

Assertion: New Philosophical Essays, edited by Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 300. H/b £39.00.

Brown and Cappelen's volume collects papers presented at a conference held at the Arché Research Center in June 2007. The issues addressed in this volume have generated much discussion in recent years, and the contributions represent the state of the art. Brown and Cappelen offer an excellent introduction which lays out the dialectical space, and which explains the division of papers into those which address the nature of assertion (Part I, from Cappelen, Max Kölbel, John MacFarlane, Peter Pagin, and Robert Stalnaker) and those which concern "epistemic norms of assertion" (Part II, from Brown, Sanford Goldberg, Patrick Greenough, Jonathan Kvanvig, Jennifer Lackey, and Ishani Maitra).

The contributions begin with Cappelen's compelling challenge to the very idea of assertion. If his argument is sound, it problematizes much of what follows. Cappelen argues that the notion of assertion should be abandoned in favor of the (uncontroversial) notion of *saying*: the saying of p is "the act of expressing the proposition that p." (p. 23) On his view "[s]ayings are governed by variable norms, none of which is essential to, or constitutive of, the act of saying." (p. 22)

Compare Timothy Williamson's view that assertion is essentially governed by:

Knowledge rule One must: Assert p only if one knows p. (p. 3)

Not all theories of assertion appeal to constitutive norms (pp. 2-4, p. 27). Other possibilities include theories that appeal to distinctive *causes* of assertion (assertion as an attempt to change the conversational score, assertion as the expression of belief) and theories that appeal to distinctive *commitments* undertaken in assertion (asserting p as undertaking a commitment to defend p). All these views are threatened by Cappelen's challenge. Consider:

1. **Predictions** (cf. p. 43): Jack Aubrey must commit to a course of action, but with limited (i.e. not enough for knowledge) evidence of the enemy's plans. He declares: "The French will attack at noon."
2. **Political bullshit** (cf. MacFarlane, p. 89): US presidential candidate Rick Perry declares something everyone knows is false: "I will fight on to the convention."
3. **Selfless assertions** (p. 42): A creationist public school teacher gives a lecture on evolution whose content she does not believe. She says: "Modern day *Homo Sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*."
4. **Private assertions**: Alone in your office you mutter: "My colleagues are such bastards."
5. **Assertions of conviction**: A mob of football fans chants: "We will win the championship!"
6. **Assertions with institutional expectations** (cf. Lackey, p. 253-4): You have asked a cancer specialist to determine whether you have cancer, but she merely learns that you have cancer based on the testimony of a colleague. Without revealing this, she announces: "You have cancer."

Is there anything that all these speech acts have in common? As Cappelen argues, there does not seem to be a common norm: the speech act in (1) is unobjectionable

even though Aubrey does not know that which he says, the speech acts in (2) and (3) are unobjectionable even though the speaker does not even believe that which she says, and the speech act in (5) is unobjectionable even if it turns out to be false, while in (6) the speech act seems objectionable even though the doctor knows that which she says.

Similarly, there does not seem to be any common cause: Aubrey plausibly attempts to change the conversational score in (1), but there's no such attempt in (2), (4), or (5); the speakers in (4) and (5) seem to be expressing their beliefs in the said proposition, but there's no such expression in (2) or (3). Finally, there does not seem to be any common commitment: the speakers in (1), (3), and (6) seem committed to defending what they've said, although the kind and amount of defense required seems different in the three cases; and the speech acts in (4) and (5) do not seem to require any kind of defense.

Could we claim that (1) – (6) all involve assertion? The assertion theorist could reply that assertions are a subset of sayings, namely, those sayings that are governed by the *knowledge rule*, or that the knowledge rule is only a constraint of proper assertion, *qua* assertion. But the assertion theorist's definition now appears to be stipulative. (It isn't as though there's an ordinary concept of assertion that we're attempting to analyze.) So Cappelen's challenge (cf. p. 44) is a demand for motivation for giving theories of assertion in the first place.

This prompts a question: what are the criteria of success for a theory of assertion? Should our theory jibe with "our intuitions" about assertion (cf. Cappelen, pp. 41-6, Pagin, pp. 99)? It's unclear that we have such intuitions. Should the theory jibe with how linguists employ the term "assertion"? Do they employ it? The answer to our question about criteria of success awaits the answer to another question: What's at stake in the debate over the nature of assertion? What's the theoretical utility of the notion of assertion? There is a temptation here to say that we must give a taxonomy of speech acts or distinguish assertion from presupposition and implicature (cf. p. 5). But to what end? More promising is the idea of putting the notion of assertion to work in one's theories of meaning and truth (p. 6-7). But criteria of success remain obscure.

Consider Greenough's "Norm-Relativism" (pp. 219-26), on which "what norm of assertion is in play in some context of use is itself relative to a perspective," such that "the standards for *assertibility* are demanding in certain contexts ...but less demanding in other contexts." (p. 219) As articulated, this is consistent with Cappelen's rejection of constitutive norms of assertion. Indeed, as Greenough says (p. 219n), his view is consistent with a Gricean account of the various norms governing assertion in various contexts (cf. Cappelen, p. 38). But Norm-Relativism could be offered as a theory of assertion, as Cappelen notes (p. 34), on which assertion is the speech act associated with an "N-function," where an N-function is a function from contexts to norms. Cappelen argues (pp. 33-5) that such a view would leave us with no principled way of distinguishing assertions from non-assertions, and that it is implausible that speakers could even tacitly grasp such a function, which would be impossible to specify given the pragmatic factors involved. Setting these worries aside, the key question here concerns the motivation for positing context-sensitive norms (or causes, or commitments) as constitutive of assertion. Why define assertion as the speech act associated with an N-function? Why not simply say that sayings are

governed by different norms in different contexts? We need some reason to posit a constitutive norm of assertion (whether context-sensitive or not), over and above the Gricean machinery.

Now as Brown and Cappelen note, “[e]pistemologists have been especially interested in the idea that assertion is governed by a norm that imposes epistemic requirements on appropriate assertion.” (p. 1) This epistemological interest can be problematized, however, if we consider an ambiguity in the idea of “epistemic norms of assertion.” On the one hand, this might just refer to norms of assertion that employ the concept of knowledge (as suggested by Goldberg, p. 176n, Maitra, p. 277), in which case the *knowledge rule* is “epistemic” in the same way that the following rule is “epistemic”: “One must: Fire only if you know the enemy has crossed the fail-safe line.” But then it is curious why *epistemologists* would be interested in assertion – they might just as well study military tactics. So perhaps the *knowledge rule* is “epistemic” in the same way that the following rule is “epistemic”: “One must: Believe p only if one has sufficient evidence for p.” Here “epistemic” is intended to indicate a distinctive species of normativity, essentially contrasting with prudential or moral normativity. The idea is that among the norms of this distinctive domain are norms governing assertion (as suggested by Brown and Cappelen, pp. 8-9, Lackey, p. 252). But it is unclear that there are epistemic norms, in this sense, that govern assertion. Williamson, for his part, does not intend the *knowledge rule* in this way: for him the norm of assertion flows from the nature of *assertion*, not from the nature of the *epistemic*.

Can the notion of assertion be “put to work” in epistemology? This idea is explored by Sandy Goldberg (pp. 175 – 96), who argues that the existence of epistemic norms of assertion explains the responsibilities and entitlements generated in testimonial exchanges. (However, he doesn’t suggest that such norms are constitutive of assertion, nor that there is a unique norm in all contexts.) Other contributors explore the relationship between the claim that there is an epistemic norm of assertion, on the one hand, and infallibilism (Brown) and shifty views of “knows” (Greenough), on the other. It seems to us, therefore, that there is little *epistemological* motivation for theories of assertion.

Skepticism about constitutive norms of assertion can be bolstered by considering Ishani Maitra’s excellent contribution (pp. 277-96) on the analogy between assertion and a move in a game (cf. Kölbel, pp. 50-2), a version of Wittgenstein’s analogy between languages and games. Some games (chess, baseball) are governed by explicit and fixed systems of rules (what Maitra calls “constitutive norms”). Given that we sometimes censure improper assertions and generally rely on the testimony of others, we seem to be treating assertion like a move in such a game. However, Maitra (pp. 280-4) argues that asserting is not analogous to playing a game. Someone can flagrantly violate the *knowledge rule* while still making an assertion; not so with the rules of chess or baseball, where flagrant violation means you are no longer playing the game. Neither (pp. 284-94) does the *knowledge rule* plausibly describe the *purpose* of assertion. Other contributors (Cappelen, pp. 35-6, MacFarlane, pp. 84-8) also challenge the analogy between asserting and playing a game, which now seems obscure. Although some games have explicit and fixed rules, other games, e.g. “when a child throws a ball at the wall and catches it again” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66), don’t. In these cases, at best there are informal

rules, which are made up on the fly. Perhaps asserting is analogous to a game of that sort – but we would then expect that there would be little in common between all instances of assertion.

In any event, Brown and Cappelen's volume is rich and fascinating reading, and should be of interest for all contemporary philosophers of language and epistemologists.

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