

Assertion as a Language-Game: the Role of Linguistic Agency in Social-Epistemic Agency

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Wittgenstein, in contrast with a number of recent epistemologists (e.g., Audi 1998, 130-48; Fricker 1994), held that hearing another person assert that *p* may itself constitute sufficient reason for one to believe that *p* — without one's needing to have positive grounds for one's belief that the other person is sincere or reliable. (Cf. Wittgenstein 1992, §§ 143, 160-1) In this paper I will argue that Wittgenstein's position follows immediately from an understanding of assertion as a language-game governed by norms binding the rational action of participant speakers and hearers.

A theory delineating the norms of assertion would seem to have to meet two general desiderata. Such a theory ought (1) to illuminate the norms to which an agent would have to be sensitive in order to make an assertion. I will call these the *norms of asserting*. Furthermore - and this is an aspect of such a theory almost universally neglected - it should (2) make explicit the norms to which *recipients* (hearers, readers, etc.) of putative assertions would have to be sensitive. I will refer to these as the *norms of attending*. Recognizing the norms governing assertion as a language-game will, I argue, allow us to recognize the centrality of testimony as a basic source of justified belief, and thus to recognize the role of linguistic agency in social-epistemic agency.

I suggest that the norms governing an agent's performance of assertions all stem from one overarching norm:

[TRUTH] Assert that *p* only if it is true that *p*.

Conveying content *truthfully* is a uniquely *linguistic* enterprise. One cannot do so other than by using language. The detective who provides pictorial proof of a crime by providing accurate photographic evidence does not thereby convey *truths* until she tells her client what she has discovered. On the other hand, those various non-truth-related tasks for which we employ language — entertaining, annoying, etc. — are ones that can equally be accomplished by other means. Thus, although one can entertain Herman by telling him a joke, one could equally do so by taking a pratfall or pulling a rubber chicken out of one's trousers. In contrast both to the conveyance of accurate (as opposed to true) information, and to the achievement of goals such as annoyance, entertainment, seduction, etc., the conveyance of truth is a goal properly belonging only to the use of language. (cf. Jackson 1987, 98)

To make this claim, however, is to claim that the conveyance of truth-evaluable information is thus peculiarly linguistic goal, one that is, in fact, constitutive. (cf. Wittgenstein, §§ 80-84, 455) It is one of the goals that distinguishes language *qua* language. Furthermore, to the extent that [TRUTH] is a norm of *assertion*, the fact that the conveyance of truth-evaluable information is a constitutive function of language singles out assertion as a core linguistic practice.

What does it mean, however, to say that [TRUTH] is a norm governing the performance of assertions? It means that in order to be competent in the performance of assertions, one must be sensitive to [TRUTH]. That is, if one is to be competent in making assertions, and one wishes to make an assertion, one must be sensitive to the fact that there is a *pro tanto* reason to see to it that the content of one's assertion be true. Thus, to recognize [TRUTH] as a norm of asserting is not to require that all assertions be assertions of the true. There can be false and/or lying assertions. Rather, it is to require that, in those cases in which one asserts that *p* and it is false that *p*, one has overridden the *pro tanto* reason characterized by [TRUTH] for reasons external to the practice of assertion.

Thus, consider a case in which you lie in order to save the life of someone taking refuge with you from a murderer. In such a case, your reason not to lie, given that you wish to make an assertion, has been overridden by stronger considerations of the danger to those to whom you have granted refuge. Even in the more commonplace, less altruistic cases in which one lies for the sake of some advantage, one will at least believe oneself to have a reason whose force overrides the force of the reason, internal to the practice of assertion, that one has to tell the truth. Whether one ought to be held blameworthy in such a case will depend upon whether it is in fact the case that the reason in question was strong enough to outweigh one's reason for telling the truth.

What [TRUTH] does, however, exclude as irrational would be a case in which one would be competent in making assertions, intend to make an assertion, and fail to tell the truth for no reason at all. Such a case would violate the norms of asserting. Given this, however, one might contend that [TRUTH] is too strong a requirement. Certainly there are many cases in which one is highly justified in believing that what one says is true, although in fact it is not. We would not, however, wish to claim that one is irrational if one makes such an assertion.

It is true that we would not wish to call such a case of asserting an *irrational* one. However, if we accept [TRUTH] as a norm of asserting, we are not forced to do so. For, if we accept [TRUTH] as a norm of asserting, we must accept only that the falsity of *p* is a reason not to assert *p*; it does not suggest that we are always *aware* of our reasons not to make an assertion. In a case in which one asserts something on the basis of very strong, but misleading, evidence that what one asserts was true, then we must only hold that, in such a case, one is unaware of the reason for not asserting what one does in fact assert.

This explanation, however, may fail to satisfy. For, if we accept [TRUTH], we must at least say that there was *something* wrong with false, but highly justified, assertions. And it may be that we are tempted to say that, in such a case, there is nothing wrong with my assertion at all. Such a reaction would, I contend, be mistaken. There *is* something wrong with my barn assertion *qua* assertion, although we might feel uncomfortable terming what it is that is wrong a case of *irrationality*. I will postpone a discussion of what it is that is wrong in such a case,

however, until our discussion of the relation between the norms of assertion and knowledge, below.

There is, however, a more immediate issue raised by the above discussion with which we are in a position to deal at this point. If [TRUTH] is the central norm of asserting, it is not the sole norm. If one is to be sensitive to [TRUTH] as a norm of asserting, one must also be sensitive to one's having reasons for holding the content of one's assertion true. This, however, leaves it open as to *what* sorts of reasons are sufficient to license one in making assertions. Further consideration lends at least some credence to the idea that the level of evidence that one should require for those cases in which one has a reason to (\square only if p is true) is a level sufficient to underwrite *knowledge*. That is, there is some reason to accept, as a general principle governing rational action [where parentheses indicate the scope of "should" in (2)]:

(2) If you should (\square only if p is true), then you should (\square only if you know p).

To see this, consider what must clearly be a norm of good electricianship: one should not rewire electric circuits when the power is not shut off. (Cf. Williamson 2000, 245) In the case of this norm, it is clear that the level of evidence one ought to have is a level sufficient to underwrite *knowledge*. If one should not rewire electric circuits when the power is not shut off, then one should not rewire electric circuits if one does not *know* that the power is shut off.

Even if one judges that (2) ought not be accepted as a *general* rule characterizing rational action, however, there are independent reasons for taking assertion to be governed by (2), and thus by:

[KNOWLEDGE] Assert p only if you know that p .

First, there is support for [KNOWLEDGE] provided by evidence from our everyday practices in response to assertions. If one asserts that p and I wish to challenge that assertion, or simply wish to receive additional information, I can ask: "How do you know?" In response to such a question, any provision of information short of evidence that the assertor *does* know is not a defense of the original assertion, but a *retreat* from that assertion.

The second consideration in support of the acceptance of [KNOWLEDGE] as a norm characterizing assertion provides a reason in support of one of the arguments left open previously — viz., that one would be accountable for asserting a falsehood, even in those cases in which one does not know that the content of one's assertion is false. Consider someone who, because of some lack of background information, was subject to a host of skeptical situations (Cartesian evil demon, brain-in-a-vat, etc.) to which his interlocutors are not subject. If such a speaker were to make assertions concerning that range of subjects for which he is subject to those sorts of unwitting failures of knowledge, he would eventually acquire a reputation for unknowing assertion among his interlocutors. Having done so, however, he will cease to be able to accomplish one of the primary goals of assertion, namely fostering belief in others — even if, *ex hypothesi*, the speaker in question has an unimpeachable reputation for sincerity. That is, even if, in such a situation, we would not hold the hapless speaker to be *blameworthy*

for his failings, we would hold him *accountable*, in the following way. We would no longer believe what he asserts, at least with respect to that range of topics for which he is not reliable. This is a form of censure *internal* to the practice of assertion, (cf. Brandom 1994) in a way in which we will now be able to explicate.

We have just classified certain forms of censure for failure to comply with the norms of asserting — viz., those involving the withholding of belief in the content asserted — as *internal* censures. This suggests that there are norms governing the *reception* of assertions, by hearers, readers, etc., in addition to those norms, already discussed, governing the performance of assertions. Consider for a moment the parallel case of issuing commands. It seems reasonable to suppose that the speech act of commanding would not exist, were it not the case that the issuer of commands could expect, as a result of the understanding of those commands, the performance of appropriate acts on the part of those commanded. Similarly, one might argue that there would be no point to the act of assertion, were it not the case that the maker of assertions could expect, as a result of the understanding of assertions, that her audience would come to believe the contents of those assertions. (Cf. Wittgenstein 1992, §354)

Indeed, when we introduced our discussion of [TRUTH] as a norm of asserting, we did so in the context of a discussion of the central linguistic role of assertion in *conveying* information. The conveyance of information involves more than the making public of information on the part of its possessor, however; it also involves the *acquisition* of information on the part of some audience. This would suggest the following as the central norm of attending:

[BELIEF] If you understand a speech act \square as involving the assertion that p , believe that p .

Unlike the norms of asserting, however, [BELIEF], involving as it does a norm pertaining to belief, provides a *prima facie*, defeasible reason to believe the content asserted.

That there is such a norm governing attending to assertions should be clear upon reflection. Just as assertors need to have a good reason in order to override the norm of [TRUTH] without incurring blame, recipients of assertions need to have a reason in order to override the norm of [BELIEF]. We would not, e.g., consider it a good reason for not believing an assertion that the assertor is black. Nor would we consider it rational behavior for one to dismiss an assertion for no reason at all. If you are aware of an assertion to the effect that p , and you have no reason to the contrary, you cannot but take that assertion as positive evidence to the effect that p .

Having discussed the norms of asserting above, we can recognize that there are, in fact, two sources of the reason expressed by the norm of [BELIEF]. Given that there could be no practice of assertion, were it not for the existence of the norm of [BELIEF], there is a practice-internal reason for comporting with the norm. And, as assertion fulfills the fundamental linguistic goal of making possible the conveyance of true content, this practice-internal reason is one tied to the pursuit of that aim of theoretical reason, the acquisition of true beliefs. Furthermore, assuming that there is an established practice of assertion, the fact that the norms of asserting include [TRUTH] and [KNOWLEDGE] provide excellent, more immediately truth-directed reasons for comporting

with the norm. As long as interlocutors follow both the norms of asserting and the norm of attention, the practice of assertion will increase the distribution of true beliefs within a population.

Thus, for competent linguistic agents, it is a norm of assertion that one ought to believe what one is told unless and until one has positive reason to doubt it. That is, a correct conception of assertion as a language-game governed by, *inter alia*, the norms of [TRUTH], [KNOWLEDGE], and [BELIEF] supports Wittgenstein's claims to the effect that one need not have positive grounds to support one's belief in the information one acquires from one's communications with others. Our status as linguistic agents thus has implications for our obligations to one another as social-epistemic agents.

References

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