

BIPARTITE ASSERTION
A NEW ACCOUNT OF ASSERTION, DEFINED IN TERMS
OF RESPONSIBILITY AND EXPLICIT PRESENTATION

by

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Abstract

Assertion is a speech act that stands at the intersection of the philosophy of language and social epistemology. It is a phenomenon that bears on such wide-ranging topics as testimony, truth, meaning, knowledge and trust. It is thus no surprise that analytic philosophers have devoted innumerable pages to assertion, trying to give the norms that govern it, its role in the transmission of knowledge, and most importantly, what assertion is, or how assertion is to be defined.

In this thesis I attempt to show that all previous answers to the question “What is assertion?” are flawed. There are four major traditions in the literature: constitutive norm theories of assertion, accounts that treat assertion as the expression of speaker attitudes, accounts that treat assertion as a proposal to add some proposition to the common ground, and accounts that treat assertion as the taking of responsibility for some claim. Each tradition is explored here, the leading theories within the tradition developed, and then placed under scrutiny to demonstrate flaws within the positions surveyed.

I follow the work of G.E. Moore and William P. Alston, whilst drawing on the work of Robert Brandom in order to give a new *bipartite* theory of assertion. I argue that assertion consists in the explicit presentation of a proposition, along with a taking of responsibility for that proposition. Taking Alston’s explicit presentation condition

and repairing it in order to deal with problems it faces, whilst combining it with Brandom's responsibility condition, provides, I believe, the best account of assertion.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Assertion is a speech act that stands at the intersection of the philosophy of language and social epistemology. It is a phenomenon that bears on such wide-ranging topics as testimony, truth, meaning, knowledge and trust. It is thus no surprise that analytic philosophers have devoted innumerable pages to assertion, trying to give the norms that govern it, its role in the transmission of knowledge, and most importantly, what assertion is, or how assertion is to be defined.

In this thesis I attempt to show that all previous answers to the question “What is assertion?” are flawed. There are four major traditions in the literature: constitutive norm theories of assertion, accounts that treat assertion as the expression of speaker attitudes, accounts that treat assertion as a proposal to add some proposition to the common ground, and accounts that treat assertion as the taking of responsibility for some claim. Each tradition is explored here, the leading theories within the tradition developed, and then placed under scrutiny to demonstrate flaws within the positions surveyed.

I follow the work of G.E. Moore and William P. Alston, whilst drawing on the work

of Robert Brandom in order to give a new *bipartite* theory of assertion. I argue that assertion consists in the explicit presentation of a proposition, along with a taking of responsibility for that proposition. Taking Alston's explicit presentation condition and repairing it in order to deal with problems it faces, whilst combining it with Brandom's responsibility condition, provides, I believe, the best account of assertion.

1.1 Alston's Requirements

William P. Alston suggests that any sufficient account of assertion ought to be able to do two things. First, it should tell us what assertion is not — it should individuate assertion. Second, it should tell us something positive about what assertion is — it should give us some idea about what it is to assert and give us some insight into the social practice of assertion. A definition that was merely extensionally correct would be interesting, but an extensionally correct definition that told us something about the nature of assertion would be much preferable.

The task of individuating assertion from other speech acts is a difficult one. Alston suggests two key questions regarding speech acts that are very similar to assertion that any satisfactory theory must answer in order to show that it correctly individuates assertion. First, what is it that distinguishes the expression of a psychological attitude from the assertion that one has that attitude? There seems to be a difference between saying “Ow!” and so expressing pain, and the assertion that one is in pain: “I am in pain now”. Any good theory of assertion should capture this, or risk collapsing the distinction between assertion and the expression of an attitude. Second, what is the distinction between what is asserted and what is presupposed? (Alston 2000 115). Suppose one says “The tiger is behind the third door on the left”. Here

there seems to be an important difference between two claims that are made by the utterance: that the tiger is behind the third door on the left and that there are (at least) three doors on the left. The former is what is asserted by the assertion, the latter is presupposed by the assertion.¹ Failing to capture the distinction between presupposition and assertion runs the risk of missing a useful distinction that we make in ordinary language, and giving rise to unintuitive consequences. In asserting that the cat is on the mat, for example, we would happily say that I presuppose that there exists a mat, yet we would be reticent to suggest that in uttering “The cat is on the mat” I assert that there is a mat.

Alston’s two considerations, and especially the two questions that fall out of the first consideration, will be in the background of much of my discussion in this thesis. I argue that the account of assertion that I develop adequately meets their demands.

1.2 What this Thesis is Not

Whilst assertion has been used in the context of the philosophical logic, in order to attempt to define meaning in terms of assertability conditions, I will not touch on that topic here. Nor will I engage with the use of assertion by logicians in their attempt to give a secure foundation for mathematics. Whilst these are interesting topics in their own right, in this thesis I aim to restrict discussion purely to the social practice of assertion.

Further, I operate under the assumption that there is such a thing as assertion. Thus I dismiss Herman Cappelen’s scepticism about assertion out of hand. For the

¹Note that this is not the only presupposition of the assertion, but rather one of (perhaps indefinitely) many presuppositions made by the speaker in asserting that the tiger is behind the third door on the left.

reader persuaded by his arguments (see Cappelen 2011) I simply remind them that his arguments are mainly aimed at constitutive norm theories of assertion, which I also reject, and that the norm pluralism I suggest in the last chapter of this thesis captures much that Cappelen wishes to argue for, without having to give up on the notion of assertion.²

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis should be seen as having a negative and positive aspect. First I show that all current theories of assertion are inadequate, second I develop a new theory of assertion, building on the successes of previous theories and avoiding their failures. The structure of the remainder of the thesis is as follows:

In Chapter Two I look at the leading and currently most fashionable approach to assertion, defining it in terms of a constitutive norm. I will suggest that theories defined in such terms are inadequate. Not only are such approaches poor definitions to begin with, the evidence that theorists in this school have gathered in attempting to demonstrate their theories is simply not sufficient to support them. Further, I will argue that constitutive norms do not individuate assertion, and that it is unclear how the thesis of constitutivity is supported.

In Chapter Three I argue that a more traditional approach to assertion, as the expression of a speaker attitude, which has its roots in Frege, is also a poor definition of assertion. I suggest that none of Bach and Harnish, Stephen Schiffer, nor even Frege himself have produced theories that are sufficient accounts of assertion. They fail to individuate assertion and face other objections that I elaborate in my rejection

²I also omit discussion of philosophers from outside of the analytic tradition.

of this approach.

In Chapter Four, I turn to Robert Stalnaker's attempts to characterise assertion in terms of the conversational score, rejecting both of his most recent attempts to elucidate the details of this theory, along with two variations on the theory put forward by Max Kölbel. These 'conversational score' accounts all fail to adequately respond to an objection by David Lewis, and I suggest objections to each theory individually.

Chapter Five sees me turn to an approach to assertion that characterises it in terms of taking responsibility for that which is asserted. This is a rich tradition stretching back to Peirce, but I focus almost exclusively on its most recent and well-developed iteration, as put forward by Robert Brandom. Whilst I eventually reject Brandom's account when taken in isolation, I suggest that it does have some virtues that I would like to preserve.

Chapter Six contains my positive theory of assertion, which I see as falling into a tradition I call 'bipartite' approaches to assertion. Bipartite accounts of assertion, as put forward by G.E. Moore and William P. Alston, incorporate some version of a responsibility condition (as discussed in the previous chapter) alongside some version of a representation condition. For Moore, this condition requires that the asserter attempt to convey that p . For Alston, it is an 'explicit presentation' condition. I argue that Alston takes the right approach, but gets the details wrong. I improve his explicit presentation condition in order to deal with an objection that I pose, and argue that his responsibility condition fails, and suggest replacing it with Brandom's responsibility condition. The resulting theory, I claim, is consistent and appropriately defines assertion, individuating it correctly from other speech acts. I then defend it against objections and show the benefits of such a theory.

In Chapter Seven I return to norms of assertion. Having dismissed constitutive norm accounts of assertion in chapter two, I suggest that an attractive position — pluralism regarding regulative norms of assertion — is available to me. This pluralism, I claim, allows for the investigation of a new form of epistemic injustice — assertive injustice. Finally I deal with a potential objection from constitutive norm theorists.

1.4 A Note on Abbreviations

Throughout this thesis I use a shorthand for the various aspects of assertion. U is to be read as some speaker, or utterer. H is to be read as some audience, or hearer. S is to be taken as a stand-in for some sentence or other utterance, whilst p should be taken as a stand-in for some proposition. L will stand for some language. Other abbreviations will be explained in the course of the thesis.

Chapter 2

Constitutive Norm Accounts

2.1 Introduction

Constitutive norm accounts of assertion are perhaps the most prominent theories of assertion in the contemporary literature. The first such theory was put forward by Timothy Williamson in his 1996 article “Knowing and Asserting” and was then tweaked slightly in his seminal *Knowledge and its Limits* (2000). Other accounts of this type have been defended by Jennifer Lackey (2007), Martin Montminy (2013), Matthew Weiner (2005), Keith DeRose (2002), Igor Douven (2006) and John Hawthorne (2004), to name but a few.

2.2 The C-Rule

More than simply claiming that there is a norm that, by convention, applies to all token assertions, constitutive norm accounts take it that a single norm gives us the *nature* of assertion. Moreover, for Williamson and others following him, the norm is

a necessary feature of assertion:

More precisely, a rule will count as constitutive of an act only if it is essential to the act: necessarily, the rule governs every performance of the act. (Williamson 2000 239).

Just as games proper, such as chess and cricket, are defined in terms of their rules, the game of assertion is defined by its rule — the norm of assertion. Thus one *cannot*, in such theorists' eyes, assert without that act being governed by the norm of assertion. Just as one would not be playing cricket were one to be playing a game governed by the rules of chess, so too one is not asserting unless one is 'playing the game' governed by the rule of assertion. As Williamson puts it,

Constitutive rules are not mere conventions. If it is a convention that one must ϕ , then it is contingent that one must ϕ ; conventions are arbitrary and can be replaced by alternative conventions. In contrast, if it is a constitutive rule that one must ϕ , then it is necessary that one must ϕ . (Williamson 2000 239).

According to Williamson, a norm of the following form defines assertion:

(The C rule) One must: assert that p only if C.

Put this way, this is a somewhat confusing definition, but Williamson helpfully spells it out in slightly more formal terms:

The rule is to be parsed as 'One must ((assert p) only if p has C)', with 'only if p has C' inside the scope of 'One must' but outside that of 'assert'. The rule unconditionally forbids this combination: one asserts p when p lacks C. (Williamson 2000 241).

Exactly what C is differs from account to account, but prominent suggestions from the literature include:

Reasonable to Believe Norm of Assertion (RTB-norm): Assert that p only if it is reasonable for one to believe that p and if one asserted that p, one would assert that p at least in part because it is reasonable for one to believe that p.¹

Truth Norm of Assertion (T-norm): Assert that p only if p is true.²

Knowledge Norm of Assertion (K-Norm): Assert that p only if you know that p.

Williamson himself defends the K-norm, and it is perhaps the most widely held of all constitutive norm views of assertion. Thus for this section I shall focus mainly on the K-norm, though my remarks later in this chapter will apply more broadly as problems for all constitutive norm accounts of assertion.

One might remark that the K-norm is obviously not constitutive of assertion. There are many cases of people asserting that p without knowing that p. Indeed, it would seem that the vast majority of assertions fall into this category, the speaker asserting with false beliefs, unjustified beliefs, or indeed no relevant belief at all.³ Naïvely read, Williamson's norm seems simply to be false, as there are lots of what we intuitively take to be assertions which break the K-norm.⁴ Williamson, however, has a powerful defence against such counterexamples. He begins by pointing out that

¹See Lackey 2007 for a defence of the RTB-norm.

²See Weiner 2005 for a defence of the T-norm.

³Indeed, we might even imagine a case in which a person falling victim to fake barn country asserted without knowledge.

⁴Counterexamples of this kind appear for all other constitutive norm accounts of assertion. They all therefore use Williamson's defence.

one can still be playing a game even if one breaks one of the rules of that game. Thus one may violate the rule of chess that white moves first and yet still be playing chess (though one would be open to criticism for such a violation) and so too in the case of assertion, one may violate the K-norm and still be counted as asserting, but one is, or at least should be, subject to criticism for so doing.

For Williamson, in mastering the speech act of assertion one implicitly grasps the K-norm (Williamson 2000 241). This, he claims, allows us to use our intuitions about the correctness or incorrectness of assertions as evidence as to the nature of the norm that governs assertion. For if we intuitively think that assertions where the K-norm is broken are improper and subject to criticism, and intuitively think that assertions where the K-norm is not broken are proper and not subject to criticism, given that we have an implicit grasp of the norm of assertion (whatever it may be) we have evidence that the norm of assertion is the K-norm.⁵

2.3 Williamson's Considerations

Williamson gives three considerations that he thinks tell in favour of the K-norm given this assumption — ‘Do you know that?’ challenges, lottery propositions, and the impropriety of Moorean assertions. Whilst there are objections (some of which I discuss briefly in footnotes below) to his claim that these phenomena support the K-norm of assertion, I will take it that any sufficient definition of assertion must be able to account for these phenomena adequately — or at least as well as Williamson’s account does.

⁵This assumption is widely shared in the constitutive norm literature. The main debate between the various norms under consideration takes place under this assumption, and intuitions about which kinds of assertions are criticisable are thrown back and forth as evidence for different norms.

2.3.1 Moorean Paradoxes

G.E. Moore's most important contribution to the philosophy of assertion (and indeed to philosophy *tout court* if Wittgenstein is to be believed) was to provide what might be thought of as a test by which any sufficient theory of assertion must pass. Moore draws our attention to certain rational paradoxes, which we now call 'Moorean Paradoxes'. Moorean paradoxes take the form of utterances of the form 'p but I don't believe that p', or 'p but I believe that not p'. The utterance of such a sentence is patently absurd (Moore 1993), but what is interesting about them is that there is no outright contradiction involved in the sentence. Despite the apparent oddness of the sentence, one might utter such a sentence truly. Further, when uttered in the third person the absurdity disappears. Thus 'p but Elena does not believe that p' is not in any sense paradoxical. A good theory of assertion should give us some explanation of why Moorean sentences seem absurd in this way.

Williamson suggests that his theory of assertion can give such an explanation for the stronger version of the Moorean paradox, 'p but I do not know that p', and thus derivatively, given that knowledge entails belief, 'p but I do not believe that p'. The explanation is thus — given that assertion is governed by the K-norm and given that, as Williamson argues, we implicitly understand the K-norm, when one asserts that p, one represents oneself as knowing that p. Thus in the first half of the sentence, one represents oneself as knowing that p.⁶ In the second half one contradicts oneself, representing oneself as not knowing p. Thus according to Williamson, it is this contradiction that gives rise to the absurdity felt upon hearing such sentences.

⁶And, given knowledge entails belief, one represents oneself as believing that p — thus accounting for belief versions of Moorean sentences.

2.3.2 Lottery Propositions

Imagine a case wherein your friend has acquired a ticket in a fair lottery with a pool of 100,000,000 tickets and a guaranteed winner. The draw has taken place, and thus there is a winner among the tickets, but which ticket the winner is is kept secret from the public — including you and your friend. Thus the only grounds for belief that your friend’s ticket has won or lost is probabilistic. In such a circumstance, the proposition that your friend’s ticket has lost is a lottery proposition. According to most epistemologists, asserting a lottery proposition is improper — it somehow feels wrong to say “Your ticket has lost,” even when the probabilistic justification of the assertion is incredibly good. In our case it has a one in a hundred million chance of being wrong, and thus the asserted proposition has a much higher chance of being true than many normally accepted assertions. Thus what explains epistemologists’ feeling that such assertions are improper?⁷

Williamson claims that he has an easy explanation as to why it seems odd to assert a lottery proposition. One does not know that the friend’s ticket has lost, and thus if one were to assert that the ticket had lost, one would be violating the K-norm. Therefore the impropriety of asserting a lottery proposition is simply the impropriety of violating the K-norm.

2.3.3 “How do you know that?” Challenges

In response to assertions, it is generally acceptable to say “How do you know that?” or “Do you know that?”. We ought to have some explanation of why such responses,

⁷That assertions of lottery propositions are always improper has been challenged (see for example Cappelen 2011 40).

which seem to presuppose that the asserter knows that which they assert, are generally acceptable responses to assertion. Similarly, “Is that true?” and “What’s your basis for believing that?” are also acceptable as challenges to assertions. The explanation should also tell us why these challenges and their presuppositions, that the asserter takes the proposition asserted to be true, and that the asserter has a justification for believing that the proposition is true, are respectively acceptable.⁸

As Aidan McGlynn remarks,

The knowledge norm offers a natural explanation of all this. In asserting, one represents oneself as having the authority to assert, and so as [according to the K-norm] knowing. That’s what licenses the presupposition that one knows in the response ‘How do you know that?’ (McGlynn 2014 88).

As knowledge entails truth and justified belief, the K-norm can also explain the presuppositions of the alethic and justificatory challenges.⁹

⁸A point made by Rachel Mckinnon (2012) is that generally one may respond to such challenges not with a demonstration that one knows that p, but rather with some evidence that is reason to believe that p. Take for example the following conversation:

Olive: “It’s raining outside.”
Randy: “How do you know that?”
Olive: “Ellie just came in and is soaking wet.”

Olive’s response here seems completely normal and acceptable, but certainly is not a demonstration of knowledge. It would seem then, that contrary to Williamson’s claims, “How do you know that?” challenges do not presuppose knowledge on the part of the utterer, but rather, some form of justification for their assertion. Indeed, I suspect that if knowledge were presupposed by such challenges, the standard required for ordinary assertion would be far too demanding.

⁹Ironically, there are cases in which the K-norm is not stringent enough to account for certain challenges and Moorean sentences. Take “Are you *certain*?” and “p but I am not certain that p” (Stanley 2008). Further, “How do you *know that you know that* p?” and “p but I don’t know that I know that p” would seem to pose similar issues (Sosa 2009).

2.4 Objections to Constitutive Norm Accounts

Whilst the debate between various constitutive norm theorists is a deep and fascinating one, I elide discussion of that literature here, as I will now outline several objections to the constitutive norm project in its entirety.

2.4.1 Boogling

One initial response to constitutive norm accounts of assertion is that they simply do not go about defining assertion in the right way. Normally, one cannot define an activity merely in terms of the single rule that governs it, especially when that rule is written in the form — ‘One must: assert that p only if one knows that p.’ One cannot help but feel that something is missing in this definition. It tells us nothing about the purpose of the activity nor even about what it is to do the activity, and thus one is left with the sense that a more robust definition of assertion is needed, featuring more than simply the single norm that governs the activity.

John Macfarlane takes this initial reaction seriously and turns it into an objection to constitutive norm accounts. After giving the rules of castling in chess, he remarks that “knowing this about castling does not tell you what it is to castle; one could know this rule and have *no idea* how to move the pieces in such a way as to castle” (Macfarlane 2011 86). Further, he argues, the same would be true of a person who knew only the single norm of assertion — “one could know the knowledge rule or the truth rule and have no understanding of what kind of act assertion is, or of how to make an assertion” (Macfarlane 2011 86). Therefore a norm alone is insufficient as a definition of assertion, insofar as a definition ought to give a language user some understanding of the phenomenon in question, rather than simply give a rule

that dictates when performing the activity is permitted. Further, a norm alone, it would seem, does not seem to capture much, if any, of the complete social practice of assertion. We require a more robust definition of assertion.

Moreover, it seems hard to think of *any* activities that are defined by a single norm, beyond assertion as defined by constitutive norm theorists.¹⁰ We might think, therefore, that this is a good reason to be wary of constitutive norm definitions. Macfarlane, in response, suggests that this need not be the case, imagining the hypothetical activity ‘boogling’ which is defined by the single norm, Boogle Rule:

Boogle Rule: One must: boogle only when the opponent’s king is next to a knight.

He then remarks:

Imagine players of this enhanced form of chess saying, periodically, “I hereby boogle!” Boogling would have no direct effect on the game, so what would be the point? Well, perhaps boogling could be a way of communicating information — calling attention to a recurring feature of the board position. Boogling would be a constative, not a performative, chess move (Macfarlane 2011 86).

Hence, he claims, boogling is an example of an activity satisfactorily defined by a constitutive norm:

All this suggests that we should be wary of the objection that accounts like Williamson’s do not tell us directly about what it is to make an assertion. Perhaps assertion is like boogling: all there is to say about

¹⁰One might remark that this signals a disanalogy between castling and assertion — but this disanalogy does not undermine the central point I make here.

what it is to make the move is when it is okay to make it (Macfarlane 2011 86-7).

However, this is not quite right. In order to help us understand boogling, Macfarlane gave us examples of boogling and what it consisted in, alongside the purpose it served in the game. This information undermines the example, the purpose of which was to show us that an activity could be understood solely in terms of a single norm. Indeed, I suggest that absent this additional information, boogling remains obscure. Imagine a new player to the game of chess, who was introduced to boogling not by example, but simply by being given the rule. Whilst they would know when boogling is appropriate, they would not know what to do when they were permitted to boogle and would certainly not understand it as a practice.

If even simple activities such as boogling cannot be satisfactorily defined solely in terms of a single norm, it would seem foolish to believe that the complex practice of assertion, involved in all aspects of social life, could be so defined. Assertion requires a richer definition than a single constitutive norm.

2.4.2 Lack of Evidence

As Aidan McGlynn points out, there has been surprisingly little motivation given for the claim that there is a *constitutive* norm of assertion in Williamson's sense, let alone that Williamson's norm in particular is the constitutive norm (McGlynn 2014 85). McGlynn does not pursue this problem further, but we might push this line of argument in a slightly different way against constitutive norm accounts. The first thing to note is that the type of evidence used in the debate between the various norm theorists says nothing about whether there is a single norm that *necessarily* governs

assertion. Intuitions about whether one is criticisable for asserting that p without knowledge that p might tell us whether, in the actual world, assertion is governed by the K-norm, but such intuitions tell us nothing about whether assertion is governed by the K-norm across all possible worlds. Certainly, given that there is a debate over the norms of assertion, it would seem that it is *conceivable* that there are worlds where different norms govern assertion — and as far as I am aware, no one has made an argument to suggest that it is impossible that other norms could have governed assertion.¹¹ Jessica Brown makes a similar point:

A second possible type of argument [for some norm being a constitutive norm, is appeal] to modal intuition. On this view, if one cannot conceive of ϕ -ing without its being governed by the C norm, that is evidence that C is the constitutive norm of ϕ -ing. Such an argument is not available whenever there is controversy about what condition is the norm of ϕ -ing (Brown 2013 333).

It seems that our practices of censure and blame for improper assertion could have been different. Therefore we should not take seriously claims that there is a norm which is essential to, or which necessarily governs the act of assertion.

Moreover, we might think that absent evidence from experimental philosophy, it is too great a stretch to even suggest that, say, the K-norm governs all assertions in all cultures and situations in the actual world.¹² Williamson says that it is “natural

¹¹I take it that positive and negative conceivability (which I have referenced here) are our best guides to possibility and necessity.

¹²John Turri has been a leading figure in attempting to bring experimental philosophy into the philosophy of assertion (see, for example, Turri 2013, 2015a, 2015b, and 2016). Whilst Turri thinks that the data he has gathered unequivocally supports the K-norm against other competing norms, it is worth noting that his sample sizes are small and all of his participants were adults, shared a single language (English) and were all U.S. nationals. Further, his results say nothing about whether the K-norm is a constitutive norm or simply a pervasive regulative norm.

to suppose that some norms are more intimately connected to the nature of asserting” (Williamson 2000 238) than others — yet provides nothing more than his own assertion of this claim as evidence. Indeed, at one point, he even seems to realise he lacks such evidence, and admits that the claim that assertion has a constitutive norm is “by no means obvious” (Williamson 2000 238-9).¹³ Whilst constitutive norm theorists can respond to the lack of evidence from other possible worlds by (perhaps begrudgingly) dropping the necessity clause, this lack of evidence from the *actual* world seems to undermine much of their argumentation. Of course, this is not a knock-down argument — such evidence may arise as experimental philosophy develops, but nonetheless, absent such evidence, we should be wary about accepting much of the constitutive norm position.

2.4.3 More Norm Trouble

A question: what differentiates constitutive from merely regulative norms? For Williamson, a constitutive norm is one which necessarily governs the act (Williamson 2000 239). Thus the rules of chess are constitutive but the norms that govern running (such as not running in traffic and so on) are not constitutive. Yet as we have seen, there is a dearth of evidence for any claim that a norm is constitutive of assertion in this sense — modal intuitions simply do not support the necessity claim made by Williamson, and the evidence collated by Williamson and his followers pertains only

¹³Williamson follows this admission with the alternative justification that we should suppose that it has such rules and see what explanatory work that supposition can perform (Williamson 2000 239). Yet whilst this may be an admirable methodological choice, as McGlynn argues, it is unclear from Williamson’s work exactly what explanatory work the hypothesis that assertion has a constitutive norm actually performs (McGlynn 2014 85). Further, other constitutive norm theorists fail to acknowledge this is a supposition at the foundation of their accounts, rather than a theorem.

to the actual world.¹⁴ Montminy instead claims that a rule is constitutive of assertion just in case it applies to every assertion (Montminy 2013 37). Where here ‘applies’ is not taken to mean ‘followed by’ — after all it is crucial to Williamsonian accounts that one can break the constitutive norm of assertion and still make an assertion. We should take it that every *actual* assertion is *governed* by the constitutive norm. How does one know when an assertion is governed by the K-norm? If one’s assertion violates the norm, the subject making the assertion is *subject to criticism*. Lackey draws on Hawthorne and Williamson to suggest that according to constitutive norm theorists (herself included),

...there is an intimate connection between our assessment of asserters and our assessment of their assertions... It is fairly common for those working on this topic to take our intuitions regarding whether we feel that asserters are subject to criticism as *evidence* for concluding that a norm of assertion has been violated (Lackey 2007 595).

Taking these considerations together, then, we come to the conclusion that:

A norm is constitutive of an action-type iff for every token action of that type, the token either obeys the norm, or the subject performing the action is (ought to be) subject to criticism for not obeying that norm.

Thus the constitutive norm theorist can rule out several possible norms from candidacy for the constitutive norm of assertion — there are occasions where one does not assert in a polite manner and is not subject to criticism for asserting impolitely. Similarly one is not *always* thought to be deserving of criticism if one asserts in an

¹⁴The evidence is also completely compatible with the K-norm being merely regulative rather than constitutive — see Brown 2013 329-330 for further argument.

imprecise and longwinded manner — despite norms existing such that longwinded or imprecise assertions are *often* criticised.

Yet there seem to be cases in which we do not (or feel that we should not) criticise someone for asserting, despite their assertion having broken the K-norm (and indeed when their assertion breaks the T-norm or RTB-norm, for that matter). Williamson raises one such example, of a person rushing for a train, with only moments to catch it and shouting “That’s our train!” despite knowing that they do not know that that is actually their train (Williamson 2000 256). The urgency of the situation in such an example requires one to assert that which one does not know, and it would be inappropriate to criticise someone for asserting in such a situation. We might think of similar cases involving the need to be polite or careful with what one says. Another example comes from trying to console a friend in a dire situation and perhaps asserting “Things aren’t as bad as they seem” despite knowing full well that they are, and that one would be unreasonable to believe that they are not. Such examples seem to show that the K-, T- and RTB-norm are not constitutive of assertion, as we would not, and indeed ought not, criticise the assertions mentioned, thus they are not governed by the K-, T- or RTB-norm.

Williamson endorses a response to this criticism that we might call the ‘overriding response’. This response treats all counterexamples of the above form as assertions which are governed by the constitutive norm of assertion, but for which the constitutive norm is “overridden by other norms” (Williamson 2000 256). Thus in the case of being late for a train, the norm of urgency overrides the constitutive norm, whilst in the consoling case, the norm of being kind to one’s friends overrides the constitutive norm. Similar responses, remarks Lackey, could be produced for “countless other

cases of this sort” (Lackey 2007 596).

However, it is difficult to make sense of a constitutive norm of an activity being overridden, and yet still governing the activity. In such cases, one does not follow the norm, and one is not criticised for violating it — thus what does the norm have to do with the activity when it is overridden? Further, to return to Williamson’s analogy of a game, suppose that one is playing football, but that all of a sudden the referee collapses, suffering from a heart attack. The rules of football forbid players from violently hammering on the chest of the referee, but in this case, one would not be criticised for violating that rule in order to perform CPR. Williamson’s analysis of this would presumably be that the norms of football have been overridden by the norm of saving a fellow person’s life, which seems correct, but in order for his position to be consistent, it would also seem that just as one is asserting in the case of being late for a train, one is still playing football when performing CPR on the referee!

Further, the overriding response is dialectically risky for the constitutive norm theorist. We might imagine someone who claimed that, say, the constitutive norm of assertion is in fact the norm of urgency, and who used the idea that the norm of urgency is overridden by other norms, such as the K-norm in order to avoid cases in which the norm was not obeyed and in which no criticism is appropriate. So too for any other given norm, including norms which never govern assertion and are never actually obeyed in assertion, the claim might be made that whilst the norm is the constitutive norm of assertion the norm is simply constantly overridden. The overriding response thus risks legitimating any number of implausible constitutive norms, and reducing the account to incoherence.

2.4.4 The Claim of Constitutivity is Unwarranted

Even if the ‘overriding’ response saves the constitutive norm account, such accounts still face an explanatory gap. Suppose that there is a norm that governs every token assertion. Montminy and others like him would say that that norm constitutes assertion. However, there is a leap of inference going on here that is unwarranted — lots of activities are governed by norms across all actual token instantiations of that activity, but are not constituted by them. All actual instances of running are governed by the norm that one must not run as to endanger others — yet we do not think that running is constituted by that norm. Constitutive norm theorists therefore need to show why we should treat assertion as more like chess and less like running.

One potential explanation comes from the idea that, unlike in the case of running, where the norm ‘do not run as to endanger others’ is derivable from general norms of morality and politeness, the rules (norms) of chess are such that they cannot be derived from wider norms. So too for assertion, runs this argument. Thus the question of whether assertion has a constitutive norm becomes, as Rescorla puts it, whether there are “internal evaluative standards” not derivable from more general standards (Rescorla 2009 101).

However, as Jessica Brown argues,

...it is hard to move from the claim that α -ing is governed by a particular norm not deducible from general rules to the claim that that norm is constitutive of α -ing. For there are rules which are nonderivative in this sense but not constitutive. Good examples of such cases are found in the norms of etiquette. There are often complicated norms governing the

polite way to eat certain foodstuffs (cherries, whole fish, prawns and crayfish etc). The peculiar norms governing these activities are not deducible from the general injunction to be polite plus general facts about human nature (Brown 2013 332).

It would certainly seem odd to claim that the norm that one must eat soup by tipping the bowl away from oneself whilst using a spoon is constitutive of eating soup! The explanatory gap for constitutive norm theories therefore remains.

2.4.5 Individuation

At first glance, constitutive norms seem poor as definitions of assertion — for the reasons mentioned above, and also because they appear to merely be necessary conditions:

(The C rule) One must: assert that p only if C.

Lacking sufficiency conditions, constitutive norm accounts are not *definitions* of assertion at all! However, Williamson and his followers do have a way of making the C rule into a necessary and sufficient condition for assertion:

C1: ϕ is an assertion iff ϕ is governed by the C rule, that is, one must: assert that p only if C.

However, given that assertion appears on both sides of the biconditional, put this way the definition is circular. We might change the definition slightly to avoid this worry:

C2: ϕ is an assertion iff ϕ is a token action of type Φ that is governed by the C rule, that is, one must: Φ that p only if C.

However, this new definition gives rise to its own problem, that the constitutive norm account may fail to adequately individuate assertion. Take belief, which Williamson also takes to be plausibly governed by the K-norm (Williamson 2000 255-6). If C2 is how assertion is to be defined, and believing is an action type, then C2 counts beliefs as assertions. Luckily, there is a quick fix available:

C3: ϕ is an assertion iff ϕ is a token *speech act* of type Φ that is governed by the C rule, that is, one must: Φ that p only if C.

However, C3 fails to individuate assertion from presupposition, which is plausibly governed by the same norm as assertion. Certainly it would seem that (at least *prima facie*) I am criticisable for presupposing that p whenever I would be criticisable for asserting that p. Thus constitutive norm accounts fail to give a satisfactory answer to Alston's second question.¹⁵

2.4.6 Analogies to Games

In attempting to account for assertions that break the norm of assertion, Williamson appealed to the analogy of games. He argued that one still counts as playing a game even if one breaks one of the rules — one is simply subject to criticism for breaking that rule. Whilst this is an interesting analogy, one wonders what proportion of the rules of chess one has to break in order to no longer be characterised as playing chess.

¹⁵One might remark that an alternative sufficiency condition for constitutive norm accounts has been investigated by Brown (2010). However, Brown famously produces powerful counterexamples to the sufficiency condition for assertion that she suggests, and strictly speaking, the biconditional KN that she gives is not one that will suit constitutive norm accounts:

KN: One is in a good enough epistemic position to assert p if one knows that p.

After all, KN does not provide a definition of assertion or asserting that p, but rather a definition of when one is in a good enough epistemic position to assert that p.

Suppose one follows none but the rule that says bishops may only move diagonally, or the rule that states one must play on an 8x8 checkerboard. Plausibly one could no longer be counted as playing chess. In the case of assertions which break the one and only norm of assertion, it would seem that if assertion is defined in terms of that norm, then one could not be counted as playing the game of assertion at all.

In response, Williamson might say that we still feel an intuitive sense that assertions that break the K-norm are criticisable, just like the rule breaking in the game, and thus we seem to think that such speech acts are still a part of the game of assertion as defined by the K-norm. Yet to this we might respond, why do we think that certain utterances are criticisable because they do not meet K-norm, and others not criticisable when they do not meet the K-norm? If there is some criterion about such utterances that tells us when some utterance by some speaker U without knowledge that p is criticisable, then it would seem wise to use that criterion to define assertion, given that the K-norm alone without our intuitive sense of criticisability does not tell us whether some speech act is an assertion. If there is no criterion that tells us whether or not some utterance is criticisable when it violates the K-norm, then the account seems to have an explanatory gap.¹⁶

2.5 Conclusion

I have presented several objections to constitutive norm accounts of assertion, which, if not individually, when taken together certainly suggest that this currently fashionable style of theorising ought to be dropped and a new approach taken. Constitutive

¹⁶It is not open to constitutive norm theorists to say ‘because it is an assertion’ here, as it would make the account circular as a definition of assertion.

norms are poor definitions, the accounts are not supported by sufficient evidence, it is unclear how constitutivity is to be established, the norms fail to individuate assertion from presupposition and the analogy to games seems to undermine the entire project. This said, I take it that the phenomena that Williamson pointed to as evidence for his position require good explanation, and *prima facie*, the K-norm (if not the other putative constitutive norms) accounts for them well. I shall use these considerations later as a standard by which to judge the theory of assertion that I put forward. I turn now to a longstanding tradition in the philosophy of assertion, to see if that tradition can provide a better account than the current fashion for constitutive norms.

Chapter 3

Assertions as Expressions of Speaker Attitudes

3.1 Introduction

Several theorists have attempted to give accounts of assertion in terms of the expression of an attitude of the speaker, whether that expression be of their belief that p , or an intention that the audience come to believe that p .

3.2 Frege

An early version of this position was developed by Frege, for whom assertion was the outward sign of a judgment, where a judgment is a thought (that is a propositional content or sense) that has been recognised to be true by the agent (and since the truth-value of a sentence is its reference according to Frege, the judgment is a thought with a reference) (Frege 1956 294). Put simply, an assertion occurs when an agent utters

some sentence that expresses something the agent takes to be true. This combination of sense and reference finds its way into Frege’s formal apparatus, where the content-stroke ‘-’ is combined with the judgment-stroke ‘|’, which carries the assertoric force, to form the assertion sign ‘|’. Therefore “by writing $|2+3=5$ we assert that $2+3$ equals 5. Thus here we are not just writing down a truth value, as in $2+3=5$, but also at the same time saying that it is True” (Frege 2003 154). To use parlance not available to Frege, when we express this judgment, we do not merely express the content of the utterance — rather, we perform the illocutionary act of assertion, uttering the sentence with assertoric illocutionary force, contending that the content is true.

Frege’s initial theory simply will not do. For one, it seems that insincere assertions are simply left unaccounted for — if I am trying to deceive you and thus lie about some matter, it would seem that I could be asserting something, but not take the content to be true. Further, the account includes far too much as assertion. Suppose that I utter “Please close the door”. Here (under fairly standard circumstances) I seem to be expressing several things that I take to be true, including that there is a door, that the door is open, that there is an audience, that the audience would be willing to shut the door at my request, and so on. Frege’s account takes me to be asserting all of these things when I utter “Please close the door”, but this is obviously wrong — I am not *asserting* anything, but am rather *requesting* that my audience close the door and *presupposing* that there is a door, that the door is open and so on.¹

¹Even if one thinks that in addition to making the request I do in fact assert the content of the request (that you will close the door) Frege’s account still seems to over-inflate the number of assertions I have made.

3.3 Schiffer

Nevertheless, this seemingly promising avenue of inquiry has been taken up by other thinkers, including Stephen Schiffer in his 1972 book *Meaning*. Schiffer holds that illocutionary acts are to be understood in terms of the Gricean notion of ‘speaker meaning’, where it is a necessary condition of a speaker meaning something by uttering S that the speaker intends that a certain psychological effect is produced in the audience of the utterance. It is only if a speaker means something by the utterance that an illocutionary act has been performed (Schiffer 1972 103). Thus illocutionary acts are, roughly speaking, expressions of intentions. Assertion, for Schiffer, is a broad category of illocutionary act which includes such wide-ranging acts as affirming, assuring and predicting.² Assertive acts, however, are to be defined as follows:

A kind of illocutionary act I is an \vdash kind of illocutionary act if and only if, for any [speaker] S and any [utterance] X, S performed an act of kind I in uttering X only if, for some p, S meant that p by uttering X. Telling that, objecting, reporting, predicting, and replying are examples of \vdash kinds of illocutionary acts (Schiffer 1972 95).³

I object that p, then, on this account (where objecting is a kind of assertion) iff I meant, in my utterance, that p is good reason for thinking some claim is false, where meaning here is to be understood in terms of intending that my audience come to believe that the claim is false on the grounds that p (Schiffer 1972 99-100). Other

²These acts are to be understood and distinguished in terms of the kind of content involved, and the kinds of reason the speaker intends the audience to have for the mental states they ground (Schiffer 97-99).

³Like Frege, Schiffer uses \vdash as the assertion sign.

assertive acts are given similar definitions, all featuring intentions to produce beliefs in an audience.

William Alston, however, provides several counterexamples to Schiffer's account of assertives as expressions of types of intention to produce belief. Suppose a shopper asks an apathetic worker in a department store, "Where is the clothes section?" and the worker replies "The second floor", not caring whether the shopper believes their utterance, or indeed not caring about the shopper's reaction at all (Alston 2000 48). Such examples of uninterested assertion are familiar, I take it, to anyone who has worked in an institutional context where they do not care about the utterances that they are forced to make by their position within that institution, and provide examples of assertion without intention to produce a response.⁴ So too for what Alston calls "hopeless" cases, where one asserts whilst knowing full well that any desired response will not occur, but one asserts 'just for the record' (Alston 2000 49). Further, Schiffer's account seems to struggle to deal with small talk:

We are thrown together at a party. I open with "Beastly weather lately, isn't it". You reply "Oh I don't know, it's not as bad as it might be"... And so on, with more of the same. It is clear to both of us that we both already know that the weather is beastly, but not as bad as it might be, and so on (Alston 2000 49).

In small talk, assertive illocutionary acts are performed, but (all too) often, the members of the conversation do not care about whether their interlocutors actually believe what they are saying. They therefore lack the intentions that Schiffer regards as essential to assertive illocutionary acts. If we are right that it is possible to assert,

⁴Even Schiffer seems to concede this as a counterexample (Schiffer 1972 68).

remark or tell in small talk then, Schiffer's account of assertive illocutionary acts cannot be correct.

3.4 Bach and Harnish

Bach and Harnish split up illocutionary acts into four categories: constatives, directives, commissives and acknowledgements:

For us, *constatives* express the speaker's belief and his intention or desire that the hearer have or form a like belief. *Directives* express the speaker's attitude toward some prospective action by the hearer and his intention that his utterance, or the attitude it expresses, be taken as a reason for the hearer's action. *Commissives* express the speaker's intention and belief that his utterance obligates him to do something (perhaps under certain conditions). And *acknowledgments* express feelings regarding the hearer, or, in cases where the utterance is clearly perfunctory or formal, the speaker's intention that his utterance satisfy a social expectation to express certain feelings and his belief that it does. (Bach and Harnish 1979 40-1).

Assertions, in this taxonomy, fall under the subcategory of constatives. Assertives include stating, avowing and other similar acts, and are defined as follows:

Assertives (simple): (affirm, allege, assert, aver, avow, claim, declare, deny (assert ... not), indicate, maintain, propound, say, state, submit)

In uttering e , [speaker] S asserts that P if S expresses:

- i. the belief that P , and
- ii. the intention that H [the hearer] believe ⁵ that P (Bach and Harnish 1979 42).

Where expressing an attitude is defined as follows:

Expressing: For [speaker] S to express an attitude is for S to R-intend the hearer to take S 's utterance as a reason to think that S has that attitude (Bach and Harnish 1979 15).

R-intentions, or reflexive intentions are those that intend that the effect occur via the very recognition that such an intention exists. Thus, if I say to you “The train leaves at four o’clock”, I count as asserting that the train leaves at four iff I intend that you believe that I believe that the train leaves at four, and I intend that you come to believe (or continue believing) that the train leaves at four, where these intentions succeed only if it is through your recognising them that you form the relevant beliefs.

However, suppose that you and I are captains of opposing sports teams and as such you do not trust my testimony on any matter pertaining to tactics for games in which we are playing — indeed you will believe the opposite of anything I say. Knowing this about you, I decide to make a double-bluff, and before such a game I say “My team will be playing a 4-4-2 formation,” intending both for you to take my utterance as a reason to believe that my team will not be in 4-4-2, and intending that on the basis of my utterance you come to believe that my team will not be in 4-4-2. Thus what seems to be an (insincere) assertion of p (that my team will play 4-4-2) turns out, on Bach and Harnish’s account, to be an assertion of $\neg p$ (that my team

⁵Or continue believing, see (Bach and Harnish 1979 44)

will not play 4-4-2). Of course, Bach and Harnish might bite the bullet on this issue, claiming that I did in fact assert that my team will not be playing a 4-4-2 formation when I uttered “My team will be playing a 4-4-2 formation,” but they owe us some explanation why this is the case.⁶

Meanwhile, the account also seems to fail to individuate assertion from presupposition. In uttering “The cat is on the mat” one seems to both R-intend that the hearer takes one’s utterance as reason to believe that one believes that the cat is on the mat and as reason to believe that there is a cat. Similarly, one seems to R-intend that the hearer take that utterance as reason to believe that one intends for them to form the belief that the cat is on the mat and as reason to believe that one intends for them to form the belief that there is a cat. Thus presuppositions, on this account, turn out to be counted as assertions as they meet i. and ii. of Bach and Harnish’s definition. Bach and Harnish might respond that I have not placed enough emphasis on the purposeful nature of the intending that they include in their definition — when I say “The cat is on the mat” I am trying to get you to believe that the cat is on the mat — it is somehow incidental that this requires that you also believe my presupposition that there is a cat. Yet even if we could clearly spell out the notion of purposeful intention at question here, the example of the careful politician seems to scupper this solution. The careful politician who is incredibly scrupulous with what they presuppose or imply with their assertions, using them to attempt to make their audience form certain beliefs, would count as asserting their presuppositions even

⁶Of course, some story about such cases being parasitic upon sincere assertion might be forthcoming here, Bach and Harnish do not seem to be interested in giving such a story. Further, it would be nice if we could account for such cases parsimoniously, using our standard theory of assertion, rather than resorting to treating such cases as improper or derivative cases of assertion. After all, insincere assertion is still assertion, and it would be nice if we had an account that could treat it as such.

with this somewhat mysterious notion of purposeful intending.⁷

Furthermore, clause ii of Bach and Harnish's definition means that their account will fall victim to the problems that Alston posed for Schiffer's account — uninterested assertion, hopeless assertion and small talk.

As Macfarlane points out, the account also has trouble with *openly insincere assertion*. If I do not believe that p, you know I do not believe that p, and I assert that p, both of us knowing that I do so insincerely, it seems hard to see how I can intend that you take my utterance as reason to think that I believe that p. In a footnote, Bach and Harnish struggle with this problem, offering a reformulated account of expression:

Instead of saying that expressing an attitude is R-intending *H* to take one's utterance as reason to believe that one has that attitude, we can say that it is R-intending *H* to take one's utterance as sufficient reason, *unless there is mutually believed reason to the contrary*, to believe that one has that attitude (Bach and Harnish 1979 291).

Yet as Macfarlane points out, this seems nearly unintelligible:

We can make sense of *intending that Jane take out the trash today, unless it is a holiday*, in a case where it might be a holiday. But, when Jane knows that today is a holiday, and the speaker knows that she knows this, what is it for the speaker to intend that Jane take out the trash today,

⁷It is an interesting question as to whether an explicit presentation condition, as will be introduced later in this thesis during the discussion of William Alston's account of assertion, could save Bach and Harnish from this objection. Certainly if it could be made consistent with their position, then *prima facie* it could provide Bach and Harnish with the resources to individuate assertion from presupposition. The other objections against their account would, however, remain.

unless it is a holiday? Similarly, if it is mutually known that the speaker lacks an attitude, what is it for the speaker to intend for the hearer to take her utterance as a sufficient reason to attribute this attitude to her, unless there is mutually believed reason to the contrary? (Macfarlane 82-3).

As it suffers from all of these faults, we must set aside Bach and Harnish's account.

3.5 Conclusion

Whilst I do not have the space to deal with all accounts of assertion that rely on the mental states of the speaker to individuate assertion, the accounts mentioned here, which are the best that this tradition has produced, face huge problems. It is difficult to see how this tradition could recover to produce a satisfactory account of assertion. In the next section I shall detail what I take to be another seemingly promising, but ultimately unsuccessful tradition of approaches to assertion.

Chapter 4

Assertion and the Conversational Score

4.1 Introduction

In this section I will look at accounts that characterise assertion as a proposal to add the content of the assertion to the score of the conversation. Two accounts given by Robert Stalnaker, along with two accounts offered by Max Kölbel will be shown to be wanting.

4.2 The Earlier Stalnakerian Account

For Stalnaker, who remains the main proponent of this approach to assertion, assertion is to be characterised in terms of its essential effect. The essential effect of an assertion is to add the content of the assertion to the so-called ‘score’ of a

conversation, absent its rejection by members of the conversation. The notion of conversational score is characterised slightly differently by Stalnaker at different points in his career (I will look at two accounts developed in the most recent portion of his career) but it will be helpful to think of the score as the set of propositions that are accepted (for the purposes of the conversation) by all members of the conversation.

In “Assertion” Stalnaker claims that assertions have a content, that is, a proposition that represents the world as being a certain way. Thus when I assert that “London is east of Gloucester” I express the proposition that London is east of Gloucester, and that proposition represents the world as being such that London is to the east of Gloucester. We can thus treat propositions as functions from possible worlds to truth values — given any possible world we can ask whether the proposition is true at that world. We can therefore represent a proposition as the set of possible worlds in which that proposition is true (Stalnaker 1999 79).¹

Using this idea, Stalnaker develops the notion of a ‘context set’, that is, the set of those possible worlds that are compatible with the presuppositions of members of a conversation. If a proposition is accepted by all members of the conversation to be true of/in all members of the set of worlds they take to be live options, it is presupposed by all members of the conversation. Assertion allows for members of the conversation to reduce the size of this set, ‘closing off’ certain possible situations that are incompatible with the utterance (Stalnaker 1999 86). Thus when I say “London is to the east of Gloucester” (unless someone rejects this assertion) the context set of the conversation is reduced in size, no longer containing those possible worlds in which, for example, London is to the west of Gloucester.

¹The account must be complicated to include two-dimensional semantics, but this need not trouble us here.

Stalnaker’s account thus gives us a necessary condition for assertion — that assertion allows one to add the content of the assertion to the conversational score, eliminating possible worlds from the context set that are incompatible with that content. He thinks that this is also a part of the primary function of conversation. He writes that to “engage in conversation is, essentially, to distinguish among different possible ways that things might be” (Stalnaker 1999 85).

Another thing to note is that Stalnaker has not offered us a complete analysis of assertion. He has only offered a necessary condition for a speech act to be an assertion, and not a sufficiency condition. Stalnaker rightly thinks that the ‘essential effect’ of assertion cannot be a sufficiency condition, as other speech acts have this effect, such as presupposition and supposition. Further, there are nonlinguistic acts that achieve the same effect — my smashing my glass on the floor has the effect of removing the possible worlds in which I did not smash my glass on the floor from the context set, for example. Further, Stalnaker’s analysis of the essential effect makes reference to rejection, which he points out will probably be defined by reference to assertion. Thus treating Stalnaker’s account as an analysis, and not merely a necessary condition of assertion has the chance of leading to circularity (Stalnaker 1999 87).

There is also reason to doubt that Stalnaker is correct to treat the essential effect as a necessary condition. For one, we often assert knowing full well that it will not change the context set. Take, for example, pointless assertions (in the face of people who simply will not believe us or who will immediately reject the assertion) and reaffirming assertions of that which is already accepted. Stalnaker responds to these worries by claiming that the essential effect will still be explanatorily relevant in these cases (Stalnaker 1999 87). Suppose I utter “This is not the right path” to

my friend who is convinced that she is reading the map correctly, and will not change course as a result of my utterance, due to her low credibility rating of me on such cartographic affairs. It is a foregone conclusion that my assertion will be rejected, but I assert anyway, having what Stalnaker calls the ‘secondary effect’ of registering my opposition to the current choice of path. That the utterance has the secondary effect it does, claims Stalnaker, is to be explained in terms of the fact that it would have had its essential effect if it were not immediately rejected. Yet I struggle to see how this explanation is supposed to go, and even if a coherent story is forthcoming, reaffirmations appear to pose a further explanatory challenge.

This earlier version of Stalnaker’s thesis is subject to several further worries. First, we might, following the later Wittgenstein, remark that to claim that conversation has an essential feature — in this case, distinguishing among possible ways the world might be — is to miss the variety of ways in which language is used. Think of the conversation between a football captain and her team before every match, in which she tells the team how to play the match, and they assent or decline to perform in the way she tells them to. Nor is this descriptive use of language even the only way in which *assertion* is used. The language game of asserting that the world is this way rather than that is no more central than the language game of asserting the funniest things that one can think of, or asserting the things one already knows to be the case about one’s tax return in order to reassure oneself that one has returned it on time. Further, imagine our football captain says to her team, “We’re faster, we’re stronger, and we’re better looking than them. Go out and win.” All three things asserted may have been false, but the point was inspirational, not factual.² Stalnaker has offered us no reason to privilege the descriptive use of assertion over these other uses, and

²I am thankful to David Bakhurst for this example.

we should not immediately jump to the conclusion that it is primary. As Brandom in his reading of the later Wittgenstein puts it, “language has no downtown” (Brandom 2008 163).³ Whilst this is certainly not a knock-down argument, it certainly seems to require further argument on the part of Stalnaker to establish his thesis about the essential function of conversation, let alone assertion.

The case of the anxious taxpayer also seems to undermine Stalnaker’s claim that conversation is the primary place in which assertion takes place. However, Stalnaker has an easy response to this worry, simply treating the taxpayer’s assertions as a conversation with only a single participant.

Another aspect of Stalnaker’s position in “Assertion” that is puzzling is his claim that assertions only decrease the possible worlds in the context set. I see no reason to support this thesis. Suppose that someone tells Truman Burbank (of the 1999 film *The Truman Show*) truly that the world he exists in is an elaborate fiction, created by television producers. Prior to this assertion, it never occurred to Truman that this might be the case — he had always simply assumed the reality of his world, and the possible worlds where he was the subject of a television show were ruled out as not a live possibility. After this assertion, however, those worlds enter his context set as live possibilities. It seems therefore, that assertions can also add to the context set, and not merely subtract.

Of course, Stalnaker might respond that this is not really an assertion, but a rejection in disguise, of the assertion of the proposition that Truman does not live in an elaborate television show. However, we can stipulate that no one ever asserted

³Whether this is actually the later Wittgenstein’s view is questionable — certainly in §18 of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein seems can be read to imply that language has a centre (the old town) and a periphery (the new suburbs). However, Brandom’s reading is still plausible given the later Wittgenstein’s general anti-essentialist tendencies and rejection of the early Wittgenstein, who like Stalnaker certainly privileged the descriptive use of language.

this fact to Truman. Thus it seems hard to characterise this utterance as a rejection. If Stalnaker is to save the idea of an essential effect of assertion to do with the score of a conversation, the claim that the effect is a reduction in the context set needs to be modified somewhat.

4.3 The Later Stalnakerian Account

In *Context* Stalnaker develops a slightly different analysis of the essential effect of assertion using the notion of ‘common ground’. Common ground, according to this later account, is a “propositional attitude concept” (Stalnaker 2014 25). That is, it is defined in terms of the attitudes of the members of a conversation. More specifically, common ground is “what is presumed to be common knowledge among the participants in a conversation” where this presumption is taken to have an iterative structure: “a proposition is common knowledge between you and me if we both accept it (for the purposes of the conversation), we both accept that we both accept it, we both accept that we both accept that we both accept it, and so on” (Stalnaker 2014 25). The presumed common knowledge is the score of the conversation, and is again represented using a possible worlds analysis. Changes to the score are changes in the propositional attitudes of the members of the conversation — the theory is in this sense Gricean, reducing semantic concepts to mental ones (Stalnaker 2014 39). Assertions, on this account, are actions performed in order to change this score.

This later account streamlines the earlier account, sidestepping worries about whether it is possible to increase the size of the context set, by simply claiming that assertion is “a proposal to change the context (the common ground) in a certain way” (Stalnaker 2014 51). However, assertions with no effect on the common ground, such

as reaffirmations and pointless assertions remain a problem, as do our Wittgensteinian concerns.

Moreover, the iterated nature of common ground is a puzzling addition to the theory. Whilst I can see the use of the original notion of joint acceptance, and indeed, the second order acceptance (that we both accept that we both accept that p) under certain circumstances, I fail to see why this needs to be iterated further. Is something really not common ground between myself and my interlocutor if we lack 6798th order acceptance of each other accepting that p? A conversation is not defective, and will not fail to be successful if acceptance is not iterated beyond the second order between the participants.

4.4 Kölbel's Accounts

Max Kölbel has attempted to give a version of Stalnaker's account that provides sufficient, in addition to necessary conditions for assertion. Responding to a problem raised by David Lewis, he turns to a dispositional account of the essential effect, and combines this necessary condition with a sufficient condition drawn from Brandom in order to distinguish assertion from other speech acts that include the essential effect.

The Lewisian problem that Kölbel is responding to sets up something of a dilemma for anyone attempting to give an account of the essential effect of assertion that spells out the effect in terms of a conversational score or context set. Suppose that one defines the conversational score in terms of propositional attitudes of the members of a conversation, that is, what the members of the conversation presuppose or take for granted. If so, then the fact that the score changes in accordance with the rules of score change (such as, if U asserts that p, then *ceteris parabis* p is added to the score)

becomes an empirical generalisation. If one defines the score in terms of the rules of score change, then the fact that the score corresponds to the propositional attitudes of the members of the conversation becomes an empirical generalisation (Kölbel 2011 54). For Kölbel, neither horn of the dilemma seems particularly attractive. Taking the first horn seems implausible, as the rules are thus made prone to exception. Taking the second horn presupposes that a mental state (or set of states) that roughly tracks the rules of score change exists.

Lewis's response to this dilemma is as follows:

Conversational score is, by definition, whatever the mental scoreboards say it is; but we must refrain from trying to say just what the conversationalists' mental scoreboards are. We assume that some or other mental states are present that play the role of a scoreboard, in the following sense: what they register depends on the history of the conversation in the way that the score should depending on the rules (Lewis 1979 346).

This response attempts to define a functional state, attributed to the conversationalists, that changes according the rules of score change. However, we again are struck with the problem that it is entirely possible that no such state exists. It is entirely possible that the scoreboard, defined in terms of the rules, but attributed to the conversationalists, 'floats free', attributed to, but not matching any states of those participating in the conversation.

Stalnaker, both in "Assertion" and *Context* defines the score in terms of the presuppositions of participants in the conversation (although in slightly different ways in each text). He thus appears to take the first horn. Taking Lewis's problem seriously then seems to entail that the rules of score change are empirical generalisations and

prone to exception. Yet this may not be a problem if we distinguish between the rules of score change that would govern conversation in ideal circumstances, and the mere regularities which occur in conversations as they actually exist. We should expect that there will be conversations in which p is asserted, not rejected and understood by all members of the conversation, and yet p is not added to the score, given the fallibility of human conversationalists. This does not mean that the rule that if p is asserted then *ceteris paribus* p will be added to the scoreboard does not govern ideal conversations.⁴

Following an early position put forward by Stalnaker (see Stalnaker 1973), Kölbel tentatively suggests a position which could avoid Lewis's problem. The score is defined in terms of the presuppositions of speakers and the account of presupposition is a dispositional one — a speaker presupposes that p iff they are disposed to act as if they take p to be true and assume or believe that their audience believes or assumes that p is true as well (Kölbel 2011 56). According to Kölbel, this approach has several advantages. First, it allows that a speaker can have different presuppositions from their audience, and second, it means that presupposition is not a propositional attitude. Third, it appears to avoid Lewis's problem, as being disposed to act as if p is true is defined by Kölbel in terms of the rules of score change. On this account, to be disposed to act as if p is true involves not uttering sentences that would be inappropriate were p to be true, and uttering sentences that would be appropriate were p true. The rules of score change form a part of the definition via the notion of 'appropriateness', as they govern what utterances are appropriate.⁵

⁴We shall see that on one reading Brandom avoids a version of Lewis's problem in exactly this manner. However, as will be discussed later, this move to the rules as governing norms threatens to turn Brandom and Lewis's accounts into constitutive norm theories, which we should be hesitant to accept, given the arguments presented earlier in this thesis against constitutive norm accounts.

⁵I am not entirely sure how it is that according to Kölbel, the rules that govern score change are

However, this account quickly runs into trouble, given that it is not simply the rules of score change that govern which utterances are appropriate and which utterances are inappropriate. Presupposition, on this account, will be defined, not only in terms of the rules of score change, but in terms of all of the operative rules of conversation — norms of politeness, gendered norms, comedic norms and so on. This might be problematic for several reasons, but consider the following: suppose that it is the outcome of the rules of score change that utterance S is appropriate given that p is true, but that according to the rules of politeness, S is not appropriate given that p is true. If U utters S, then according to this account, U both presupposes and does not presuppose that p. So too if U does not utter S. Of course, one might try to artificially limit the notion of ‘appropriateness’ to include only the rules of score change, stipulating that non-score change norms and rules do not determine what is appropriate and therefore what it is for a speaker to be disposed to act as if some p is true. However, this move makes it increasingly difficult to be convinced by the suggested account of what it is to be disposed to act as if some p is true. In short, it seems hard to see how the rules of score change alone can provide an adequate definition of what it is for a speaker to be disposed to act in a certain way.

Kölbel’s own, more considered, account of assertion is a ‘simplified version’ of Stalnaker’s conversational score account, but one which also attempts to give a sufficient condition for assertion. For Kölbel, the score depends on what is accepted by the participants of the conversation, where acceptance is defined in terms of the rules of score change (Kölbel 2011 60). Thus rules such as ‘if someone utters that p and no one rejects that utterance, p is added to the score’ and ‘if a participant utters S and

supposed to govern utterances (his writing on this is all too brief) but let us assume that there is an easily made link.

it is manifest to all that they did so, that the participant uttered S becomes accepted' determine what the score is (what is accepted) in a given situation (Kölbel 2011 61). Assertion, on this account, has the same essential effect as on Stalnaker's various accounts — it is a proposal to add the content of the assertion to the score, where the score is defined in terms of acceptance. However, Kölbel also adds a sufficiency condition to distinguish assertion from other similar speech acts — a responsibility condition, as given by Brandom, that “if one asserts that p, then he or she undertakes the obligation to justify *p* upon request” (Kölbel 2011 68).⁶ This condition individuates assertion from mere supposition and conjecture, as in supposition and conjecture, we do not take on such an obligation to justify the content of our utterances.

Kölbel's account would seem vulnerable to an objection raised by Stalnaker and mentioned earlier. In using rejection to define assertion (remember that its essential effect relies on no rejection taking place) the account looks worryingly circular, as assertion would seem *prima facie* to be that in terms of which rejection ought to be defined. However, Kölbel offers an independent account of rejection defining it as “the refusal to accept a proposition” (Kölbel 2011 62).

Where Kölbel's account really does face problems, however, is in its attempt to distinguish presupposition from assertion. By the act of presupposition Kölbel means

⁶Kölbel thinks that Brandom's first condition, that other participants in the conversation obtain the license to rely on the assertion as a premise in inference, is subsumed under the first, that if challenged, the asserter must produce justification for the assertion. He argues that it is only because of the authority of the asserter that the hearer is justified in using the assertion as a premise in inference — thus the ability to use the assertion as a premise is justified by the obligation upon the speaker to justify the assertion if challenged. However, whilst Kölbel's 'simplified' account gets the structure of justification (at least in assertion) correct, this does not imply that the one condition is reducible to the other. The entitlement to use a claim as a premise, made possible by the assertion of that claim, is an importantly different phenomenon to the obligation placed upon a speaker to justify that claim. This is shown in the cases of conjecture and supposition. When I suppose that p for the sake of argument, I make p available for inference, without thereby being obligated to justify that p.

“the act of adding, or attempting to add, a proposition to the score by using a sentence that requires a presupposition” (Kölbel 2011 69). Thus when I say “Even Ambròs could climb the mountain” I attempt to add the proposition that Ambròs is a weak climber to the score, and am thus presupposing that proposition, whilst I assert that Ambròs could climb the mountain. Yet this account is puzzling, as Kölbel never offers an account of what a presupposition is in a way as to properly distinguish it from an assertion. Why is it that I do not also presuppose the proposition that Ambròs could climb the mountain? One answer that Kölbel offers is that the sufficiency conditions are different for presupposition and assertion. Whilst in assertion the one who utters the sentence takes on the Brandomian obligation discussed above, in presupposition no obligation is generated (Kölbel 2011 70). Yet this seems obviously false. Suppose again that I utter the sentence “Even Ambròs could climb the mountain” — when challenged upon my presupposition that Ambròs is a weak climber, I ought to be able to justify my presupposition if asked, just as I ought to be able to if I had asserted the proposition instead.⁷

It also seems as if Kölbel has not provided a sufficient response to Lewis’s problem. In defining the score in terms of acceptance, where acceptance is defined in terms of the rules of score change, Kölbel simply appears to be taking the second horn of the dilemma, and it is unclear how the conversational score relates to the beliefs and other attitudes of the members of the conversation. On Kölbel’s account it is quite possible for some proposition *p* to be accepted (in his technical sense) and therefore a part of the score, whilst none of the members of the conversation believe (or indeed

⁷Cases of offensive presupposition make this especially clear — think of the racist who utters “She’s as untrustworthy as a black”. Not only would we wish to challenge the way in which the speaker refers to black people, we would also feel the need to challenge the presupposition that black people are untrustworthy.

have any attitude towards) p. Kölbel might deny that this is a problem, but he owes us at least some explanation of why this is the case.

4.5 Conclusion

Lewis's objection causes serious problems for all score-based accounts, and each one analyzed in this section has faced insuperable problems individually. Moreover, I should like to return to the Wittgensteinian point made against the earlier Stalnakerian account. To suggest that assertion is primarily, indeed essentially, performed with the purpose of adding some proposition to the conversational score, is to miss the varied phenomena that comprise our practice of assertion. We need an account that respects this data.

Chapter 5

Commitment, Endorsement, Responsibility

5.1 Introduction

One of the more influential historical accounts of assertion has been to attempt to define assertion in terms of a commitment to, or responsibility for, some claim. Its roots can be found in Peirce, who claims that “to assert a proposition is to make oneself responsible for its truth” (Pierce, quoted in Macfarlane 2011 90). Whilst positions of this type have been held by many, including John Searle (1969) and Crispin Wright (1992),¹ here I will only look at its most developed contemporary version, put forward by Robert Brandom.

¹Along with Alston, Moore, and myself, who incorporate a responsibility condition alongside an additional condition. Such accounts will be discussed in the next chapter.

5.2 Brandom's Account

Brandom's account of assertion attempts to frame assertion in terms of the social statuses we undertake or acknowledge when making an assertion. Such social statuses are normative, deontic in form, and constituted by members of a conversation treating the speaker as so committed. Borrowing the notion of a conversational score from Stalnakerian accounts, Brandom thinks that members of a conversation keep score of the deontic statuses undertaken by themselves and other members of the conversation, attributing to them the appropriate commitments and entitlements. For Brandom, asserting that p is to undertake or acknowledge two such statuses. It is to endorse p , enabling others to use p as a premise in inference, and to commit _{b} ² oneself to p , undertaking a conditional task-responsibility to justify p if challenged (Brandom 1994 170-3, 1983 640-1).

Endorsement is a deontic status that one can undertake, which states that one has the authority to make some claim, and that others may, on the basis of that authority, use that claim as a premise in further inference. In the context of an assertion, if the assertion goes unchallenged, or is justified appropriately in response to challenges, an assertion has the effect of the speaker endorsing that which the assertion claims. That is, the assertion (via the deontic status undertaken by the speaker) authorises further assertions, including the re-assertion of the original claim and those claims which are entailed (logically or materially) by the original claim. The audience of the assertion are thus offered what we might call an 'inference ticket', licensing further assertions. The ticket metaphor is a useful one. Suppose I offer you a ticket to attend

²Brandom unhelpfully uses commitment in two senses. The first sense is a broad commonsense notion of any normative status that demands some action, the latter sense a technical term referring to a specific normative commitment detailed below. Hereafter I shall refer to the former as commitment, the latter as commitment _{b} .

a performance of *Twelfth Night* by the Royal Shakespeare Company. In doing so I am offering you a socially significant license to perform further social acts, specifically those to do with sitting and watching a play. In the same way, my asserting to you that p offers you a license to perform social acts, including asserting that p.³ In this way, assertions have a role in what Brandom calls ‘the game of giving and asking for reasons’ — asserting something gives a reason for further assertions, and can serve as a response when one is asked for a reason. This ‘endorsement condition’ accounts for one of the distinctive features of assertion — that it is somehow the straightforward conveying of information.

However, assertion involves not only endorsement, but commitment_b:

In asserting a claim one not only authorizes further assertions, but commits oneself to vindicate the original claim, showing that one is entitled to make it. Failure to defend one’s entitlement to an assertion voids its social significance as inferential warrant for further assertions. It is only assertions one is entitled to make that claim serve to entitle others to its inferential consequences. Endorsement is empty unless the commitment can be defended. (Brandom 1983 641)

In asserting, “one undertakes the conditional task responsibility to justify the claim if challenged” (Brandom 1983 641-2). Where a ‘task-responsibility’ is defined as a responsibility which requires the fulfillment of a task (in this case, the task of justifying the claim) in order to be fulfilled. Thus, one commits_b oneself to p if one

³The metaphor goes further. Suppose the ticket I gave you to attend the theatre with was a bad one (I used a photocopier to produce a forgery). Upon seeing the ticket, you can challenge me about the goodness of the ticket, or if you decide to attempt to use it anyway, the guard at the door of the theatre will challenge you about the legitimacy of the ticket. So too for licenses to assert (see Brandom 1994 161).

is willing to justify it in some way if challenged. There are three ways in which this justificatory task can be fulfilled. First, there the appeal to the authority of another, who has also asserted the claim, and upon whose authority one bases one's own assertion. Second, one can make further assertions, justifying the content of the first assertion. Third, one can invoke one's own authority as a reliable reporter of non-inferential information (as one does in cases of reporting how one feels, or in cases where one is the only person who has observed some phenomena) (Brandom 1994 174). Note that in each of these ways of fulfilling the justificatory task, one is passing the justificatory buck, whether to another speaker, other assertions, or one's own reliability as an observer. These authorities for one's assertion can themselves be challenged and defended in the same ways as the original assertion. Of course, this leads to a potentially endless chain of further justifications, but this need not be problematic, given that the justifications are only required *when the asserter is challenged to provide them* — the task responsibility is, after all, a *conditional* task responsibility. This commitment_t aspect of assertion captures a second distinctive aspect of assertion, its force — that when we assert something, we are somehow responsible for being right about what we have asserted.

Challenging obviously plays a central role in this definition of assertion, but Brandom is a little unclear on what exactly it consists in. Thankfully Jeremy Wanderer has provided a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that are implicit in Brandom's *Making it Explicit*:

The first (C1) is that the successful act of challenging must provide the condition requiring the challenged asserter to undertake the task of demonstrating entitlement to the challenged claim. The second (C2) is

that the effect of a successful challenge, according to a scorekeeper, is to remove the default entitlement associated with a claim, suspending entitlement to the claim pending successful defence. The third (C3) is that the challenge must be an act that can be performed appropriately or inappropriately; it must be susceptible to being challenged itself, so that successfully challenging the challenge is one way of restoring the entitlement to a claim (Wanderer 2010 100).

Whilst Wanderer and Brandom (see Brandom 2010) take this definition to imply that all challenges are assertions of incompatible propositions, I fail to see how this follows.⁴ Indeed, what I take nice about this definition, defined in terms of the effects of a speech act is that it allows for challenges to take a plurality of forms. The challenge need not be a question, but could be an assertion, or even a promise or order. Suppose Johann utters “The moon is made of cheese”. All the following responses to that utterance, count as challenges on Wanderer’s account, and I take it that it is intuitive that we would ordinarily count them as such:

Jamelia: “Are you sure?”

Josephine: “The moon isn’t made of cheese.”

James: “I promise you, you’re wrong.”

Jackie: “You are going to have to show me where it says that on the NASA website before I accept that.”

Accounting for the variety of utterances that can count as challenges, and having given fairly rigorous conditions for which acts count as assertions, I think that Brandom

⁴In fact it would make Brandom and Wanderer’s accounts circular, as assertion and challenging would be interdefined.

and his followers should be happy to rely on Wanderer's definition.

Brandom's definition of assertion (absent appropriate caveats for challenges) may be given thus:

U asserts that p in uttering S iff:

U R's that p in uttering S, where U R's that p in uttering S iff both:

R_{B1}: U endorses p, offering license to make inferences from p,

R_{B2}: U commits_b to p, undertaking a justificatory responsibility for p.

Call these two conditions R_{B1} and R_{B2} jointly the responsibility condition for assertion, R. Later we shall see slightly different versions of the responsibility condition in Moore's and Alston's work. But whilst I will endorse much of what Alston has to say on assertion, we shall see that his responsibility condition needs to be replaced with Brandom's superior condition.

5.3 Problems for Brandom's Account

Despite capturing two important aspects of assertion, Brandom's account is not without its difficulties. In the following sections I suggest that whilst it can be defended against most of these problems, Brandom fails to distinguish assertion from presupposition.

5.3.1 Lewis's Problem Revisited

We saw in our discussion of Stalnakerian theories of conversational score that Lewis's dilemma causes real problems for any theory of linguistic interaction that relies on

the notion of a score. One worry we might have is that a parallel problem will occur for Brandom, given that he uses the idea of a score. Brandom's score, unlike that of the Stalnakerian, does not keep track of the presuppositions or 'live options' of a conversation, but rather keeps track of the deontic statuses of the various members of the conversation. This score is kept by each member of the conversation about each member of the conversation, tracking what the each scorekeeper takes to be the commitments of the various members of the conversation (Brandom 1994 185). Despite this difference, however, we can construct a parallel version of Lewis's dilemma. Suppose that what governs what gets added to a given person A's score according to a given scorekeeper B are the various rules of commitment and entitlement. If this is the case, then what the scoreboard says about what B supposedly takes A to be committed to seems to become entirely disconnected from B's mental states. Whether or not B believes that A is committed to p or attributes to A a commitment to p is irrelevant to the scoreboard. If A asserted that p and B could hear that assertion, then according to B's score, A is committed to p, regardless of B's mental states. That the score 'floats free' of B's intentional states seems even more odd for Brandom than it did for Stalnaker, as the deontic statuses that are supposedly tracked by the scoreboard are constituted by the states and actions of scorekeepers (Brandom 1994 141-2). Suppose instead that what governs what gets added to a given person A's score according to a given scorekeeper B are the various intentional states of B — what B takes or believes A to be committed to. But here we run into the worry that the rules of conversation become empirical generalisations. This is especially worrying for anyone attempting to give a Brandomian account of assertion, based around the rule that in asserting that p one is undertaking a commitment to

the truth of p . If this horn of the dilemma is taken, Brandom's account of assertion becomes an empirical generalisation.

This dismissal of the second horn might be thought to be a little too quick. We might claim that the responsibility condition does not govern the actual score, but rather, governs what score it is appropriate for a scorekeeper to have on the board. Thus the rule that "if A asserts that p , A is committed to the truth of p " does not tell us what scorekeepers actually take A to be committed to, but it rather tells us what scorekeepers ought to take A to be committed to, should A assert something.⁵

One worry that may strike the reader is that thus understood, the Brandomian account of assertion (and so too any Stalnakerian account which uses this or a similar response to Lewis's problem) becomes a constitutive norm account. According to this line of thought, Brandom would be giving an account of the form "Assert that p only if C " where C is defined as 'the audience attributes to the speaker commitment to the truth of p ' (along with other appropriate conditions defined by Brandom). If this were the case, and the arguments against constitutive norm accounts given earlier in this thesis are correct, then we ought to reject Brandom's account.

Another response is simply to grasp the second horn of the dilemma and claim that the rules are generalisations. In favour of this response we might say that we should not expect the rules of language-use to be universal. Language, like most social practices, is messy, and despite our best attempts, is not corralled easily into neat categories. Rather, we should expect general patterns and regularities, prone to exception and overlap. Brandom's theory, according to this response, is best

⁵According to this reading, the rules Brandom describes might be thought to be similar to the rules of cricket. The rules determine how the game ought to be played, and guide the actions of the umpires, but the ruling of the umpire with regards to the score is final, despite the fact that it is quite easy for the umpires to make mistakes with respect to the laws, and can even deliberately avoid enforcing certain rules.

understood as a generalisation about the way in which assertions function in social practice. However, methodologically, we should be wary of this response. Whilst it may well turn out to be right, we should only take this approach as a last resort, after attempting to see if we can say something more conceptually rigorous about linguistic phenomena.⁶

A better response to the modified Lewisian dilemma is to reject the first horn as being a problem. Remember that for Brandom, the rules of assertion are defined in terms of the commitments one undertakes and one has attributed to oneself by others. Thus the rules cannot ‘float free’ of the intentional states of the scorekeepers, as the intentional states of the scorekeepers determine whether the act is an assertion or not according to the rules. What is the score (the deontic status) according to some H and U if U utters some sentence S? It depends on the intentional states of U and H, where those intentional states can be used to say whether S was an assertion according to the Brandomian definition of an assertion. Thus the apparent oddness mentioned in describing the problem of the first horn is what saves Brandom’s account.

5.3.2 Am I Committed_b to the Inferential Consequences of my Assertions?

Brandom claims that in asserting that p, I am not only committing_b myself to p and entitling others to make assertions that follow from p, but I am also committing_b myself and entitling others to that which is materially and logically entailed by p

⁶It is worth noting that Brandom himself would probably be unhappy with this situation. Despite a healthy respect for Wittgenstein, he claims that language indeed has a downtown, and that downtown is assertion, where assertion is defined in terms of his responsibility condition. A move to treating the definition of assertion as a generalisation would more than likely have unwelcome effects for his inferentialist semantics, grounded as they are in this central speech act.

(Brandom 1994 186). This seems right in many cases. If I say “The cows are in the shed and the sheep are in the field”, I am committed_b to the cows being in the shed, just as much as I am committed_b to the cows being in the shed and the sheep being in the field. So too for your entitlement to those claims. However, Brandom’s positions also seems too strong in many cases. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that one day in the far flung future, Goldbach’s Conjecture will be proved to be true and was a logically necessary truth. Now, let us suppose that in the present Jasper asserts “ $1+2=3$ ”. Supposing that Goldbach’s conjecture is a logical truth, then Jasper is committed_b to Goldbach’s conjecture. This seems to be the wrong result, given that Jasper, when asserting, had no idea whether Goldbach’s conjecture was true or false. This is even more absurd in the case of entitlement. Jasper’s assertion does not entitle anyone to use Goldbach’s conjecture as a premise. David Bakhurst, in correspondence, has remarked that this need not be seen as a problem — commitment_b and entitlement are putatively objective notions and that in certain contexts it is quite appropriate to say that A was committed to p, though they could not have known it at the time. However, according to Brandom, commitment_b and entitlement are not strictly speaking objective — they are rather intersubjective social obligations and permits constituted by members of a conversation treating the speaker as so obligated or permitted. One might be tempted to try to avoid this problem by making the principle one referring to *obvious* inferences that both the speaker and hearer recognize. But beyond the difficulty of defining ‘obvious inferences’ here, the account also seems to rule out the possibility of a hearer objecting to a speaker on the grounds that the speaker is committed to something that they have not noticed. Given the vital nature of such objections in philosophy, we should be hesitant to

dismiss them. We might also think that the careful speaker can make, or indeed not make commitments through inference that their audience misses completely. We see this most often in the measured speech of politicians, who can omit commitments, whilst appearing to make them to an audience.

Instead, we ought to think not of the commitments_b made by a speaker *tout court*, but rather, what each member of the conversation takes the speaker to be committed_b to. Thus suppose I take it as obvious that if p then q, but you do not, and you utter p, I will take you to be committed_b to p but also to q, whilst you take yourself merely to be committed_b to p. Thus I will think myself entitled to ask for justification of q, to challenge it, and also take myself to be entitled to assert that q and all that I take to follow from q, on your authority. Meanwhile, you will not think that I am entitled to either, nor you so committed_b. This also makes sense of Bakhurst's case of A being committed to p, though they could not have known it at the time, as one's *post hoc* attribution of commitment_b to A constitutes A being committed_b to p. Moreover, this account of the inferential commitments of asserting that p ties in much better with Brandom's account of deontic scorekeeping as an individual practice.⁷

5.3.3 A Note on Disagreement

If I say “the cat is on the mat” and take myself to be committed_b to the cat being on the mat, and take you my audience to be entitled to use the cat is on the mat as a premise in inference, but you do not take me to be so committed_b, or take yourself to be so entitled, have I asserted that the cat is on the mat? According to me, yes, to you, no. Is there some further fact of the matter? Not according to Brandom, for

⁷If one does happen to think that groups can have intentional states, nothing I have said here precludes the possibility that groups can also keep conversational score of deontic statuses.

whom there is only the social practice in which the speech act took place.

5.3.4 Individuation

Brandom’s account gives a simple answer to the question of how to individuate assertion from conjecture or supposition. In the case of conjecture or supposition, the responsibility condition is not met, whilst in the case of assertion, it is. When one makes a supposition, whilst one does enable others to use the content as a premise in inference (albeit conditionally) one is only suggesting the content of the speech act. Thus one does not undertake an obligation to justify it if challenged — thus one is not committed_b to the content, and R_{B2} does not hold. I take it that the same is true of conjecture.

However, Brandom’s account struggles to distinguish assertion from presupposition. *Ceteris parabus* if I say “The cat is on the mat” I presuppose that there is a cat, yet in doing so I both endorse and commit_b myself to the claim that there is a cat and so according to Brandom I assert that there is a cat. I endorse the claim, as after I have said “The cat is on the mat”, others are entitled to use the claim that there is a cat as a premise in inference. Meanwhile, I am committed_b to the claim that there is a cat, as in uttering “The cat is on the mat”, I undertake an obligation to justify the claim that there is a cat. Therefore R_{B1} and R_{B2} hold for this and many other presuppositions, and thus Brandom’s account treats presuppositions as assertions. Brandom’s account alone then, is insufficient for a definition of assertion, as it fails to properly individuate the speech act.

Brandom might respond that he has given an answer to the question of how to individuate assertion from other assertoric speech acts, such as presupposition. For

Brandom, assertions are unique as they are the only speech acts that both perform the role of being that which reasons are asked for, and that which giving a reason consists in. Thus whilst one can ask what the reason for (the justification of) an action was, one cannot offer an action as a reason for anything.⁸ Meanwhile, whilst one can offer the reliability of an observer as a reason for believing that observer, one cannot ask for the reason for (in the sense of a justification of) the reliability of the observer. My assertion of *p*, however, can both provide a reason and stand in need of reasons to justify it (Brandom 1994 167).

However, Brandom is simply wrong about this. Presuppositions also stand in this dual relation to a reason. If I assert that *p*, where *p* presupposes that *q*, not only would an interlocutor be quite within their rights to demand justification for (reasons for) *q*, but they would also be acting legitimately were they to take *q* itself as a reason.⁹ Assertion, then, cannot be individuated by reference to the unique relation that assertions have to the notion of a reason, as presuppositions also incur assertional commitments.

This said, Brandom's account captures something important about assertion, that is, the normative force that assertions carry. In the next section, I will outline Alston's position, before showing how combining it with the Brandomian picture both answers the individuation question and retains this nice account of assertoric force.¹⁰

⁸It is unclear whether this is in fact the case. Ordinary language suggests that actions can play the role of reasons in this sense — we can quite easily imagine a bartender who, when asked why they threw a punter from their bar would reply “They punched another customer!”, or show a CCTV video of the punch, or mimic the act of punching. Whether this is surface ‘grammar’ misleading us as to the underlying metaphysical nature of reasons notwithstanding, contemporary debates in the metaphysics of reasons are inconclusive, and we should not be quick in accepting Brandom's claim here.

⁹This falls quite simply out of the fact that Brandom takes reasons to be propositions, and that the content of a presupposition is, for him at least, a proposition.

¹⁰Beyond those discussed in this chapter, there are other worries for any Brandomian or

responsibility-based account, including Pagin's objection and accounting for ironic assertion, but I shall save discussion of those for when I have given my completed picture of assertion.

Chapter 6

Bipartite Accounts of Assertion

6.1 Introduction

Thus far, the accounts of assertion that I have discussed have been thoroughly unsatisfactory. Even Brandom's responsibility-based theory, which I expressed some admiration for, failed to properly individuate assertion. In this section I turn to accounts of assertion that attempt to take the best of responsibility-based theories and add conditions that capture the way in which assertions are used to openly present information and, more importantly, properly individuate assertion from presupposition. I will suggest that a modified version of Alston's explicit presentation condition, combined with Brandom's responsibility condition(s), provides the correct account of assertion.

6.2 Moore's Account

Whilst Russell, Frege and the early Wittgenstein had mostly been concerned with giving accounts of assertion that would enable the concept to be used as a part of providing a sound logical basis for mathematics, Moore was largely concerned with what Russell called 'psychological assertion', or the ordinary social practice of asserting. Whilst what can be made of Russell's theory of psychological assertion is largely absurd,¹ Moore's own positive theory of assertion still holds some weight. Moore's positive theory of (psychological) assertion may be drawn from some suggestive remarks he makes in *The Commonplace Book*. For Moore, in uttering some sentence S, one asserts if one is attempting to convey the content of the sentence and one is committed to the truth of the proposition expressed by the proposition (Moore 1962 181).² We may put the account thus:

U asserts that p in uttering S iff:

R: U R's that p

C_m: U attempts to convey that p

Where U R's that p iff:

R_m: U is committed to the truth of p.

As things stand, the Moorean position simply will not do. The notion of 'commitment to the truth' is vague, and needs spelling out. More troublingly, one can attempt to

¹Russell thinks that it is impossible to make an error when (psychologically) asserting (Russell 1937 503). This seems hopelessly naïve. Regardless of whether one agrees with Williamson and company that (psychological) assertion can be defined by a single constitutive norm that governs the activity, it is a brave person who denies that there are no norms governing assertion whatsoever.

²Interestingly Moore even accounts for lying and joking. Such speech acts are uttered intending to convey the content in the same way, but without a commitment to the truth of the proposition in question.

convey that p and be committed to the truth of p without making any physical action. Suppose that you are the only person who knows that the only way to stop Dr X's evil plan to destroy the earth is to blackmail her with her pet cat, and you attempt to convey this to someone else. Unfortunately Dr X has bound and gagged you, such that you cannot move at all, despite your best attempts to do anything that would convey the blackmail solution. Thus being committed to the truth of the relevant proposition, and attempting to convey it, Moore's account counts you as asserting — despite you not having done anything!

This said, Moore's account seems to get something intuitively right about assertion. It gives us a distinctive *force* for assertion, by including a responsibility condition. It also gives us that distinctive putting forward of content that assertion seems to involve. Taking these advantages seriously, I will, over the course of this chapter, develop a model of assertion based on the one Moore provides, drawing on the work of William P. Alston.

6.3 Alston's Account

We saw in the Chapter One that Alston gives two questions that any satisfactory theory of assertion must be able to answer if it is to individuate assertion. First, what is it that distinguishes the expression of a psychological attitude from the assertion that one has that attitude? Second, what is the distinction between what is asserted and what is presupposed? (Alston 2000 115). To this, he adds a third problem for theories of assertion that rely on a notion of commitment or responsibility — if assertion is simply the commitment to (the truth of) some proposition, then why is it that in other speech acts, such as promising and ordering, I am not asserting the

content and necessary preconditions of those speech acts? To see why this might be a problem, take the following order, uttered by the Major: “Polish your boots, Private!”. Here the Major is committed to the following:

That the private will polish her boots.

That it is possible for the private to polish her boots.

That the private has boots.

That there is a private.

That the private will be placed under an obligation by the utterance of this order.

And so on...³

Thus, if assertion is understood as mere commitment, the Major is asserting all of the above. Thus the problem for any sufficient account of assertion is telling us why the above commitments are not assertions when expressed via order, promise, or other non-assertoric speech act.

³It is fairly obvious that a good answer to Alston’s second question will eliminate all but the first commitment on this list as a problem. The first commitment on this list is the propositional content of the order, and seems to be explicitly presented by the order. I am certainly less worried than Alston about saying that in making an order or promise one also asserts the content of the order or promise. Indeed it is not clear to me why we should not count the Major as asserting that the private will polish her boots when ordering “Polish your boots Private!”, or why we should not count me as asserting that I will take out the trash when I promise to take out the trash by saying “I promise to take out the trash”. Gary Watson also raises a further example:

Consider also giving directions to the library solely by a series of imperatives: “Go to the next corner, turn right, and continue on to the northeast corner of the first intersection with a traffic light.” I take it that one has told [asserted to] one’s interlocuter that the library is on the corner of that intersection (Watson 2004 74).

Thus despite using this problem to show (in part) why Alston is motivated to take his position, I will take it that given an appropriate response to Alston’s second question dissolves Alston’s third question.

6.3.1 Explicit Presentation

These problems, and a frustration with contemporary accounts of assertion lead Alston to his fundamental insight:

...we assert that p when we “come right out and say that p *in so many words*”, when “we *explicitly* say that p ”. This suggests that the difference between asserting that p and R’ing that p without asserting it lies in the verbal means employed in the utterance, rather than in the psychological attitudes or in any other inner factor. Furthermore it suggests that the crucial feature of the sentential vehicle is the “explicitness” with which it “presents” the p in question. Where the p R’d is “explicitly presented”, it is asserted; where not, not (Alston 2000 117).

Alston spells out this notion of ‘explicit presentation’ in terms of semantic isomorphism. That is, a sentence S explicitly presents a proposition p iff S and p are semantically isomorphic. S and p are semantically isomorphic iff there for each semantic element of S there is a corresponding element of p (and vice-versa) and the elements of S and p are each combined in corresponding ways. Thus the proposition that the door is open is semantically isomorphic to the following sentences:

“The door is open.”

“That door is open.”

“It’s open.”⁴

In each of the above sentences, there are semantic elements corresponding to each semantic element of the above proposition — a referring expression for the door, a

⁴In each of these sentences, ‘the door’, ‘that door’ and ‘it’ must have the same referent as the door referred to by the proposition for the sentences to be semantically isomorphic with the proposition.

predicative term describing that something being open, and the relation of predication between the referring expression and the predicative term (Alston 2000 117).⁵

Thus in addition to a responsibility condition R (the details of which will be spelled out shortly), Alston gives an explicit presentation condition that must be met if one is to count as asserting that p. Thus:

U asserted that p in uttering S iff both:

R: U R'd that p

EP: S explicitly presents the proposition that p.

Alston rightly suggests that this deals with his three problems quite nicely (Alston 2000 120-1). When I say “Wow!” or “Eww!” I do not explicitly present the proposition that I am excited or the proposition that I am disgusted, thus Alston’s account correctly categorises such utterances as not being assertions. Further, when one asserts “The cat is on the mat”, the proposition that there exists a cat is not explicitly presented by the sentence and thus this and other presuppositions of assertions do not count as assertions. Finally, when one orders another thus: “Close the door!” despite one R’ing that there exists a door and R’ing that one has the authority to order another in such a way, neither the proposition that there exists a door nor the proposition that one has the authority to order another in such a way are explicitly presented by the utterance. Thus *prima facie* all three problems are solved by the

⁵In requiring that assertion involve the explicit presentation of a proposition, Alston takes himself to be siding with Strawson and against Russell on the nature of definite descriptions. He claims that this is because “a natural way of extending Russell’s theory of definite descriptions to the topic of assertion” is to treat the utterance of “the king of France is bald” as the assertion that there is a king of France, that there is only one such king, and that the king is bald (Alston 2000 115-6). Meanwhile, Strawson would treat all but the proposition that the king of France is bald as presuppositions (Strawson 1950). It is unclear to me that Russell’s theory of definite descriptions need be extended in this way however.

introduction of the explicit presentation condition.

However, the explicit presentation condition cannot be as simple as I have presented it here. There are cases where we assert that p in uttering S , where S is not semantically isomorphic to p . Take the following case suggested by Alston (2000 120):

Alice: “What did you have for lunch?”

Bobby: “Soup.”

Here Bobby seems to be asserting that they had soup for lunch, but the utterance “Soup” is certainly not semantically isomorphic to the proposition that Bobby had soup for lunch, as it lacks both the semantic elements designating Bobby and lunch, along with the predicate ‘had for lunch’ and the appropriate tripartite predication relation between had for lunch and the three subjects Bobby, soup and lunch. To deal with cases such as these, Alston introduces ellipsis, arguing that the utterance need not explicitly present the proposition that p , but need only be elliptical for a sentence that does. Therefore Bobby’s utterance does count as an assertion, as “Soup” is elliptical for “I had soup for lunch” which explicitly presents the proposition that Bobby had soup for lunch. Thus Alston’s modified analysis of assertion is as follows:

U asserted that p in uttering S iff both:

R: U R’d that p

EP_e: S explicitly presents the proposition that p , or S is uttered as elliptical for a sentence that explicitly presents the proposition that p .

However EP_e causes more trouble for Alston than it prevents. Take the following utterance:

Clara: “Joanna batted well today.”

Clara’s utterance here is correctly analysed by Alston’s account as an assertion that Joanna batted well today. However, we might worry that Clara’s utterance is elliptical for the sentence “Joanna batted well and played cricket today” and even simply “Joanna played cricket today”. Thus Clara is, according to Alston, asserting that Joanna batted well and played cricket today, and asserting that Joanna played cricket today, alongside innumerable other propositions which are explicitly presented by sentences that the original utterance is elliptical for. Given that these propositions are, intuitively, not asserted by Clara, but are rather presupposed, then the introduction of the EP_e means that Alston’s second problem, of distinguishing assertions from their presuppositions, rears its ugly head once more. In attempting to account for assertions like “Soup”, Alston has fallen victim to the very problem he posed for other accounts of assertion.⁶

It seems then, that adding ellipsis is too clumsy a move — it lets too much into the category of assertion. I propose however, that Alston was on the right track with this move — it is merely that we need to specify the right *kind* of ellipsis. Anaphoric dependence, I claim, specifies the right *kind* of ellipsis to individuate assertion. Anaphoric dependence is a linguistic phenomenon whereby the content of one token utterance is passed on to another token utterance. Take the example given by Brandom: “Have I read *the book*? I haven’t even taught *it* yet” (Brandom

⁶We might think that the ellipsis condition also means that Alston no longer has a satisfactory response to his first problem. Take the utterance “Wow”. It is an expression of enthusiasm, but we might read it as elliptical for the sentence “I am enthusiastic”, which explicitly presents the proposition that I am enthusiastic. “Wow”, according to EP_e , thus becomes an assertion. EP_e would thus mean that Alston falls victim to his own first problem. A question remains however, as to whether “Wow” is indeed elliptical for “I am enthusiastic” — and the burden of spelling out the nature of this problematic ellipsis is at this point passed to Alston’s critic.

2005 239). Here, ‘it’ anaphorically refers to ‘the book’ and thus the content of ‘it’ is determined by the content of its referent — ‘the book’. ‘It’ is of course a pronoun, but there are also ‘prosentences’, expressions whose anaphoric reference can be an entire declarative sentence. Take, for example ‘yes’, which Brentano first described as a prosentence in 1904 (Grover et al. 1975 87-8):

Danny: “Does Tim like the library?”

Emma: “Yes”

Here, Emma’s utterance anaphorically refers to the sentence ‘Tim likes the library’ (which can be derived from the context — Danny’s utterance) and derives its content thereof. Thus in this context the sentence “Yes” anaphorically refers to the sentence “Tim likes the library”. Note that that Tim likes the library is precisely the proposition that we take Emma to be asserting when she utters “Yes”. We can thus use the notion of a prosentence anaphorically referring to another sentence in our definition of assertion:

U asserted that p in uttering S iff both:

R: U R’d that p

EP_a: S explicitly presents the proposition that p, or S is a prosentence anaphorically referring to a sentence that explicitly presents p.

To understand how this definition solves the problems faced by Alston’s account, let us return to the ‘soup’ example. Bobby’s utterance of “Soup” as a response to the Alice’s question “What did you have for lunch today” is a prosentence that anaphorically refers to the sentence “I had soup for lunch” (we derive this from the context — Alice’s utterance). “I had soup for lunch” explicitly presents the

proposition that I had soup for lunch. “Soup” is thus correctly categorised as an assertion.

The cricket counterexample is also dispatched, as Clara’s utterance of “Joanna batted well today” does not anaphorically refer to any sentence. There is no relevant context and thus no anaphoric reference. Thus only the only proposition that is asserted by Clara is that which her utterance explicitly presents: that Joanna batted well today.

One might worry that a more challenging example comes when there is an anaphoric context providing a sentence to which the utterance refers in addition to a proposition explicitly presented by the sentence uttered:

Florence: “Did Joanna play rugby today?”

Gareth: “Joanna tackled well today”

Here it seems that Gareth’s utterance anaphorically refers to the sentence “Joanna played rugby today and tackled well today” or “Yes she did, and Joanna tackled well today” or simply “Joanna played rugby today” and therefore Gareth counts as asserting that Joanna played rugby today. Yet given the context of Gareth’s utterance, it seems less than clear to me that this is not the correct result. Analogous to the soup example, intuitively Gareth is asserting that Joanna played rugby today in this context.⁷ EP_a thus provides the appropriate ellipsis relation to include assertions and rule out presuppositions.⁸

One might think that an account of assertion could be given just in terms of an

⁷Does my EP_a version of Alston’s position fall victim to Alston’s first worry? Plausibly not. It seems hard to see how “Wow” or “Eww” could anaphorically refer to sentences such as “I am disgusted”.

⁸For an alternative and powerful criticism of Alston’s explicit presentation condition as it relates to his theory of meaning, see Tanesini (2005).

explicit presentation condition. However, such an account would fail to individuate assertion from supposition and conjecture. In conjecturing “The rain today will be especially hard” the speaker explicitly presents the proposition that the rain today will be especially hard, and would, on this naïve account, wrongly count as asserting. Thus any such account would do well to be supplemented by a clause that accounts for the distinctive force of assertion — that in asserting that p one is somehow responsible for p ’s being the case, in a way that one is not if one merely conjectures that p , or supposes that p for the sake of argument.

6.3.2 Alstonian Responsibility

We have already seen two such responsibility conditions, given by Brandom and Moore. Alston’s condition is somewhat different. For Alston,

R_A: U R’s that p in uttering S iff: In uttering S , U subjects their utterance to a rule that, in application to this case implies that it is only permissible for U to utter S only if p . (Alston 2000 60).

Where this rule is a social norm concerning what it is acceptable to say in a given language game, and lays the speaker open to criticism if they break that rule. Alston points out that this responsibility condition implies that if one asserts “The cat is on the mat” one R’s not only the propositional content of the assertion, but all of the presuppositions of the assertion. Thus alone this condition would not individuate assertion from presupposition — it needs to be combined with an explicit presentation condition. The condition does, however, allow individuation of assertion from conjecture and supposition, acts which meet the explicit presentation condition, but

not Alston's requirement that one only perform them if one subjects one's utterance to the rule that one may make that utterance only if the content of that utterance is the case.

It might appear that Alston's R'ing condition is simply a constitutive norm of assertion, but we should hesitate to apply the criticisms that we saw of those accounts too readily, given differences between the accounts. For one, Williamsonian and other similar accounts only required that assertions be governed by some rule, whilst Alston requires that not only does assertion need to be governed by some rule, but that the rule governance must also be instituted by the speaker. Second, given that the R'ing condition is combined with an explicit presentation condition in Alston's final account, complaints that the definition of assertion is not rich enough will have a tougher time gaining traction. Nevertheless, Alston does take the norm that the R'ing condition describes, along with his explicit presentation condition, to be constitutive of assertion (Alston 2000 253).

If the Alstonian R'ing condition is (with these caveats in place) a norm of assertion, where do we place it in the taxonomy of those accounts? At first glance, it might be tempting to characterise it *simply* as a truth-norm of assertion. After all, if one may only assert that p only if p, and as is generally accepted, the T-schema holds, then one may assert that p only if 'p' is true. However, whilst Alston does take his rule to be the T-rule, he also thinks that his rule entails two other formulations of the R'ing condition, whilst maintaining that R_A (the T-rule) "is the most fundamental formulation" (Alston 2000 63):

R_{AP} : U R's that p in uttering S — In uttering S, U purports to know that p.

R_{AR} : U R's that p in uttering S — In uttering S, U represents p as being the case.

Alston argues that R_A entails R_{AP} , as one subjects oneself to that rule that one may assert that p only if p — and thus one cannot purport to follow the rule without thereby purporting to know that one does so. Alston argues that R_{AR} follows from R_A , as when one subjects something to a rule that requires that p , one represents p as being the case (Alston 2000 63).

Given that Alston regards R_A as entailing R_{AP} and R_{AR} , if we can find counterexamples to these conditions, then by *modus tollens*, Alston ought to reject R_A . As it happens, there are cases where we do not purport to know that p in uttering S , and yet still assert that p . Take, for example, Jennifer Lackey’s cases of selfless assertion,⁹ and openly insincere assertions.¹⁰ Further, even if the Alston were to change his mind and reject the inference from R_A to R_{AP} , R_A itself is vulnerable to the objections Williamson made against the truth norm of assertion.¹¹ It seems, then, that if we are to have a bipartite account of assertion, we had better have a different responsibility condition.

6.4 The Alstonian-Brandomian Account

I therefore suggest that we incorporate Brandom’s responsibility condition into Alston’s account, along with the changes I proposed to the explicit presentation condition, in order to adequately deal with cases of ellipsis:

U asserted that p in uttering S iff both:

⁹See Lackey 2007

¹⁰Note that these will not do as counterexamples to R_{AR} , as the creationist teacher still represents evolutionary statements to be the case to her students, and even in cases of openly insincere assertion, there is a certain sense in which the assertion represents its content as being the case, given that it explicitly presents the proposition.

¹¹See Williamson 2000

EP_a: S explicitly presents the proposition that p, or S is a prosentence
 anaphorically referring to a sentence that explicitly presents p.

R: U R'd that p

Where U R's that p in uttering S iff both:

R_{B1}: U endorses that p, offering license to make inferences from p,

R_{B2}: U commits_b to p, undertaking a justificatory responsibility for p.

I take this to be the correct account of assertion. In the next section I shall show that it adequately responds to Alston's challenges, along with a number of other objections.

6.4.1 Individuating Assertion

My bipartite account of assertion individuates assertion from conjecture and supposition on the one hand, and presupposition on the other, by incorporating the best aspects of Brandom and Alston's accounts. The following table indicates how the conditions individuate assertion:

		Meets Condition?		
		EP _a	R _{B1}	R _{B2}
Speech Act	Assertion	✓	✓	✓
	Presupposition	✗	Sometimes	Sometimes
	Conjecture/Supposition	✓	✓	✗
	Expression of Emotion	✗	?	?
	Speech Act Commitments	✗	Sometimes	Sometimes

In asserting that p , all three conditions are met. Meanwhile, when one presupposes that p , one does not explicitly present the proposition that p . Take my utterance “Cal is stuck in the well.” Here, I presuppose (amongst other things) that there is a well which one can get stuck down — yet my utterance does not explicitly present that proposition, nor does my sentence anaphorically refer to a sentence that explicitly presents the proposition that there is a well to get stuck down. Thus EP_a is not met. Further, in some cases, one does not R the presuppositions of one’s utterances. As discussed in Chapter Four, whether I am committed _{b} to the consequences of my assertion will depend on the interpretation of myself and my interlocutors. Similarly, whilst there will be cases where one’s presupposition of some proposition will be taken as an endorsement of that proposition (in the Brandomian sense of making available for further inference) there will be cases, differentiated by context, in which the presuppositions of an utterance are not endorsed.

In conjecturing that p , or supposing that p , as in “For the purposes of argument, metaphysical zombies exist,” one explicitly presents the proposition that metaphysical zombies exist, and thus one’s conjecture meets EP_a . One also endorses that p — indeed, one of the main functions of supposition is as the putting forward of some claim as a premise for further inference. However, one is not committed _{b} to the utterance, and is under no obligation to justify that claim, thus conjecture does not meet R_{B2} .

As to the expression of emotion, which gave rise to Alston’s first problem, it is quite clear that Tess does not explicitly present the proposition that she is elated at her victory when she shouts “Yes!” It also seems difficult to see how such an utterance

could anaphorically refer to the sentence “I am elated at my victory”.¹² Finally, to Alston’s third problem, the addition of the EP_a condition rules out the commitments of other speech acts counting as assertions.¹³ The Major’s order, “Polish your boots Private!” does not explicitly present the proposition that the private will be placed under an obligation by the utterance of the order, nor does the order anaphorically refer to a sentence which explicitly presents that proposition.

6.4.2 Williamson’s Considerations

If our definition of assertion is to be preferable to accounts such as Williamson’s, it would be nice if we could offer an alternative explanation of the phenomena that Williamson’s account seems to explain well: Moorean paradoxes, the impropriety of lottery propositions and “How do you know that?” responses.

Moore and Retraction

I suggest that we can understand the oddity of Moorean sentences using the notion of retraction — that is, what makes them seem so absurd is that in the very same utterance, a speaker asserts that p and then retracts that assertion. A question then: what is retraction? I take it that retraction is the ‘taking back’ of something, in the linguistic case, a taking back of some speech act. Thus the notion of retraction will differ depending on what is being taken back. The retraction of an order will have different conditions to the retraction of an assertion.

¹²In using these and other similar examples, I am assuming that indexical terms pose no additional problems for my account, and that the proposition that she is elated at her victory and the proposition that I am elated at my victory are one and the same when the pronouns in each sentence refer to the same individual.

¹³Subject to my earlier reservations regarding the propositional content of the speech act itself intuitively counting as an assertion.

I take it that given my conditions for assertion are jointly necessary for an utterance to count as an assertion, anything that makes it clear that one does not meet one of those conditions will count as a retraction of the assertion. Thus if one makes it clear that any of EP_a , R_{B1} , or R_{B2} is not met, one has retracted the assertion.

Initially, it might seem hard to see how one could, after the fact, make it such that EP_a does not obtain — after all, if one’s utterance explicitly presented a proposition at the time of utterance, there seems to be nothing one can do to change that fact. However, given that EP_a involves anaphoric reference, it is possible to change the referent proposition of the utterance after the fact. Suppose a religious friend makes a Freudian slip:

Annie: “I love dog”

Nikhil: “Wait... What?”

Annie: “I didn’t mean that. I meant I love God”

Here the anaphoric reference of Annie’s initial utterance is made, post-hoc, the sentence “I love God” (this type of anaphor is known as cataphoric reference) and thus the assertion that I love dog is retracted, as EP_a is no longer met.¹⁴ Thus in some cases, one retracts one’s assertion that p by making one’s utterance no longer meet EP_a for the proposition that p . In most cases of retraction, however, it is R_{B2} that is shown to fail to obtain. Thus when I say “I don’t stand by that anymore” or “I’m not so sure of that anymore” or “I don’t believe that anymore”, I shirk the justificatory

¹⁴It might be responded here that we have not replaced the assertion of the proposition that I love dog, but rather have simply created a glut of asserted contents. Strictly speaking, Annie seems to have asserted both that she loves dog and that she loves God! However, we can also appeal to Annie’s use of the phrase “I didn’t mean that”, which seems to undermine the claim that we can take her original utterance to mean (explicitly present) that which we initially took it to mean (explicitly present). Even if one does not accept this argument, it seems plausible that “I didn’t mean that” will at least undermine R_{B2} .

responsibility that I undertook in making the initial assertion. By making myself no longer responsible for vindicating the claim I made if challenged, I thus make it such that R_{B2} no longer holds, and I thus retract my initial assertion.¹⁵

Thus we can give an explanation of why Moorean sentences sounds so odd. If I utter “p but I don’t know that p” I seem to be both claiming that I have a justificatory responsibility with respect to p and that I have no justificatory responsibility with respect to p. This is an expression of a contradiction, and it is thus unsurprising that this should sound odd. Moreover, *I actually do undertake a justificatory responsibility* in the first half of the sentence, and then shirk it in the second. No wonder the Moorean paradoxes, to use Moore’s own term, sound so absurd!

Lottery Propositions

The impropriety of the assertion of a lottery proposition, on this account, is to be explained in terms of R_{B2} . In asserting “Your ticket has not won the lottery”, one undertakes a justificatory responsibility with regards to the claim that the ticket in question has not won the lottery. When challenged, however, one cannot fully justify that claim, beyond the probabilistic reasoning available to both parties. Thus one cannot, in the face of a challenge, adequately justify one’s assertion, beyond a justification already available to both parties. Thus the impropriety of the utterance of such sentences is explained.

¹⁵David Bakhurst has suggested a possible example of retraction via the removal of R_{B1} : one might utter “P, but don’t think anything follows from that.” Yet I am not sure that this counts as retraction of P, nor that R_{B1} fails when one says that one does not think anything follows from P. One still licenses P for use in further inference, even if that inference shows that nothing follows from P.

“How do you know that?” Challenges

Finally, given that challenges are built into our definition of assertion, via R_{B2} , it is quite clear that we can give an explanation of why “How do you know that?” is an appropriate response to an assertion: simply, in asserting, one commits oneself to producing a justification of one’s claim in the face of a challenge. As it is a challenge, “How do you know that?” is appropriate, as the initial asserter has committed themselves to providing an answer to it.

6.4.3 A Note on Desert Landscapes

There are many philosophers who have a “taste for desert landscapes” (Quine 1948 23). This aesthetic sensibility manifests itself in a number of ways, not least in a distaste for the perhaps ontologically inflated notion of a proposition, which many regard with suspicion. Such an anti-propositionalist might look upon my definition of assertion with some scepticism, given that EP_a (like Alston’s EP and EP_e) relies on the notion of a proposition. Given that the burden of proof is usually assumed to be on the anti-propositionalist to show that they can account for all the work that propositions can do without reference to propositions, I am not particularly troubled by this thought, but I should like to note one way in which we might eliminate propositions from our definition of assertion.¹⁶ Alston puts it thus:

“When we specify what it is that U may or may not have asserted, we do so by using a declarative sentence, for example, ‘There is a chair in the corner’. Our first way involved taking that sentence to specify a

¹⁶Of course, one might instead try to keep the language of propositions by reducing propositions to something appropriately austere and unproblematic, perhaps relying on the notion of translation.

proposition and then asking whether S's sentence was related in a certain way to that proposition. But instead of taking this detour through the proposition, why not go directly from the sentence used to specify the assertion to U's sentence and ask whether they stand in the appropriate equivalence relation, R? We can then say that U has asserted that p only if S1 (S's sentence) is related by R to S2 (the sentence used to specify what was putatively asserted)" (Alston 2000 118).

Of course, as Alston notes, the difficulty will come in specifying the nature of R, and he dismisses several possible relations, but I suspect that something like the notion of semantic isomorphism (applied to sentence-sentence rather than sentence-proposition relations) will do the work that the anti-propositionalist requires of it. Thus R may be thought to be *sentential isomorphism*:

S' and S'' are sententially isomorphic iff there for each semantic element of S' there is a corresponding element of S'' (and vice-versa) and the elements of S' and S'' are each combined in corresponding ways.

I take it that this does not rely on anything too extravagant for the desert landscape.

6.4.4 Pagin's Objection

In "Is Assertion Social?" Peter Pagin provides an objection to theories that rely on what he calls *social significance* to define assertion. One type of social significance condition that Pagin considers is what I have been calling responsibility conditions for assertion, and he regards theories based on such conditions as extensionally inadequate, including utterances that we would not ordinarily count as assertions in the

category of assertions. Pagin considers what I take to be a Moorean responsibility condition:

To assert that p is to commit oneself to the truth of p (Pagin 2004 838).

He points out that if assertion is defined according to this definition, then the utterance of any of the following would count as an assertion that p:

P1: “I hereby commit myself to the truth of p”

P2: “I guarantee that p”

P3: “I promise that p” (Pagin 2004 838-9).¹⁷

According to Pagin, none of these seem to be assertions of p, but all would be counted as assertions of p by a definition of assertion that relied solely Moore’s responsibility condition. More pertinently to my project, Pagin presents a similar counterexample to Brandom’s definition of assertion. He neatly puts Brandom’s definition as:

To assert that p is to authorize the audience to claim whatever follows from p and to undertake the responsibility of justifying p (Pagin 2004 839).

Which, he claims, wrongly categorises the following as an assertion of p:

P4: “I hereby authorize you to claim whatever follows from p and undertake the responsibility of justifying p.” (Pagin 2004 840).

¹⁷I am unsure as to whether or not we would ordinarily characterise P2 and P3 as assertions of p (see footnote 3 of this chapter). Nonetheless, P1 is enough to prove Pagin’s point here.

Pagin thus produces a mechanism for producing counterexamples to theories defined in terms of an R'ing condition — any utterance of the form “I hereby x”, where x is the definition of assertion, will be counted as an assertion of some p by the theory, but will be unlikely to be intuitively thought to be an assertion of that p.

Yet whilst this is a counterexample to Brandom's theory,¹⁸ as Philip Pegan points out, Pagin's counterexamples will only do as a response to theories of assertion that are expressed wholly in such terms (the R'ing condition being necessary *and* sufficient for assertion) and not those theories that claim that social effects are merely necessary for assertion (Pegan 2009 2557-8). Thus my bipartite theory of assertion is untroubled, as it would not count P4 as an assertion, because P4 does not meet EP_a . Pegan does, however, offer a potential counterexample generator to bipartite theories that rely on something like an explicit presentation condition:

P5: “In making the following utterance I intend to undertake a commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed by the sentence I utter: The Red Sox won.”

P6: “In uttering the sentence I next utter, I intend to undertake a commitment to the truth of the proposition it expresses: The Red Sox won”(Pegan 2009 2561).

Applying this counterexample generator to my bipartite theory, we get a putative counterexample:

P7: “In making the following utterance, I hereby authorize you to claim whatever follows from it and undertake the responsibility of justifying it: The Red Sox won.”

¹⁸I will not discuss potential Brandomian responses for want of space.

Yet it is less than clear to me that P7 (and for that matter P5 and P6) are not what we would ordinarily characterise as assertions. It is simply that in each case the implications of the last clause (the assertion proper) are made explicit in the earlier clauses. Indeed, I take it that P7 is mostly an exercise in redundancy, wherein one asserts that the Red Sox won after having made explicit what it means to assert that the Red Sox won.¹⁹

6.5 Irony

No account of assertion considered thus far has a satisfactory account of ironic assertion. At best, the philosophers I have looked at have simply said that asserting in irony is improper assertion and is somehow derivative from the sincere case. Whilst there are several ways of spelling out ironic assertion as a derivative, improper case of assertion, available in the literature, I should like to see if we can preserve the intuition that ironic assertion is assertion proper.

Constitutive norm accounts such as Williamson's claim that ironic assertion is still governed by the constitutive norm — but in cases where it is clear that the speaker is being ironic, it seems hard to see what this governance amounts to. Certainly, one would be in error to criticise someone (on epistemic or indeed other grounds) for ironically asserting that p , when it was quite clear that the assertion was meant to endorse that $\neg p$.

¹⁹Both Pegan (2009 2561) and Pagin (2009 2565-6) believe that there are non-assertoric readings of the 'the Red Sox won' clause. Pegan does not take the non-assertoric reading of 'the Red Sox won' to be a counterexample to bipartite theories, whilst Pagin does. I, for one, simply cannot see what a non-assertoric reading of such an utterance amounts to when embedded in such a sentence — and given that such examples are designed with the aim of contradicting our intuitions with regards to what counts as an assertion, I do not feel the force of Pagin's objection here.

Speaker attitude accounts are similarly troubled. Fregeans hold that assertions are outward signs of thoughts that the speaker takes to be true, but it is quite obvious that in ironic assertion, the speaker does not need to take the claim expressed to be true. Similar problems arise for Bach and Harnish, as was discussed (under the rubric of openly insincere assertion) earlier in this paper.

Conversational score accounts of assertion also seem to struggle with ironic assertion. When one ironically asserts that p , the content of that assertion is that p is the case, and thus according to Stalnaker, the context set is reduced in size to exclude all of the worlds in which $\neg p$ is the case. Yet it is quite clear that this is not what actually occurs in such cases. When I say that “He is a *wonderful* friend,” meaning my utterance to be taken ironically, the context set should be reduced to exclude those worlds in which he *is* a wonderful friend!

Finally, responsibility theorists of assertion (including bipartite definitions such as my own) have a problem with ironic assertion as it appears that one is not committed to the truth of the ironic assertion, nor does one undertake a commitment to providing a justification of what one claims when legitimately challenged. In ironic assertion, one does not take responsibility for the content of one’s assertion.

Given the failure of philosophers of assertion to come to terms with ironic assertion as assertion proper, I suggest a slight tweak in our understanding of irony, that will enable not only my own account of assertion, but also responsibility and conversational score accounts of assertion to incorporate ironic assertion. The thought is this: thus far I have assumed that, in uttering the ironic assertion “He’s a wonderful friend,” the content of the assertion is that he’s a wonderful friend, and that the irony works as something like a pragmatic operator on the content of the assertion

(often a simple negation, at other times an operator that changes the meaning in a slightly more subtle way). Instead, I suggest that we ought to treat the irony as a part of the semantics of an utterance. Thus we should take the content of the assertion as directly involving the irony. Thus the content of the ironically asserted “He’s a wonderful friend,” is that he’s not a wonderful friend.

How does this aid conversational score accounts, along with responsibility accounts and my own bipartite account? For conversational score accounts, the move simply allows such accounts to treat ironic assertions as reducing the context set in the correct way. For my own account (and indeed responsibility condition accounts more generally) it removes the need for the utterer to be committed to something they are being ironic about. Instead of being committed_b to the fact that he’s a wonderful friend, given that the content of the ironic assertion is in fact that he’s *not* a wonderful friend, one, in asserting ironically, commits_b oneself only to the claim that he’s not a wonderful friend.

The close reader might spot a difficulty for my account (and indeed Alston’s account) of assertion here. Such a reader might say: “Very well Matthew! So far, so good for Brandom’s account, but your account relies on an explicit presentation condition, and it doesn’t seem that the content of an ironic assertion is explicitly presented in an ironic assertion!” To this, I reply that yes, that he’s not a wonderful friend is not semantically isomorphic to the utterance “He’s a wonderful friend,” but that both myself and Alston have the resources of ellipsis to draw upon in formulating our explicit presentation conditions. Thus we can treat the sentence “He’s a wonderful friend” as elliptical for “He’s not a wonderful friend” when the sentence is uttered ironically. Irony then, is to be analyzed as making special elliptical references available

for assertion. Call the sentences referred to in this way ironic referents.²⁰

How does one determine what ironic referents an ironic utterance has? Bach and Harnish, for all of their problems with insincere assertion, provide a schema.²¹ They claim that hearers, in interpreting a speaker's utterance, begin from an assumption of sincerity or literalness:

Presumption of Literalness (PL): The mutual belief in the linguistic community C_L that whenever any member S utters any [utterance] e in [language] L to any other member H , if S could (under the circumstances) be speaking literally, then S is speaking literally (Bach and Harnish 1979 12).

Applied to my definition of assertion, *ceteris parabis*, when one hears someone U utter some sentence S , the only propositions that U could be asserting in uttering S are those explicitly presented by S , or those explicitly presented by anaphoric referents of S . However, certain features of uttered sentences can trigger ironic references. Thus when a speaker uses one of the following, a speaker can pick out other sentences as references of what they utter:

Contradiction or anomaly: The future is now.

Conceptual truth: No man is an island.

Obvious factual falsehood: She's a gazelle.

²⁰Thus strictly speaking, EP_a ought to read:

EP_a : S explicitly presents the proposition that p , or S is a prosentence anaphorically referring to a sentence that explicitly presents p , or S is an ironic utterance that has an ironic referent sentence that explicitly presents p .

²¹As David Bakhurst has pointed out, an alternative explanation is also available using Grice's maxims.

Obvious factual truth: I wasn't born yesterday (Bach and Harnish 1979: 68).

These features of utterance allow speakers to make it clear to their audience that they are picking out sentences that are the negation of, or an under- or overstatement of the literal sentence as originally uttered. A small addition that I should like to make to this account is to allow that specific contexts of utterance enable the speaker to indicate that they may be making ironic references. The comedy club, the theatre, a smirk as one utters the sentence, or a particular tone of voice all allow the speaker to point out that their utterance is, or may be²² referring to a sentence that is not that which is literally uttered.

²²With the development of 'alternative comedy' in the 1980s, ambiguity as to whether ironic reference is really occurring in the comedy club has become a space for aesthetic experimentation. Al Murray's 'The Pub Landlord' provides an excellent example of this — a character who seems to be, at least at first glance, a simple jovial landlord, whose jokes are aimed to please a certain (somewhat xenophobic) portion of his British audience. Yet at certain points in Murray's routine, his portrayal seems to undermine this literal reading, pointing to an ironic reading of his character as a biting critique of certain aspects of English culture. For further examples, one need simply wander around Edinburgh in the month of August.

Chapter 7

Norms Revisited

Given that we now have a robust definition of assertion that does not require a single constitutive norm for its definition, an attractive position is open to us: norm pluralism. Instead of privileging any single norm as *the* norm of assertion, which alone defines what it is to assert, we can say that assertion is defined according to the bipartite definition, and is governed by a plurality of contextually activated norms. It is thus open to us to say that whilst in some cases the knowledge norm operates, in others the justification norm may operate, and in yet others the truth or some other norm operates, depending on the speaker, the audience, their stakes in the matter, and the context of utterance more generally. Therefore, whilst it is perfectly acceptable to assert that there will be a plane landing at 3.15 when one is in the pub, where you are a little unsure of your assertion (it could land at 3.16 — you can't remember), and you certainly do not know it for certain, it would not be acceptable to assert that there will be a plane landing at 3.15 and one is uncertain of that claim, in the context of an air traffic control room. Further, it is not merely epistemic norms which regulate assertion. Non-epistemic norms, such as the comedy,

beauty and politeness norms often govern assertion:

The Comedy Norm of Assertion: Assert that p only if it would be funny to do so.

The Politeness Norm of Assertion: Assert that p only if it would be courteous to do so.

The Beauty Norm of Assertion: Assert that p only if p is beautiful.

Of course, whether these norms are in operation will be dependent on context. In certain family environments, the politeness norm does not operate. At most funerals, the comedy norm is inoperative.

This pluralism also allows us to account for the various norms attached to different social identities. Take, for example, asserting as an upper-class child in Victorian England. The Victorian child was strictly regulated in their behaviour, and if we take the well known phrase from this era seriously, that “children should be seen and not heard,” we should conclude that there was a norm governing the assertion of such children: do not assert. More pertinently to our own time, we can turn to sociolinguistic studies of how one’s social identity affects whether, how and what one may assert. It may well be the case that whether one is allowed to assert that p in some context will depend on one’s gender, race and so on. Certainly there is empirical research that shows that women assert less than men in mixed-gender group environments (Leaper and Ayers 2007) and this may be explained by a regulative norm (or indeed a set of regulative norms) governing women’s speech. I suggest that a new form of epistemic injustice¹ is revealed by this analysis. If one is governed by a norm of assertion purely in virtue of one’s social identity, where that norm places restrictions

¹See Miranda Fricker’s seminal *Epistemic Injustice* (2007).

on what one can assert, then one faces *assertive injustice*.² Assertive injustice is distinct from testimonial injustice, that is, the unfair reduction in one's credibility rating as a testifier, as assertive injustice is not a question of whether the speaker is taken to be a credible testifier, but rather one of whether the speaker will be chastised for breaking a norm if they do speak. It is also obviously distinct from hermeneutical injustice, whereby "the powerful have an unfair advantage in structuring collective social understandings" (Fricker 2007 147), such that the oppressed do not have access to concepts that would aid in their liberation.

One might think that assertive injustice is simply a form of silencing — and indeed, when there is an oppressive norm of assertion in place, *which one follows*, one may be silenced. However, I maintain that even if one breaks the rule, and asserts even though one is not permitted to (and one is therefore not silenced), I suggest that there is still an assertive injustice occurring. We can therefore say that there are at least two kinds of assertive injustice — one in which the speaker is silenced directly by the norm, being unable to or discouraged from speaking, the other in which the speaker violates the norm to assert, but is still governed by that norm as they had to violate it in order to assert. Another kind of injustice occurs in which the speaker utters some sentence, but because of norms surrounding their social identity, their utterance, which would normally be counted as an assertion, is not counted as an assertion at all. Failures of 'uptake' such as this have been explored widely in feminist philosophy when thinking about the speech act of refusal, especially in contexts of rape and sexual violence.³ I suggest that thinking about the ways in which the norms surrounding social identity

²One might think that this kind of injustice is generalisable across all speech acts, such that there will be unjust norms governing promising, ordering, and so on. I lack the space to develop this idea further here.

³For seminal discussions see Langton 1993, Jacobson 1995, and Hornsby and Langton 1998.

play into which *assertions* get uptake is a fertile area for further research for those of us working in the feminist tradition. A clear feminist concern in this area is the assertion of what was once known as the ‘hysterical’ woman, whose putative assertions were not taken to be assertions, but was rather simply dismissed as gibberish by a patriarchal medical establishment. In moving to norm pluralism then, we thus move away from seemingly *a priori* questions regarding the constitutive norm of assertion, towards a truly social, empirically informed epistemology of the regulative norms of assertion.

7.1 The Norms Bite Back?

That there is a comedy norm of assertion should, however, give us pause. We might think that the comedy norm does not govern assertion but rather (constitutively) defines a separate speech act: the joke. As such, we might wonder whether there are similar norms defining other speech acts, and this, at least *prima facie*, seems to be reason to think that a single norm is more intimately connected to the definition of assertion than I have argued throughout this thesis.

However, were this analysis right, we should expect to find other speech acts defined by the norms mentioned above, and it seems hard to see what those acts would be. The politeness norm doesn’t seem to single out any particular act, nor does the beauty norm. Further, it seems that many different speech acts are governed by the comedy norm — one can ask a funny question,⁴ make a funny order or imperative,⁵ as well as assert something funny.⁶ It would seem then, that the category ‘joke’ does not

⁴*Is a pessimist’s blood type B-negative?*

⁵*You’re cold? Stand in that corner — it’s around 90 degrees.*

⁶*I dream of a better tomorrow, where chickens can cross the road and not be questioned about*

pick out a single speech act, but rather any speech act performed with the intention of being funny, along with a number of other grammatical forms. Many jokes take the form of narratives,⁷ calls and responses,⁸ and other extended utterances.⁹ It would therefore seem that the comedy norm does not pick out a single speech act, and that we should not be troubled by the apparent constitutive tie it made between norms and speech acts.

7.2 Concluding Remarks

This thesis began with a set of requirements of any sufficient theory of assertion, taken from William Alston and Timothy Williamson. I have shown, I hope, that my theory of bipartite assertion meets those requirements. Moreover, I take myself to have shown several virtues of the theory that take it beyond a merely sufficient theory and towards an being an attractive position. Of course, as Montaigne remarks,

For this I am obliged to be responsible: if I get myself tangled up, if there is vanity and faultiness in my reasonings that I do not perceive or that I am not capable of perceiving when pointed out to me. For faults escape our eyes; but infirmity of judgment consists in not being able to perceive them when another reveals them to us. Knowledge and truth can lodge in us without judgment, and judgment also without them

their motives.

⁷*A protestant priest, a catholic priest and Graham Priest walk into a bar. The bartender asks “What do you want?” The catholic priest replies “A pint please,” the protestant priest replies “Nothing for me please,” and Graham Priest replies “I’ll have what they’re having!”*

⁸*What do you call a philosopher in a pile of leaves? Bertrand Rustle.*

⁹Indeed, many jokes are not utterances at all — a cartoon can have no writing and still be funny, and many contemporary ‘memes’ defy categorisation and transcend the form in which they were first presented.

(Montaigne 2003 360).

If judgment has lodged in me without knowledge and truth, I hope that there at least remains some knowledge and truth, even absent judgment, that has lodged itself in this thesis.

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