

On the Normativity of Speech Acts

Abstract

Illocutionary speech acts such as assertion are subject to norms. In this paper I describe how we might explain the normativity of such speech acts, focusing on the case of assertion itself. In the introduction I clarify what is at issue: we are concerned not with whether speech acts are essentially conventional, but with whether they are constitutively governed by norms; I am sympathetic to the view that they are, and wish to explain how this could be the case. Next, I suggest that one kind of attempt to explain the normativity of assertion by appeal to a reductive view of its essence fails; and I sketch my own preferred explanation of this normativity which treats assertion as an irreducible kind. Then, in the final section, I show how the account I favour grounds the normativity of speech acts and their essences in more basic facts in a manner that is naturalistically acceptable – provided that the piecemeal conception of philosophical naturalism articulated there is correct.

Keywords

Speech Acts; Normativity; Naturalism; Assertion; Knowledge Rule; Constitutive Rule

Introduction

Speech acts are governed by norms: for instance, one ought not to assert a proposition p unless one knows p ; and one ought not to ask a question q unless one wants to know q 's answer.¹ But what is the status of such norms? Construed as moral or prudential norms they seem defeasible: it might, under certain circumstances, be morally acceptable to lie to someone, asserting something one knows to be false; or it might be prudentially advisable to flatter someone by asking them a question to

¹ These are both norms requiring speakers to have attitudes which they present themselves as having by performing the speech acts in question; that is, they are what we might call norms of sincerity. It is not my present concern whether it is precisely these norms, rather than some variants (e.g. ask q only if you wonder what q 's answer is, assert p only if you have a justified true belief that p), that govern the acts in question; nor shall I address the question whether there are norms other than those of sincerity governing speech acts.

which one does not seek an answer. Can these or similar norms² be construed, however, in such a way that they are not defeasible, but apply universally and without qualification? What might the source of such normativity be?

Unfortunately, early debates obscured these issues somewhat, focusing on the notion of convention and its role in the performance of speech acts. Thus, Austin (1962/1975) argued that “the illocutionary act is a conventional act: an act done as conforming to a convention” (105); but Strawson (1964) objected that only some illocutionary speech acts are “essentially conventional” (457), while others are not.

It is important to be clear what Austin’s disputed claim amounts to – or, at the very least, what it does not amount to. Austin famously distinguished three types of speech act. The *locutionary* act is the act of saying something “in the full normal sense... which includes the utterance of certain noises, the utterance of certain words in a certain construction, and the utterance of them with a certain ‘meaning’ in the favorite philosophical sense of that word, i.e. with a certain sense and with a certain reference” (94). Performing an *illocutionary* act, however, requires more: in particular, it requires that one’s utterance have a certain communicative force, e.g. that of an assertion or a conjecture, a command or a request. Finally, *perlocutionary* acts are individuated by their non-communicative outcomes: for instance, in arguing something, one might convince one’s audience; if so, then one has not only been understood as adducing (perhaps conclusive) evidence in support of some proposition, thereby achieving a communicative effect – one has also achieved the result that one’s audience believes the proposition argued for.

According to Austin, “the illocutionary act and even the locutionary act too involve conventions” (107); but, by contrast, “perlocutionary acts are *not* conventional” (121, italics original). It should be clear that the performance of a locutionary act does indeed require the existence of a convention, just as Austin claimed: since the sounds one utters might

² See previous note.

have been associated with other meanings, something must serve to effectuate the actual association between the two; and this something is, of course, a linguistic convention employed in the community to which the speaker belongs.³ Similarly, that the perlocutionary act is in no way conventional is also correct, though perhaps less obviously so. To convince someone, for instance, is to induce in them a belief by way of argument: and of course, to argue is, *inter alia*, to perform locutionary acts involving conventions; so it might be thought that conventions are necessary for the performance of perlocutionary act, which can therefore be regarded themselves as conventional. But it is better to think of the matter in the following way. Take two cases in which a speaker argues that p: in one her audience is convinced, and in the other not. Is there any convention, beyond those involved in the latter case that must be in place in the former case? Clearly, the answer is *no*: all that must happen is that the hearer must form the belief that p, and this is not a matter of any convention.

Crucially, the claim that the illocutionary act is conventional is not merely the claim that it involves a locutionary act, and therefore involves a convention. Indeed, it is not even the (contentious) claim that illocutionary force has a conventional means of expression, just as sense and (perhaps) reference do. But then, what is required for Austin's claim to be correct? Austin seemed to have in mind that there must exist something like a ritual or ceremonial practice in the community of language users from which the illocutionary act receives its significance, or force (19, 70). But in what respects must the relevant practice be like rites and ceremonies? Must it, for instance, be arbitrary? Must it serve some broader function within the community? Austin did not address these questions, and accordingly left our central problems ill-formulated and vague.

Searle (1969) made significant progress on this front, distinguishing three questions: "First, are there conventions for languages? Second,

³ I am not claiming here that convention is *sufficient* to effectuate the association of words with meanings required for the performance of a locutionary act (such as expressing the proposition that p) - a claim upon which doubt is cast by, e.g. Hawthorne (1990); rather, I am claiming that it is *necessary*.

must there be rules (realized somehow) in order for it to be possible to perform this or that illocutionary act? And third, are the conventions realizations of rules?" (40) He argued that the answer to all three questions is *yes*: indeed, even posing the third – which might equally be rephrased, “are the rules realized by the conventions?” - presupposes an affirmative answer to the first two. Clearly, the first of Searle’s questions receives an affirmative answer given, as we have seen, that the association between words and their meanings is (largely⁴) arbitrary. The third question is one that, while interesting in its own right, will be set aside here.⁵ Crucially, however, by articulating the second question, and distinguishing it from the third, Searle allowed us to pull apart the question of conventionality from that which is of central interest to us.

Searle’s insight was to recognize that a rule might be constitutive of an act, and even (necessarily) conventionally realized (if realized at all), though not itself a convention. Much more recently, Williamson (2000) has made it absolutely clear that constitutive rules (which may have normative force) are not conventional in nature. More specifically, he notes that “[c]onstitutive rules are not 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 .” (239) Our question, then, is whether illocutionary speech acts are constitutively governed by rules where, as Williamson says, “a rule... count[s] as constitutive of an act only if it is essential to that act: necessarily, the rule governs every performance of the act” (239).

Clearly, our question is one of metaphysics: it concerns the essences of certain items, namely, speech act types such as assertion and command. In my (forthcoming b) paper, “Speech Acts: Natural or Normative Kinds?” I claimed, following Fine (1994), that essences in general are

⁴ This qualification is made by way of acknowledgement of the existence of onomatopoeia – though it must be recognized that even words such as “moo” and “baa”, while not arbitrary, involve an element of convention.

⁵ It concerns the contentious claim mentioned above that there are conventional devices whose employment is necessary and sufficient for the performance of illocutionary acts.

specified by way of (possibly non-reductive) definitions; and I suggested that we can distinguish two views of the essences of speech acts in the philosophical literature. According to one of these views, some normative term such as “must” or “may” will occur in the definition of any illocutionary act type; according to the other, only (naturalistically acceptable) descriptive terms will occur. On views of the latter kind, speech acts are natural kinds; on the former, they are normative kinds. Finally, I argued that despite appearances, it is possible to reconcile these views: speech acts are in fact both natural and normative kinds.

I will describe below how this reconciliation is to be effectuated: but it will be helpful, in order to see more clearly what is at issue, to have a concrete proposal in front of us. Williamson claims that the speech act of assertion is constitutively governed by the knowledge rule (with which we began), according to which “[o]ne must: assert p only if one knows p” (243). I find this claim plausible; but some theorists, such as Hindriks (2007) and Bach (2010), have not been convinced by Williamson’s (abductive) arguments in favour of it. Part of their resistance, I suggest, comes from general concerns about the metaphysics of speech acts it implies. In particular, these concerns are of two kinds.

A first concern is that we should be able to say, in reductive terms, what it is to perform a speech act such as assertion; yet Williamson’s account of the essence of assertion is non-reductive - assertion is simply that speech act which is subject to the knowledge rule. A second concern is that normativity such as that involved in the knowledge rule ought to be explicable in more basic terms; yet Williamson’s claim that the knowledge rule is constitutive of assertion does not seem to leave room for such explanation - indeed, Williamson says, “It is pointless to ask why the knowledge rule is the rule of assertion. It could not have been otherwise” (267). In fact, however, these two concerns are intertwined: for if we were able to give a reductive definition of the essence of assertion, we might be able to show that it is subject to a norm similar to the one articulated by the knowledge rule; and Hindriks (2007) has attempted just this.

In the first section below, I will describe a standard reductive naturalist account of the nature of assertion, and say briefly why I don't think the kind of derivation of the norm of assertion based on it that Hindriks proposes works, before giving my own proposed explanation of the norm of assertion. In the second section, I will consider concerns about the naturalistic potential of my account. The two sections correspond roughly to the two kinds of concerns mentioned above, taken in reverse order.

Explaining the Normativity of Assertion

Standard naturalist accounts of the essences of speech acts attempt to explain what it is to perform a given type of speech act by appeal to the kind of intention with which one makes an utterance, rather than by appeal to constitutive rules articulating norms governing their performance.⁶ Thus, Grice (1957) argued that an agent can mean something by performing an action with a certain sort of intention – a *reflexive* one whose fulfillment consists in part in its recognition. And Strawson (1964) suggested that we can understand some basic illocutionary forces, such as those of assertion and request, in terms of these Gricean intentions.

More fully, Grice isolated, and attempted to characterize, a special kind of non-factive, “non-natural” meaning as being of interest to the study of communication. Strawson summarized Grice's theory of this kind of meaning as follows: “*S* nonnaturally means something by an utterance *x* if *S* intends (*i*₁) to produce by uttering *x* a certain response (*r*) in an audience *A* and intends (*i*₂) that *A* shall recognize *S*'s intention (*i*₁) and intends (*i*₃) that this recognition on the part of *A* of *S*'s intention (*i*₁) shall function as *A*'s reason, or a part of his reason, for his response *r*” (446); and he claimed that “we must add to Grice's conditions the further condition that *S* should have the further intention (*i*₄) that *A* should recognize his intention (*i*₂)” (447). Strawson argued that the audience *A* has understood the speaker *S* provided that *A* recognizes *S*'s intentions

⁶ Searle (1969: 41) recognizes that there might be constitutive rules which are not normative.

(i_2) and (i_4), i.e. those aspects of S 's overall intention which make it reflexive, and so communicative.⁷ Accordingly, one might perform an illocutionary act provided that these sub-intentions are fulfilled, though one will only perform the corresponding perlocutionary act if the initial intention (i_1) is fulfilled, and the response r is produced. On Strawson's view, different speech act types can then be individuated, at least in part, by the different responses they are intended to bring about: belief in the case of an assertion; action in the case of a request.

Bach and Harnish (1979), however, impressed perhaps by the thought (noted by Austin and stressed by Searle) that one can perform an illocutionary act without attempting to perform some perlocutionary act, abandoned the requirement that the speaker must intend the non-communicative response r in order to perform an illocutionary act. They suggested instead that speech acts express attitudes, where roughly speaking, one expresses an attitude if and only if one reflexively intends one's hearer to believe that one has that attitude (Bach and Harnish 1979: 15). And working in this tradition, Hindriks (2007) claims that "[t]o assert that P is to utter a sentence that means that P and thereby express the belief that P " (400).

Hindriks claims that we can derive, on this basis, a restricted version of the knowledge rule, having the force of a moral norm, and applying only to situations of normal trust: since such a norm would not govern every possible assertion (but only those made in situations of normal trust), it is not constitutive of that act given the necessary condition for this articulated by Williamson (above); but its existence, it might be thought, can account for the appearance of plausibility enjoyed by Williamson's unrestricted, constitutive norm. Without going into too much detail, the idea is to appeal to the fact that knowledge is the norm of belief (Williamson 2000: 47), together with the fact that the essence of assertion is to express belief, to conclude that when one ought, morally

⁷ There is some debate over the relationship between nested intentions such as those described by Strawson and the reflexive intentions posited by Grice; but I leave it to one side here. For some comment, see my (forthcoming b).

speaking, to be sincere, one ought to assert a proposition only if one knows it.

Although I am sympathetic to the claim that knowledge is the norm of belief as well as that of assertion, I do not think that Hindriks' own derivation of the latter from the former, together with his belief-expression theory of the essence of assertion, succeeds. In my (forthcoming a) paper, "Deriving the Norm of Assertion", I have argued this in some detail. The basic problem is that Hindriks equivocates between moral norms and epistemic norms, when what is ultimately needed is a distinctive kind of assertoric norm: the claim that knowledge is the norm of assertion is the claim that assertions ought, *qua assertions*, to be expressions of knowledge.

Elsewhere (Ball, forthcoming b) I have attempted my own explanation of why it should be that we engage in a practice – namely assertion – which is subject to the knowledge rule.⁸ The idea was to argue, first, that speakers normally assert only what they know, and second, that speakers always have (some, possibly overridden) reason to do what is normal. If successful, the two arguments together would show that speakers are subject to an unrestricted knowledge rule having normative force. Finally, I claimed that we can understand what it is for an assertion to be normal in naturalistic terms. Since assertion was not taken to be special in any way amongst illocutionary acts, the upshot was taken to be that although speech acts are normative kinds, they are also natural kinds.

My argument for the first claim is based on four premises, and runs as follows:

(P1) Normally, speakers assert only if they intend to induce belief.

(P2) Normally, speakers intend to induce belief only if hearers come to believe.

⁸ Although Williamson does not countenance an explanation of why assertion is subject to the knowledge rule, he recognizes that it is legitimate "to ask why we have such a speech act as assertion in our repertoire." (267)

(P3) Normally, hearers come to believe only if they thereby come to know.

(P4) Normally, hearers come to know only if speakers know.

Therefore,

(C) Normally, speakers assert only if they know.

My idea was that Grice, in effect, correctly described what Millikan (1984) would call the “normal” cases of assertion, viz., those which explain the continued existence of the practice. More fully (though still very roughly), Millikan thinks that a device type functions normally (or properly) if, and only if, it does what past tokens of it did which caused them to be copied, thereby causally explaining the fact that current tokens of the type exist. My first premise, then, claims that in all such normal cases of assertion, speakers reflexively intend to induce belief in their hearers, just as Grice and Strawson suggested. The second premise is supported by the thought that speakers would not continue to assert if hearers did not believe what they were told; accordingly, we have reason to believe that hearers do believe what they are told in these normal cases in which speakers (reflexively) intend them to do so. The third premise is supported by the thought that knowledge is the norm of belief, i.e. that one ought only to believe something if one thereby knows it: the idea is that there is no reason to think that hearers’ cognitive capacities should be malfunctioning in those cases of assertion in which it does what makes it advantageous to us; so we should expect that belief is perfectly normal, and hence constitutes knowledge, in these normal cases of assertion. Finally, the fourth premise is made plausible by reflecting on the fact that knowledge requires safety, and that this is likely to be secured in normal cases in which hearers accept what they are told only if speakers themselves believe what they say, and indeed do so safely – thus, likely, only if speakers assert only what they know. The conclusion then follows from the premises, by the transitivity of “only if”, together with the fact that “normally” serves as a universal quantifier over the same set of normal cases of assertion.

Supposing this argument to be successful (i.e. sound), why think that its conclusion vindicates the thesis that assertion is constitutively governed by the knowledge rule? In particular, why think that what speakers normally do in respect of assertion is what they *ought* to do in this respect? One initial thought is that device types are propagated and reproduced because advantageous to those that employ them: accordingly, normal, knowledgeable assertions must provide some benefit to language users; and so, speakers themselves must, *prima facie*, secure some advantage by asserting only what they know, and therefore (prudentially) ought, *prima facie*, to do so. A second, slightly different argument was given in “Speech Acts”. This time the idea was that, since it is of the essence of assertion to normally produce hearer knowledge, and since speakers assert knowingly and intentionally (i.e. they are not ignorant of what they do when they assert), they in some sense intend hearer knowledge whenever they assert. But a means to the end of such hearer knowledge is asserting only what one knows; so speakers always have some *pro tanto* obligation of rationality to intend this means and assert only what they know.

Neither of these lines of thought seems to capture the full normative force of the “must” occurring in the knowledge rule; yet each has the advantage of showing that the naturalistically acceptable conclusion (C) of the argument above articulates a constraint on assertion which induces a normative requirement on speakers, *despite the fact that assertion is an irreducible kind*. That is, we do not need a reductive definition of assertion to explain the normativity in the knowledge rule; we can get by with the thought that speakers possess reflexive intentions to induce hearer beliefs in normal cases of assertion. This allows us to recognize that abnormal assertions produced when such intentions are absent are assertions nonetheless, and that no non-trivial necessary and sufficient conditions can be given for being an assertion; but that features of the normal cases are the source of the normativity involved.

In the remainder of this section, I want to try to say some things that capture more adequately the normative force of the “must” occurring in the knowledge rule. The problem with each of the arguments given above is that they treat the “must” as having purely prudential force for

the speaker: yet part of what is wrong with abnormal, unknowledgeable assertions concerns the position the hearer is put in by the speaker's action; the abnormal asserter arguably does some wrong by the hearer. The normativity involved in the knowledge rule thus seems to have an inter-subjective character, and not just the force of personal, prudential rationality. In particular, what I want to suggest is that, while the knowledge rule has the force of a *pro tanto* obligation which points beyond oneself, it can nevertheless be given a kind of prudential, or utilitarian explanation.

My account here follows the work of Rawls (1955), who distinguished two ways of thinking of (normative) rules. On the first, "summary" conception, rules articulate generalizations which may have exceptions; they are "rules of thumb" which simply abbreviate a whole range of particular normative facts. Accordingly, whenever one is in the kind of situation with which the rule is concerned, the question of what one ought to do arises: the case may then be like the majority of other cases of its type, so that one ought to do as the rule says; or it may differ from them, so that one is under no obligation to do as the rule says. Crucially, on the summary conception, the rules in question can have no independent normative status themselves.

By contrast, on what Rawls called the "practice" conception, "rules are pictured as defining a practice. Practices are set up for various reasons, but one of them is that in many areas of conduct each person's deciding what to do on utilitarian grounds case by case leads to confusion, and that the attempt to coordinate behavior by trying to foresee how others will act is bound to fail. As an alternative one realizes that what is required is the establishment of a practice, the specification of a new form of activity; and from this one sees that a practice necessarily involves the abdication of full liberty to act on utilitarian and prudential grounds." (24) Now, one of the cases that Rawls has in mind is the legal practice of punishing those convicted of a crime; and it is entirely possible (whether or not it is probable) that such a practice should have been deliberately set up by enlightened legislators recognizing the advantages it would offer. This, however, is inessential for our purposes: what is crucial is that Rawls thought that such rules can be given

utilitarian defences; that is, it is because they are advantageous to us, and more so than any (nearby) alternative, that they are established and retained – whether or not we realize this.

Clearly, Hindriks is operating with something like the summary conception of the knowledge rule, whereas on the Williamsonian view that I have been espousing, this rule is treated as defining a practice, namely, that of assertion. And I think the knowledge rule can be given a utilitarian defence of just the sort that Rawls suggests: in particular, it seems to me that normal assertions are advantageous to those involved (both speaker and hearer), and that it is because of this that there is a practice of assertion within human communities. But it is worth noticing that the utility alluded to is not that of the speaker in a given (perhaps abnormal) case: rather, it is that of the members of the community (or perhaps species) to which she belongs. It is in this way that the knowledge rule acquires its distinctive, *sui generis* normative force: but *acquire* it, nonetheless, it does; the normativity is not basic. That is, it is because having a practice of asserting is beneficial to us in general that we have it; and this means that in any particular case we have a *pro tanto* obligation, not just to ourselves, but one owed towards the members of our community, to assert only what we know. This account of the normative force of the knowledge rule is only possible given the *non*-reductive character of the essence of assertion.

Piecemeal Naturalism and the Essence of Assertion

We have seen that the normativity involved in the knowledge rule of assertion – and, by analogy we might hope, that involved in the constitutive rules of other illocutionary speech acts – can be explained by the advocate of a non-reductive account of the essence of assertion, thus alleviating the second kind of worry mentioned at the end of the introduction. But what about the first kind of worry? Isn't there something problematic about non-reductive accounts of high-level features of reality in general, and of the essences of speech acts in particular?

The general worry is that without a reduction of some non-physical phenomenon P, it seems mysterious how P could be instantiated. After all, in the beginning was the world, with its wholly physical character. If, at some later time, phenomenon P arose, this cries out for explanation; yet given that P is not (reducibly) physical, it might seem no such explanation can be forthcoming. Must we suppose that God simply added P to the world at that stage? This seems problematically *ad hoc* and unexplanatory.

In connection with speech acts in particular, we might worry that it is impossible to intend to perform an illocutionary act directly and immediately: assertion, for instance, doesn't feel like a basic kind of action in the way that, say, moving one's hand (or one's lips) does. Surely, then, we must be able to say what it consists in, what we have to intentionally do if we are to assert. And this can seem to militate in favour of a reductive account of the essences of such speech acts as assertion; for given such an account we could readily say what we must do in order to assert, and so, for assertion to be instantiated.

In order to address these worries, however, I want first to discuss an objection raised about my account at the PhiLang2013 conference by Maciej Witek. Witek noted that my account of assertion does not succeed in explaining the normativity of assertion in entirely natural terms, since I appeal to unexplained norms of rationality - and in particular, epistemic norms - in my argument that in normal cases, speakers assert only what they know. More specifically, Witek pointed out, quite correctly, that I appeal to Grice's account of what it is to communicatively mean something in defending the first premise (P1), and that this involves something like Strawson's intention " (i_3) that th[e] recognition on the part of A of S's intention (i_1) shall function as A's reason, or a part of his reason, for his response r " (446). In short, the speaker must intend that the hearer treat his recognition of her perlocutionary intention to produce r as *an epistemic reason* to form that response - i.e. as subject to an epistemic norm.

A cheap response is to note that the occurrence of the normative notion of an epistemic reason occurs here within the scope of an intention: so

strictly speaking, I don't need to recognize the antecedent existence of epistemic norms in appealing to Grice's theory of meaning, but only that of our conception thereof. But this reply won't do in general: Witek might as well have pointed to my defence of the third premise (P3) of my argument that normally speakers assert only what they know; for here I made direct use of the claim that knowledge is the norm of belief. Similarly, in arguing that the second premise (P2) is true, I appealed to norms of practical rationality: it would be practically irrational for speakers to intend to induce belief if they did not have a reasonable expectation that hearers would come to believe – an expectation that is best explained by its truth (in normal cases). My explanation of the normativity of the illocutionary act of assertion is run through with normative notions.

The concern, then, is that I have not explained the normativity of the knowledge rule in entirely non-normative terms, and so I have not guaranteed that my account is naturalistically acceptable (by my own lights). Strictly speaking, this is not an objection to the fact that my account of assertion is non-reductive, since even if I had defined assertion in terms of Gricean intentions, as Bach and Harnish and Hindriks do, it would still apply; the problem is that the base properties appealed to are normative in character. Nonetheless, I think the current objection can be addressed in a way which also alleviates the concern that it is mysterious how assertion could be irreducible.

Williams (2002) points out that there is, in general, a difficulty in characterizing philosophical naturalism. The problem is that we run the risk of either describing it as a position which is utterly trivial, or else as a view that is entirely implausible. In somewhat more detail, Williams' thought is that naturalism about some phenomenon is, very roughly, the view that it is simply "part of nature": but this is trivial if nature includes everything there is; and it is implausible if it means that we can reductively define that phenomenon in physical terms. Williams' solution is to take a kind of piecemeal approach to naturalism.⁹ He says, "The question for naturalism is always: can we explain, by some

⁹ Williams himself calls it the "creeping barrage" (23) conception.

appropriate and relevant criteria of explanation, the phenomenon in question in terms of the *rest* of nature?” (23) He thinks that there are open questions about “what we are prepared to regard... as an explanation” (23); and what the rest of nature is will depend on the target phenomenon.

I am sympathetic to Williams’ view of naturalism. More specifically, my suggestion is that if we can specify *sufficient* conditions for the instantiation of a type in simpler terms, that will count, for the purposes of naturalism, as having *explained* it: for we will be able to answer the question how that type of phenomenon could have occurred employing only simpler terms, standing for (instances of) already instantiated types. (This will not count as a reduction, since the statement of *necessary* conditions employing only the simpler terms is also required for a reductive definition.) And when it comes to the target phenomenon of illocutionary act types and their normativity, my proposal is that the rest of nature includes the norms of practical and theoretical rationality by which agents are bound. Accordingly, if we can explain how, for instance, assertion could be constitutively governed by the knowledge rule appealing only to the existence of interacting agents subject to the norms of reason, as well as the (non-assertoric) intentions they form, we will have given a naturalistic account of the normativity of that speech act. And this, of course, is exactly what I take myself to have done.¹⁰ Thus, by adopting Williams’ piecemeal approach to naturalism we can see both how the normativity of speech acts such as assertion can be recognized as naturalistically explicable, and how it is possible to

¹⁰ In particular, on my view sufficient conditions for the performance of a speech act can be given in simpler terms - for instance, it is sufficient to assert that p that one utter a sentence which means that p, reflexively intending to thereby induce the belief that p in one’s hearer – and it is accordingly unmysterious how that speech act type might have arisen. The sufficient conditions specified, however, will not in general be necessary for the performance of the act in question, and so the account of is non-reductive in character: it does not purport to capture the whole essence of the act in the simpler terms of Gricean intentions. Of course, the question remains how we perform e.g. assertions in the remaining cases where the sufficient conditions are not met: but to say *how* we do something is not the same as saying *what* we thereby do; the means is no part of the essence of the act.

perform such acts despite their not being (in some relevant sense) basic actions.

Conclusion

I began this paper by remarking on the innocuous fact that illocutionary speech acts are subject to norms – for instance, that one ought only to assert a proposition if one knows it to be true. I then asked what the source of that normativity might be: in particular, I wondered whether the acts in question might be constitutively governed by such norms, taking care to distinguish this from the issue of whether they are essentially conventional; it emerged that our question concerned the metaphysics of speech acts. I then proposed to defend the view that assertion in particular, is constitutively governed by Williamson’s knowledge rule, and to show that this is compatible with philosophical naturalism. From there on the paper was in two parts. In the first of these I responded to the concern that only if speech acts can be reductively characterized in other terms can we explain their normativity, i.e. that otherwise we must, implausibly, treat it as basic. Appealing to Rawls’ distinction between the “summary” and “practice” conceptions of rules, I argued that it is not despite but because of its irreducible nature that the normativity of assertion can be adequately explained (rather than treated as primitive). In the final part of the paper I responded to concerns that my approach was insufficiently naturalistic. More specifically, I showed how, appealing to Williams’ piecemeal conception of naturalism, we can accommodate the thought that some norms (those of rationality) are invoked in the explanation of the normativity of speech acts without compromising our naturalistic ambitions; and I argued that by giving sufficient conditions for the performance of a speech act such as assertion in simpler terms we can explain the possibility of its performance without providing a full reduction. In this way I have hoped to provide support for the view that speech acts are both natural and normative kinds.¹¹

¹¹ Thanks to Piotr Stalmaczyk for inviting me to contribute this paper, and to Charlie Pelling and Maciej Witek for comments on an earlier draft.

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