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Lenient Accounts of Warranted Assertability

E. J. Coffman

Introduction

Some assertions are epistemically defective. True story: Shortly after moving to South Bend, Malou mentioned that she was surprised to see so many gulls around town. I thought for a moment, then replied: “You know, those birds fly all the way over here from Lake Michigan.” Unfortunately, knowledgeable Mark overheard my assertion, and promptly said: “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Our gulls aren’t from Lake Michigan; they live on the St. Joseph River.” Mark had just pointed out that my assertion about the gulls was epistemically defective.

Say that you warrantedly assert \( P \) iff your assertion that \( P \) is epistemically proper. A theory of warranted assertability tells us when you have warrant to assert \( P \)—i.e., when you’re positioned to warrantedly assert \( P \). Strict accounts of warranted assertability entail that you have warrant to assert \( P \) only if you know \( P \). Lenient accounts allow that you could have warrant to assert things you don’t know.

Much of the recent literature on warranted assertability focuses on the following strict account:

**Knowledge Account (KA):** \( S \) has warrant to assert \( P \) iff \( S \) knows \( P \).

Many philosophers have jointly built an impressive prima facie case for KA.\(^1\) Some have argued that KA explains the main data for theories of warranted assertability better than do certain lenient rivals.\(^2\) Others have argued that certain

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\(^2\) See (e.g.) Williamson (2000), Reynolds (2002), and Sutton (2005, 2007).
lenient accounts explain the relevant data better than KA does. While many of the contributors to this body of work reject KA, most are preoccupied with it.

This chapter focuses on the lenient approach to warranted assertability, arguing that one neglected lenient account competes closely with its more prominent rivals. After some preliminary remarks, I'll introduce three lenient accounts of warranted assertability (section 2.1): the Rational Credibility Account (RCA), the Justified Belief Account (JBA), and the Would-Be Knowledge Account (WKA). I'll also highlight a way in which RCA and JBA seem superior to WKA. WKA will then make a comeback in section 2.2, where I'll argue that it turns out to be as good a theory of warranted assertability as—and is perhaps even better confirmed than—RCA and JBA. To foreshadow: WKA does as well as its rivals on the three most prominent data for theories of warranted assertability (those Timothy Williamson collects in chapter 11 of Knowledge and its Limits). But only WKA can accommodate a certain underappreciated fourth datum (which I defend in what follows)—viz., that if you’re an unreliable believer on the question whether P, you lack warrant to assert P (alternatively: you have warrant to assert P only if we can count on you to believe truly as to whether P). Finally, after providing some reason to think WKA compares favorably with its main strict rival (KA), I will in section 2.3 answer three pressing objections to section 2.2’s pro-WKA argument.

I begin the promised preliminary remarks by emphasizing that “warrantedly asserts” and “has warrant to assert” are here used as technical expressions. The definitions given should make clear that my main concern is epistemically proper assertion. This is the main notion at play in Williamson’s influential work on assertion. According to Williamson (2000: 252),

[the knowledge account subsumes the Unger-Slote thesis [i.e., that when one asserts P, one represents oneself as knowing P] under more general principles. In doing anything for which authority is required (for example, issuing orders), one represents oneself as

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4 Another prominent lenient account is what Williamson (2000: 261–3) calls the RBK Account, on which (roughly) S has warrant to assert P iff it’s reasonable for S to believe S knows P. I won’t have room in the main text to discuss RBK, but I will address it briefly here and in footnote 32. As will be clear once RCA, JBA, and WKA are introduced in the next section, one significant disadvantage of RBK is that it puts a prima facie implausible higher-order constraint on warranted assertability (cf. Brown [2008: 102]): S has warrant to assert P only if it’s reasonable for S to believe an “epistemic” proposition to the effect that S knows P. For starters, it seems plausible that relatively immature or unsophisticated subjects who lack good reason to believe the relevant “epistemic” proposition (perhaps simply because they haven’t yet acquired the concept of knowledge) may nevertheless have warrant to assert such things as (e.g.) that they exist. In footnote 32, I’ll argue in more detail that RBK lags behind the three other lenient accounts explored here.
having the authority to do it. To have the (epistemic) authority to assert \( p \) is to know \( p \). The Unger-Slote thesis follows.

Here, Williamson makes clear that KA concerns the notion of *epistemic propriety*—as opposed to (say) *moral* or *prudential* or *conversational* or even *general* (“all-things-considered”) propriety.\(^5\) Reflecting on certain well-chosen pairs of assertions helps fix us on the notion of epistemically proper assertion. Consider, e.g., the following pair of assertions that DeRose contrasts in his (1996: 568):

In some lottery situations, the probability that your ticket is a loser can get very close to 1. Suppose, for instance, that yours is one of 20 million tickets, only one of which is a winner. Still, it seems that . . . [y]ou are in no position to flat-out assert that your ticket is a loser. ‘It’s probably a loser’, ‘It’s all but certain that it’s a loser’, or even, ‘It’s quite certain that it’s a loser’ seem quite alright to say, but, it seems, you are in no position to declare simply, ‘It’s a loser’. […] Things are quite different when you report the results of last night’s basketball game. Suppose your only source is your morning newspaper, which did not carry a story about the game, but simply listed the score, ‘Knicks 83, at Bulls 95’, under ‘Yesterday’s Results’. Now, it doesn’t happen very frequently, but, as we all should suspect, newspapers do misreport scores from time to time. […] Still, when asked, ‘Did the Bulls win yesterday?’, ‘Probably’ and ‘In all likelihood’ seem quite unnecessary. ‘Yes, they did’, seems just fine.

The “score” and “lottery” assertions that DeRose here contrasts together serve to illustrate the difference between (respectively) *epistemically proper* and *epistemically improper* assertion.

A related clarificatory point: an assertion’s being somehow improper due to its lacking a particular epistemic feature is not the same thing as an assertion’s being *epistemically improper*. In other words, an epistemically justified assertion may be unjustified in some other way—e.g., conversationally or morally or prudentially—because the assertion lacks a particular epistemic feature. Similarly, a morally justified act may be improper in some other way—e.g., prudentially—because it lacks a particular moral feature.\(^6\) In this context, an unwarranted assertion is an *epistemically improper* one—as opposed to (say) one that’s *conversationally* or *morally* or *prudentially* improper because it lacks a certain epistemic feature.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Some parties to the debate sparked by Williamson’s work aren’t always perfectly clear on this point (cf. Kvanvig [2011]). See (e.g.) Douven (2006), Lackey (2007), and Levin (2008).

\(^6\) Suppose I know that you’ll give me a small gift if, but only if, I perform a supererogatory act at noon. At noon, I do something that violates no moral duties, though I could just as easily have performed a supererogatory act. My behavior at noon is morally appropriate. But it’s prudentially defective because it lacks a certain moral feature—viz., *being supererogatory*.

\(^7\) Some contributors to the literature on warranted assertion seem to confuse being *epistemically improper* with being somehow improper due to lack of particular epistemic features. See, e.g., Levin
Now for some motivation for this project. After distinguishing between *strict* and *lenient* accounts of warranted assertability, I noted that an impressive prima facie case can be made for one strict account in particular: KA. This raises the question whether any of the data for theories of warranted assertability conflict with KA. If so, then the main project undertaken here—that of offering a comparative evaluation of three *lenient* accounts of warranted assertability—will seem more worthwhile than it otherwise would.

Some of the data *do* conflict with KA. Among the clearest anti-KA data are certain amplified “Gettier-type” cases that seem to involve subjects warrantedly asserting propositions they don’t know (cf. Lackey [2007], Brown [2008], Kvanvig [2009]).

Consider the following case (derived from one presented by Zagzebski [1994: 71]):

**Two Viruses:** On the basis of excellent evidence, Dr. Jones believes that Mr. Smith has Virus A. Smith has all the symptoms of Virus A, which are uniquely associated with A among known viruses; a blood test shows that Smith’s antibody levels against A are extremely high; none of the evidence available to Jones conflicts with the view that Smith has A; and so on. Sure enough, Smith has Virus A. Unfortunately, just after contracting A, Smith also contracted the extremely rare and unknown Virus B. Typically, B is contracted only by those who already have Virus A; but B can stay in one’s system after A is gone—though that’s extremely unlikely. B renders A causally inert, while producing all the symptoms and antibody levels associated with A. As it happens, Smith contracted B so soon after contracting A that A never contributed to Smith’s relevant symptoms and antibody levels—all of these are caused solely by Virus B. Smith asks Jones for her diagnosis. Jones tells Smith that he has Virus A.

Jones doesn’t *know* that Smith has Virus A. Still, Jones’ assertion that Smith has Virus A seems epistemically justified. Notice, for starters, that Jones’ assertion is underwritten by a belief based on grounds that reliably indicate the truth of its content (e.g., Smith’s symptoms and antibody levels). Further, Jones’ belief is produced by properly functioning, successfully truth-aimed cognitive faculties. And Jones could successfully defend her assertion against standard challenges used to expose unwarranted assertions as such—questions and exclamations like

(2008), Brown (2010), and Lackey (2011). For further explanation, defense, and application of this charge of confusion, see my (2011a, 2011b).

* Perhaps a more prominent anti-KA datum is the thought that some *false* assertions are nevertheless warranted. I choose to discuss only “Gettierized” assertion in this connection for two reasons: (1) So far as I can tell, Gettierized assertion has received less attention than has the alleged phenomenon of warranted false assertion (for helpful discussion of the latter, see §11.5 of Williamson [2000], and §6 of Douven [2006]). (2) I think that Gettierized assertion constitutes a harder problem for KA than does warranted false assertion.
“How do you know?”, “You don’t know that”, “Why do you think that?”, and “You’ve no reason to think that”.

Reflection on cases like Two Viruses suggests the following datum for theories of warranted assertability:

**D₀**: Some Gettierized assertions are warranted.

Provided that Gettierized asserters don’t know the propositions they assert, D₀ conflicts with KA.

Now, I don’t say that KA’s incompatibility with D₀ is a decisive objection to KA. Nevertheless, this incompatibility counts against KA, prompting a more thorough investigation of the lenient approach. I devote the following to such investigation.

### 2.1 Three lenient accounts

Our first lenient account involves the concept of **rational credibility** (expressed by locutions like “P is rationally credible for S”, “It’s reasonable for S to believe P”,...). Roughly, the rational credibility relation holds between a subject, S, and a proposition, P, just when there is “epistemic support available to [S] that makes it in the actual world, as a matter of objective fact, likely that it is true that P” (Lackey [2007: 610]). More precisely, where ‘z’ names the actual world, P is **rationally credible** for S just when S has evidence such that P is objectively probable on that evidence in z (but stay tuned for an important qualification in section 2.2).⁹ Here’s our first account:

**Rational Credibility Account (RCA):** S has warrant to assert P iff P is rationally credible for S.

Proponents of versions of RCA include Igor Douven (2006) and Jennifer Lackey (2007).

Our second lenient account invokes the concept of **knowledge-level justification**: the kind of justification that “puts one in a position to know—that is,... the kind that is sufficient for knowledge in the presence of ungettiered true belief”.¹⁰ More exactly, S’s belief B is **knowledge-level justified** (hereafter, **justified**) iff S holds B in such a way that B would constitute knowledge were B true and not “Gettierized”. Here’s our second account:

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⁹ Writes Lackey: “The clause ‘in the actual world’... captures the intuition that what is of import [for rational credibility] is the connection between epistemic support and likely truth when things are working as they should” (2007: 610–11).

Justified Belief Account (JBA): S has warrant to assert P iff S justifiably believes P.


Our third and final lenient account employs two related concepts that will need discussion: that of an environment’s being misleading with respect to a particular belief, and that of a belief’s constituting would-be knowledge. Here are some examples to illustrate the first notion. Someone who’s globally deceived (think: evil demons, brain envatment,...) inhabits an environment that’s misleading with respect to most of her beliefs. In other words, if you’re a victim of global deception, then a typical belief of yours has the following feature: your environment is conducive to your believing falsehoods and avoiding truths about the belief’s subject matter—roughly, nearly all the propositions you’re disposed to believe about that subject matter are false. By contrast, while the environment in a typical Gettier-type case is misleading with respect to certain of the protagonist’s beliefs—roughly, most of the propositions the protagonist is disposed to believe about the relevant subject matter are false—such an environment is not nearly as bad as that inhabited by the globally deceived. Finally, if you’re a typical thinker, you assume that your environment is pretty friendly to most of your beliefs. In other words, you assume that a typical belief of yours has the following feature: your environment is conducive to your believing truths and avoiding falsehoods about the belief’s subject matter—roughly, most of the propositions you’re disposed to believe about the relevant subject matter are true.

Now, say that S’s belief B constitutes would-be knowledge iff B would constitute knowledge were S’s environment considerably less misleading relative to B—roughly, were S disposed to believe many more truths, and many less falsehoods, about B’s subject matter. Granted, the notion of one cognitive environment’s being considerably less misleading—or, to save a word, considerably friendlier—than another relative to a given belief falls short of maximal clarity. But we do have some grip on this notion. It’s clear that my current environment is considerably friendlier to my belief that there’s a cup on the table than is “fake cup country”.11 And it’s also clear that “fake cup country” is considerably friendlier to my cup belief than is an environment in which I’m a victim of global deception. I think we have a firm enough grip on the notion of one cognitive environment’s being considerably friendlier than another relative to a given belief to evaluate the claims involving that concept that will arise in what follows. Without further ado, then, here’s our third lenient account of warranted assertability:

11 The relevant analogue of “fake barn country”; see Goldman (1976).
Would-Be Knowledge Account (WKA): S has warrant to assert P iff S’s belief that P constitutes would-be knowledge.

Jonathan Sutton offers a brief critical discussion of a WKA-like view (he calls it the “J rule”) in his (2005, 2007).

We must carefully distinguish WKA from JBA. One good way to do so invokes the point—made by Zagzebski (1994: 66), among others—that subjects in typical Gettier-type cases suffer a stroke of bad luck prior to enjoying a stroke of good luck. The bad luck consists in inhabiting a somewhat abnormal environment—one involving (e.g.) lying colleagues, fake barns, and so on. Say that a previously Gettierized belief has been degettierzied iff the belief’s environment has become normal (i.e., is no longer relevantly abnormal). Notice that we can make a belief’s environment considerably less misleading without degettierzizing the belief: a belief whose environment has become considerably less misleading may nevertheless remain Gettierized. Consider the following fake barn case. When you form your barn belief, nine out of ten apparent barns in your region are fakes. Just after you form your belief, a benevolent demon improves your environment so that only five out of every ten apparent barns are fakes. Your environment has become considerably less misleading, but your barn belief remains Gettierized.

So, would-be knowledge is stronger than knowledge-level justification: while any case of would-be knowledge is also a case of knowledge-level justification, there can be cases of knowledge-level justification that aren’t cases of would-be knowledge. Consider a typical belief held by a victim of global deception, Vic. On the basis of a nonveridical experience as of a hand, handleless Vic believes [I (= Vic) have a hand]. Vic’s hand belief is not a case of would-be knowledge: in some of the closest worlds where Vic’s environment is considerably less misleading relative to his hand belief, the belief still doesn’t constitute knowledge. (Consider, e.g., a world where Vic is embodied while remaining massively deceived in a vat.) Vic’s hand belief does, however, qualify as knowledge-level justified: in all the close worlds where Vic’s hand belief is true and degettierzied—i.e., held in a normal environment, which will include being free from massive deception for a considerable length of time—Vic knows that he has a hand. So, while Vic’s hand belief is knowledge-level justified, it’s not an instance of would-be knowledge. Reflection on such cases reveals that would-be knowledge is a better epistemic status than knowledge-level justification: the “environmental change” required to make an instance of (mere) would-be knowledge into knowledge will be smaller than that required to make an instance of (mere) knowledge-level justified belief into knowledge. Accordingly, WKA constitutes a middle ground between JBA and KA.

12 Here and elsewhere, “[P]” abbreviates “the proposition that P”.
Our three lenient accounts are now on the table. Perhaps not surprisingly, WKA is by far the least prominent of these accounts. To my knowledge, WKA has no proponents; and the aforementioned works by Sutton are the only places something like it has been discussed in print. But it's not just obvious that WKA deserves such neglect. Indeed, I think it's pretty easy to find some initial reason to prefer WKA to its main rivals, lenient (RCA, JBA) and strict (KA). Consider the following line of thought, which was hinted at earlier and will be developed more fully in what follows.

An epistemically proper assertion will be underwritten by a belief that “fits well” with both the asserter’s perspective and the asserter’s environment. Arguably, each of the views before us—KA, RCA, JBA, and WKA—respects the thought that an epistemically proper assertion will fit well with its subject’s perspective. But unlike RCA and JBA, WKA honors the thought that an epistemically proper assertion will also fit well with the asserter’s environment. Any assertion underwritten by a belief that would be knowledge were its environment considerably friendlier to it must already be in step with that environment to some nontrivial extent. On the other hand, unlike KA, WKA respects the thought that an epistemically justified assertion needn’t be so in step with its environment as to be underwritten by knowledge. Initially, then, WKA can seem an attractive compromise between RCA and JBA, on the one hand, and KA, on the other.

Over the course of sections 2.2–2.3, I’ll build and defend a much more detailed case for the conclusion that WKA is as good a theory of warranted assertability as—and is perhaps even better confirmed than—RCA and JBA. I’ll also provide more robust reason to think WKA compares favorably with KA. In building my case for WKA, I’ll simply grant to proponents of RCA and JBA the widely (though not universally) held view that the concept of knowledge is parasitic on that of justified belief, and that the latter is parasitic on the concept of rational credibility. If this view about the relations among these concepts is correct, then there’s a clear sense in which RCA and JBA are simpler than WKA. In addition to involving the concept of one environment’s being considerably friendlier than another (relative to a given belief), the concept of would-be knowledge is obviously parasitic on the concept of knowledge, and so (given the common view just noted) parasitic on the concepts of justified belief and rational credibility. Arguably, then, WKA’s conceptual complexity outstrips that of JBA, which in

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13 As we just saw, a victim of global deception may still have numerous knowledge-level justified beliefs. It seems even less controversial to claim that numerous propositions may be rationally credible for such a subject (cf. Douven [2006: 477]; Lackey [2007: 611]). For more on this point, see the discussion of D4 in section 2.2.

14 Douven provides a helpful discussion of the relevant sort of simplicity—what he calls “a priori simplicity”—in his (2006: 450–2).
turn outstrips that of RCA. Upshot: if WKA nevertheless manages to compete closely with its simpler rivals, that must be because it accommodates certain important data much better than do those rivals.

The next two sections will, respectively, present and defend an argument that WKA meets this requirement on closely competing with RCA and JBA. After arguing that WKA does at least as well as its rivals on three prominent data for theories of warranted assertability, I’ll highlight an equally important yet often overlooked fourth datum, and argue that WKA is the only lenient account that respects it.

2.2 The case for WKA

The three most prominent data for theories of warranted assertability are those Williamson collects in chapter 11 of his (2000), where he develops what’s come to be the standard cumulative case for KA. We’ll start exploring the question how well our three lenient accounts accommodate Williamson’s data with a fact on which RCA does quite well:

\[ \text{D}_1: \text{ You can challenge an assertion’s epistemic propriety by asking a question like: “How do you know?”} \]

Here’s how our lenient theories accommodate D₁:

\[ \text{RCA: One main way to challenge an assertion’s epistemic propriety is to respond by doing something that tends to expose unwarranted assertions as such. Asking a question like “How do you know?” is one such act. When asked in response to an assertion that was in fact unwarranted, such a question can generate evidence that the assertion’s content wasn’t rationally credible for the asserter, and so the asserter lacked warrant to assert the relevant proposition.} \]

\[ \text{JBA’s explanation of D}_1 \text{ piggybacks on RCA’s:} \]

\[ \text{JBA: When asked in response to an assertion that was in fact unwarranted, the relevant kind of question can generate evidence that the assertion’s content wasn’t rationally credible for the asserter, and so the asserter didn’t justifiably believe the relevant proposition, and so the asserter lacked warrant to assert the proposition.} \]

Finally, WKA’s explanation is parasitic on JBA’s:

\[ \text{WKA: When asked in response to an assertion that was in fact unwarranted, the relevant kind of question can generate evidence that the assertion’s content wasn’t rationally credible for the asserter, and so the asserter didn’t justifiably} \]
believe the relevant proposition, and so the proposition wasn’t among the asserter’s would-be knowledge, and so the asserter lacked warrant to assert the proposition.

RCA provides the simplest explanation of $D_1$, with JBA and WKA giving increasingly more complex explanations.

Here’s the second of Williamson’s three data:

$D_2$: “Lottery assertions” are often (if not always) unwarranted.

Suppose you hold what will eventually become a losing lottery ticket. Friend 1 offers you a penny for it. Friend 2—who has no “inside information” about the lottery—says: “Take the penny: your ticket’s going to lose”. By hypothesis, Friend 2’s assertion is true: your ticket will indeed lose. Still, Friend 2’s assertion seems out of place. In particular, the assertion seems epistemically improper, a fact you could highlight by saying something like: “Hey, you don’t know I’m a loser!”\(^{15}\)

Here’s an obvious way for RCA to try to explain $D_2$ (letting ‘$L$’ denote [Your ticket’s going to lose]):

**RCA:** Friend 2’s (merely probabilistic) evidence for $L$ doesn’t make $L$ rationally credible for him. So, Friend 2 lacks warrant to assert $L$.

\(^{15}\) Some theorists try to replace $D_2$ with something that won’t ultimately favor JBA and WKA over RCA. Jennifer Lackey (see §6 of her [2007]) is one prominent such theorist. Lackey attempts to explain $D_2$ away as follows: Those who reckon $D_2$ a datum for theories of warranted assertability have confused $D_2$ with

$D_{2*}$: “Lottery assertions” are often (if not always) predictably misleading relative to the purposes of the conversations in which they occur—i.e., one who makes a “lottery assertion” is justified in believing it will lead testifees to believe false propositions about the subject matter of the assertion.

Here’s how reflection on the example described in connection with $D_2$ can also give rise to $D_{2*}$. By hypothesis, you and Friend 2 have exactly the same (merely probabilistic) evidence for the proposition that your ticket’s going to lose. Friend 2 then flat-out asserts [Your ticket’s going to lose]. Under such circumstances, it’s reasonable for Friend 2 to think that his assertion will lead you to believe some false propositions about the subject matter of his assertion—e.g., that he has inside information indicating that your ticket can’t win because the lottery has been rigged in someone else’s favor. Since it’s reasonable for Friend 2 to think his assertion will mislead you in this way, his assertion is conversationally inappropriate. More generally, when a lottery assertion is defective, it’s because the asserter has reason to think it will lead his audience to believe false propositions about the assertion’s subject matter.

This attempt to explain away $D_2$ fails. Lackey’s error theory for $D_2$ implausibly distinguishes the infelicity involved in the lottery case described previously from that involved in certain slightly amplified lottery cases (cf. Williamson [2000: 248]). Suppose that Friend 2 makes the following slightly more robust outright assertion: “I have no inside information about the lottery, but your ticket’s going to lose.” Unlike before, Friend 2 now has no reason to think that his assertion will lead you to believe false propositions about its subject matter. So, Lackey will have to say that the impropriety involved in this slightly amplified lottery case differs from that involved in the original one. But that seems wrong: Friend 2’s assertions seem to be defective in more or less the same way.
Unfortunately, RCA’s explanation of D2 turns out to be more complicated than it initially appears. While it’s plausible to think your friends don’t know you’ll lose, it’s nevertheless reasonable for them to think you’ll lose; but if that’s right, then Friend 2’s evidence for L does make L rationally credible for him. To my knowledge, the main strategy for handling this problem is to argue that the concept of rational credibility includes a constraint that prevents Friend 2’s evidence for L from making L rationally credible for him.\textsuperscript{16} The argument for this constraint has two premises:

\textbf{Closure:} Rational credibility is closed under (obvious) entailment—i.e., if (i) \( P \) is rationally credible for \( S \) \textit{and} (ii) \( P \) entails \( Q \), then \( Q \) is rationally credible for \( S \).

\textbf{No Rational Inconsistency (NRI):} If \( P \) is rationally credible for \( S \), then no proposition inconsistent with \( P \) is also rationally credible for \( S \).

Suppose, for reductio, that Friend 2’s evidence for L makes L rationally credible for him. If so, then it’s reasonable for Friend 2 to believe of each ticket holder that she’ll lose. By Closure, it’s reasonable for Friend 2 to believe that everyone will lose. But Friend 2 rationally believes—indeed, knows—that someone will win. By NRI, then, it’s not reasonable for Friend 2 to believe that everyone will lose. Contradiction! Our reductio assumption must be false: Friend 2’s evidence for L doesn’t make L rationally credible for him, and that’s why he lacked warrant to assert L.

Unlike RCA, JBA explains D2 without substantive auxiliary premises:

\textbf{JBA:} Friend 2 doesn’t justifiably believe L. For even if Friend 2 held a true, “non-Gettierized” belief in L on the basis of the relevant (merely probabilistic) evidence, he still wouldn’t know L. So, Friend 2 lacks warrant to assert L.

WKA also explains D2 without substantive augmentation:

\textbf{WKA:} L isn’t among Friend 2’s would-be knowledge. For even if Friend 2 believes L, he doesn’t know L; and making his environment even friendlier than it already is vis-à-vis that belief won’t turn the belief into knowledge.\textsuperscript{17} So, Friend 2 lacks warrant to assert L.

\textsuperscript{16} Douven employs this strategy in §§2–3 of his (2006).

\textsuperscript{17} Of course, giving Friend 2 additional evidence about the lottery—e.g., that it’s rigged in someone else’s favor—might result in his knowing L. But giving Friend 2 such evidence would go well beyond merely making his environment considerably friendlier vis-à-vis a current belief in L based on merely probabilistic evidence.
JBA’s and WKA’s explanations are simpler than RCA’s, which invokes two auxiliary premises, at least one of which—Closure—is somewhat controversial. While JBA and WKA do about equally well on D2, RCA does worse.

The third and final Williamsonian datum is:

D3: You can’t have warrant to assert a proposition of the form \([P & \text{I don’t know whether } P]\).

RCA is incompatible with D3 (cf. Douven [2006: 474], Lackey [2007: 613]): since it’s possible that you have good reason to believe both \(P\) and \([I \text{don’t know whether } P]\), RCA allows that you could warrantedly assert a proposition of the relevant form.

Unlike RCA, JBA honors D3:

**JBA:** You can’t justifiably believe a proposition of the form \([P & \text{I don’t know whether } P]\). For suppose you could. Since such a belief could be both true and

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19 Suppose, e.g., that you know that you currently have no belief on the question whether \(P\).
20 As with D2, some theorists try to replace D3 with something that won’t ultimately favor JBA and WKA over RCA. Two prominent such theorists are Igor Douven (2006: 473–6) and Jennifer Lackey (2007, 86). The following proposal incorporates the most plausible aspects of the similar explanations Douven and Lackey offer: Those who mistakenly judge D3 a datum for theories of warranted assertability have confused it with the following fact:

D3*: When you sincerely assert a proposition of the form \([P & \text{I don’t know whether } P]\), you perform what you have reason to believe is a self-defeating act. For one of your main aims in sincerely asserting \(P\) is to convince your audience that \(P\) is true; but you have reason to believe that sincerely asserting \([I \text{don’t know whether } P]\) will inhibit your audience’s believing \(P\).

In short, those who draw D3 from reflection on the relevant kind of assertion have misread the prudential impropriety of knowingly performing a self-defeating act as epistemic impropriety.

I think this attempt to replace D3 with D3* fails, for two related reasons. First, in suggesting that such assertions involve only prudential impropriety, the theory neglects what’s arguably the most salient aspect of our reaction to such assertions. If someone made such an assertion to you, you would feel not only that the speaker had somehow defeated himself; you would also feel that the speaker had somehow wronged you, that he had somehow taken back with one hand what he just gave you with the other. The obvious candidate for what’s given and then retracted here is some content, a proposition. However similar such assertions may be to akratic behavior, they are also similar to straightforwardly contradictory assertions of the form \([P & \text{not-}P]\).

Second, the attempted replacement leaves intact the following argument for D3. When you assert \(P\), the proposition that you know \(P\) gets conveyed to you by a source you’re justified in believing reliable—viz., you. In asserting \(P\), then, you gain evidence that you know \(P\). So, if you were to assert (a proposition of the form) \([P & \text{I don’t know whether } P]\), you’d thereby gain evidence against the overall content of your assertion. In asserting the first conjunct, you’d gain evidence against the second conjunct; and that would defeat whatever justification you previously had to believe the content of your assertion. But any assertion that defeats whatever justification its agent previously had for believing its own content is unwarranted. So, you can’t be positioned to warrantedly assert (a proposition of the form) \([P & \text{I don’t know whether } P]\). For more discussion of this reasoning, see my (2011a).
non-Gettierized, it follows that you could know the relevant kind of proposition, which is absurd. So, you can’t have warrant to assert such a proposition.

WKA also respects D₃:

**WKA:** No belief in a proposition of the form \([P \& I \text{ don’t know whether } P]\) could qualify as would-be knowledge: since you can’t know the relevant kind of proposition, no belief in such a proposition would be knowledge were it held in a friendlier environment. So, you can’t have warrant to assert such a proposition.

So, JBA and WKA accommodate D₃, doing so about equally well. RCA’s proponents, on the other hand, can’t accommodate D₃.

We’ve now discussed the three most prominent data for theories of warranted assertability. We’ve found that JBA accommodates those data slightly better than WKA, which accommodates the data significantly better than does RCA. It’s now time to consider an important yet frequently overlooked fourth datum, in whose light we’ll see that WKA is a very close competitor to RCA and JBA. Here’s the additional datum:

**D₄:** If you’re unreliable on the question whether P, then you lack warrant to assert P.

In other words: if we can’t count on you to believe truly with respect to P, you lack warrant to assert P. The slogan: *Warranted assertion requires reliability.*

I find D₄ about as plausible as other, more prominent data for theories of warranted assertability. Nevertheless, before officially endorsing D₄, I’m going to present and defend an argument for it. I’ll do so because I worry that D₄ won’t initially strike everyone as correct. This worry stems from the fact that some philosophers explicitly reject one of D₄’s consequences—viz., that typical assertions made by your globally deceived “internal twins” are unwarranted.²¹ Writes Douven (2006: 477):

> But that [an asserter] is mistaken does not imply that she has violated a norm or done anything else for which she deserves reproach [footnote omitted]. Presumably brains in a vat are to be deplored for being so massively and inveterately mistaken, but they are certainly not to be reproached for that.

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²¹ Say that X and Y are **internal twins** iff X and Y are in exactly the same nonfactive mental states (where a mental state type, M, is **nonfactive** just in case it’s possible that there be false/nonveridical tokens of M).
And according to Lackey (2007: 611), it is clear that [RCA]… sanctions both assertions of Gettierized beliefs and those made by our twins in evil demon worlds. Since such asserters do not seem subject to criticism in any reasonable sense, these are clear and compelling advantages that [RCA] has over rival norms of assertion.

I agree with Douven and Lackey that some Gettierized and run-of-the-mill false assertions are warranted. But I’m about to argue—pace Douven and Lackey—that your being an unreliable believer on the question whether P suffices for your lacking warrant to assert P. By my lights, there are some epistemologically significant differences between certain Gettierized and run-of-the-mill false assertions, on the one hand, and assertions made by the globally deceived, on the other.22

We’ve seen that one standard way to challenge an assertion’s epistemic propriety is to respond with a question or statement that can expose unwarranted assertions as such. Some such questions and statements concern the asserter’s reliability on the relevant point. Examples include “Does he know what he’s talking about?” and “She’s not reliable on this issue”. If such a question or statement generates evidence that the asserter isn’t a reliable believer on the relevant point, then the assertion’s epistemic propriety will have been successfully challenged.23 Here’s an example that will prove useful in what follows:

**Manipulated Doctor:** You know that Dr. Jones has excellent reason to think that a certain drug, D, is safe and effective. But you also know that, several years ago, D’s manufacturer rigged Jones’ circumstances so that if there should ever be evidence that D isn’t safe and effective, Jones would not be exposed to it. One day, I report to you that Jones just told me that D is safe and effective. You reply: “Jones isn’t reliable on that issue: she’s being manipulated by D’s manufacturer.” You just challenged the epistemic propriety of Jones’ assertion that D is safe and effective; and you did so by indicating that we can’t count on her to believe truly as to whether D is safe and effective.

So: a challenge to S’s reliability on the question whether P can give rise to good (though defeasible) evidence that S lacks warrant to assert P. This suggests that being unreliable on the question whether P suffices for lacking warrant to assert P. In short, the fact that we can use questions and statements like “Is she reliable on this issue?” and “You don’t know what you’re talking about!” to challenge

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22 In section 2.3, I’ll argue—contrary to what Lackey suggests in the passage quoted earlier—that while some Gettierized assertions are warranted, others aren’t.

23 For development and defense of the view that reliability is a key ingredient in the epistemic normativity of belief, see (e.g.) DePaul (2001: 178–80) and Greco (2010: 7 ff.).
an assertion’s epistemic propriety constitutes good (though defeasible) evidence for D4.

We can summarize this argument for D4—call it the Challenge Argument—as follows:

1. You can question the epistemic propriety of my assertion that P by questioning my reliability relative to P.
2. Here’s a good explanation of 1: My lacking reliability on the question whether P suffices for my lacking warrant to assert P.

Therefore,

3. 1 constitutes good (though defeasible) evidence for D4.
4. The defeasible support that 1 provides for D4 is in fact undefeated.

Therefore,

5. We should endorse D4.

Let me defend this argument from a worry frequently pressed against arguments that move from facts about how we can question an assertion’s epistemic propriety to conditions on warranted assertability.

The worry concerns 4.24 Why think that D4 explains 1 uniquely well? After all, there are other natural explanations of 1 that don’t entail D4. Perhaps when one issues a “reliability-citing” challenge to S’s assertion that P, one’s real concern is that S lacks strong evidence for P. Because we typically assume that strong evidence for P brings with it reliability on the question whether P, this “evidence-focused” concern gets expressed as a concern about reliability. Alternatively, perhaps when one issues a “reliability-citing” challenge to S’s assertion that P, one’s real concern is that S can’t be counted on to believe truly relative to P under “normal” circumstances. Because we typically assume that the asserter’s circumstances are normal, this “would-be reliability” concern gets expressed as a concern about reliability (full stop). In sum, there are alternatives to D4 that seem to do equally well on 1. If so, then 4 is false.

No doubt, this objector’s strategy is sound: if you can show that an assertion can be defended against a particular challenge by adverting to epistemic features different from those cited in the challenge, then you’ll have undercut an inference from the propriety of such challenges to the thesis that the properties cited in the challenge are required for warranted assertability. This would suggest that the

24 Thanks to Patrick Rysiew for making me think much harder about this sort of worry than I would have otherwise.
challenge wasn’t primarily concerned with the features cited in the challenge. Notably, proponents of lenient theories of warranted assertability use this strategy to undermine arguments for the strict approach stemming from the propriety of challenges that cite knowledge and/or certainty—“knowledge/certainty-citing” challenges (e.g., “How do you know?”, “Are you certain about that?”). Lenient theorists have pointed out that you can successfully defend an assertion against a “knowledge/certainty-citing” challenge by describing your grounds for your assertion’s content.25 This point casts doubt on the inference from the propriety of “knowledge/certainty-citing” challenges to a strict theory of warranted assertability.

The following question arises: Can the support that 1 provides for D4 be undermined via the strategy just described? More specifically, can “reliability-citing” challenges always be understood to concern not reliability (full stop), but instead either evidence or would-be reliability?

I think not. To see this, recall Manipulated Doctor. There, you make a “reliability-citing” challenge to Jones’ assertion that D is safe and effective while (we can stipulate) knowing both (i) that Jones has excellent reason to think D safe and effective, and (ii) that Jones would be reliable on the question whether D is safe and effective were her circumstances “normal”. So, your “reliability-citing” challenge to Jones’ assertion in Manipulated Doctor can’t be understood to concern either Jones’ evidence for the relevant proposition or her reliability on the relevant issue under “normal” conditions. The best explanation of the propriety of your challenge in Manipulated Doctor is that Jones’ unreliability on the relevant question suffices for Jones’ lacking warrant to assert the relevant proposition. So I persist in the thought that the Challenge Argument provides good undefeated evidence for D4 (which, again, I find plausible even in the absence of an argument for it). I conclude that D4 is an important datum for theories of warranted assertability.

How well do our three lenient accounts accommodate D4?

Neither RCA nor JBA can handle D4. As for RCA, it’s plausible to think that the contents of typical assertions made by your globally deceived “internal twin” are nevertheless rationally credible for her.26 And as for JBA, it’s plausible to think that your globally deceived internal twin nevertheless justifiably believes the contents of her typical assertions.27 So, each of RCA and JBA allows that typical

25 In this connection, see Lackey (2007: 610), Kvanvig (2009: 143), and §3 of Brown (2010).
27 In addition to the example I presented in section 2.1 to distinguish WKA from JBA, I would also cite in support of this claim the so-called “New Evil Demon Problem,” which is widely thought to constitute a serious objection to “Pure Reliabilism” about the epistemic justification of belief.
assertions made by your globally deceived internal twin are warranted. Unlike you, however, your globally deceived internal twin is not reliable relative to the contents of her typical beliefs. Thus, each of RCA and JBA allows that one could have warrant to assert P even if one is unreliable on the question whether P. RCA and JBA are incompatible with D₄.

Unlike its rivals, WKA respects D₄. Indeed, WKA entails D₄. Here’s the argument:\(^{28}\)

1. Suppose (a) WKA is true, and (b) you’re unreliable on the question whether P.
2. If you believe P, then some of the closest worlds where your environment is considerably friendlier to your belief are such that your belief isn’t knowledge.\(^{29}\) (1b)
3. If you don’t believe P, then you don’t have a belief in P that would be knowledge were your environment considerably friendlier to it.

Therefore,

4. P isn’t among your would-be knowledge. (2, 3)

Therefore,

5. You lack warrant to assert P. (1a, 4)

Therefore,

6. D₄ is true—warranted assertion requires reliability. (1b–5)

Therefore,

7. WKA entails D₄. (1–6)

The only questionable step in this argument is 2. Carefully considering cases like the following revised version of Two Viruses (from the introductory section)

According to the problem’s proponents, your globally deceived internal twin is no less justified in her beliefs than you are in yours; thus, assuming that you hold many justified beliefs, so does your globally deceived internal twin, notwithstanding the fact that her belief-forming/sustaining processes/faculties are considerably less reliable than yours. Early discussions of this problem are found in Cohen (1984) and Foley (1985); for a helpful introductory discussion, see chapter 5 of Feldman (2003).

\(^{28}\) The following argument depends on two standard assumptions about the semantics of counterfactual conditionals (letting "P □→ Q" abbreviate "If P were true then Q would be true", and "P ◊→ Q" abbreviate "If P were true then Q might be true"): (1) If there’s a ¬Q-world among the closest P-worlds, then (P ◊→ ¬Q). (2) If (P ◊→ ¬Q), then ¬(P □→ Q).

\(^{29}\) Alternatively: If you’re unreliable on your belief B’s content, then simply making your environment significantly less misleading relative to B won’t ensure or guarantee that B comes to constitute knowledge. Put one last way: If you’re unreliable on B’s content, then B might still fall short of knowledge even if your environment were significantly friendlier to B.
brings out 2’s plausibility. Suppose that, typically, those suffering from Virus A who then contract Virus B quickly lose Virus A. Suppose also that this has happened to Mr. Smith. Then Jones is not reliable on the question whether Smith has Virus A. Now, among the closest possible worlds where Jones’ environment is considerably friendlier to her belief about Smith are some in which Smith remains infected with Virus A despite Virus B’s presence. In such worlds, Jones doesn’t know that Smith has Virus A. It follows that Jones’ belief about Smith isn’t would-be knowledge: even if Jones’ environment were considerably friendlier to her belief, it still might fall short of knowledge.30 Examples like this one bring out the plausibility of step 2. Upshot: the only questionable step of the argument from WKA to D₄ turns out to be quite plausible.

It’s time to sum up the findings of sections 2.1–2.2. While WKA is not so conceptually complex as to be unwieldy, I’ve granted that WKA is considerably more complex than JBA, which is in turn more complex than RCA. Turning to D₀–D₄, JBA does slightly better on D₁–D₃ than WKA, which in turn does significantly better on those data than RCA. But WKA is the only lenient account that can accommodate D₄. Further, WKA also explains the anti-KA datum, D₀: returning to (the original version of) Two Viruses, Jones would have known that Smith has Virus A had her environment been considerably less misleading with respect to that belief.31 Thus, of all the accounts considered here (KA included), only WKA accommodates all of D₀–D₄.

In light of these findings, I submit that WKA closely competes with its main lenient rivals, RCA and JBA, as well as with its main strict rival, KA. Depending on how you weight the various considerations in play, you might even conclude that WKA is the best confirmed of our four theories of warranted assertability.32

30 It’s important to be clear about the antecedent of this counterfactual. The antecedent is [Jones’ environment is considerably friendlier to her belief], not [Jones’ environment is (on balance) friendly to (roughly, not misleading vis-à-vis) her belief]. The fact that your environment has become considerably friendlier to a belief of yours does not entail that your environment is now (on balance) friendly vis-à-vis that belief. To see this, recall the following fake barn case from earlier in the chapter. When you form your barn belief, nine out of ten apparent barns are fakes. Just after you form your barn belief, a benevolent demon improves your environment so that only five out of ten apparent barns are fakes. Your environment has become considerably friendlier to your barn belief; but your environment has not yet become (on balance) friendly to your belief.

31 Two points about (the original version of) Two Viruses merit emphasis here. First, Smith’s symptoms and antibody levels are an extremely reliable indicator of Virus A’s presence; so, Jones is reliable on the question whether Smith has A. Second, were Jones’ environment considerably less misleading relative to her belief that Smith has A, Smith wouldn’t have Virus B and Smith’s relevant symptoms and antibody levels would be caused solely by Virus A (just as Jones believes). Under such circumstances, it’s plausible that Jones would know Smith has A.

32 As promised in footnote 4, I’ll now argue for the inferiority of RBK to the three lenient accounts we’ve explored. I’ve already pointed out one clear disadvantage of RBK: unlike the other
I’ll close by defending this section’s case for WKA against three objections I’ve encountered in print and in conversation.

2.3 Three objections

Objection 1: False assertions

WKA allows that one could have warrant to assert a false proposition. To see this, we need only modify the original Two Viruses case as follows: against all odds, B remains in Smith’s system after A has been eliminated, continuing to produce symptoms and antibody levels indicative of A. So, Jones’ belief that Smith has Virus A is now false. Still, her belief seems to constitute would-be knowledge: if Jones’ environment were considerably less misleading with respect to her belief that Smith has Virus A, she would know that Smith has Virus A. Thus, WKA entails that Jones has warrant to assert the false proposition that Smith has Virus A. Intuitively, though, any false assertion is thereby epistemically defective: you can’t have warrant to assert a false proposition. The fact that WKA allows for warranted false assertions is a serious strike against it.

My reply: Note first that this objection doesn’t raise a special problem for WKA relative to its lenient rivals, RCA and JBA. Because a false proposition can be both rationally credible for and justifiably believed by you, RCA and JBA allow that you could have warrant to assert a false proposition. So this objection threatens only to put WKA at a disadvantage relative to KA and other strict accounts. Our question, then, is this: Does this objection show KA and other strict accounts to have a leg up on WKA?

No. For starters, it’s not obvious that warranted false assertion is impossible. Indeed, many theorists find the possibility of warranted false assertion lenient accounts, it places a prima facie implausible higher-order constraint on warranted assertability, requiring for warrant to assert P good reason to believe an “epistemic” proposition about P. Further, while RBK may be roughly comparable to WKA in terms of complexity, it’s more complex than RCA and JBA. Finally, RBK does worse on the data than all our three lenient accounts. Let’s grant that RBK can do as well as the other accounts on D1 and D3. In contrast to our three lenient accounts, RBK seems unable to accommodate D2 (pace Brown [2008: 93]). This is because it seems possible that someone reasonably believe they know a lottery proposition (even if, in fact, such propositions are unknowable), yet lack warrant to assert it. And like RCA and JBA, RBK is incompatible with D4, since someone who is unreliable on the question whether P may nevertheless reasonably believe he knows P. So, in light of the facts that RBK (i) does worse on the data than all the other lenient accounts, (ii) is at least as complex as WKA, and (iii) imposes a dubious higher-order constraint on warranted assertion, we’ve good reason to deem RBK inferior to the other lenient accounts. I hasten to concede, though, that a more thorough investigation of these issues is desirable. I commend such inquiry to interested readers.

33 On this point, see Williamson (2000: 262).
quite intuitive.\textsuperscript{34} In light of this fact, I submit that honoring the thought that warranted false assertion is impossible is no more important than accommodating D\textsubscript{0}, the thought that some Gettierized assertions are warranted. As we’ve seen, while WKA honors D\textsubscript{0}, no strict account can. So, even if WKA’s allowing for warranted false assertion constitutes something of a liability, it doesn’t put WKA at a serious disadvantage relative to its strict rivals.

\textit{Objection 2: D\textsubscript{0} and D\textsubscript{4} are incompatible}\textsuperscript{35}

In arguing for WKA, I deployed both D\textsubscript{0} (“Some Gettierized assertions are warranted”) and D\textsubscript{4} (“Warranted assertion requires reliability”). But on reflection, these claims can seem incompatible. To begin to see this, consider the following (in)famous Gettierized assertion (Goldman [1976: 772–3]):

\textbf{Fake Barn District:} Henry is driving in the countryside with his son… Henry identifies various objects on the landscape as they come into view. “That’s a cow,” says Henry, “That’s a tractor,” “That’s a silo,” “That’s a barn,” etc. Henry has no doubt about the identity of these objects; in particular, he has no doubt that the last-mentioned object is a barn, which indeed it is… [U]nknown to Henry, the district he has just entered is full of papier-mache facsimiles of barns. These facsimiles look from the road exactly like barns, but are really just facades, without back walls or interiors, quite incapable of being used as barns. They are so cleverly constructed that travelers invariably mistake them for barns.

Presumably, proponents of D\textsubscript{0} will have to say that Henry had warrant to assert [That’s a barn]. But Henry isn’t reliable on the question whether the thing he’s looking at is a barn. By D\textsubscript{4}, then, Henry lacked warrant to assert [That’s a barn]. So, D\textsubscript{0} and D\textsubscript{4} render conflicting verdicts about the epistemic propriety of Henry’s assertion. So, D\textsubscript{0} and D\textsubscript{4} are incompatible. Finally, since the case for WKA combines D\textsubscript{0} with D\textsubscript{4}, that case is now seen to be unstable.

\textit{My reply:} D\textsubscript{0} says only that \textit{some} Gettierized assertions are warranted. Taken by itself, then, D\textsubscript{0} doesn’t commit its proponent to saying that Henry has warrant to assert [That’s a barn]. Of course, this point is useless against the following slightly different worry about combining D\textsubscript{0} with D\textsubscript{4}:

There’s no difference between Jones and Henry that could justify judging Jones’ assertion warranted but not Henry’s. So, anyone using Two Viruses to justify D\textsubscript{0} must also judge Henry’s assertion warranted, and so must reject D\textsubscript{4}.

\textsuperscript{34} See (e.g.) §6 of Douven (2006).
\textsuperscript{35} Thanks to Jonathan Kvanvig for pressing this objection.
If this worry goes through, then my overall case for WKA fails. Fortunately, though, the worry stems from a natural but mistaken judgment about Two Viruses and Fake Barn District.

There is a relevant difference between Jones and Henry, one that justifies judging Jones’ assertion warranted but not Henry’s. To see this, notice that some Gettierized asserters are much more reliable than others on the contents of their Gettierized beliefs. Taken together, Two Viruses and Fake Barn District illustrate this general point. Henry isn’t reliable on the question whether the thing he’s looking at is a barn. By contrast, Jones is reliable on the question whether Smith has Virus A: the details of the case make clear that we can count on Jones to believe truly as to whether Smith has A. Given this important difference between Jones and Henry, we can sensibly reckon Jones’ assertion warranted while also judging Henry’s unwarranted. Accordingly, the following combination seems stable: (i) Accept D<sub>0</sub> on the basis of Two Viruses; (ii) Accept D<sub>4</sub> on the basis of the Challenge Argument; and (iii) Deny that Henry has warrant to assert [That’s a barn].

Objection 3: Selfless assertion

According to WKA, one has warrant to assert P only if one believes P. But it seems you could have warrant to assert a proposition you don’t believe. Consider the following case due to Douven (2006: 461 [emphases added]):

You are responsible for the safety of the population in a given area, and one of your superiors informs you of an imminent threat. The reported threat is of a nature so terrible that you cannot right away get yourself to believe it . . . The situation calls for immediate evacuation of the area, though, and it is now your main duty to inform the authorities responsible for that. Still numbed by the message you received and still not being able to believe it, you nonetheless do manage to inform them . . . It seems to me that by so doing you are asserting things you do not (currently) believe . . . but that, given your source of information, are perfectly credible to you; and by so doing, you are not doing anything untoward or anything you lack warrant for, but are precisely doing what you ought to do under the given circumstances.

And consider also this case due to Lackey (2007: 598–9 [emphasis added]):

Sebastian is an extremely well-respected pediatrician and researcher who has done extensive work studying childhood vaccines. He recognizes and appreciates that all of the scientific evidence shows that there is absolutely no connection between vaccines and autism [footnote omitted]. However, shortly after his apparently normal 18-month-old daughter received one of her vaccines, her behavior became increasingly withdrawn and she was soon diagnosed with autism . . . [T]he grief and exhaustion brought on by his daughter’s recent diagnosis cause him to abandon his previously deeply-held beliefs regarding vaccines. Today, while performing a well-baby checkup on one of his patients,
the child’s parents ask him about the legitimacy of the rumors surrounding vaccines and autism. Recognizing . . . that he has an obligation to his patients to present what is most likely to be true, Sebastian asserts, “There is no connection between vaccines and autism.” In spite of this, at the time of this assertion, it would not be correct to say that Sebastian himself believes or knows this proposition.

According to Lackey (2007: 600), these Selfless Assertion Cases (SACs)\textsuperscript{36} show that

\textit{it is a mistake to require proper assertion to pass through the doxastic states of the asserter} [footnote omitted] . . . [In such cases], even though the person in question may be subject to criticism \textit{qua believer}, she is nonetheless subject to praise \textit{qua asserter} [footnote omitted].

\textit{My reply:} I begin my defense of views that require belief for warranted assertability—which include WKA, JBA, and KA—by noting that this objection from SACs fights an uphill battle: the belief requirement (BR) is well motivated independent of whatever support it gets from any particular theory of warranted assertability. For one thing, questions like “Are you sure?” and “Are you confident?” are among those we can use to challenge assertions.\textsuperscript{37} Another true story: Recently, my wife asked me to verify that we had ceiling paint for a particular room in our house. Wanting to get back to work on this chapter, I hastily searched the garage for the paint. I soon came to believe of a certain can that it very likely contained the right paint. I grabbed the can, took it to my wife, and said: “Here’s the paint.” My wife challenged my assertion: “You really think this is the right stuff?” I stammered: “Well, okay—this is \textit{very likely} the right stuff.” What just happened? By questioning my degree of confidence in the proposition I asserted, my wife successfully challenged my assertion: she caught me cheating! So, a question about your degree of confidence in the content of your assertion can yield evidence that the assertion was unwarranted. This suggests that having warrant to assert \( P \) requires having a certain significant degree of confidence in \( P \). A natural thought is that the degree of confidence \textit{required} for warranted assertability is the degree (minimally) \textit{sufficient} for belief.

A second line of support for BR stems from reflection on assertions of the form \([ \neg P \& \neg \text{I don’t believe } P \)].\textsuperscript{38} Such assertions are infelicitous. Why? Suppose I flat-out assert: “Bert and Ernie are at the library, and I don’t believe they’re there.”

\textsuperscript{36} The expression “selfless assertion” first appears in §2 of Lackey (2007), where we also find two additional cases relevantly similar to those just described. My treatment of the cases mentioned earlier will apply equally well to Lackey’s additional cases; I leave such application as an exercise for the interested reader.


\textsuperscript{38} For early discussion of such assertions, see Moore (1962).
Obviously, Bert and Ernie could be at the library at a time when I don’t believe they’re at the library. So, in saying “Bert and Ernie are at the library, and I don’t believe they’re there”, I didn’t flat-out assert a contradiction. The explanation of my assertion’s infelicity lies elsewhere.

The standard explanation is that, in making such an assertion, I imply (without actually asserting) a contradiction, one of the form [I believe P & I don’t believe P]. Such an assertion implies a contradiction because, in asserting P, one represents oneself as believing P. When you assert a proposition of the form [P & I don’t believe P], you imply with the first conjunct something you deny with the second—viz., that you believe P. So, making such an assertion implies or conveys a contradiction.

BR nicely explains the fact that you represent yourself as believing P when you assert P. In asserting P, you represent yourself as having warrant to assert P. If BR is right, then you have such warrant only if you believe P. So, given BR, when you assert P you represent yourself as believing P. In this way, BR yields a good explanation of the infelicity of assertions of the form [P & I don’t believe P].

So, each party to the current debate—that between proponents of SACs and proponents of BR—has work to do. Proponents of SACs need to attack the aforementioned prima facie case for BR, whereas proponents of BR need to explain away SACs. In what follows, I’ll defend BR by sketching a plausible error theory for the anti-BR intuitions generated by SACs, leaving for others the task of neutralizing the pro-BR case just sketched.

I’m looking for a plausible error theory for these two intuitions: (1) In Douven’s case, I have warrant to assert [This area faces a terrible threat]. (2) In Lackey’s case, Sebastian has warrant to assert [There’s no connection between vaccines and autism]. BR’s proponent can explain away these intuitions by citing two factors. First, in a SAC, one clearly has warrant to assert a proposition quite similar to the proposition one actually asserts. Start with Douven’s case. There, I clearly have warrant to assert [I’ve excellent reason to think this area faces a terrible threat], which is quite similar to the unqualified proposition I actually assert (viz., [This area faces a terrible threat]). As for Lackey’s case, Sebastian clearly has warrant to assert [The scientific evidence shows that there’s no connection between vaccines and autism], which is quite similar to the unqualified proposition he actually asserts (viz., [There is no connection between vaccines and autism]). So, one factor that can generate an anti-BR intuition when

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considering a SAC is that, in such cases, one clearly has warrant to assert a proposition quite similar to the proposition one actually asserts.

A second factor is that, in a SAC, one has epistemic features or properties in virtue of which one’s assertion is permissible—indeed, obligatory—from one or more normative perspectives (e.g., moral, professional, prudential).\(^{40}\) To see this, recall the emphases I added to the stories told by Douven and Lackey. According to Douven, once I learn from my superior about the imminent threat, it becomes my “main duty” to tell the relevant authorities about the threat; in so asserting to the relevant authorities, I am “precisely doing what I ought to do under the given circumstances”. Clearly, the kinds of propriety or justification involved here are professional and moral. In Lackey’s story, Sebastian “has an obligation to his patients to present what is most likely to be true”. Thus, in virtue of his knowledge that all the scientific evidence shows there’s no connection between vaccines and autism, Sebastian is professionally and morally obligated to tell his patients that no such connection exists.

Here, then, is a plausible error theory available to BR’s proponent for the intuitions that (1) I have warrant to assert [This area faces a terrible threat], and (2) Sebastian has warrant to assert [There’s no connection between vaccines and autism]. These intuitions result from some or other of the following natural mistakes:

- Confusing [This area faces a terrible threat] with the quite similar [I’ve excellent reason to think this area faces a terrible threat].
- Confusing [There’s no connection between vaccines and autism] with the quite similar [The scientific evidence shows that there’s no connection between vaccines and autism].
- Confusing an (epistemically evaluable) item’s being somehow justified in virtue of its subject’s epistemic features with the item’s being epistemically justified.\(^{41}\)


\(^{41}\) Such a confusion would be similar to one identified in the introductory section (see especially footnote 7). Suppose you have strong, though not quite conclusive, evidence to believe a certain negative moral proposition, P, about a close relative, R—e.g., R is dishonest and manipulative. Because your evidence isn’t quite conclusive, you have a moral obligation to let R benefit from the room your evidence leaves to doubt P: you should be “giving R the benefit of the doubt”. You reflect on the strength of your evidence and your relevant moral obligations, and (somehow) achieve judgment-suspension on P. Your withholding on P is morally justified in virtue of the inconclusive character of your evidence. Still, for all we’ve said, your evidence for P may well be strong enough to make your withholding on P epistemically unjustified. Upshot: an (epistemically evaluable) item’s being somehow proper in virtue of its subject’s epistemic features doesn’t suffice for the item’s being epistemically proper.
BR’s proponent can plausibly claim that the best overall position results from *keeping BR* and *rejecting* the contrary intuitions generated by SACs via the error theory just sketched. So far as I can see, then, SACs don’t cast serious doubt on theories that (like WKA) require belief for warranted assertability.

WKA emerges more or less unscathed from its confrontation with the objections mentioned earlier. And so I stand by the conclusion of section 2.2: the heretofore neglected WKA competes closely with—and is perhaps even better confirmed than—its more prominent rivals, lenient and strict.42

References


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