crime with the evidence available to us.

This is a conviction resulting from rational knowledge. Here, John has plethora of alternatives, but given his conviction on what's the best option, he asserted the above. His potential action therefore, is not one of will, but knowledge warranted conviction. As is the case with many assertions, the appropriateness of this assertion is not guaranteed by its truth. By John's assertion, he accuses someone of rubbery, and you can't properly make such accusations without compelling reasons, even if they turn out to be true. However, his first response – that, the available evidence points towards the suspect – appears to be properly assertable.

You can't be right by simply guessing that charging the suspect is the right thing to do, because by merely guessing that charging the suspect is the right thing to do, then you

are morally and rationally wrong to charge the suspect. If John's first assertion is correct, and he is convinced of it, his belief must be based on rational conviction. Given the conviction, one can appropriately guess that charging the suspect would be what to choose if, you reflect on the conviction that results from the evidence and the moral significance of the choices available to you.

We are not going to try to provide a complete defence of The Evidence Conviction Rule here. However, we take the rule to be very plausible. And we are hopeful that it can adequately explain a lot of phenomena that serves as motivation for our assertions and action which other accounts of assertion struggle with.

Most times when we act, it is assumed that, the knowledge of the possible consequence of our action is the basis for our acting. However, this is not the case; we can always object that since the agent does not know the potential outcome of such action, then, it cannot be the basis for acting. As Maitra and Weatherson pointed out, "to act as if *p* is true is to build *p* into one's plans, or to take *p* for granted when acting. This, note, is not the same as using *p* as a basis for action... To act as if *p* is to take certain conditional obligations or permissions you have—in particular, those obligations or permissions that are conditional on *p*—to be actual obligations or permissions" (114-5). When a car owner buys car insurance, he acts as if buying car insurance is the thing to do. The fact that buying car insurance is the thing to do, does not imply that it is the basis for his action because, he does not know that his car will be involved in an accident. However, he knows about accident, and the nature of accident generally, and his car, and its vulnerability to accident.

To assert a proposition as the right thing to do within a circumstance implies that an agent in such circumstance must act in that way if their action is to attract praise. Therefore, assertion is equivalent to action – not in deeds. That is, acting as if *X* is what to do (in your circumstances) is simply to do *X* (in those circumstances). And in doing *X*, you're acting as if *X* is what to do (in your circumstances).

In explaining the link between assertion and action, Maitra and Weatherson propose a rule which they termed action rule. According to this rule, an agent is to assert a proposition only if acting on account of the truth of that proposition is the right thing to do (114). Here we will adopt this rule to show how a subject's epistemic position to a proposition can be pivotal in giving us insight into the rationality behind their actions, and how we could use this to evaluate, explain and predict action. For any claim about what is to be done, it is important that subjects satisfy the action rule if we want to get the right result. For instance, employing the action rule, one can adequately explain why the assertion – about what to do – of both John the police officer, and Emeka the applicant is appropriately based given their circumstance. If in those circumstances,

they act otherwise, we would be justified to blame them – since their actions are contrary to the right thing to do.

The action rule offers a good explanation for why it's often improper to act in situations of lack of conviction with high probability. For example, we may want to look at the possible choice of action which, an agent would take in situations of uncertainties, with high counter probability. According to Maitra and Weatherston, in most cases acting on a sort of proposition is irrational when we have probabilistic evidence for that proposition (116). Although in this kind of case, previous evidence may point towards a particular direction, however, this does not give enough conviction to act in that way. Also, this does not make for enough ground to rightly assert that acting in that way is the best thing to do in such a case.

As we have seen, there is a link between knowledge, assertion and human action, however, the link between knowledge assertion and action is mediated. The link is mediated by conviction resulting from evidence. There is a direct link between assertion and conviction – assertion results from conviction, and it is this conviction that calls the shot for action.

### **Human Action and Context**

Supposing that our claim – that it is conviction resulting from evidence that calls the shot for action – is true, at what point therefore does an agent arrive at the conviction that acting in this or that way is the thing to do. A look at the potential actions that an agent might be confronted with, in connection with which some evaluators might take interest in evaluating them. We notice that, there are multiple possible practical situations relative to which evaluators might conceivably evaluate our potential and actual actions. Evaluators do not limit their evaluation of a subject's assertion – that this or that action is the thing to do – to the subject's practical situation, but goes further to evaluate if the subject's epistemic position is adequate to generate the necessary conviction for such potential action.

DeRose rightly pointed out that the standard our evaluators will employ for such evaluation depends on what potential practical situation they happen to be considering (274). Some theorists would contend that, the subject is either epistemically positioned to have the necessary conviction or they are not. For them, given the subject's epistemic position, they are to act in this or that way. In fact, a similarly positioned subject is expected to act in that same way. For these theorists, the potential practical situation which the evaluators are considering does not play any role in determining if, they will judge the subject to act in a particular way. For them, irrespective of the situation under consideration, an agent's action is to be evaluated, explained and predicted in a

particular way given the evidence available to the agent. But our intuition tells us that this is not how actions are evaluated. According to DeRose, “depending on just what potential cause of action speakers are discussing, they will apply different standards... even where they have the same information about what [a subject] actual practical situation is” (274).

Upon reflection, we realize that the context of an evaluation plays a pivotal role in explaining and predicting the rationality and morality of an actual or potential action. In talking about what a subject does or does not actually have convincing evidence, in connection with passing verdict about an actual or potential action, different groups of evaluators tend to apply varying standards to the subject, based on the practical situation the evaluators are interested in – although, all the groups of evaluators have exactly the same information which formed the subject’s conviction within the situation that he – the agent – faces. Evaluators therefore are bound to apply standards that are appropriate to situation which the agent faces. These different standards which evaluators employ does not require the agent to have different information about the actual or potential action, before such variation in standard will be accepted as the thing to do. It is basically the practical interest of the evaluators that determines the standard to be employed in evaluating, explaining and predicting an agent’s action.

## **Conclusion**

One may object that the norm of assertions should be the knowledge rule which states that: one should assert only what they know. Although the knowledge rule of assertion enjoys a wide acceptance among epistemologists, however, it is not always the case that proper assertion equals knowledge. Oftentimes, proper assertion can outnumber knowledge within a context – in this kind of context, action can properly outnumber knowledge. If we adopt the knowledge rule of assertion, as Maitra and Weatherson rightly pointed out, “It would slow down learning dramatically if people didn’t engage in various projects that really only make sense if some hypothesis is true. So, academics will study in archives, conduct experiments, write papers, to mention a few., and do so, on the basis of reasons they no more know than we know the truth of the speculative claims of this paper and this is all to the good; the alternative is a vastly inferior alternative to academia as we know it. So, in some fields, action requires much less than knowledge. Happily, in those fields, assertion also requires much less than knowledge” (100). On the other hand, the evidence conviction rule which this paper proposes, and the action rule of Maitra and Weatherson which we adopt provides a satisfactory alternative to this challenge. In fact, using the evidence conviction and actions rule, we observe that proper assertion equals evidence conviction, and action equals assertion. Our effort her has been that of showing the kind of connection which exist between knowledge, assertion and human action. This does not amount to a

rejection of the role which factors like bias, fear, faith etc play in determining human action.

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