

NOTES ON WILLIAMSON: CHAPTER 11 *ASSERTION*

11.1 CONSTITUTIVE RULES

Chapter 11 is not a general scrutiny of *all* of the norms governing assertion. Assertions may be subject to many different norms. Some norms are ‘constitutive’ in the sense that ‘they are tied to the nature of the act’. Rules of a game can be thought of as the paradigm of constitutive rules. Of course, while playing a game you’re also subject to lots of other norms, but it is in virtue of abiding to the rules of the game that you’re engaging in that particular practice.

How do we look for the constitutive rules of a practice? We want a minimal set of rules that will yield (together with some more general rules) all of the normative verdicts about assertions. At any rate, this is the only methodology that is followed in this chapter. Note that it is essential to applying this methodology that we have some idea, or at least clear intuitions, about what the “external” rules are.

Why have any constitutive rules? It isn’t obvious that there is such a minimal set of rules. The alternative, W says, is to think of assertion “more like a natural phenomenon than it seems.” This is a bit dense for me. Can’t there be rule governed activities in which every rule is a derivative rule—a rule that derives from more general rules, and perhaps the specific circumstances one is in ? Is this enough to make an activity ‘natural’? Maybe this is a question for later.

Breaking a constitutive rule is not:

- ceasing to be an asserter (analogy with games).
- conducive to a moral criticism (though of course some violations of constitutive rules may be so).
- conducive to teleological criticism (i.e. the criticism is not that one has used the speech act in a way incompatible with its aim) (Maradona’s hand of God)

I took the last point (as made on p. 240-1) seems to me to imply that we shouldn’t confuse talk of ‘the aim of assertion’ with talk of the ‘constitutive norms of assertion’. Except, W did this at a couple of later points.

Simplicity. Any instance of the following schema is a *simple* rule (where C is a property of propositions):

(C) One must: [(assert p) only if p has C]

A *simple account* (of assertion) is one that accepts some particular instance of the C-rule as the *unique* constitutive rule governing assertion. Moreover the following is necessary: assertion is *the unique* speech act for which the (C) rule is uniquely constitutive. As W puts it, the simple rule must be individuating.

I suppose that the individuating claim follows from the claim that given a practice and a complete enumeration of its constitutive rules there cannot be another practice with exactly the same constitutive rules (b/c constitutive rules aim at being complete specifications). If, as I said before, it isn't obvious that there are constitutive rules, it is even harder to defend the view that a simple account is true. Let's concede this as a methodological assumption.

Instances of the C-rule.

- (T) One must: [(assert p) only if p is true]
- (W) One must: [(assert p) only if one has warrant for p]
- (K) One must: [(assert p) only if one knows p]

Of course, (T) is insensitive to the particular states of agents (esp. *epistemic* states). Lucky guesses may satisfy (T) (though in general a defender of (T) will say that lucky guesses violate some *derivative* norms). (W) is supposed to be schematic; 'warrant' stands for some good epistemic standing. (W) entails (K) on a conception on which one has warrant for p only if one knows p .

11.2 W. AGAINST THE THE TRUTH RULE

Forking. The claim that (T) is the unique constitutive rule of assertion privileges assertions over other speech acts. This privilege is not warranted by anything in the nature of assertion. This is because many other speech acts 'aim at truth'. Williamson claims that *conjecturing* that p , and *swearing* to p both 'aim at truth'.¹ Then he comments: "Why should assertion be the only one of them to be a speech act A whose unique rule is 'Perform A with content p only if p is true?'"

Conjecturing. "Although, it is somehow good to conjecture the true and bad to conjecture the false, it is quite acceptable to conjecture p , but not to assert p " W's point is that conjecture is a speech act that is 'weaker' than assertion, but still subject to the norm: 'aim at truth'. However, from the fact that 'it is somehow good to conjecture the true' it doesn't follow that conjecturing has an equivalent of (T) as its individuating norm—it doesn't even follow that truth is normative for conjectures (it is *somehow good*, to hope the true and bad to hope the false).

Williamson says that "what matters here is not the ordinary use of 'conjecture' and 'swear' but the possibility of speech acts of the kind described". This is impenetrable for me. The pattern of argument was that there are speech acts (some evidentially weaker, some stronger, than assertions) that are in some sense truth-directed. From

¹This is puzzling, by the way, because I thought we were supposed to play down the connection between the teleological 'aiming at blah' and a norm requiring you to blah.

this it was supposed to follow that it is arbitrary to assume that (T) is individuating for assertion only. If we are allowed to consider ‘possible’ speech acts, as well, wouldn’t the argument generalize to any type of *simple* account (including (K))?

Evidential Rules deriving from (T). Evidential norms for (T) are *derivative*. W. claims that a supporter of (T) must accept the following norm:

T_E One should not: [(assert p) and lack evidence that p is true.]

In W.-ese, ‘one should not do ϕ ’ means ‘one has a reason not to ϕ ’ (p. 245). He claims there is even a general bridge principle governing this transition. This is

- (1) if one must (ϕ only if p is true), then one should (ϕ only if one has evidence that p is true).

It is important though that the claim that will be tested later is not T_E (indeed T_E is a derivative norm even for (K)-supporters). Rather it is being tested whether T_E *exhausts* the evidential norms entailed by (T) and appropriate bridge principles.

Lotteries. W. describes a typical (fair) lottery case. P(your ticket loses) can be made arbitrarily small.

t_0	t_1	t_2	t_3
we both know your chances are slim	winning ticket drawn (not yours)	I assert: (*) ‘your ticket did not win’	You find out (*) was mad solely on probabilistic gro

Intuition: at t_3 you have a right to criticize my assertion. Options for an explanation of the incorrectness:

- (E1) **(1) is not the strongest possible bridge principle.** W considers the option of strengthening (1) by replacing ‘having evidence’ with ‘having perfectly good evidence’: he suggests that this might be motivated by the thought that it is so extremely bad to make false assertions “that one should not run even a minute risk of doing it”. He then proceed to attack this motivation for the strengthening.
- (E2) **Conversational Explanation.** This explanation suggests that (*) is in violation of Gricean *conversational* norms. Conversational norms are not constitutive norms for assertion, for they apply to conversation in general (not just to the particular speech act of assertion). Williamson’s criticism of the Gricean story is worth pausing and puzzling over (below).
- (E3) **Package Principles.** The assertion is bad because you have equal grounds to make a similar assertion for each of the tickets. But doing so would result in a sure violation of (T).

More on the Gricean thing: ‘Do not make your contribution more informative than is required’. Williamson proposes (on behalf of his Gricean opponent) that we may read the maxim as suggesting that, by asserting (*), I represented myself as having grounds for (*) that were not readily available to you. W. proposes two arguments for a *reductio* of this interpretation.

- (a) The re-interpreted maxim forbids: (**) ‘Your ticket probably/almost certainly did not win’, but this may be an OK thing to say.
- (b) The re-interpreted maxim does not explain why ‘Your ticket did not win’ is a bad assertion, even if we change the scenario to a situation in which you don’t know the total number of tickets. (intuitions?)

Weiner on (a). What must be accommodated by the Gricean explanation is the fact that the sense in which (**) is inappropriate is different from the sense in which (*) is inappropriate.

	(*) Your ticket did not win	(**) Your ticket probably did not win
C1	You already know the odds	You already know the odds
C2	I do not present myself as knowing something that strengthens your belief in (*)	I do not present myself as knowing something that strengthens your belief in (**)
C3	You do not need a reminder of (*)	You do not need a reminder of (**)

Weiner claims that in each case, *if* C2 holds *and* C1 + C3 are mutual knowledge, then the assertion is pointless. In the case of (*) you know that C1 and C3 hold, and expect me to know them as well. For my assertion to have a point, you must then expect me to make C2 false (so I am presenting myself as knowing something more than you do Re: (*)).

In the case of (**) your belief in it couldn’t possibly be stronger, so you expect C2 to be satisfied. You know C1 and C3. Your utterance might still be not inappropriate if you don’t know C1 and C3. If you do, (**) is pointless.

Weiner on (b). Weiner has a much more complicated story on (b)m. For Weiner, a supporter of (T) should adopt the evidential norm: One should not : [(assert p) and lack a reason to believe that p is true]. Weiner gives a story about how the implicature is generated: you see that for me to comply with the evidential norm I must have a reason to think (*) is true. Since in the example the lottery has already taken place, you are entitled to suppose that my reason for making the assertion stems directly from my knowledge of the drawing. The reason you’re entitled to assume that my reason isn’t entirely probabilistic is that, if it had been I should have uttered (**) instead (for otherwise I am claiming more than I am entitled to by my evidence).

Package Principles. W comments that (T) “does not rule out the possibility that there is adequate evidence for each of the assertions ‘ t did not win’, but not for their conjunction. If each conjunct is true then the conjunction is also true, but it does not automatically follow that the same goes for adequate evidence of truth.” (p.248)

I’m not clear how this is relevant: talk of conjunction never occurred in (E3). I think W has an intuition against him and a point in his favor. The intuition is that someone who asserts (*) should be willing to assert all of the lottery claims. Dilemma: the person who asserts (*) solely on probabilistic grounds is either treating the propositions ‘ t did not win’ unevenly or not. If not, she will assert to one of those propositions just in case

she asserts to all of them, so in this case she is setting herself up for certain violation of (T). This is what triggers the intuition.

Now suppose you're on the first horn of the dilemma. The proponent of (E3) must say why it is bad to treat the claims '*t* did not win' unevenly. As it turns out, it is very hard to say this without complicating the account of assertion, and since only 'simple accounts' are on *W*'s radar, it seems that the (E3) must go.

11.3 KNOWLEDGE ACCOUNT

W. starts with a battery of perplexing arguments/claims. Let 'probability' mean 'probability on one's evidence' (whatever *that* means for *W.*)

- (1) re-issue of the lottery case to argue that (c) no probability short of 1 warrants assertion (hence the norm can't be: assert *p* only if there is high (but possibly <1) probability for *p*).
- (2) (undefended) appeal to the principle: (d) if $Pr(p) < Pr(q)$ and *q* is unassertible, then *p* is unassertible. This principle is used to rule out inference to the best explanation as warranting assertion.

Now (c) and (d) force the rule:

- (P) assert *p* only if *p* has probability 1 on your evidence.

Under $E = K$, this implies the knowledge rule (though the principle (d) sounds hard for me to defend especially if you think of predictions as assertions.).

Conversational Evidence. More on this stuff next week with Beri, I'll just sketch it so that we have it on the table. *W* discusses some conversational evidence: it is proper to respond to assertions with the question "How do you know?" for (K). I don't know much of the literature that *W* refers to here, but I need to be convinced that in these occurrences in ordinary conversation 'know' refers to knowledge:

Branden: I heard you guys are playing your playoff game tonight.

Fabrizio: We're going to win.

Branden: How do you know ?

Fabrizio: We're the better team: during regular season we scored more goals, gave up less, and we're in better shape.

It is only to a philosophical ear that my answer sounds bad. It seems to me the question: "How do you know" is used as a request to vindicate one's entitlement. If *W.* isn't talking about the ordinary use of that question, then I don't have the intuition that the question is a proper response.

Moore-Paradoxical. The key argument is the related Moore-Paradox argument. (K) explains why it is inappropriate to assert:

(3) *A* and I do not know that *A*

even though that is often true (the explanation under (K) is obvious). *W* says on any norm weaker than (K) it is hard to understand what prevents correct assertion of (3).

Worry *W* worries that Moore paradoxical arguments might prove too much. (4) sounds just as odd as (3)

(4) ‘*A* and I cannot be certain that *A*’

Does it follow that certainty is the constitutive norm of assertion? It doesn’t, of course. In most contexts, *W* says, the standards for knowledge and certainty line up. Now, if you make a conscious effort to separate them it seems that sentences like (4) aren’t that problematic after all. We could grant this to *W*, although there might be other cases similar to (4) in which this explanation doesn’t go through.

Back to the point I made in the last section, even granting all of these arguments establish that the evidential standard for assertion is knowledge, nothing follows about what are the constitutive rules of assertion. Some of these considerations can be accommodated by a supporter of (T) with a sufficiently robust bridge principle (or class of bridge principles).

11.4 OBJECTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE ACCOUNT.

W has a notion of *reasonable* belief: high probability on one’s evidence. It can be reasonable to believe *p* while one fails to know *p*. If occurrent belief is the ‘interior’ match of assertion, then occurrent belief is subject to the knowledge norm.

Conversely some assertions are reasonable but violate (K). Some assertions are *reasonable given the circumstances* (*W*’s example: “that’s your train”). Some are reasonable in a more distinctively epistemic sense (they are highly probable given the evidence). They still will be violations of the rules.

Is the knowledge norm too restrictive? Don’t we make assertions in gossip, brainstorming, predictions etc.? *W* must avoid saying that none of these things are assertions, for that would make the knowledge account trivial. Rather, the norm is violated in all these cases. The violations might be excusable: “when assertions come cheap, it is not because the knowledge rule is no longer in force, but because violations of the rule have ceased to matter so much”.

There still is something odd about this: we need independent reason to think that in these context violating the rule isn’t a big deal. While it is true that sometimes rules can be violated, we need at least a sketch of a characterization of when it is ok to relax those rules (mathematics graduate students play soccer friendly without corners: I tolerate this because they are *friendlies*...). The same point is made by Weiner. Truth is, *W* just doesn’t seem to be playing the (philosophy) game by its rules in this section.

11. 5 BK AND RBK

(BK) One must: [(assert p) only if one believes that one knows p]

(RBK) One must: [(assert p) only if one reasonably believes that one knows p]

W criticizes (BK) because your belief can get as irrational as it gets. The larger consideration however is that neither (BK) nor (RBK) entail (T). So, if falsity of the content is *by itself* a defect of the assertion, these two accounts would not be able to explain that.

--In TW's arguments he never addresses the possibility he is alert to in the beginning while defining a norm of assertion, that our intuitions of disapproval when someone breaks the knowledge rule are coming from moral considerations that are not part of the constitutive norms of assertion. In such a case, I'd be making a proper assertion but it would be immoral for me to do it in this case, for reasons external to assertion itself. So, for example, when we say (as on p. 247) that someone did a bad by asserting in a way that exceeded her evidential authority, why don't we say the bad had to do with her breaking an evidential rule in believing the proposition in the first place, rather than in asserting what she believed? So, her assertion was fine, on this reading, because she asserted what she believed, but she broke an evidential rule in coming to that belief.

--Why isn't it that when I make an assertion I represent myself not as an authority on p, but as *believing* p? Then whether I'm in an authoritative enough position for you to believe p too is something that should be decided on the basis of evidence. I don't owe you that merely by asserting. Check all examples for the plausibility of this line. TW talks about responsibility at the end of the chapter, but there's an issue about where the responsibility lies for my having everything I need to in order to have warrant for asserting it too, when I believe it (partly) by hearing you assert it. The only issue in the rules for assertion, on the view I'm suggesting, would be that I am sincere. TW doesn't address this possibility at all. (A believing rule works for a lot of the key cases TW cites. I haven't checked any it doesn't work on, but I also haven't checked all.)

--There's no example I can see where the knowledge rule gives an answer the tracking rule wouldn't also give. Tracking doesn't imply truth, as knowledge does. So there is a difference. Why should we go with knowledge rather than tracking? Tracking would give a beefed-up, non-accidental version of a believing rule. (See previous.)

--The intuitions in this chapter seem particularly slippery to me. His treatment of them misses a lot of possible interpretations of our disapproval that don't have to do with the knowledge rule. I shared some of his intuitions, sort of, if I strained and ignored other possible interpretations, but then came to p = "G.E. Moore was a serial murderer," and said: I cannot see why this isn't a proper assertion. This despite the fact that the person asserting doesn't know, doesn't track, doesn't have a rational belief. (Of course, TW is using this sentence in a different way, as part of "I know that G.E. Moore was a serial killer" to defeat the BK rule, but p also fails the knowledge rule (and the tracking rule, and a rationality rule), and I can't see why it breaks a norm of assertion. (See the first point above.) You were irrational in *believing* p, but asserting what you believed was surely perfectly proper.