A Rightness-Based Theory of Communicative Propriety[1]

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Abstract: We express and communicate many attitudes beyond belief, such as amusement, joy, admiration, hatred, and desire. I consider whether there are any general norms that would cover all of these cases. The most obvious generalization of the most popular norms for assertion, fittingness-based theories, fail in part because it is sometimes an intrinsic good to have certain kinds of mental states (amusement, say). I develop an alternative, rightness-based approach, according to which it is appropriate to communicate a mental state to an interlocutor when it is right to make the interlocutor have that mental state because of the speech act. This view arises naturally from conversational participants' common interests, and it helps make sense of linguistic phenomena like expressives.

We can express a variety of mental states with language: belief, but also desire, hatred, contempt, and joy, too. Expressions of belief—assertion, roughly—can be inappropriate, and philosophers have exercised considerable ingenuity in determining when they are. They have paid significantly less attention to when we may properly express any of these other mental states. That is not because it is a less worthy topic. So, what's the reason?

Perhaps they tacitly accept this picture. When I express my belief that *p*, it is, at least when I express it in the normal case through *assertion*, because I hope to give *you* the belief that *p*.[2] But when I express my anger or joy, I don't mean to transmit that anger or joy to you, not in the normal case. On this view, norms governing the expression of mental states affect

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[1] Thanks to audiences at Michigan, and Ishani Maitra, Neil Mehta, Eric Swanson, Brian Weatherson, two anonymous referees and one editor for this journal, and the Postdoctoral Fellow program at UNAM.

[2] Heck, Jr. [2002] calls this the "Naïve Conception of Communication", Egan [2007] calls it the "belief transfer

only those speech acts we use to infect others with our mental states. I doubt that's true, but the real problem is that we *do* often aim to transmit our mental states through our utterances. We attempt to communicate our feelings all the time, and I do mean 'communicate' literally. When some news emerges I find disappointing, my 'it's a shame, isn't it?' does not simply assert that it's a bad thing, nor just *express* my disappointment as a downcast face might; I hope to get you to be disappointed by the news, too, by *communicating* my disappointment *to you*. More worryingly, demagogues communicate their hatred to others.[3] There's a large number of devices by means of which we can do these things, but that doesn't mean that their use is less norm-governed than the communication of belief *via* assertion.

To fix some jargon, where Φ is an attitude[4] (e.g., being disappointed at some particular news, or hatred of some group, etc.), call a speech act consisting of the use (utterance, inscription, etc.) of a sentence σ a Φ-*assertion* iff the speaker publicly purports to intend to communicate Φ by expressing Φ with σ. Is there anything fully general we might say about when Φ-asserting is appropriate? I'm interested in two sorts of general answer. First:

> FITTINGNESS NORM OF Φ-ASSERTION. For all speakers S and mental states Φ, S must:
>
> Φ-assert only if Φ is *fully fitting* for S.

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model", and Moss [2012] calls it the "Package Delivery Model". It is a distillation of Stalnaker [1978]'s views.

[3] For the communication of hatred and other feelings, see Langton [2012]. For the communication of desire in conversation, see Pettit and Smith (1996).

[4] I use 'attitude' and 'mental state' interchangeably in this paper.

Though 'fitting' is a modish term, others use different terms to express what I mean to express, such as 'correct'[5] or 'apt'.[6] I'll use these interchangeably to express the condition that one meets when one is angry *because* someone just kicked your dog for no reason, or sad *because* your dog died, or happy *because* you have a new adorable puppy full of vim and vigor.[7]

Fittingness theories are speaker-directed: the propriety of a Φ-assertion depends on the speaker but not the hearer. It's natural to think of the various norms of assertion proposed in the literature as instances of the fittingness norm of assertion, spelling out what the theorist thinks a believer has to be like for their belief to be fully fitting. At least, it's natural to think of them that way if those norms are fundamental rather than derived. Someone who thinks that *S*'s belief that *p* is fully fitting just in case *S* knows that *p* and accepts FITTINGNESS NORM OF BELIEF-ASSERTION will accept the knowledge norm of assertion.[8] Others who think all that's needed for full fittingness is truth will accept a truth norm of assertion.[9] Other ways of spelling out fittingness for beliefs will deliver still other norms.[10] But as I said, those norms might be derived from a more basic sort of norm.[11]

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[5] See, e.g., Gibbard [2005] and Engel [2013].

[6] See, famously, Gibbard [1990].

[7] There is a long tradition of taking 'fitting' primitively. See recently McHugh and Way [2016]. Roughly an attitude toward something is fitting when the thing merits the attitude. My hope is that my future examples are uncontroversially unfitting.

[8] See, among many others, Unger [1975], Williamson [2000], and Turri [2016].

[9] See, e.g., Weiner [2005].

[10] E.g., Lackey [2007], Douven [2006].

[11] Though I will ultimately defend a rightness norm, even if, say, the Knowledge Norm is a fittingness norm, I need not reject it. In fact, I derive it.

Here's the second sort of theory:

RIGHTNESS NORM OF Φ-ASSERTION. For all speakers S, hearers S', and mental states Φ, S must: Φ-assert to S' only if it is right (i.e., not wrong) for S to make S' have Φ by Φ-asserting.

Rightness theories claim that both the speaker and the hearer matter. I have not seen them much discussed in the literature on norms of assertion,[12] which is somewhat surprising, since I think of them as having something like a default status. One of my aims is to provide the best version of the RIGHTNESS NORM that I can. My other is to argue for it, especially as against the FITTINGNESS NORM. It will emerge that belief-assertion (hereafter, 'assertion') is unique in a way that distorts our overall picture of communicative propriety if we focus on it too narrowly.

Though I reject it, it's important to understand why the fittingness theory should have proved so attractive. In the first section, I'll provide one argument for it; then I'll give a recipe for generating counterexamples to Fittingness Norm of Φ-Assertion that reveals the flaw in that argument. The counterexamples will also provide motivation for looking at rightness theories and provide some desiderata, and in section 2 I'll provide a framework that naturally delivers Rightness Norm of Φ-Assertion. In section 3, I'll consider another argument for fittingness theories, and show how the work done in section 2 allows the rightness theorist to answer that argument. In section 4, I'll formulate a sufficient condition for the lack of fittingness constraints on a Φ-assertion, and I'll address an objection. Section 5 concludes.

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[12] There are some exceptions, of which Hinchman [2013] seems the closest to mine.

1 Unfitting but Appropriate Φ-Assertions

In this section, I'll present counterexamples to some fittingness norms. I'll then diagnose the counterexamples: because they don't contravene the Rightness Norm, the Φ-assertions I display are not improper. But first I'll say why the Fittingness Norm is tempting.

We ought not to have unfitting attitudes, you might think; and if we ought not to have them ourselves, then, at least in the typical case, we ought not to give them to others. If I ought not to believe that *p*, say because my evidence for it is slim, then I ought not to give *you* that belief. On this view, standards for *having* an attitude translate into standards for *communicating* that attitude. Fittingness norms tell us when we ought not to have a given attitude. So, fittingness norms will tell us when we ought not to *transmit* that attitude.

This argument, I think, trades on an equivocation involving 'ought'.[13] Here's what I mean.

Take amusement. Jokes are, among other things, purported attempts to communicate amusement. A joke, especially one that the teller seems to find funny, purports to communicate the joke-teller's amusement. It is an amusement- assertion, using my jargon. Now, I've had friends who are hilarious but sometimes tell bad jokes. They have some special ability to bring a room to tears with what I would say is objectively bad material. The joke might be run-of-the-mill toilet humor, or a nonsense *bon mot*, or an overused Internet meme. Suppose the joke-teller (call him Bryan) says:

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[13] Brown [2011] and Hawthorne et al. [2016] also argue against this argument, but not in the same way I do.

(1) Where's the beef?

Suppose that there is nothing that *really* makes (1) funny. To make the case watertight, imagine

Bryan usually has a funny way of delivering even bad jokes: he's reliable enough that we've all

formed enough of an expectation that he *will* be amusing that we find him amusing when he

isn't. Suppose this time nothing in Bryan's delivery of (1) is amusing. Yet we are amused.

According to the FITTINGNESS NORM OF AMUSEMENT-ASSERTION, Bryan's (1) was

improper. That's because it's both an amusement-assertion and it wasn't *actually* funny. Bryan's

amusement at his own joke was not fitting. But it amused us, predictably. My first claim about

(1) is that it was not wrong for Bryan to make the joke.

You might worry that (1) is all-things-considered permissible but still has some *pro tanto*

or *prima facie* wrongness because it violates a governing norm of assertion. It might be like a lie

beneficial enough to be permissible.[14] But the cases are not analogous. Sometimes when we do

things that are *pro tanto* or *prima facie* wrong, we have reason to apologize or feel bad when the

time is right, even if what we did was permissible. If I lie to you to spare your feelings,[15] even if

that was right, when you find out I should apologize. It would also be permissible for you to ask

for an apology. When Bryan's audience thinks on (1) later and realizes it was unfunny, they

should not ask for an apology, and, more importantly, Bryan does not owe them one. (He might

nevertheless apologize, but that would itself be jocular.) (1) is different from lies or other *pro

tanto* improper assertions. To be sure, it has aesthetic defects. But it's pleasant and harmless to

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[14] Pagin [2015] has worries like this about counterexamples to proposed norms of assertion. Thanks to an
anonymous reviewer for pressing this objection.

[15] Feel free to increase the benefit to taste here; I don't think the structure changes.

be amused, even when the objects of our amusement are unfitting. Playing to the crowd might be artistically bankrupt, but it's not inappropriate in the way, say, asserting what one does not have evidence for is inappropriate. Children's authors who write books about flatulence needn't be making any error like that. These joking cases are not even *pro tanto* wrong in the way that a beneficial lie is.

There are other examples like this for other mental states, like joy. I take it that taking delight in something mundane's happening isn't typically fitting. Nevertheless, I don't think there's anything wrong with getting someone else to share your delight in something mundane's happening. This can be difficult. But if one is a prisoner that has little to delight *in*, then it's not inappropriate for one to get the other to share their excitement that the same (bad) food is being served once again at the regular time. Even though the joy is unfitting, it's not inappropriate to communicate it. This is another class of counterexamples to Fittingness Norm of Φ-Assertion.

Here's a general recipe. Where Φ is an enjoyable or otherwise intrinsically good mental state that one can expect one's interlocutors to reasonably and appropriately want, and having Φ in the circumstances is unfitting, it is often not inappropriate to make one's interlocutor have Φ. We can usually assume that our interlocutors want to be amused or delighted. This recipe isn't infallible. Spreading a belief that one has no evidence for, even if it is pleasant to believe, can be inappropriate. For now I only need that there are many straightforward counterexamples.

What explains why this recipe generates counterexamples? It's not that it is always right to communicate pleasing attitudes; flattery, e.g., is a pernicious wrong. Rather, being amused by (1) is in some ways significantly good and in no ways significantly bad. That goes for both the amusing people and the people who are amused. Being delighted is often in some ways

significantly good and in no ways significantly bad. Delighting people, exciting them, etc., can be a cynical marketing ploy. But when it's not, it is fine to do so. In both cases, though the underlying mental state Φ being communicated is unfitting, having that mental state is a harmless good.

Here's what's wrong with the argument I began with. In *some* sense, all of our attitudes ought to be fitting. If I could have Φ fittingly or unfittingly, I should prefer fittingly, *ceteris paribus*. But with some attitudes, that the attitude is unfitting is a very weak consideration against having that attitude. There are some attitudes where the goodness of *having* the attitude far exceeds the badness of having the attitude unfittingly, and *where there need be no suitable alternative that would have the same effect*. Amusement and joy are two of these attitudes. Usually it's not wrong to amuse someone, even if the object of their amusement is unfitting. So, it's not wrong to communicate your amusement in even a bad joke. Though our attitudes ought to be fitting, *ceteris paribus*, not everything is equal: if I won't have the intrinsically good attitude at all if I don't have it unfittingly, then I may have it unfittingly. That is why the argument for the Fittingness Norm of Φ-Assertion equivocates.

FITTINGNESS NORM OF AMUSEMENT-ASSERTION says that (1) is inappropriate or a mistake of some kind, but that's wrong.[16] That is reason to think that the schema of which it is an instance, FITTINGNESS NORM OF Φ-ASSERTION is wrong. RIGHTNESS NORM OF AMUSEMENT-ASSERTION does not have this consequence, and that is reason to like it.

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[16] Nor is the amusement-assertion *unsuccessful*, in Mehta [2016]'s sense; it amuses us, and Bryan knew that it would.

I have introduced an argument for the fittingness norm, and tried to show that the

argument fails. I've also established a couple of desiderata for a rightness-based theory. It should

allow that communicating amusement is typically fine; this should have something to do with the

goodness of amusement for the addressee; and the account should be contrastive. I'll next

present a rightness theory that satisfies those constraints.

2 A Framework for Communicative Rightness

It's hard to defend the RIGHTNESS NORM OF Φ-ASSERTION without saying when it is right to

make someone have a mental state. That is what I'll attempt to do in this section.

The fully spelled-out RIGHTNESS NORM will have two features. First, it will be

contrastive: the rightness of a Φ-assertion will depend on salient alternative Φ-assertions the

speaker might have made. Second, it will be *goal-based*: the rightness of a given Φ-assertion will

depend on what goals it helps and hinders.

Each interlocutor will have interests, ways her life can go better or worse. Conversation is

a tool people use ideally to better one another's lives and their own. I will assume that

communicative norms, being norms, target the ideal case. Given this, whether a Φ-assertion is

right will depend on whether it advances interlocutors' interests. This is a relatively

consequentialist perspective on communicative norms. I cannot here defend it, or

consequentialism itself, against standard objections to it. Nevertheless, it is valuable to work out

a minimally consequentialist view of communicative norms, to see how much of the standard

apparently deontological norms we can recover that way.

Interlocutors will each have a set of *actual* and of *apparent* interests. Often an interest

will be in both—for example, not to be in excruciating pain—but sometimes the lists will

diverge. I will pretend the lists of actual and apparent interests are always the same. We should

also distinguish between primary and secondary propriety, where S's φ-ing can be secondarily

appropriate if S reasonably thinks her φ-ing satisfies the primary norm.[17]

I'm interested in cases where the interests are *mutual*, i.e., common to all parties. Prior to

entering into a conversation, interlocutors will have many interests in common, at least if they're

normal and decent. Some interests will *become* mutual because one of the parties indicates they

have them. I might strike up a conversation to discover when the museum opens, and when I ask,

if you don't have some reason for me not to go to the museum, my learning that will be in both

our interests. Some conversations are more adversarial. Even then there will be a store of mutual

interests, though there will be explicit differences.

Suppose X and Y are in a conversation, and X and Y have mutual interests $I_1, ..., I_n$.

Suppose finally that these facts are publicly known by both X and Y. Given any possible Φ-

assertion X or Y thinks about making by means of a sentence σ, there is a *salient alternative set*

ALT (σ) of alternative conversational contributions X or Y might make instead of the actual Φ-

assertion. Intuitively, the set will include those alternative contributions that we can expect (in a

broadly normative sense) the interlocutor to have considered making instead, at least tacitly or

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[17] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to be clearer about the distinctions here. DeRose [2002] among
others makes the primary/secondary propriety distinction.

implicitly. For example, $\varphi \in$ ALT $(\varphi \wedge \psi)$.[18] It is a difficult open problem from semantics and

pragmatics to say exactly what belongs in any given salient alternative set.[19] Nevertheless they

are indispensable to basic semantic[20] and pragmatic[21] reasoning. Here are some helpful sufficient

conditions for membership in ALT (σ):

• $\{\varphi, \psi\} \subset$ ALT$(\varphi \wedge \psi)$

• $\{\varphi, \psi\}\ \subset$ ALT$(\varphi \vee \psi)$

• $\{$⌜ must φ ⌝, ⌜ might φ ⌝, ⌜ probably φ ⌝$\} \subset$ ALT (φ)

• The null contribution (e.g., silence) $\in$ ALT (σ) for all σ.

• If e is a constituent of σ, and e is on a Horn scale with $e_1, ..., e_n$, then for all σ' such that

σ' is like σ except substituting e^1 or ... or e_n for e, $\sigma' \in$ ALT (σ).[22]

This is not exhaustive, so it's important to re-emphasize that the salient alternative set will

include those sentences that the speaker can be expected easily to have in mind. That is the

intuitive criterion I will sometimes use. And if that's really what an alternative set is, rather than

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[18] I will be somewhat sloppy with use and mention for readability.

[19] See, e.g., Katzir [2007] and Swanson [2010].

[20] See, e.g., Rooth [1992].

[21] See, e.g., Abusch [2002].

[22] A Horn scale is a set of logically related expressions, increasing in strength. For example, {'some', 'most', 'all'} form a Horn scale; ⌜ all F s are Gs ⌝ entails ⌜ most F s are Gs ⌝, etc. Other examples are {'one', 'two', ...} and {'warm', 'hot', 'boiling'}. See Horn [1972].

something determined by grammar, then we shouldn't expect to be able to specify situation-independent membership criteria for ALT anyway.

I'll now suggest a sufficient condition for wrongness. Call an utterance of a sentence σ *interest-dominated by* σ′ *in* c iff σ′ ∈ ALT (σ) and the use of σ in c does at best insignificantly better by every mutual interest in the conversation than does the use of σ′ in c, and not merely insignificantly worse by some mutual interest. The use of a sentence σ is *interest-dominated in* c *simpliciter* iff there exists a σ′ ∈ ALT (σ) such that the utterance of σ is interest-dominated by σ′ in c. The use of a sentence is interest-dominated when there's a salient alternative that the speaker might have said instead that would've done not significantly worse in every way and significantly better in some way.

Simpler definitions would delete the qualifications involving 'significantly'. Doing that would rob the definitions of application. If σ is the first sentence our speaker considers and initially elects to utter, there is a small cost to efficiency in switching to some σ′. Similar "costs" are easy to see. Usually they don't matter, since they are dramatically outweighed by most other salient considerations. My official definitions will stand, but sometimes I will drop the qualifications in the interests of efficiency.

Here are two versions of a norm I accept:

NON-DOMINATION NORM (primary). For all S and σ, S must: utter σ in c only if σ is not interest-dominated in c.

NON-DOMINATION NORM (secondary). For all S and σ, S must: utter σ in c only if it's

not the case that S should (subjectively) think that σ is interest-dominated in c.

Conversation is a tool for advancing our mutual interests. If we say things that only *hinder* those interests compared with others that we easily could've said instead, then we have done something wrong. NON-DOMINATION NORM is the weakest norm that captures that basic idea. That does not mean stronger norms are false. There might be an expected utility norm, according to which speakers should maximize the expected mutual benefit of their contributions. I think this norm is likely too strong; either way, I will explore what can be done with the weaker NON-DOMINATION NORMs.

Here are examples of some interest-dominated sentences that the two norms would rule impermissible in usual situations.

(2) It's raining and it's raining.

(3) It's raining or it's not raining.

(4) I'm either in Paris or France.

(2) will in usual conversations be interest-dominated by:

(5) It's raining.

(5) is in ALT ((2)) and communicates the same information that (2) does, but it takes less time and is less strange. (3) will often be interest-dominated by silence, or by many other things a person might say. We do sometimes say things like (3), i.e., if we wish to deny indeterminacy. Otherwise, though, (3) is not acceptable. Finally, (6) is a *Hurford disjunction*, a disjunction $\ulcorner \varphi$

$\vee \; \psi \; \urcorner$ such that either φ entails ψ or *vice versa*.[23] What *exactly* accounts for their usual infelicity is a matter of controversy, but personally, the story I like is that (6) usually interest-dominates (4), again by being briefer and less confusing:

(6) I'm in France.

The full explanation of Hurford's constraint is likely to be complicated, both because an algorithm for determining what's in ALT ((4)) is difficult to find, and because my initial gloss of Hurford's constraint has to be refined. Here's another example with a little more bite. Suppose that the fact that it's raining is public knowledge among us, and that we've been thinking about it recently. Then it is typically inappropriate to say, for most any φ:

(7) Suppose it's raining. Then this rain is unusual weather to have in January!

The first part of (7) is a supposition-assertion. It's useless to get us to *suppose* that it's raining, since that fact is obvious. The supposition is useless at best, but more likely confusing. The speaker should just remove the supposition-assertion.

Notice that the NON-DOMINATION NORMs do not yet tell us when a Φ-assertion is right or wrong, just when using certain sentences is. Here's the bridge between them: a Φ-assertion is wrong in *c* if every sentence one could use to make the Φ-assertion is wrong in *c*. A sufficient condition for a given Φ- assertion's being wrong is that there's no sentence σ such that σ is non-dominated in *c* and using σ in *c* would constitute a Φ-assertion. What could explain why *every* sentence one could use to impart Φ to one's addressee would be interest-dominated? Sometimes

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[23] See Hurford [1974].

it'll be that it's wrong to make their addressee have Φ because of your Φ-assertion, and whatever else the Φ- assertion does could be done in ways that don't make the addressee have Φ. There might be other cases where the same result—the impermissibility of Φ-asserting—comes about because of a different mechanism, but this kind of case is central.

The NON-DOMINATION NORMs and the wrongness of making someone have Φ and the availability of alternatives that would do just as well while not making the addressee have Φ entail RIGHTNESS NORM of Φ-ASSERTION. So, not only does it look like an antecedently attractive view; it also arises naturally from this framework and minimal constraints formulated within it. Do we need *both* FITTINGNESS NORM and RIGHTNESS NORM? Though they are compatible, I already gave some initial counterexamples to the former, so maybe we can explain the large amount of data that seem to support it even if we abandon it entirely. I'll argue we can in the next section.

3 When We Can Simulate Fittingness Constraints

There are apparently good reasons to think that *even if* something like RIGHTNESS NORM of Φ-ASSERTION is correct, we'll still need something like FITTINGNESS NORM of Φ-ASSERTION. Assertion seems epistemically and not merely practically or morally constrained. I'll try to show two things: first, the rightness theory I presented can account for epistemic constraints; and

second, assertion is far more of a special case than it might have seemed.

As I said, assertion seems to be epistemically constrained, independent of practical

considerations that would otherwise warrant conveying particular pieces of information. Some

think that asserting *p* requires knowledge, or that the assertion express that knowledge.[24] Even

those who reject any version of the knowledge norm still think that assertion is epistemically

constrained. A complete theory of the norms of assertion should explain those constraints, in

particular by explaining this sort of data:[25]

• Lotteries. If I buy a ticket from an *n*-person lottery knowing there will be exactly one winner,

then so long as this is all I know about the lottery, it is inappropriate for me to say that I have lost

the lottery even though the probability that I have lost can be arbitrarily close to 1. One

explanation is that I cannot know that I have lost, another is that I cannot justifiably believe I

have, and there are still others.

• Convertibility. 'I can't say' and 'I don't know' seem pragmatically equivalent.

• Prompting and Challenging. One way for me to ask whether *p* is to ask whether my interlocutor

knows whether *p*. One way for me to challenge my interlocutor's claim that *p* is to ask whether

they know that *p*.

If there are epistemic constraints on belief-assertion, then perhaps *any* theory of communicative

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[24] See, e.g., Turri [2011].

[25] I have left out *Moore's paradox*, i.e., that while assertions of the form ⌜ φ and I don't [believe/know] φ ⌝ might be
true, they cannot be appropriate. I did so because I think the problem arises from Moorean *beliefs*. See, e.g.,
Sorensen [1988] and Coliva [2015] for discussion.

propriety ought to account for fittingness constraints—that there is something inappropriate about communicating an unfitting mental state. FITTINGNESS NORM OF Φ-ASSERTION would, then, be inferred as a generalization from the fact that there are epistemic constraints on assertion. Why should belief be special in this regard?

I will show two things: that the rightness theory, using the NON-DOMINATION NORMs, can, under certain conditions, entail the knowledge norm; and that belief *is* special in a way that blocks the generalization step.

Suppose my evidence makes ϕ extremely probable (e.g., we're in a lottery case), but where I don't have the right kind of evidence to *warrantedly believe* that ϕ. Williamson [2000: 248] says: "Probabilistic evidence warrants only assertion that something is probable." For any assertion ϕ, our language provides a number of probabilistically hedged alternatives, e.g., ⌜ Probably ϕ ⌝, or ⌜ It's likely that ϕ ⌝, or where specific numbers can be attached as in a standard lottery case, ⌜ ϕ is 1/n likely ⌝. These come to mind so easily, and augment an utterance's length so insignificantly, that they will be members of ALT (ϕ). They have no drawbacks relative to asserting ϕ on any natural way of filling out the case. They are similar enough to assertions of ϕ that they license almost all the same behavior. Will these probabilistic versions also have relative advantages?

They will, at least in ordinary cases. They will not communicate the *belief that* ϕ. Suppose that a person who believes that p due to testimony can have warrant for *p* only if the testifier had warrant for *p*. So, if I communicated that ϕ, I would give my interlocutor an unwarranted belief that ϕ. Now, if an individual *ought not* to believe that ϕ, then it is in their interest—and thus in the interlocutors' mutual interest—not to believe that ϕ. I assume that when

S would lack warrant to believe that p, then S ought not to believe that p. There are many

possible explanations of why it is that an individual ought not to have unwarranted beliefs, and I

won't pick between them. It follows that it is in our interlocutors' mutual interests that the

addressee not believe that ϕ. ϕ is interest-dominated by probabilistic hedges.[26] This is an

epistemic constraint: the reason they ought not to believe that ϕ is epistemic. *What* epistemic

norm we ultimately get by this procedure depends on what makes a belief unwarranted. If you

think that a belief is warranted only if it constitutes knowledge,[27] then this process gets you the

familiar knowledge norm. From this perspective, the intramural disputes between epistemic

theorists about norms of assertion boils down to whether only knowledgeable beliefs are

warranted.

The assumption about testimony is false, with interesting results. The assumption about

testimony is false, with interesting results. If someone who doesn't know or warrantedly believe

ϕ asserts ϕ and makes her addressees warranted in believing that ϕ, her assertion seems

permissible. If a creationist high school teacher perfectly conveys the theory of evolution and the

evidence that supports it to her students, it seems appropriate for her to do so.[28] Rightness

theories are, as I said, speaker *and* hearer-focused, unlike fittingness theories. So, while

fittingness theories struggle with the counterexamples to that assumption, rightness theories do

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[26] Note that ⌜ Probably φ ⌝ and the others can express and communicate warranted beliefs. See, e.g., Moss
[forthcoming].

[27] See, e.g., Sutton [2007], Bach [2008], and perhaps Williamson [2000].

[28] For these counterexamples to the assumption, see Lackey [2007].

not.

I have, then, explained lotteries—schematically, because I haven't said what epistemic warrant requires. If warrant requires knowledge we have a knowledge norm of assertion. Asking a question will normally make it common knowledge that it is in the mutual interests of the interlocutors that the questioner receive an answer. What reason could a speaker have for *not* giving an answer? Given implicit understanding of the work of the previous two paragraphs, it will be clear to both interlocutors that the only reason for withholding the answer, in typical cases, will be that the speaker has doubts about whether they know, or warrantedly believe, an answer. Of course, in *some* cases 'I can't say' or 'I can't tell' is *not* interchangeable with 'I don't know'. If you indicate that you've been sworn to secrecy, the former are felicitous but not the latter. But those are cases where it's clear the interlocutors' receiving an answer is *not* in their mutual interests. The rightness theorist is in a *better* position to explain convertibility than a fittingness knowledge norm theorist.

Finally, return to prompts and challenges. Why should I be able to elicit information by asking whether my interlocutor *knows* that φ? If I ask that, the answer must advance my or my interlocutor's interests somehow; but it is unlikely that simply knowing whether you know whether φ is enough—if I cared about that, I would also typically care about the answer. Some-times we can make it clear we only want to know whether they know whether φ, like with a survey where what matters is whether they think they know whether φ. None of this appeals to

any specific norms, but in this case, I don't think we need to. Challenges, on the other hand, do. If you say that ϕ, and ϕ seems to me dubious or without sufficient evidential warrant, I can challenge you on that basis, just because, as I argued above, it is typically wrong to communicate that ϕ without sufficient evidential warrant.

There is other data in the knowledge norm's favor I bracket for space. For now I've supported the following claim: the rightness theorist needn't posit a special fittingness norm to account for lotteries, etc. We can't pull similar maneuvers with other kinds of Φ-assertions, but we don't have to, since the generalization step in the argument was far too quick.

I've argued that for any assertion ϕ, there is a nearby hedged version, e.g., $\ulcorner$ Probably, ϕ $\urcorner$ that interest-dominates ϕ. $\ulcorner$ Probably, ϕ $\urcorner$ communicates an attitude very much like the belief that ϕ, but a warranted one. In general, ALT (ϕ) will have sentences in it that interest-dominate ϕ when the belief that ϕ is or would be unwarranted, because the attitudes they communicate are so similar to the belief that ϕ.[29] The important point is that *this is a special feature of belief and assertion*. It is in general not true that, where uttering σ in c would constitute a Φ-assertion, there are members of ALT (σ) such that uttering one of them in c would constitute the a Ψ-assertion, with Ψ suitably related to Φ. Return to Bryan's (1):

(1) Where's the beef?

It isn't fitting for Bryan or for his addressees to be amused by (1). But there is in general no $\sigma \in$ ALT ((1)) that would communicate amusement. We have no appropriate expectation

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[29] E.g., if Moss and others like Yalcin [2012] are right, they communicate the *high credence* that φ.

that someone who makes a bad joke also consider making a good joke. Good jokes require creativity, effort, and luck; hedged versions of φ don't. What looked like a general constraint on Φ-assertions is peculiar to belief, since any belief we might like to communicate has nearby hedged versions of that belief that are more likely warranted and that we can fairly expect people to have had in mind as alternatives to what they said. There are obvious repairs to lottery assertions (and lottery beliefs), but there are no obvious repairs to bad jokes. This is why it looks like assertion obeys a fittingness norm like the knowledge norm and amusement- assertion doesn't. On the present picture, every kind of Φ-assertion falls under the same norms, and the systematic differences in propriety between the different kinds of Φ-assertions arise from how their associated alternative sets work.

Even if there are epistemic constraints on the propriety of assertion, we should not expect there to be general fittingness constraints on Φ-assertion for other sorts of Φ. This blocks the generalization step of the argument above. The propriety of using σ to make a Φ-assertion will often depend on structural features of ALT (σ). Where it is easy to improve on fittingness while communicating a Φ-like attitude, we should find that not improving on fittingness is bad or marked. To confirm this picture, I will now investigate whether that happens.

Expressives like 'damn' and 'bastard' express or communicate an attitude to some content, typically the content the speaker herself expresses:

(8) My damn dog ate my homework again!

(9) That bastard John stole my car!

(8)'s speaker expresses their negative affect toward their dog in response to the dog's eating their homework. (9)'s speaker expresses negative affect toward John as in part a response to John's having stolen the speaker's car. Following Potts (2007), expressives behave as follows:

• They are independent from the regular descriptive content of the utterance.

• They concern something of the utterance situation (rather than a past or counterfactual situation).

• They arise from the speaker's own perspective.

• They are resistant to descriptive paraphrase.

• They are performative (i.e., do their job just by being uttered).

• They intensify with repeated use.

Sometimes expressives are used in order to communicate speakers' attitudes rather than just express them. Suppose I say the following:

(10) That politician is such a villain.

In saying (10), I aim to communicate my low opinion of the politician. My speech act was unsuccessful to some extent if you retain a high opinion of them. If my speech act was totally successful, I can *assume* we take the same attitude toward the politician:

(11) And given that she's such a villain, we have to start campaigning against him right now.

Expressives can be graded very finely. 'Darn', 'damn', and stronger expletives form a scale of increasing negative intensity. They form something like a Horn scale. Other scales might be {'jerk', 'bastard', 'villain', ...} and {'cool', 'awesome', ...}.[30] So, where e is an expressive in σ,

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[30] See Potts [2007].

ALT (σ) will often be very rich, just as with normal assertions. We can use expressives to test the generalizations from my discussion of belief and assertion, i.e., that fittingness constraints arise from alternative sets with rich enough structure.

Suppose what prompts me to say (10) is that the politician in question released an attack ad on her opponent. Negative advertising isn't *that* bad. It might make her a jerk, but not a villain. If the speaker wanted to communicate her disdain, she should have used:

(12) That politician's a jerk!

(12) expresses a more fitting attitude given the speaker's evidence. The addressee ought not to have an unfitting attitude toward the speaker, especially an unfitting negative attitude. Thus it seems to interest-dominate (10). The speaker should have said (12) rather than (10), then, and that is why (10) sounds bad. This is another fittingness constraint that arises without an explicit fittingness norm, simply because the set of expressives has a rich, gradational structure.

I've argued that a natural way of saying when a Φ-assertion is wrong, combined with a framework invoking salient alternatives, can capture the data that motivate fittingness theories. This framework makes rightness a function of the interlocutors' interests and the options the speaker should have considered. That's in general no different from any other sort of action. We can see how *fittingness* constraints, e.g., epistemic constraints, can arise from a general moral framework.

4 When Fittingness Is No Constraint

 I'll now give some sufficient conditions for the *absence* of fittingness constraints on Φ-assertions.

Bryan's (1) was an example of when a Φ-assertion was appropriate despite communicating unfitting amusement. The joy in something totally mundane that one prisoner communicated to the other was another. I already sketched one explanation of why (1) was not inappropriate: ALT ((1)) does not have anything that would be fittingly amusing. Good jokes are not determined by algorithms that contribute most elements of ALT. So there are likely no *good* jokes in ALT ((1)). There might be sometimes: if Bryan had nearly told a good joke, but messed up the punchline, perhaps the good joke is in ALT. But those types of cases are performance errors for which criticism seems unfair.

Amusement and joy are not only attitudes that might or might not be fitting, but also ones most people have interests in having. They're attitudes we have "state-given reasons" for, even if these reasons don't rationalize having those attitudes. Happiness, amusement, etc. work like that. Others we have intrinsic interests in not having, like sadness. Finally there are instrumentally useful ones we have no general state-given reason to have or not, e.g., belief. These are first *positive*, *negative*, and *neutral* attitudes, respectively.[31] It is, *ceteris paribus*, in interlocutors' mutual interests that they be amused or joyful, against their mutual interests that they be sad, and neither that they have a given belief.

I conjecture that a Φ-assertion made to S by uttering σ will not have associated fittingness

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[31] This distinction is very old: Aristotle's *Rhetoric* distinguishes between attitudes accompanied by pleasure and pain. The 'state-given' terminology comes from Parfit [2001].

constraints if it meets the following conditions:

i. Φ is a kind of positive attitude.

ii. There is no $\sigma' \in$ ALT (σ) such that σ' were one to communicate Φ with σ' to S, S would have Φ more fittingly than S would when Φ is communicated to S with σ, and it would not be wrong to communicate Φ to S with σ'.

I base this conjecture on two things: the goodness of having a positive attitude, and the contrastive nature of communicative propriety. The thought is that an attitude's unfittingness typically has a minimal effect on one's overall interests, and that an attitude's positivity will *outweigh* its lack of fittingness when there is no salient alternative available to the speaker with which the speaker could fittingly communicate that positive attitude. Not everyone will agree with me that unfittingness makes a small difference to an agent's interests. It is difficult to argue about that sort of claim, so I just invite those who disagree to consider Bryan's (1) again: do they *really* think that the unfunniness of the joke compares very much to the value of the amusement as far as the interlocutors' interests go? I don't think they are at all comparable.

The NON-DOMINATION NORMS were not sufficient conditions for communicative propriety, just necessary ones. But I think any plausible way of strengthening them into sufficient conditions would preserve the goodness of the reasoning in the previous paragraph. An overall utility or an expected utility norm would validate it, as would many norms intermediate be-tween them and the NON-DOMINATION NORMS. Though I do think of the conditions' sufficiency as a conjecture, it seems plausible for these reasons and because of the cases in section 1.

Objection. In section 1, the speakers didn't knowingly communicate unfitting attitudes. Bryan was amused by the bad joke. But isn't there something wrong with intentionally communicating an unfitting attitude, even a positive one? Take the following case:

> *Unfitting happiness*. Jorge does not take decreases in the unemployment rate to be cause
> for celebration; other indicators, he thinks, are better guides to how we should feel. But
> he thinks Parisa, who *does* take it to be a good indicator of economic health, could use
> cheering up after a rough period. He makes the following excitement-assertion:
>
> (13) How wonderful! The unemployment rate is down this month!

It seems Jorge has done something impermissible in uttering (13), even though delight is positive. Perhaps knowing or intentional unfittingness is enough for impropriety.

Reply. There's something wrong with (13), but it's not that Jorge says something knowingly unfitting. (13) is *deceptive*: it makes Jorge sound like he has an attitude he doesn't, excitement at the decrease in the unemployment rate. True, (13) will not be interest-dominated, since excitement is a positive attitude. But misrepresenting one's attitudes can be a pretty bad harm, especially if Jorge and Parisa are close and she cares about honesty. The problem with (13) isn't the knowing lack of fittingness, but the presence of deception or manipulation. Those can be strong enough harms to outweigh whatever benefit Parisa gets from momentary excitement.

Consider an author who writes "inspirational" biographies of famous people overcoming adversity. If she caters to her audience, she might write some schlock that inspires her audience. This needn't be bad: they might not care whether *she* thinks they're inspiring. Whether or not these kinds of knowingly unfitting Φ-assertion cases are inappropriate seems to turn on what the

actual interests of the individuals involved are—how much they'd care about the speaker's misrepresenting themselves. This objection provides support for my account.

5 Conclusion

I've developed a rightness-based approach to communicative propriety, one that could simulate fittingness-based approaches when such approaches are correct. My account was contrastive and interest-based, a form of consequentialism applied to intentionally causing people to bear given attitudes *via* speech. I hope to have shown that we need not posit fittingness norms as theoretical primitives; we *shouldn't*, since such norms apply only under specific conditions. The account is also much more general than other accounts, applying to every kind of Φ-assertion.

Belief has had a large and distorting influence. The norms of expression to which it is subject are idiosyncratic; that fact has inhibited a full understanding of even where epistemic norms of assertion come from. I hope to have shown that work on communicative propriety requires looking carefully at a wide spectrum of attitudes, even when just belief is at issue.

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