First Person Wisdom Ascriptions

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Abstract: This paper examines the oddity of first-person wisdom ascriptions, such as "I am wise." While individuals may possess wisdom, self-ascriptions of wisdom appear infelicitous in ordinary discourse. I argue that the explanation of this phenomenon lies in the epistemic structure of wisdom itself. I defend the claim that wisdom is non-luminous: a wise agent lacks higher-order knowledge that she possesses the knowledge required for wisdom, largely because wisdom involves humility, open-mindedness, and sensitivity to one's cognitive limitations. These traits generate a form of higher-order ignorance about one's own wisdom-related knowledge. Drawing on the norms of assertion, particularly a rational norm requiring justified belief for rationally permissible assertion, I argue that a wise agent lacks the justification needed to assert that she is wise, thus explaining why first-person wisdom ascriptions sound deviant.

Keywords: humility, justified belief, norms of assertion, self-knowledge, wisdom.

I. Introduction

Wisdom is typically taken as a virtue that is intimately connected to wellbeing or living well (e.g., Grimm 2015; Kekes 1983, 2020; Nozick 1989; Whitcomb 2011; Tsai 2022). In Plato's *The Apology* (20e-23c) Socrates reports that he and his friend Chaerephon visited the Delphic Oracle where Chaerephon asked the Oracle if anyone is wiser than Socrates. To this the Oracle answered that Socrates is the wisest person. The Delphic Oracle speaks only the truth, and so, it is indeed true that Socrates is wise. However, Socrates was puzzled by this answer. He believed that there are many people who are known for their expert knowledge and wisdom which he himself claims to lack.

That a genuinely wise person like Socrates finds it hard to ascribe wisdom to himself, is echoed in the general infelicitous nature of first-person wisdom ascriptions. Consider the following sentences:

(1) # I am wise.

(2) # I am a wise judge.

Imagine someone says (1) or (2) to you. What would be your response? Well, whatever it might be, you would not take the utterance seriously. If the utterer is a normal person you know, your first reaction would perhaps be just that she is joking. In any case, irrespective of whoever utters such a statement, it is hard to take such a statement seriously for a normal hearer even if the hearer knows that the utterer is in fact wise – the hearer would just dismiss them as jocular or

nonsensical. Similarly, it is unnatural when, in the first-person, we use 'wise' with modifiers as well:

(3) # I am very wise.

(4) # I am a very wise judge.

(5) # I am a fairly wise judge.

This infelicity persists even when we use 'wise' in conjunction with, say, other virtue-terms in the first person:

(6) # I am honest, hardworking, and wise.

(7) # I am an honest, hardworking, and wise judge.

This is not to give an exhaustive list of how 'wise' and its cognates are used in first-person ways.[1] However, it is hard to see how in normal contexts any first-person wisdom ascriptions could be taken seriously. But the underlying nature of this phenomenon needs to be unearthed since it is linguistically rather unusual that an agent possesses a certain property and ascribing that property to herself is oddly self-defeating.[2]

This paper attempts to explain this oddity. I demonstrate that the deviant nature of first-person wisdom ascriptions could be traced to wisdom's intimate relationship with knowledge. My argument is that ascriptions like (1)-(7) are unnatural because the wise agent is ignorant[3] about the knowledge of living well that is necessary for her to be wise. I argue that such ascriptions are odd because utterances of such ascriptions violate a certain norm of assertion.

[1] Some first-person usages of wisdom are still felicitous. They, however, do not concern us here. For instance, interrogative first-person usages of wisdom, like "Am I wise?", sound fine. Direct questions, however, are not ascriptions. Another felicitous first-person usage of wisdom would be in a sentence like "It would be wise on my part to not confront her right now." Here, however, wisdom is not applied to the agent, the utterer; it is applied to the potential action that the utterer can perform, i.e., it would be a wise thing to do if the utterer maintains the status quo of not confronting her at the moment. Our examples only deal with wisdom as a character trait of the utterer.

[2] There are some other examples of course. For instance, self-ascriptions of humility like "I am humble" seems similarly self-defeating, and in many contexts even ascribing beauty to oneself may sound odd. For discussions, see Driver (2004, ch. 2), Robinson (2020), and Hughes (2024).

[3] Currently there is a debate surrounding the nature of ignorance. The defenders of the so-called Standard View take ignorance to be the absence of knowledge (e.g., Goldman and Olsson 2009; Le Morvan 2013). On the other hand, defenders of the so-called New View take ignorance to be the absence of mere true belief (e.g., Brogaard 2016; Peels 2010). The outcome of this debate, however, shall not concern us here as in this paper I am taking 'ignorance' merely to mean an absence of knowledge. Thus, any instance of absence of true belief will *a fortiori* also count as ignorance (as we take it here) given that knowledge entails true belief.

II. Humility and Pragmatics

Before developing my account, it is worth considering some seemingly natural explanations of the oddity of wisdom self-ascriptions. These appeal, respectively, to the constitutive role of humility in wisdom, and the pragmatics of ordinary conversation. I argue that, while each captures important aspects of the phenomenon, none adequately explains it.

a. Humility

One may think that an easy explanation to why wisdom self-ascriptions are self-defeating is that they are boastful utterances. Wisdom is a cognitive achievement and making self-ascriptions of such achievements amounts to boastfulness. Humility is typically taken as a constitutive virtue of wisdom (e.g., Tiberius 2016, Baehr 2019). Since humility is a constitutive virtue of wisdom and boastful utterances betray a lack of humility, therefore someone who ascribes wisdom to oneself cannot be wise. Relatedly, one could also think of assimilating first-person wisdom ascriptions to the familiar paradox of humility. Philosophers have observed that assertions such as "I am humble" appear self-undermining (e.g., Driver 2004; Robinson 2020; Hughes 2024). The act of asserting one's own humility, paradoxically, seems itself to display precisely the kind of self-regard that humility excludes. Once again, since humility is taken as a constitutive virtue of wisdom, one might think that the oddity of first-person wisdom ascriptions is simply derivative of this more general paradox. The thought here is that, if sincere self-ascriptions of humility are defective, then self-ascriptions of wisdom should be likewise defective, insofar as wisdom constitutively incorporates humility. On this proposal, there is no requirement for seeking a distinct explanation of first-person wisdom ascriptions; their oddity is an extension of the paradox of first-person humility ascriptions.

In response, firstly, it is not clear that self-ascriptions of wisdom should be taken as boastful utterances, at least in every context. Suppose Michael Phelps says something like, "No one has won even ten gold medals in Olympics; I have won twenty-three of them." This seems like a paradigmatic example of boastful utterance. Now, one thing to think of such utterances is that, inter alia, the utterer compares her achievements to those of others and takes their own (or ones they are representing) achievements in a more heightened sense relative to others (whether justifiably or not). Even in non-paradigmatic examples, say, where a father boasts "My daughter dances really well," one may think of some such comparisons, but implicitly – perhaps here the father compares his daughter to her cousins or those in her dancing class. However, that may not always be the case. Suppose an immunology professor winning the Nobel Prize for developing a certain vaccine is invited to a news channel to debate with a random internet anti-vaxxer, and after hearing what the anti-vaxxer has to say, she introduces herself saying something like, "I am one of the most prominent experts in this area, and

what my opponent mentions is entirely incorrect." I do not think that this will count as boasting even though this is a case where she compares herself with others in the area and has a heightened sense of her achievements relative to others. Similarly, think of an instance where someone in a dire situation in their life approaches a wise person for advice. The wise person listens carefully and, realising how anxious she is, says something like the following just to ease her anxiety without any intention of boasting: "You have come to the right place for advice. I am a wise man who has helped a lot of others in similar situations, and they have left with a lot of ease and clarity after speaking to me." This is a case where the wisdom self-ascription sounds odd too, but by stipulation it is not a boastful utterance. Accordingly, boastfulness fails to account for the oddity of wisdom self-ascriptions. In any case, it seems rather arbitrary that one should be accused of boasting only while making wisdom self-ascriptions. For instance, even understanding is a cognitive achievement, but generally we do not take someone to be boasting when they claim to understand something, and a wise agent claiming to understand a situation also does not take wisdom away from her.

Secondly, even if we take wisdom self-ascriptions as boastful utterances, why think that they are also instances of arrogance – which I shall take to be the antithesis of humility. One could well say that these are cases of what could be called *proper pride* – a proper understanding of one's identity, worth, dignity, abilities and so on (see Hacker 2018, ch. 5; Tanesini 2021). Thus, when the immunologist says that she is one of the most prominent experts in the area, she demonstrates a proper understanding of her knowledge, skills, and achievements in vaccine development and also her importance as a professor of the subject and a Nobel laureate, i.e., as an authority in the area, given the context of the televised debate. Similarly, even though the father's utterance regarding her daughter is boastful, it does not seem to be a case of arrogance; he has a proper sense of all the hard work she has gone through to bring herself to the position of being a good dancer – something that a parent can take pride in without being arrogant about it. An arrogant person would disregard others' feedback or ignore or dismiss others' counterevidence and so on (e.g., Tanesini 2016, 2018). However, the immunologist can continue to remain respectful to her colleagues' criticisms of her research and the father can encourage her daughter to work on the feedback from her teachers to become an even better dancer – all these would be characteristic of someone with intellectual humility. Similarly, one can think that even though utterances like (1)-(7) might be actually boastful, it could at the same time also be merely instances of proper pride – a proper sense of where one stands relative to the goals of living well (see Grimm 2015, 144-5) – and not a lack of humility uncharacteristic of wisdom.

Regarding the humility paradox, the paradox concerns the apparent self-undermining character of attributing humility to oneself. By contrast, our question here is why wisdom *itself* should exhibit a comparable first-person asymmetry. Appealing to the humility paradox alone merely shifts the explanatory

burden, for we are still left asking why humility has this consequence for wisdom, rather than for other intellectual virtues as well of which humility is a constituent. For instance, a number of philosophers take (intellectual) humility to be a constitutive virtue of open-mindedness (e.g., Adler 2004; Riggs 2010). Yet, a self-ascription like "I am open-minded about *X*" is not merely felicitous but is also a frequent and natural occurrence in everyday language. Now, philosophers typically try to explain away the humility paradox by treating the oddity of first-person humility ascriptions primarily as a feature of our conversational practices or our social evaluation of speakers (e.g., Robinson 2020; Hughes 2024). That, however, is not applicable to first-person wisdom ascriptions. Such explanations concern why hearers may interpret such utterances as boastful, arrogant, or otherwise inappropriate. But the limitation of applying those explanations to wisdom is that they would leave unexplained why wisdom *itself* appears to resist first-person attribution so systematically.

b. Pragmatics

One might therefore abandon the appeal to humility and instead seek an explanation in ordinary conversational pragmatics. According to Grice's (1989) influential account of conversation, speakers routinely communicate more than the literal semantic content of their utterances through conversational implicatures. In ordinary contexts, assertions such as (1)-(7) naturally invite hearers to infer that the speaker regards herself as possessing superior judgment or understanding. Such an implicature may strike the audience as socially inappropriate since conversational norms generally discourage unnecessary self-praise (e.g., Leech 1983; Brown and Levinson 1987). On this account, the infelicity of first-person wisdom ascriptions is fundamentally pragmatic; nothing about the proposition expressed is defective – rather, speakers avoid making such assertions because of the undesirable conversational implications they predictably generate.

There is something right about this proposal; it explains why hearers often react to first-person wisdom ascriptions with suspicion, amusement, or disbelief, even when the speaker is in fact wise. Nevertheless, the pragmatic explanation appears incomplete. Firstly, conversational implicatures are highly context sensitive. As discussed in section II.a., in appropriate circumstances speakers routinely attribute intellectual excellences to themselves without sounding infelicitous. For instance, someone may say, "I understand this proof," "I am an experienced judge," or "I am an expert in immunology." Although such remarks may occasionally be interpreted as immodest and boastful, they are ordinarily regarded as perfectly socially appropriate assertions. By contrast (and again, as observed before), first-person wisdom ascriptions appear to remain infelicitous even in contexts where there is no obvious conversational reason to regard them as self-aggrandising. If the phenomenon were merely a contingent feature of conversational etiquette, one would expect it to disappear in contexts where self-

praise is conversationally appropriate or irrelevant. But even when speakers have no intention of self-praise or self-aggrandisement, and even when the audience already recognises their wisdom, utterances such as (1)-(7) continue to sound infelicitous.

Importantly, the pragmatic account merely explains why hearers are inclined to interpret first-person wisdom ascriptions as self-aggrandising or socially awkward. However, this is not the phenomenon that requires explanation. The central question is not just why *hearers* react negatively to utterances such as (1)-(7), but, as seen from Socrates' story, why a wise agent *herself* seems unable to make such an assertion appropriately. A pragmatic account characterises the conversational effects of the utterance, whereas my concern is with the epistemic conditions under which the utterance could be rationally made. Even if conversational norms were somehow altered so that self-praise no longer carried negative implicatures, it would remain to be explained whether a wise person could justifiably assert that she is wise. Accordingly, the account that I advance below should not be understood as denying the role of conversational conventions, but as explaining the deeper epistemic features of wisdom that make those conversational norms appropriate.

III. Wisdom is Non-Luminous

Elsewhere, I (Nath 2026) have argued that wisdom is non-luminous, i.e., a wise agent does not know that she is wise. Towards this, I observed that if an agent comes to know that she is wise, she will lose certain virtues which are constitutive of wisdom, and thus, will lose wisdom. The specific constituent virtue I discussed there was open-mindedness. But I think that this could be extended to humility as well. Now, a common intuition about wisdom is that wise agents are good advice givers – we tend to go to someone who is wise when we require deep insight into what we should do in difficult situations in life. However, when wise individuals give advice, they usually avoid presenting it as a strict prescription or a normative judgment. Instead, it tends to be expressed in a more open-ended form, typically as suggestions or recommendations rather than firm directives or something similar (see Staudinger and Baltes 1996, 762; Fleming 2016, 183-6). This is partly because wise agents are aware that their understanding of a situation may be shaped and limited by their own biases, assumptions, and values. Consequently, even though they may know that a particular advice will promote the advisee's wellbeing, they will not be certain about it. This uncertainty allows them to remain both humble and open-minded – two characteristic virtues of wise agents (see Zagzebski 1996; Tiberius 2016). Humility inclines them to be less self-focused such that they are aware of and are sensitive to their various cognitive and other limitations and thus, know that their advice may not be the best advice in the situation. Open-mindedness, on the other hand, inclines them to be aware of and be sensitive to alternative perspectives or ways that may also lead to the advisee's wellbeing. In other words, given that a wise agent is both humble and open-

minded, she is uncertain about the advice she gives, and accordingly it makes sense that their advices are more open ended and in terms of recommendations rather than prescriptive or normative judgments.

But what would happen if a wise agent came to know that she is wise? In such cases, she would be fully confident that hers is the best advice. This entails that she is no longer sensitive to her cognitive limitations and alternate ways that may lead to the advisee's wellbeing, such that in a large number of cases where giving wise advice depends on whether the agent considers her limitations and alternative ways and perspectives, she will not be able to give wise advice. In other words, her epistemic and pragmatic dispositions will be manifested in some forms of arrogance and dogmatism which are not characteristic of wisdom, and therefore she cannot be wise. Accordingly, wisdom requires that one does not know that she is wise. Now, if we follow the standard view in philosophy that knowledge of living well is necessary for wisdom (e.g., Kekes 1983, 2020; Nozick 1989; Whitcomb 2011; Grimm 2015; Nath forthcoming), then a wise agent does not have the higher-order knowledge of the body of knowledge that is necessary to make her wise.

IV. Explaining the Oddity

Let us try to gain some insight into norms of assertion. Williamson argues that the so-called Knowledge Norm of Assertion (*K-Assertion*) – that one must assert only what one knows – is a constitutive norm of assertion (Williamson 2000, ch. 11). He observes two points about constitutive norms. Firstly, that there is a certain sense of necessity involved in it such that,

> …if it is a constitutive rule that one must φ, then it is necessary that one must φ. More precisely, a rule will count as constitutive of an act only if it is essential to that act: necessarily, the rule governs every performance of the act. (Williamson 2000, 239)

Thus, following Williamson if we espouse *K-Assertion*, then an agent *S* must assert a proposition *p* only if *S* knows that *p*. But secondly, he also argues that constitutive norms are not necessary in the sense that they "lay down necessary conditions for performing the constituted act." (Williamson 2000, 240) That is to say, even though an agent may break a constitutive rule, she does not thereby stops performing the speech act – it would be a defective assertion of course, but an assertion nonetheless.[4] Thus, suppose that *S* asserts *p* without knowing that *p*. In such a case, *S* violates *K-Assertion*. However, despite this violation, *S* does not fail to assert *p*. This is because constitutive rules merely guide the agents in performing the constitutive actions under conditions in which it is appropriate to

[4] This can be likened to instances where players break the rules of the game but do not stop playing the game in virtue of it. For example, footballers break the off-side rule all the time, but they do not thereby stop playing football.

perform the actions. Let us discuss this point in a bit more detail. Take the following two examples:

> (*Fake Zebra*): Suppose that I am in an African safari and at a certain distance I see some zebras grazing. The safari guide asks me how many zebras I see. My cognitive faculties are performing normally. I count the zebras and say, "There are five zebras." However, unbeknownst to me, there were only four zebras; the fifth one was only a mule cleverly painted to look like a zebra.
>
> (*Tom's Twin*): I see a man walk into the library and remove a book from the library by concealing it beneath his coat. Since I am sure the man is Tom, whom I have often seen before when he attended my classes, I report to the office saying, "Tom has removed the book." However, in reality, it was Tom's identical twin of whom I was unaware of.

Now, in both these cases I believe and utter something false. Accordingly, since knowledge entails true belief, I do not know the propositions that I asserted. In *Fake Zebra* I do not know that there are five zebras as there are only four zebras with the fifth animal being merely a cleverly painted mule to look like a zebra. Similarly, in *Tom's Twin* I do not know that the man who removed the book was Tom since it was actually Tom's identical twin. Given this, both the assertions violate *K-Assertion*. However, there seems to be nothing deviant about my utterances of those sentences. Why is that the case? It is simply because, despite me lacking knowledge of the propositions represented by those assertions, my asserting them is justified – the mule looked no different from the zebra and Tom's twin looked no different from Tom.

But we may think that one can be blameless in believing a false proposition and still not be justified in asserting it as justification and blamelessness may not entail each other. As Williamson (forthcoming) observes, "In killing a child who suddenly runs out into the road, a driver may be blameless without being justified." Now, Williamson may indeed be correct in terms of the way in which the term 'justified' is used in practical contexts, however, in post-Gettier epistemology philosophers view terms like 'justification' to track a certain kind of epistemic blamelessness (e.g., Bonjour 1985) and that is how I shall use the term here. Take the *Fake Zebra* case. Assume that the guide knows that there are only four zebras, and that the fifth one is a cleverly painted mule. Suppose that when I assert "There are five zebras," he replies by saying, "Are you sure there are five zebras?" This might make me doubt my assertion. But in all likelihood, I might merely suspect that my counting has gone wrong and might come to realise that the fifth animal is a mule only when, say, I go near the mule, touch it, and see the paint sticking to my fingers. In such a case I was blameless in asserting that there were five zebras. Given that the painting on the mule to deceive viewers was a job very well done, I had no reasonable doubt in believing that there are five zebras – it was rational for me to believe that. Similarly for *Tom's Twin*. Suppose that, after it came to light that it was Tom's twin brother who stole the book, the office summoned me to question if I gave Tom's name merely to defame him. In such a case, the following

defence on my behalf would be fair: "Look, the distance from which I saw him, he looked exactly like Tom – his face, his height, his built, everything. Plus, I had no idea that he has a brother who is his identical twin. It was only reasonable for me to believe that he was Tom." Given this (and assuming that I am trustworthy and the people in the office are reasonable), the office would consider me blameless of the charge that I took Tom's name merely to defame him. Thus, in both these cases I break the *K-Assertion* norm, and therefore I would take them back once I realise that what I said was false, but I would still be justified in asserting the statements as I am not epistemically blameworthy as described above. Given this, it could be said that justified belief is necessary for rational assertion, thus allowing us to formulate the following norm:

> (*JB-Assertion*): It is rationally permissible for *S* to assert that *p*, only if *S* justifiably believes that *p*.

Now, if an agent utters a sentence ascribing wisdom to oneself, like (1)-(7), then she thinks that she knows about living well (in accordance with the standard view that if one is wise, then one know about living well). Accordingly, any rational agent would be in a position to know that the proposition that she is wise entails that she knows about living well. And since a wise agent is sufficiently conceptually competent, she would understand that ascribing wisdom to herself would involve believing that she knows about living well. But given our discussion so far, since a wise agent demonstrates humility and is open-minded about various wisdom related subject matters of living well, she is not justified in believing that she possesses the knowledge of that body of living well necessary to make her wise. Given this, as predicted by *JB-Assertion*, the wise person lacks the justification to believe that she is wise because she lacks the belief that she has the requisite knowledge for wisdom – by her own lights, she does not know the wisdom relevant claims. But as justified belief is a necessary condition for rational assertion by *JB-Assertion*, and since the wise agent does not justifiably believe that she is wise, she is not in a position to assert that she is wise. This, thus, explains why self-ascriptions of wisdom are deviant.

V. Conclusion

In this paper I set out to explain the puzzling infelicity of first-person wisdom ascriptions like (1)-(7), which sound oddly self-defeating in ordinary discourse. I argued that this phenomenon cannot be adequately explained by appealing to the idea that such utterances are simply boastful and incompatible with humility, or to some conversational conventions. While humility is often associated with wisdom, self-ascriptions of wisdom need not always involve arrogance or improper pride, and therefore boastfulness and lack of humility alone cannot account for their oddity. Similarly, although conversational norms help explain why hearers perceive first-person wisdom ascriptions as odd, they cannot explain the deeper epistemic fact that a wise person herself is not in a position to make

such assertions rationally. Instead, I offered an epistemic explanation of the phenomenon by tracing the oddity to the epistemic structure of wisdom itself. I defended the claim that wisdom is non-luminous: a wise agent lacks higher-order knowledge that she possesses the body of knowledge necessary for wisdom. Because wisdom involves intellectual virtues such as humility and open-mindedness, a wise agent remains aware of her own cognitive limitations and the possibility of alternative perspectives. This results in a form of higher-order ignorance regarding her own epistemic standing with respect to her knowledge of living well. When this epistemic condition is combined with the rational norm of assertion *JB-Assertion* – according to which an agent may assert a proposition only if she justifiably believes it – it follows that a wise agent lacks the justification required to assert that she is wise. Hence, the wise agent herself is not in a position to make assertions like (1)-(7), thus explaining why first-person wisdom ascriptions appear deviant.

If this account is correct, its significance extends beyond the linguistic phenomenon with which the paper began. It has implications for virtue epistemology by suggesting that at least some intellectual virtues are constitutively non-luminous to their possessors. Possessing an intellectual virtue need not place an agent in a position to know, or even justifiably believe, that she possesses it. In the case of wisdom, this lack of higher-order access is not an accidental limitation or a consequence of cognitive deficiency; rather, it is partly a product of the very intellectual excellences that constitute wisdom. Intellectual humility and open-mindedness, far from facilitating transparent self-knowledge of one's own epistemic standing, require the wise agent to remain responsive to the possibility of error, overlooked evidence, and alternative perspectives. My account, therefore, challenges assumptions that epistemic excellence is invariably accompanied by privileged reflective access to one's own epistemic excellences.

My argument also bears on broader debates concerning self-knowledge. Much of the literature on self-knowledge has focused on first-order mental states such as beliefs, intentions, and perceptual experiences, or on the transparency of attitudes. My discussion highlights a different kind of limitation: the possibility that higher-order self-knowledge may be constrained not by a failure of rationality, but by the demands of epistemic virtue itself. If wisdom is non-luminous, then there are constitutive limits on what even ideal epistemic agents can know about their own epistemic standing. More generally, my suggestion is that the relationship between intellectual virtue and self-knowledge is more complex than is often assumed – rather than treating reflective access as a mark of epistemic excellence, philosophers may need to recognise that, in some cases, intellectual excellence itself places limits on higher-order self-knowledge. Whether a similar explanation extends to other intellectual virtues remains a fertile question for future research.

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