Commitment and Obligation in Speech Act Theory

Abstract

This paper aims to illuminate the notions of commitment and obligation, as well as their explanatory role, in the theory of speech acts. I begin (section 1) by arguing in support of the view that assertion involves a commitment to the truth; and, building on Williamson's (2000) account of this act, I suggest that we can understand such commitment in terms of an obligation to ensure. I then argue (section 2) that this foundationalist account of the commitment involved in assertion is preferable to the discursive coherentism of Brandom (1983). Next (section 3), I propose that MacFarlane's (2011) taxonomy of views of the nature of assertion should be simplified, so that there is just a broad division into those that understand the act in descriptive, vs those that understand it in normative, terms. And finally, I show (section 4) how we can understand the normative view I favour through a comparison with Stalnaker's (1999) descriptive account of assertion which, I hope, reveals the role played by obligation in the characterization of this act.

Introduction

It is often said that to make an assertion is to commit to the truth of the proposition asserted: thus, Searle, for instance, says 'an assertion is a (very special kind of) commitment to the truth of a proposition' (1969: 29). I believe that this claim is correct. It is not immediately clear, however, just what it amounts to: what exactly is involved in undertaking the special kind of commitment to truth that Searle speaks of? Various theorists have made attempts to answer this question, and to explain the notion of commitment involved. My own view is that to undertake a commitment is to incur an obligation to ensure: and so to commit to the truth of a proposition is to incur an obligation to ensure its truth. Following Williamson (2000) I will suggest, moreover, that one ensures the truth of a proposition in the manner relevant to assertion *epistemically*, by knowing it.

In what follows I will briefly motivate the thought that assertion involves a commitment to truth, and spell out in more detail a general notion of commitment that can be applied in the context of speech act theory. Next, I will consider what kind of commitment is involved in assertion: in particular, I will argue that we should prefer Williamson's epistemic foundationalism over Brandom's (1983) discursive coherentism. I will then distinguish two ways of thinking about illocutionary speech acts (such as assertion): on one, these speech acts can be understood independently of such normative notions as commitment; on the other these notions play a central role. In the process I will criticize MacFarlane's (2011) four category taxonomy of views. Finally, I will show how we can modify Stalnaker's famous (1999) model of assertion, which is descriptive in character, to yield a more plausible normative account.

Section 1: Commitment and Obligation

Following Searle and others, I have said that assertion involves undertaking a commitment. But why should we believe this? My reasoning is simple. Assertions can be retracted. But assertions can only be retracted if they involve undertaking a commitment. So, assertions involve undertaking a commitment.[1]

I take it that the first premise of this argument is uncontroversial. The major premise, therefore, is the second. In order to see that it is true, we should consider the nature of the act of retraction. So, what is retraction? 'To retract an assertion,' as MacFarlane notes, 'is to "take it back," rendering it "null and void"' (2011: 83). But what does this mean? Not that to retract an assertion is to undo it in the sense of bringing it about that the assertion was never made! Rather, something other than the assertion itself is undone, or cancelled. That something is the result of the assertion, the commitment.

The key point here concerns the timing. The commitment to the truth of the proposition asserted begins at the time of the assertion *and then lasts indefinitely*. When an assertion is retracted, one does not make it the case that one was *never* committed to the truth of the proposition in question; one simply makes it the case that one is *no longer* so committed. Accordingly, there must be, not only the *act* of asserting (which, let's say, occurs at t), but also the state of being committed (which exists for a period of time beginning at t). If at t' one retracts an assertion that p made at t, one undoes one's commitment *from t' onwards*: one *ceases* to be committed to the truth of p; one does not make it the case that one was not so committed from t (to t'). This is only possible if the act of asserting brings about a state distinct from that act – a state which I have been suggesting is one of commitment. Any adequate theory of assertion (and, I would suggest, some other speech acts) must recognize the existence of this state (though, of course, they may differ on how to characterize it).

So far we have seen reason to believe that making an assertion involves undertaking a commitment. But what is a commitment? What is meant by saying that a commitment is undertaken? I suggest that in undertaking a commitment one incurs an obligation. More specifically, to commit to something is to incur an obligation to ensure it.

Consider promising, for instance. Suppose I promise I will meet you for dinner. Then I incur an obligation to ensure that I do so. How can I ensure that I meet you for dinner? By so acting as to bring it about that I do. My action ensures the result. That result is the state of affairs that I promised. I fulfil the obligation that I incurred in promising by ensuring through action that the promised outcome (i.e. the outcome to which I committed) occurs.[2]

Some computer scientists have a generalized notion of an action: they say that when an agent α so acts as to guarantee the outcome *that p*, α *sees to it* that p.[3] It is, I think, no accident that the logical grammar

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[1] The argument here is a refinement of one hinted at by MacFarlane (2011).

[2] Things may seem to be a little trickier when I promise to do something, i.e. to perform some action. For then what I need to ensure is my performance of the action in question. Does this require a meta-action? I don't think so. Suppose, for instance, that I promise not only that there will be cake at the party, but that I will bake it. Then by baking the cake and bringing it to the party, I ensure through my actions that I have baked a cake and brought it to the party. No additional action is required.

[3] See Horty (2001) for an excellent book length use of this approach.

of this notion is the same as that of the propositional attitudes: the phrase 'sees to it', like 'believes' or 'desires' is, as Prior put it, 'a predicate at one end and a connective at the other' (1971: 19); that is, just like the attitude expressions it takes a noun and a sentence (well, complement clause) to make a sentence. This is no accident because the propositional attitudes are, paradigmatically at least, the results of cognitive actions: to judge that p, for instance, is to act cognitively on the proposition that p,[4] with the result that one believes that p; and, of course, if all goes well, this belief will constitute knowledge that p. Accordingly, it seems to me that when we commit to the truth of a proposition by asserting it, we incur an obligation to so act (or better, to have so acted) cognitively as to ensure its truth. And we can see to it that a proposition is true, cognitively, by knowing it.[5] Thus, I suggest that when we assert that p, we incur an obligation to know that p. Of course, others have suggested that the obligations we incur in performing the speech act of assertion are different ones than this. In the next section I argue that they are mistaken.

Section 2: Epistemic Foundationalism and Discursive Coherentism

Brandom thinks that assertion is best understood (partly) in terms of the notion of commitment: thus, he says that '[i]n asserting a sentence one… commits oneself to it' (1983: 640). Of course, this claim mistakenly takes sentences, rather than propositions, to be the objects of assertion: what one asserts, when one makes an assertion, is something which might be expressed by a different sentence in a different context (or indeed language), and which might not be expressed by the same sentence in a different context; and this is so even if one asserts it *by* uttering a sentence which expresses it (in one's context). As a result of this error, Brandom also misidentifies the object of commitment here: obviously, one's commitment is to the proposition one expresses, not to the sentence which one uses to express it. Clearly, if a speaker says that she is hungry by uttering the sentence 'I am hungry', she need not defend that *sentence* against those who says that they are not hungry by uttering its negation; nor, indeed, if she has eaten in the intervening time, need she defend the sentence anymore.

But let us set these points aside: what is of more immediate interest is how Brandom thinks the commitment undertaken in asserting something is honoured. What is it that one becomes obliged to do, or responsible for doing, when one asserts that p? According to Brandom, one must (in effect) provide independent evidence for p in the form of further assertions, if one's assertion is challenged. But this can't be right in general. Suppose that one asserts that there is a Goldfinch in the yard; and suppose this assertion is challenged. One might, perhaps, provide some independent evidence in support of this claim, maybe by noting that one can *see* that there is a Goldfinch in the yard. But what if this in turn is challenged? It seems clear that one is entitled to make the assertion in question (one need not retract it, for instance): but it is far from obvious that there is a further assertion one might make that would serve

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[4] I do not intend to suggest that these acts are voluntary.

[5] How so? Well, to ensure the truth of a proposition is to do something which makes that proposition not only true, but *safely* true – i.e. true in nearby possible worlds. Thus, when I (so act as to) intentionally bring it about that p, p is (typically) not only true in the actual world, it is also true in nearby worlds where things go slightly differently (but not so differently as to disrupt the success of my action and the fulfillment of my intention); and thus I ensure that p is true. Similarly, when I so act cognitively as to ensure that p is true (by properly judging that p, thereby activating knowledge that p), not only will p in fact be true, it will also be true in nearby worlds where things go slightly differently (but not so differently as to disrupt the success of my cognitive act).

to justify this claim. The thesis that knowledge is what licenses assertion, by contrast, copes well with this case. Since one knows that one sees that there is a Goldfinch in the yard, one is entitled to assert that one sees that there is. The fact that one cannot provide further, independent evidence for this claim does not impugn one's right to make it: after all, some propositions must be evidentially basic, on pain of regress or circularity; but we might still want to transmit our knowledge of these propositions to others.

Brandom also thinks that a full account of the speech act of assertion must take note of the entitlements an assertion proffers. In particular, Brandom thinks that when one asserts that p, others become entitled to assert p (as well as its immediate consequences). But this is not, in general, true. Suppose S lies, thereby asserting something false – let's say, the proposition p. Is S's hearer H thereby entitled to assert p? Clearly not. If he does, and his audience A relies on his word, believing what he has said, she will err: accordingly, if A comes to recognize that p is false she is within her rights to rebuke H; for he has made an unwarranted assertion, one which he is not entitled to make. Of course, H might pass the buck, blaming S for the falsity of his assertion; and A might accept the fact that S told H that p as an excuse for H's having asserted this falsehood. But this just confirms the point: it is only wrong-doing that can be excused; so if H is to be exculpated in this way, he must have done something wrong in asserting p. In short, H's assertion was unwarranted, and illegitimate: he was not entitled to make it, even if he was blameless in having done so.

It is important to recognize that blamelessness is not entitlement. We can see this by contrasting the above case with the following one. Suppose S asserts p. Working as a translator, H utters a sentence in another language which means that p. A hears H's utterance and understands that p. If p is false in this case, A should not rebuke H: for H did not assert p; accordingly, he was never responsible for ensuring the truth of p in the first place. By contrast, in our original case, H *was* responsible for ensuring p's truth: for even though S misled him by telling him that p, H re-iterated this assertion; he was accordingly committed to the truth of p, and obliged to ensure it. While it might be harsh for A to blame H in this case, we need not regard it as irrational (for given that H was not entitled, there is an open question whether he was blameless); whereas in the translator case, A should certainly *not* shoot the messenger, H, who is not responsible (ultimately or otherwise) for ensuring the truth of p (and therefore *clearly* blameless).[6]

'In asserting a claim' says Brandom, 'one… authorizes further assertions [and] commits oneself to vindicate the original claim, showing that one is entitled to make it' (1983: 641). We have seen reasons to think that both components of this claim are mistaken. Perhaps, with the addition of epicycles, the phenomena can be captured within this approach.[7] It seems to me, however, that we do better to

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[6] Brandom says, 'An assertion in force [that is, one which has not been overturned] licenses others to re-assert the original claim (and to assert its immediate consequences) *deferring to the author of the original assertion the justificatory responsibility which would otherwise thereby be undertaken*.' (1983: 642) It is unclear, however, whether one who defers responsibility to another in this way is nonetheless responsible.

[7] Brandom recognizes that '[i]t is only assertions one is entitled to make that can serve to entitle others to its inferential consequences' (1983: 641); and this might be thought to help with the second problem encountered above. I agree: as we shall see, it is only in normal cases that one is entitled to assert what one is told. Brandom also acknowledges that '[t]here are cases in which it is inappropriate to issue a justificatory challenge to an assertor' (1983: 643); but he suggests these are to be understood as 'parasitic on a paradigm in which justificatory responsibility is undertaken' (1983: 643). This might help with the first kind of problem case discussed above; though in this case I am less optimistic.

abandon Brandom's discursive account of assertoric entitlement, which descends ultimately into a kind of coherentism about justification; instead, we should endorse a foundationalist epistemic position, recognizing that one is entitled to assert a proposition if and only if one knows it. In the final section I develop this Williamsonian alternative further; but first, an interlude on the taxonomy of speech acts.

Section 3: Descriptive and Normative Accounts of Speech Acts

MacFarlane thinks 'there are four broad categories' of views of the nature of assertion, namely:

1. To assert is to express an attitude.
2. To assert is to make a move defined by its constitutive rules.
3. To assert is to propose to add information to the conversational common ground.
4. To assert is to undertake a commitment. (2011: 80)

This taxonomy of positions may be arrived at by means of two cross-cutting distinctions. The first distinction is that between views (such as the second and fourth) on which we can understand assertion only in normative terms, on the one hand, and those (such as the first and third) on the other hand, on which assertion can be characterized in wholly descriptive, non-normative terms. The second distinction aims to differentiate positions (such as the first and second) on which we can understand assertion by looking "upstream" to the conditions of the production of the speech act, and those (such as the third and fourth) on which we must look "downstream" to its effects.

It seems to me, however, that this second distinction is largely illusory, being at best one of degree, or emphasis, not one of kind. Consider first the descriptive views. According to Bach and Harnish (1979) to assert a proposition is to express a belief in that proposition, as well as an intention that one's hearer believe it, where to express an attitude is to reflexively intend one's audience to take one's utterance as a reason to think one has it. It is, I think, an oversimplification to regard this as an entirely speaker-oriented account of assertion: for it is clear that the intentions one must have in order to assert, on this view, are hearer-directed; the intentions in question are intentions to bring about certain effects in the hearer. And it is for this reason that theorists sympathetic to this approach have wondered whether, if one has the relevant intentions, but they are not recognized, one has succeeded in making an assertion.

At the same time, if we consider the third view, Stalnaker's (1999) account of assertion, we see that it is said (by MacFarlane) to characterize this speech act in terms of its 'essential effect'. Yet the effect in question is the alteration of the conversational common ground, which is in turn defined by the various interlocutors' attitudes *prior* to the performance of the act. We cannot understand Stalnaker's view of assertion if we ignore the conditions upstream from the assertion, any more than we can understand Bach and Harnish's approach without looking to the intended effects of this speech act.

Moreover, I will argue that something similar can be said in the case of the normative views of types 2 and 4. To begin with, Searle, who is rightly described as having a commitment view (i.e. one of the fourth kind), *also* clearly thinks that speech is governed by constitutive rules; indeed, an entire section of his (1969) book *Speech Acts* is devoted to making this point. Furthermore, MacFarlane himself concedes that '[i]n principle, the two approaches [can] be combined,' (2011: 91); and he suggests Alston (2000) as a

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theorist who does so combine them. My own view is that Williamson's insights are best understood from such a combined perspective. The upshot of the considerations to be adduced will be that, as I have suggested elsewhere (Ball, 2014), there are just two (broad) kinds of views about the essences of illocutionary speech acts such as assertion: in particular, on one they are *natural kinds*, and we can give an account of their essences in purely descriptive terms; on the other we must employ normative terminology in characterizing them, and they are what I accordingly called *normative kinds*. To see this, however, in the next section I will contrast the descriptive approach of Stalnaker with Williamson's normative account.

Section 4: Language Games and the Very Idea of a Normative Kind

Williamson (2000) advocates a view of MacFarlane's second type, on which assertion is individuated by its constitutive rules. In fact, Williamson thinks there is just one such rule, *the knowledge rule*:

> (KR) One must: assert p only if one knows p.

MacFarlane also considers views of this general kind on which there is some other single constitutive rule (such as the truth rule, or the reasonable belief rule, the details of which need not detain us here); he then says, 'It is not clear to me whether any of the proponents of these accounts intend them as explications of the illocutionary force of assertion' (2011: 85). The problem, for MacFarlane, seems to be that these rules do not appear to be very informative. Let me try to draw out the nature of this concern, before responding to it.

It is common for authors who take speech acts to be governed by constitutive rules to draw an analogy with the moves in a game.[8] Let us pursue that analogy.

Castling is a move in chess which appears to have what Williamson would call a constitutive norm: one cannot (legitimately) castle if either one's king or one's rook has moved previously.[9] In fact, we can re-write this castling rule in a form exactly analogous to the knowledge rule:

> (CR) One must: castle only if neither one's king nor one's rook has moved previously.

Notice, however, that the rules of chess also appear to say what castling *is* quite independently of this rule: according to Wikipedia, 'Castling consists of moving the king two squares towards a rook on the player's first rank, then moving the rook onto the square over which the king crossed.' The constitutive norm governing castling does not appear to individuate that move. There seem to be other possible moves subject to the same restrictions:[10] for example, one might have the rule that the king moves next to his rook, and then the rook moves to the other side of the king.[11] So if the constitutive norm governing castling

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[8] See, for instance, Searle (1969), Lewis (1979), and Williamson (2000).
[9] There are also other conditions on castling; I ignore them here.
[10] Conversely, it seems that this same move might be subject to other restrictions. This suggests that if CR is constitutive of something it is not castling (the move) but chess (the game). In fact, though, it will be turn out to be (partially) constitutive of both, as we shall see.
[11] This is the same as castling on the king's side, but differs from it on the queen's side.

doesn't individuate it, how can the knowledge rule individuate assertion? If constitutive norms can't individuate, then it is not clear that the notion of a normative kind is even coherent, and the Williamsonian account of assertion is in trouble.[12]

This concern can be raised in a more general form. Don't we need to know what an act *is* independently of knowing when it *may* be performed? Actions are events;[13] and events, in turn, are changes in states of affairs. Thus, in order to know what an action is, it seems we must know at least what change it effectuates; or at least, we must know what change it is supposed to effectuate – for actions are arguably differentiated from other events by having intended outcomes, goals, or purposes. If so, then the need for an account of what change an act is supposed to produce is even more pressing; for effectuating that change is, presumably, the purpose of that act, and therefore essential to it (*qua* type). Thus, what we want to know is: What are the dynamics of assertion?

There is, I think, a response to this concern which can be made on the normative theorist's behalf. Suppose that we could not define the game board in chess independently of the permissible moves. Then perhaps castling would be individuated by the constitutive norm governing it, CR. In particular, the two possible moves subject to the restrictions on castling that I have discussed are differentiated by their differing outcomes (the positions of the king and the rook in the queen's side versions of the moves). If those two outcomes could not be distinguished, then arguably there would be just one move subject to the norm in question. Maybe the proponent of speech acts as normative kinds can claim similarly that the positions on the game board in a conversation cannot be distinguished independently of the permissible moves such as assertion itself. It will be worth exploring this possibility; to do so I shall develop the analogy between linguistic activities and games.

If language is like a game then it seems natural to suppose that the players are the speakers and hearers in a given conversation, and the pieces are the propositions on which they act.[14] The game states, or configurations, are defined by the relations the players stand in to the propositions. The moves are changes to these game states, i.e. to the relations players stand in to the propositions. Finally, the board consists of the collection of all possible game states.

There are two ways of developing this thought. According to the first, the relations between players and propositions which serve to define the game states are descriptive in nature; according to the second, they are normative. In what follows I first consider descriptive accounts, raising a concern about all such

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[12] Hindriks (2007) is puzzled by the idea of a kind whose essence is (exclusively) normative, and he objects to Williamson's account of assertion on these grounds. He makes this point, however, through an inexact analogy between language and games: in particular, he compares assertion – which is akin to a move – to the bishop, which is, of course, a piece. MacFarlane (2011), on the other hand, draws the analogy pursued here between assertion and castling. He does not press the concern that KR does not individuate the act of assertion: but he does say that 'one could know [the castling rule] and have *no idea* how to move the pieces in such a way as to castle' (2011: 86); this suggests his concern is much like the one pressed in the main text.
[13] See Davidson (1967).
[14] One might think that the pieces are certain linguistic items rather than what those items express. I will not explore this possibility here, for the reasons given above in connection with Brandom's account of the object of assertion.

approaches. This will serve to motivate the second approach, and allow me to articulate a coherent account of what it would be for assertion to be a normative kind.

Stalnaker (1999) provides the most precise and explicit descriptive account of language games involving assertion in the philosophical literature. On his view, the *context set* is defined as the set of possible worlds compatible with the (shared) *presuppositions* of the various conversational participants. Working in this framework, we can then define the game board as the collection of possible context sets involving those players.[15] Since presupposition can be understood independently of assertion and other speech acts,[16] assertion can be defined by the transitions it effects on the game board: assertion is that move in which one adds the content of the act to the presuppositions. Since Stalnaker takes propositions to be sets of possible worlds[17] we can put this claim another way: the effect of an assertion that p on a context c is to yield a new context $c' = c \cap p$.

Stalnaker makes a number of controversial assumptions: for instance, he maintains that the attitude which serves to define the context set is transparent[18] and mutually held amongst conversational participants; more fundamentally, he holds that propositions are unstructured sets of possible worlds.[19] Yet either of these assumptions might be given up without compromising the descriptive character of the account of language games on offer; what is crucial is that the effect of an assertion is to bring about a change in the attitudes of conversationalists. Nevertheless, whatever attitude is taken by the descriptive theorist to be affected by assertion, it seems that this effect will not be universal: it will not occur in all cases of assertion. If hearer knowledge is said to be produced by assertions, we need only reflect on the fact that false statements are sometimes made. If belief is said to be induced, we need only recognize that some lies are obvious, and that hearers will not accept them. Making the relevant attitudes mutual merely exacerbates the problem: liars do not believe, and therefore do not know, what they assert. Indeed, it is not even the case that assertion always produces in hearers the attitude of presupposition – that is, of acting, for the sake of discussion, as if one takes for granted (Stalnaker 1973: 448); for as Stalnaker recognizes (1999: 86-87), a hearer may reject what is asserted, and when he or she does so, the proposition in question is not presupposed, despite having been asserted. It seems, then, that there is no

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[15] Stalnaker says, "One may think of a… conversation as a game where the… context set is the playing field" (1999: 88). If a field is to outdoor sports what a board is to board games, this conflicts with my suggestion. Instead we should regard the context set as a configuration of the playing field, something akin to the fact that the players on one team in a soccer game have formed a wall, when a free kick is about to be taken. Such a configuration of the game board/playing field of course leaves players a range of options regarding what they may legitimately do next – e.g. try to shoot past the wall, or pass to a teammate – just as Stalnaker was (presumably) hoping to suggest through his analogy.

[16] In fact, Stalnaker has given a number of accounts of the attitude of presupposition (Stalnaker 1973, 1999, 2002); on one of them it turns out to be a disposition to act in certain ways in speech situations. But the point could be made even more clearly if we simply replaced shared presupposition with common knowledge, or – as Stalnaker himself has sometimes been inclined to do - with common belief.

[17] Of course, we can all agree that propositions *determine* sets of worlds.

[18] According to Stalnaker, presupposition obeys both positive introspection (if one presupposes that p then one presupposes that one presupposes that p), and negative introspection (if one does not presuppose that p, then one presupposes that one does not presuppose that p). Hawthorne and Magidor (2009) have argued that this assumption is false, and that its being so raises serious problems for Stalnaker's theory of assertion.

[19] See for instance Soames (1987).

change in the descriptive psychological relations that conversationalists bear to propositions which is universally brought about as the effect of an assertion.

Perhaps, then, assertions have irreducibly normative effects. As MacFarlane points out, '[b]oth Stalnaker's view and… Brandom's view… are influenced by… Lewis' suggestion (1979) that we can think of speech acts in terms of the way they alter a shared "conversational score." Stalnaker takes the score to be the common ground of accepted propositions; Brandom takes it to be a collection of normative statuses' (2011: 88). We have seen that there are problems, however, with the way in which Brandom develops this thought; if Williamson's view can be developed in this way, however, this will serve to demonstrate that MacFarlane's claim that 'while the constitutive-rules approach looks at "upstream" norms – norms for *making* assertions – the commitment approach looks at "downstream" norms – the normative *effects* of making assertions' (2011: 91) is mistaken, and there is just one kind of view here on which speech acts are normative kinds. In what follows I undertake to do just this.

Williamson appears to endorse the thought that there is just one (universal normative) effect of assertion. 'To make an assertion,' he says, 'is to confer a responsibility (on oneself) for the truth of its content; to satisfy the rule of assertion, by having the requisite knowledge, is to discharge that responsibility, by epistemically ensuring the truth of the content' (2000: 269). This suggests that he thinks that the effect of an assertion that p is, just as I have claimed, that the speaker becomes obliged to know that p – that is, to ensure, by knowing, that p is the case.

The knowledge rule may, however, appear inadequate on its own to establish that this is the effect of an assertion. Williamson stresses that the modal expression 'must' takes wide scope over the conditional expression 'only if' in KR. This suggests that he has in mind to formalize the knowledge rule within modal logic as $\Box(Asp \rightarrow Ksp)$. But this formula, together with Asp does not entail $\Box Ksp$ in normal modal logics. The reason is that there can be $\neg Asp$ worlds accessible from Asp worlds, and some of them may also be $\neg Ksp$ worlds. Williamson's account of assertion, on which it is defined by the knowledge rule, therefore appears to be incomplete.[20]

What is needed, if we are to solve this problem, is an account of the accessibility relation for the box operator of constitutive normative necessity. Suppose, then, that the worlds accessible from *w* at *t* are those which comply with the knowledge rule and in which exactly the same moves of the language game have been made as in *w* up to *t*. Since assertion is such a move, all the facts concerning who has asserted what in *w* up to *t* must be matched in accessible worlds; but knowledge is not such a move, and so the knowledge facts need not match those in *w* at *t*. Accordingly, after S asserts that p in *w*, the only worlds accessible from *w* will be ones in which the knowledge rule is adhered to and in which S has asserted that

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[20] MacFarlane says, 'One might object that the… castling rule… is incomplete' (2011: 86). Strangely, however, he does not pursue this objection in connection with the knowledge rule, suggesting instead that Williamson might overcome the problem by noting that assertion is what Austin (1962/1975) called a 'constative', rather than a 'performative' speech act, and that it is therefore to be expected that it has no constitutive effect(s). This suggestion seems to me to be misguided: better to pursue the response given here.

p; these, of course, will all be worlds in which S knows that p, and so 'S must know that p' will be true in *w* at that time *t*.[21]

On this approach, KR does individuate assertion – and indeed is constitutive of this act – though it only does so in terms of the characteristic deontic 'must' of the language game, which is in turn defined partly in terms of assertion. That is, the move (assertion) and the game to which it belongs (indefinitely iterated assertion, together, perhaps, with retraction[22]) are defined in terms of each other. This is not an illegitimate vicious circularity: each is simply essentially related to the other. On this reading, Williamson's account of assertion is not so much incomplete as inexplicit: a great deal of information is packed into the deontic modal expression occurring in KR; in particular, the dynamics of assertion is built into it.

I have provided a model of assertion based on Williamson's normative account of the essence of this act; so there is clearly no incoherence somehow embedded in the very notion of a normative kind. We do not need to know what an act is independently of when it may be performed; for it may in part be constituted by the rules governing its correct performance. In such cases of rule governed behaviour, Searle was right: the rules in question make possible 'new forms of behavior' (1969: 33); forms of behaviour whose effects could not be described independently of (the obligations incurred by) the rules.

Conclusion

I have argued that those who claim that assertion involves a commitment to the truth are right, for only by accepting this claim can we account for the phenomenon of retraction; and I have suggested that we can understand undertaking a commitment as incurring an obligation to ensure (section 1). Next, I argued that this understanding of the commitment involved in assertion, which has a foundationalist character, is superior to the discursive coherentist alternative proposed by Brandom (section 2). I then suggested that MacFarlane's four-fold taxonomy of accounts of assertion should be simplified, so that there is only a broad division between descriptive and normative views (section 3). And finally, I argued that a normative account, on which in asserting we incur an obligation to know the truth of the proposition

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[21] We might compare this with an approach, modelled on von Fintel and Heim's (2011: 60) 'naïve' suggestion for the accessibility relation for a deontic modal, on which the worlds that are accessible from *w* at time *t* are those in which the rules of the game are conformed to and *everything whatsoever* up to *t* is as in *w*. Although this will have the effect that 'S knows that p' will be true in every world accessible from one in which S asserts that p, it will also have the consequence that whenever an improper assertion is made everything is required – the reason being, of course, that no worlds will be accessible. This is counterintuitive, and yet it might be defended on the grounds that our intuitions on the matter are clouded by our ignorance: since we don't *know* that the assertion is improper, we don't *regard* everything as mandatory; yet the fact remains that it *is*. Moreover, it is worth noting that on the proposal considered in the main text this difficulty will arise, though in a less acute form: for whenever two propositions are asserted, the knowing of both of which is impossible, no worlds will be accessible. This may happen if, e.g. S asserts that p but also asserts that S does not know that p; interestingly, it may also happen if S asserts that p but someone else asserts that not p, or that S does not know that p - though in such cases it is less clear who is responsible for the messy situation. I suspect that the desire to avoid such cul-de-sacs in which everything is required is what motivates the practice of retracting assertions.

[22] See the previous footnote for some relevant considerations.

asserted, is both fully intelligible and superior to a purely descriptive account (section 4). The upshot, I hope, is an illumination of the role of commitment and obligation in speech act theory.

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