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REVISTA DE LIBROS

*Assertion. New Philosophical Essays*, by JESSICA BROWN and HERMAN CAPPELEN (EDS.), OXFORD, OXFORD UP 2011, 320 pp.

There has been a continuous discussion of the nature of assertion in contemporary philosophy. Grice and Strawson proposed in the 1960s an account in terms of communicative intentions, classically presented in polished form in Bach & Harnish's (1979) *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*. Austin and Dummett propounded a contrasting normative account, while Davidson made influential sceptical remarks. Also at the end of the 1970s, Stalnaker influentially suggested to understand assertions as proposals to update a context set of information commonly taken for granted by conversationists. Recently, Tim Williamson's (1996/2000) already classic paper on the topic has initiated a whole new industry: many papers have been published in recent years on the topic, mostly discussing the pros and cons of the account that Williamson proposed, according to which assertions can be individuated as propositional acts subject to the normative requirement that the asserter knows the proposition put forward. This new collection of essays follows in general that trend, even though a few papers develop alternative accounts. After a helpful introduction by the editors, classifying the different views on assertion and placing the debates about it in the contemporary philosophy of language and epistemology, the collection is divided into two parts with six papers each. The first includes papers on the nature of assertion, the second papers on epistemic norms of assertion exploring issues related to Williamson's proposal. All in all, this is a useful and interesting compilation, including some first-class papers, which will be of interest to a sufficiently wide group of researchers. A few comments on the specific papers follow, including some objections that I think are worth exploring further.

HERMAN CAPPELEN (St Andrews and Oslo): "Against Assertion." This paper has a critical part and a more positive part. The critical part is summarized at the beginning [p. 21]: "We don't play the assertion game. The game might exist as an abstract object, but it is not a game you need to learn and play to become a speaker of a natural language." The positive part has it that "there are sayings; sayings are governed by variable norms, none of which

are essential to, or constitutive of, the act.” The critical part includes interesting critical arguments, some of them already known, some original, which defenders of opposing views should take into consideration. I have a fundamental concern about the positive view, which has consequences for one of the original criticisms. Kent Bach (1994) has distinguished two notions of ‘saying’ and ‘what is said’, a “locutionary” one, which corresponds to Austin’s notion of “locutionary act”, and a “stative” one, on which ‘to say’ is “a generic illocutionary verb that describes any constative act whose content is made explicit” [*op. cit.*, p. 143]. Cappelen defines sayings in terms of the first notion, as simply “the act of expressing the proposition that p” [p. 23] but then goes on to “restrict sayings to complete propositions” – so that the expression of a proposition embedded in a propositional attitude or in the antecedent of a conditional does not count as a saying – and also to sayings expressed by declarative sentences, not interrogative or imperative sentences [p. 24]. What is the rationale for this restriction? The only one that occurs to me is that he in fact has in mind the stative, illocutionary sense of the two that Bach distinguishes.

In fact, Cappelen goes on to suggest that the Gricean conversational maxims – such as the quality maxim “do not say what you believe to be false” – should be understood as applying to sayings in his sense: “the maxim tells us that, in order to be cooperative, you should aim to express (that is, say) propositions that are true” [p. 25]. However, if we understand ‘saying’ in the locutionary sense in the unrestricted sense, this is simply false; we are under no obligation, if order to be cooperative, to express in the antecedent of conditionals we assert or in the content of our questions propositions that are true. It is only under the restrictions that the proposal make sense; but one has every reason to think that this is because we are in fact considering, not the expressing of a proposition by itself (a saying in the locutionary sense), but the a generic illocutionary act in the category of those with mind-to-world direction of fir (i.e., a saying in the illocutionary sense). Now, in reply to a natural objection he puts to himself, “hey, wait a minute, there are all these very tricky questions about sayings – you owe us a story about all of this” [p. 23], Cappelen retorts that “According to all the views I target below, the act of saying that P is part of the act of asserting that P”. However, while this is clearly true taking ‘saying’ in the locutionary sense, it is not taking ‘saying’ in the illocutionary sense – assertions are sayings in the stative sense. Similarly, his claim that “sayings are evaluated by non-constitutive, variable norms” is [pp. 24-5] is perfectly ok with respect to locutionary sayings, but it is unclear that it is with respect to illocutionary sayings. And, finally, his point that ascriptions of acts of assertion are infrequent, and what we ascribe are sayings, once again, is manifestly correct of illocutionary sayings, but it is very unclear that it also applies to locutionary sayings. To put it in a nutshell, if to say is just to express a proposition (Austin’s *locutionary* sense), Cappelen is

right that it is a problem for everybody to give a philosophical elucidation of what this is, but it is unclear what makes sayings of “complete” propositions especial. If to say is rather to perform any one of a generically indicated class of speech act, Cappelen does owe us a story about them, and it might well be that the correct story is normative.

MAX KÖLBEL (Barcelona): “Conversational Score, Assertion, and Testimony”. This paper examines the topic of assertion from the perspective of Stalnaker’s account. The paper first explores different conceptions of the “conversational/context set” or “conversational scoreboard”, confronting particularly the pros and cons of invoking either a psychological or a social/conventional account; and then, on the basis of that discussion, provides a characterization of assertion in terms both of norms and Stalnakerian effects on the scoreboard, distinguishing assertion from other conversational contributions such as presuppositions and implicatures. I found the whole discussion illuminating, and many helpful points throughout. (Given that this is a mistake that copy editors probably are not going to notice, I should say that ‘Ambròs’ is spelled in Catalan with grave accent, not acute as it appears in the paper, ‘Ambrós’.)

JOHN MACFARLANE (Berkeley): “What is Assertion?” This excellent paper identifies four different kinds of accounts of assertion in the contemporary literature: assertion as the expression of belief; as an act defined by its constitutive norms; as a proposal to add its content to what is already taken for granted; and as an act defined by the commitments its agent undertakes. The paper presents the main motivation favouring each of them, explains for each of them how they could or could not capture the motivation adduced in favour of the three rival accounts, and makes some compelling objections to each of them. Given that MacFarlane’s interest in assertion comes from his recent work defending truth-relativism, arguments for which rely to a good extent on intuitions about retraction, MacFarlane appeals to the issue of whether the accounts provide corresponding explanations of the retraction of assertions as one of the main criteria to evaluate them. Although it appears that his preferences are for the “commitment-based” account that he himself has subscribed to in his work on truth-relativism, he ends up presenting an important criticism to such account, based on a more general argument in Pagin (2004).

PETER PAGIN (Stockholm): “Information and Assertoric Force”. This excellent paper goes against the recent trend of explaining assertion in normative terms. Pagin offers a descriptive account, different also from Gricean intentionalist accounts, aiming for a characterization compatible with the assumption that “assertions, not just something with a certain similarity to assertions, are both made and acknowledged by unsophisticated speakers who don’t have any conception of communicative intentions, commitments or communal norms” [p. 116]. The account Pagin provides appeals to the notion of a propositional act being made “because it is true”, which he unpacks in

terms of the act being prima facie informative for the speaker or the hearer, and this in its turn on the basis of dispositions to increase the subjective probabilities of the asserted propositions given the manifest properties indicating the assertion. A problem with this is that it provides a relative notion (*being assertoric for someone*) where we take for granted an absolute one [pp. 115-6]. Also, on Pagin's account, an assertion of a proposition is made with an expression that has the proposition as its semantic content, because this is the manifest property that is supposed to provide a prima facie indication of reliability p. 123]. As MacFarlane points out [pp. 80-1], however, accounts like this have to face the obvious objection that, in the way that we could make indirect requests, indirect promises and in general indirect speech acts, we could make indirect assertions; for instance, one could assert that Canada is not a banana republic by asking rhetorically whether Canada is by any chance a banana republic. Pagin agrees that this is an indirect assertion [p. 128]. However, unlike 'fake' in 'fake request', 'indirect' in 'indirect request' is a conjunctive predicate: if something is a fake request, it is not a request, but an indirect request is a request. It is unclear to me, however, how is it that Pagin's account allows for such indirect assertions being assertions.

ROBERT STALNAKER (MIT): "The Essential Contextual". On Stalnaker's well-known view of assertion, assertions are proposals to further restrict a context set of possibilities left open by the shared information: what participants know, know that others know, know that others know that others know ..., or rather by what is thus commonly accepted. In this paper, Stalnaker provides a new framework, already introduced in his (2008), to represent commonly accepted *self-locating* information – a distinctive category unveiled in classic papers by Castañeda, Perry and Lewis – and assertions with that content. As in his earlier work on this topic (1981), Stalnaker strives to have an account capable of explaining the communication of self-locating information in a more direct form than Lewis (1979) well-known alternative proposal, on which the contents of self-locating thoughts are not propositions but properties that the subject self-ascribes. Stalnaker's new proposal provides a way of formally implementing a distinction between *belief-states* and *belief-contents* which John Perry (2006) has been insisting all along is required to properly account for these thoughts. The paper feels a bit tangential to the issues unifying the compilation, but the proposal is interesting enough, and does relate somehow to the problem of offering an adequate philosophical account of the nature of assertion.

JESSICA BROWN (St Andrews): "Fallibilism and the Knowledge Norm for Assertion and Practical Reasoning". This paper discusses two issues arising from recent debates on the knowledge norm for assertion, which the author calls the 'sufficiency' and 'commonality' questions. The main arguments in the literature support the idea that knowledge is *necessary* for being in a good epistemic position for assertion. However, some defenders of the

knowledge norm also endorse the sufficiency direction; while some also claim that the epistemic standards for practical reasoning and assertion are the same. The *sufficiency* question critically examines motivation for the first proposal. The *commonality* question examines motivation for thinking that there are common epistemic standards for practical reasoning and assertion. The author further connects these issues with other recent epistemological debates; on the basis of the contention that a number of recent defenders of the knowledge norm embrace some version of infallibilism, the paper discusses whether any version of infallibilism can answer the two questions, especially given that the author and others have proposed counterexamples to the sufficiency claim *prima facie* based on fallibilist intuitions. After examining several ways of articulating infallibilism, the paper concludes that none of them provides adequate answers to the two questions. Both the critical discussion and the negative conclusion are interesting, but the paper feels somehow disappointing. Firstly, the connection between infallibilism and the two questions the author sets up for herself is rather impressionistic, given that some writers have defended a sufficiency norm while adopting a fallibilist epistemology, combined with an “impurist” way of accounting for contextualist intuitions about knowledge. Secondly, the author cannot do proper justice to the different infallibilist ideas she discusses, nor to the fallibilist-impurist way of defending sufficiency. Nonetheless, the true specialist will find food for thought here.

SANFORD GOLDBERG (Northwestern): “Putting the Norm of Assertion to Work: the Case of Testimony”. This paper argues that the norm of assertion can be used to give an account of two features of the testimonial exchange, which the author calls “buck-passing” (roughly, that the recipient of testimony is entitled to appeal to the giver for justification of the exchanged proposition) and “blame” (correspondingly, that the recipient is entitled to resent the giver’s lack of proper justification). The author argues that exchanges of testimony are assertions, and that the norms of assertion should then account for those features, and also that they can serve this explanatory goal, independently of exactly which norms they are (to the extent that they are epistemic), and also independently of whether *reductionist* or *anti-reductionist* views about testimony are correct. The author concludes by pressing the benefits of his account against two alternatives. I found the paper very clearly written, interesting and rather convincing.

PATRICK GREENOUGH (St Andrews): “Relativism, Assertion, and Belief”. The paper sets up very clearly several schematic templates presenting the basic features of the “epistemic variability” and “retraction” data concerning ascriptions of knowledge that need be accounted for, presents in an equally perspicuous form the different views purporting to account for them (Indexical Contextualism, Non-Indexical Contextualism and several forms of Truth-Relativism) and the precise import of “Evans’ Challenge” to truth-

relativism. Along the way, the author distinguishes “lottery cases” from others properly producing “epistemic variability” data, makes a case that only a form of truth-relativism can properly account for the data, criticizes Kölbel’s account, defends a “goal-oriented” account of assertion vis-à-vis MacFarlane’s account in terms of commitments, and argues that an account along those lines is well-placed to answer Evans’ challenge, once the latter is properly stated. The way in which the paper sets up the issues is extremely helpful, and the paper contains in addition sharp critical remarks and illuminating appraisals.

However, I was puzzled by some claims. Greenough’s main reason to reject Non-Indexical Contextualism in favour of Truth-Relativism – which, unlike the former, makes *utterance* truth relative to “context of assessments” or “perspectives” – has to do with the NIC’s difficulties to uphold the disquotational schema [§3], which Greenough thinks we should do. Concerning Kölbel (and Richard), Greenough says that it is unclear whether he defends NIC or TR [fn. 14, p. 201]. Now, in his first criticism of Kölbel’s views [§8, p. 206], Greenough says: “As we have seen, Kölbel holds that it is a mistake for one to assert a proposition that is not true in one’s own perspective. But does this answer Evans’ challenge? Just like Evans’ own reply, the answer yields a once-and-for-all assessment of correctness.” The question “does this answer Evans’ challenge?” might wrongly suggest that there might be some doubt whether Kölbel’s proposal answers Evans’ challenge, but it is pretty clear that it does, the only question being whether in doing it the proposal reveals itself as a form of NIC, which as I said Greenough rejects because of his commitment to disquotationalism. Now, when Greenough moves on to explain how to meet Evans’ challenge [§10, pp. 207-8], the suggestion that he makes, as he himself says, “issues in a once-and-for-all assessment of correctness ... It is true that an assessment of the form ‘From the perspective of B, B did not do anything incorrect in making the assertion that they did’ is a once-and-for-all assessment in the sense that this evaluation is absolute — there is no assessment-sensitivity in the meta-language, the language we use to talk about the relativised correctness conditions of assertions. But *that* kind of once-and-for-all answer, unlike the answer ‘is correct (simpliciter)’, (i.e. ‘is correct with respect to all contexts of assessment’) is, of course, compatible with Truth-Relativism.” Now, even if it is true that the answer is compatible with Truth-Relativism, why is it not subject to the same complaint made before against Kölbel? As I understand it, the “perspective” of the asserter is his perspective, i.e., context of assessment, *when he makes the assertion*; to take this perspective as a guidance for the asserter to make the assertion is to assume that the context of assessment with respect to which the assertion is intended to be evaluated is *the context in which the assertion was made*. But now, even if utterance-truth was defined in Truth-Relativistic terms, it seems that, just as in the case of Kölbel, the guidance provided is that it would be a mistake

for one to make an assertion that is not true in one's own perspective. This seems to me to meet Evans' challenge, indeed, but exactly in the terms in which Kölbel's proposal meets it, and thus to be as much "compatible with Non-Indexical Contextualism" as Kölbel's view; exactly as Greenough said about Kölbel's proposal, "the answer yields a once-and-for-all assessment of correctness". For the same reason, I cannot understand how this proposal accounts for the retraction data, while Kölbel's couldn't. Given the guidance that this reply to Evans' challenge offers to the asserter, why should he later retract the assertion, from what is obviously a different "perspective"?

JONATHAN KVANVIG (Baylor): "Norms of Assertion". This paper provides an interesting defence of an epistemic norm for assertion and action weaker than knowledge – a justification norm. The main argument goes as follows. Well-known objections to the account in terms of a knowledge norm require the proposal to distinguish primary from secondary propriety, so that an assertion might be primarily wrong while reasonable or excusable, i.e., secondarily acceptable. This, however, cannot answer our "fundamental egocentric predicament", i.e., telling us what to do or what to believe in particular cases. The author argues that, in contrast, an account in terms of a justification rule can do this, once it is taken into consideration the relativity to a perspective of justification and the consequent need to distinguish levels of justification and their interaction. In addition, the author argues that, properly understood, the justification-account can deal with two of the considerations offered in favour of the knowledge account, examples involving lotteries and Moorean paradoxes. Finally, Kvanvig argues that the more direct intuitive appeal of the knowledge account comes from a scope confusion that we are naturally prone to make.

I was not sure that the paper entirely dispels a doubt I had. In arguing that the justificationist can account for the lottery and Moorean data, a crucial distinction is made between a technical sense of 'justification', which the author calls "epistemic justification", and the "ordinary, alethic notion of justification" [p. 245]. I understand then that it is this *epistemic* justification that, according to the proposal, figures in the constitutive norm for epistemically proper assertion and action. However, *prima facie* it seems that, the way epistemic justification is defined, a norm stated in terms of it is going to also allow for the distinction between primary and secondary propriety. As Kvanvig notes [p. 245], "As so stipulated, epistemic justification is not the only kind of justification which answers to an epistemic goal of getting to the truth and avoiding error. There is also the ordinary, alethic notion of justification which may not reach the level needed to prevent one from knowing, in spite of the belief in question being true, ungettiered, and alethically justified. The demands of epistemic justification may exceed the demands of alethic justification, even though both notions involve some relation to the same goal of getting to the truth and avoiding error." But, if so, it seems that, as much as

when knowledge is the norm of assertion, one's assertion may well be excusably in the wrong, because one is justified in the ordinary alethic way, while not being epistemically justified. So, how exactly is it that the proposal is in a better position than the opposing view to give us "a resolution of a central question of the egocentric predicament, the questions of what to do or what to think" [p. 238]?

JENNIFER LACKEY (Northwestern): "Assertion and Isolated Second-Hand Knowledge". Lackey discusses the knowledge norm as sufficient for epistemically well-positioned assertion and action. She criticizes it on the basis of several interesting examples of what she describes as *isolated second-hand* knowledge. I do not find completely convincing all the answers she provides to objections; in particular, I think that the "Gricean Implicature" objection, the first one she discusses, can be substantiated against the "no-cancellation" rejoinder she provides. But the counterexamples are interesting and well developed in relevant detail, and the main potential objections are taken into consideration and receive sufficiently compelling rejoinders. At the very least, the paper puts a heavy burden on defenders of the sufficiency of the knowledge norm.

ISHANI MAITRA (Rutgers): "Assertion, Norms, and Games". Researchers who defend accounts of assertion on which it is an act defined by constitutive norms, and in addition that the constitutive norms of assertion are either a norm of truthfulness, or epistemic norms, appeal typically to the analogy with games; assertion would have constitutive norms in the way that games do. This is explicitly so in the work of Williamson, which is the source of the recent popularity of accounts of this sort. In this paper, the analogy with games is questioned; the author argues that there are important disparities between the role constitutive norms play in games such as baseball, and also between the norms that could be derived from intrinsic or extrinsic purposes players of games may have, and those asserters have. The paper calls for an alternative motivation for claims that assertion has alethic or epistemic constitutive norms. Although I think that defenders of the game analogy are left with some room for manoeuvre, the paper poses at least a challenge worth taking into consideration.

*Manuel García-Carpintero*  
*LOGOS-University of Barcelona*  
*Departamento de Lógica, Filosofía e Historia de la Ciencia*  
*c/ Montalegre, 6, E-08001 Barcelona*



E-mail: [mgcarpintero@gmail.com](mailto:mgcarpintero@gmail.com)

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