Commitment Accounts of Assertion

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Abstract. According to commitment accounts of assertion, asserting is committing oneself to something's being the case, where such commitment is understood in terms of norms governing a social practice. Sections 1 and 2 of this chapter elaborate and compare two types of commitment account, *liability accounts* (associated with C. S. Peirce) and *dialectical norm accounts* (associated with Robert Brandom), concluding that the latter are more defensible. Section 3 argues that both types possess an advantage over rival normative accounts of assertion in that they needn't presuppose any notion of an assertion's correctness. Section 4 shows how dialectical norm accounts can explain relations between assertion and truth. Section 5 sets forth objections that have been raised against commitment accounts, and argues that responses are available on behalf of dialectical norm accounts. Section 6 proposes that a liberalized dialectical norm account can illuminate phenomena sometimes seen as supporting truth relativism.

The entry on "assertion" in Ritter (1971), an encyclopedic dictionary of philosophical concepts, describes two philosophical usages of "assert." In its traditional usage, the authors observe, "assert" was closely tied to "judge." By contrast, they claim, the contemporary usage can be regimented thus:

> Whoever *asserts* a sentence guarantees [*verbürgt sich für*] its truth, i.e. undertakes [*macht sich anheischig*] to be able, in every case, to defend it vis-à-vis interlocutors who are well-informed and willing to engage in argument. (Ritter 1971, 816; my translation)

This sentence combines central claims of both versions of what are now known, following MacFarlane (2011), as "commitment accounts" of the speech act of asserting.

(a) By asserting, one takes responsibility as guarantor for the truth of the asserted proposition, assuming liability in the event that it's revealed to be untrue.

(b) By asserting, one obligates oneself to respond in certain ways to appropriate challenges from fellow participants in reasoned discourse.

According to what I'll call *liability accounts* of assertion, (a) states constitutively necessary and sufficient conditions for asserting. According to what I'll call *dialectical norm accounts*, a statement of constitutively necessary and sufficient conditions will include (b) as a central component. Liability accounts originate with C.S. Peirce; the most important dialectical norm account is due to Robert Brandom (1983a). An independent origin of the commitment approach can also be found in the "Erlangen School" represented by the above entry. Unlike its authors,

though, most proponents of commitment accounts don't equate (a) with (b).[1]

Liability accounts and dialectical norm accounts amount to different ways of understanding asserting as *committing oneself to something's being the case*. In both cases, such commitment is understood in terms of norms governing a social practice, rather than as a mental state, attitude, or practical disposition (Kibble 2006, 183). On these views, furthermore, the normativity of asserting isn't just a matter of its being essentially subject to assessment according to a practice's norms. Crucial to commitment accounts is that asserting brings about normative statuses that *remain in effect* unless the assertion is withdrawn.[2]

In this chapter, I'll present what I see as the most defensible formulations of each of these two types of commitment account, evaluate considerations for and against them, and suggest an application for a liberalized dialectical norm account. At several points, I'll compare commitment accounts with the most prominent rival way of explaining asserting as normatively constituted. This is a *correctness rule account*, according to which asserting is the speech act constituted by a rule to the effect that the act is correct only if a specified condition obtains.[3] (The condition varies widely: to cite two examples, it might be that the asserted proposition is true or that the asserter knows it to be true. See e.g. Pagin 2016, 179-81.) However, there won't be space to consider general reasons for or against the view that assertion is normatively constituted.[4] Nor can I address the roles commitment accounts play in large-scale conceptions of language and thought, such as Peirce's pragmatism and Brandom's inferentialism.[5]

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 1 introduces liability accounts and raises a

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[1] In the background of the entry's equation of (a) with (b) is the doctrine that a claim is *true* just in case there exists a "defense *strategy*" for it (Ritter 1971). The authors cite the chapter on truth in Kamlah and Lorenzen (1967, ch. 4), though the exposition of Lorenzen's "dialogical" logic (chs. 5 and 7) is more relevant. Elsewhere, Lorenzen writes: "To assert a statement is to undertake [*sich anheischig zu machen*] to defend it against one's dialogue partner" (Lorenzen 1968/1987, 37/13, my translation). Lorenzen's claim is endorsed in a 1968 lecture by Kambartel (1976, 102-4), a collaborator on Ritter (1971), and a formulation resembling the entry's appears in a 1971 article by Kambartel (1976, 124-6). Marion (2009) cites subsequent work by Kambartel to show affinities between Brandom's commitment account and Lorenzen's Erlangen School. There are also resemblances between commitment accounts of assertion and Austin's discussion of *promises* and *knowledge avowals* ([1946] 1979, 98-100; see Watson 2004, 73n7).

[2] According to Sbisà (2013, 32-3), Austin regards it as characteristic of his category of "illocutionary acts" more generally that they make normative statuses "tak[e] effect" (Austin [1962] 1975, 117).

[3] MacFarlane (2011, 91) notes that the approaches "could be combined." He mentions Alston (2000), but here assertional commitment is *analyzed* in terms of a correctness rule. A clearer case is Green (2017).

[4] See the chapter in this volume by Simion and Kelp. Pagin (2016) and Johnson (2018) offer broad critiques of the view that assertion is normatively constituted.

[5] On Peirce, see Boyd and Heney (2017). On Brandom, see MacFarlane (2010).

challenge for them. With this challenge as motivation, Section 2 turns to dialectical norm accounts. Section 3 examines the distinction between commitment and correctness rule accounts, clarifying the normative notions they employ. Section 4 shows how the dialectical norm version of the commitment approach can explain two connections between assertion and truth. Section 5 distinguishes and responds to various objections against commitment accounts. Section 6 proposes that phenomena sometimes seen as supporting truth relativism can be illuminated instead by modifying Brandom's dialectical norm account.

1. Liability accounts

An analysis of asserting as committing oneself to something's being the case can be drawn from many remarks by Peirce (Watson 2004; Rescorla 2009; MacFarlane 2011; Marsili 2014; Boyd 2016). Noting in a 1902 fragment that a "proposition may be stated without being asserted," Peirce explains what's special about *asserting* a proposition: "I may state it to you: and assume a responsibility for it: in which case I assert it" (1976, 4:39).[6] He elaborates in a 1903 lecture:

> Now it is a fairly easy problem to analyze the nature of assertion. To find an easily dissected example, we shall naturally take a case where the assertive element is magnified— a very formal assertion, such as an affidavit. Here a man goes before a notary or magistrate and takes such action that if what he says is not true, evil consequences will be visited upon him …. (1931-58, 5.30)

One who signs an affidavit to the effect that *p* assumes responsibility for its being the case that *p* in the sense that they're *liable* to sanctions should it turn out not to be the case that *p*, barring what Peirce elsewhere calls a "sufficient excuse."[7] (Henceforth, I suppress that qualification.) According to Peirce, it's the same in every case of asserting. The "essence" of assertion "is that one voluntarily puts oneself into a situation in which penalties will be incurred unless some proposition is true" (1931-58, 8.313 [1905]; also 8.337).

As a first pass, we can formulate Peirce's attempt to "analyze the nature of assertion" thus:

(L) To assert that *p* is to say that *p* in such a way as to intentionally make oneself liable to adverse consequences should it turn out not to be the case that *p*.

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[6] In a nearly contemporaneous article, Frege too associates the "asserting force" of an uttered sentence with the speaker's being "responsible for the truth" of what's stated (1903/1960, 371/12, quoted in Section 6 below).

[7] An assertion renders the asserter "liable … in case it should not be true, unless he has a definite and sufficient excuse" (1931-58, 2.315 [1903]). According to Peirce, that is, one found to have asserted falsely is *accountable*: an accounting can be demanded, and if it isn't exculpatory or at least excusing, they're liable to sanctions.

Except in affidavit-like cases, the stakes aren't codified, but the "forfeit [is] no smaller for being unnamed" (1931-58, 5.543 [1902]). Elsewhere Peirce describes it as damage to "the esteem in which the utterer was held" (5.546 [1908]). Specifically, "if what is asserted is not true, the assertor forfeits in a measure his reputation for veracity" (1903, 5). Peirce thus prefigures Green's (2009, 152-7) claim that asserting is a way to stake one's "credibility" on the status of a proposition. Green doesn't take this status to be *truth*, but rather the speaker's believing the proposition with justification (perhaps justification sufficient for knowledge). Here I needn't address which version is preferable.

Peirce's appeal to *taking responsibility* for the truth of a proposition is echoed in Searle's (1969) statement of the "essential rule" constitutive of asserting (Brock 1981). What makes an utterance an assertion, Searle says, is that it "counts as an undertaking to the effect that [the expressed proposition] represents an actual state of affairs" (Searle 1969, 66). That is to say, the speaker "commits himself to the truth of the expressed proposition" (1979, 62). Subsequently, Searle glosses such undertaking/commitment by saying that the asserter "takes responsibility for" the proposition's truth (2001, 173, 176) and "can be held publicly responsible if it turns out to be false" (2010, 82). But characterizations of asserting as taking responsibility needn't explicate this in terms of *liability*. Alston (2000, 60-3) explains "taking responsibility" for truth as subjecting one's utterance to a rule according to which it's "incorrect" or "out of order" *qua* assertion unless the expressed proposition is true. Similarly, when Williamson (1996, 522) says that "to make an assertion is to confer (on oneself) a responsibility for the truth of its content," he argues that one does this by performing a speech act constitutively subject to a rule according to which it isn't "correct" (1996, 492-3) unless one *knows* the truth of the expressed proposition. By contrast, Peirce doesn't invoke correctness rules; his is a liability account.[8]

Three observations may prevent misunderstanding of Peirce's approach. First, assuming responsibility for something's being the case needn't involve assuming responsibility to *do anything* if things turn out otherwise (Carson 2006, 294; Rescorla 2009, 115), except perhaps to "accept responsibility" by acknowledging one's liability (cf. MacFarlane 2005, 335).[9] Admittedly, I might assume responsibility by declaring that *I'll eat my hat* (do something

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[8] As I use the word here, the *liability* one incurs in doing something is always a matter of one's being properly subject to undergoing something undesirable in consequence. Green (2017; this volume) uses the word in a different sense: he describes asserting as an act that "makes one liable to be correct or incorrect."

[9] Taking responsibility *as asserter* for something's being the case must be distinguished from taking responsibility for *making* (or having made) it the case (Alston 2000, 54).

arduous) if it's not snowing. But if I believe in damnation, I might instead try to do so by declaring that *I'll be damned* (suffer something onerous) if it's not snowing. Second, while Peirce anticipates subsequent theorists in likening asserting to *guaranteeing* (1931-58, 5.543), the analogy shouldn't be exaggerated.[10] An actual guarantee involves "commitment to respond in compensatory ways in case the 'product' is not as advertised" (Watson 2004, 66). By contrast, the forfeit Peirce thinks is risked in asserting needn't involve compensating those who accept the asserter's word. Third, (L) isn't ultimately Peirce's view. While he holds that intentionally incurring liability in case a stated proposition is untrue is a *necessary* condition for asserting, he doesn't think it sufficient (Boyd 2016). If A agrees to a wager with B that some proposition is true, A assumes liability in case it's untrue. Yet Peirce distinguishes accepting a wager from asserting. His ground is that in the case of the wagering A's intention is to get B to take responsibility for the proposition's *falsity* (1931-58, 5.31). Peirce appears to hold that asserting, by contrast, requires an intention to provide others a reason to believe the proposition.[11] This component of his view might also help him distinguish asserting from other speech acts for which (L) plausibly holds, such as conjecturing or (in the right circumstances) even guessing.

The requirement that the asserter *intend to furnish potential hearers a reason for believing* a proposition distinguishes Peirce's commitment account from subsequent ones, which have been offered as alternatives to accounts in terms of communicative intentions (Marsili 2014, 114-5). However, liability accounts needn't invoke such intentions in order to distinguish asserting from other kinds of taking responsibility for a proposition's truth. Rather, they can follow Peirce's motivating example of an affidavit. A performance's status as an affidavit depends on an institution, whose existence is explained by the way agents assume responsibility by participating in it. Likewise, one might say being an assertion is a matter of being an instance of

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[10] Those who explain asserting in terms of guaranteeing include Ritter (1971), Tugendhat (1976/1982, 254-62/208-14), Watson (2004), and Carson (2006). However, Tugendhat rejects a construal of guaranteeing in terms of liability, construing it instead in terms of the rules of a "verification game." Others invoke guaranteeing to explain the narrower class of *tellings* (Ross 1986; Moran 2006).

[11] "[E]very assertion involves an effort to make the intended interpreter believe what is asserted, to which end a reason for believing it must be furnished. But if a lie would not … be apt to entail such real effects as he would avoid, the interpreter would have no reason to believe the assertion…." (1931-58, 5.546 [1908]). It's not obvious what Peirce takes the provided reason to be. Around 1895-6, he writes that an assertion "consists in the furnishing of evidence … that the speaker believes something" (1931-58, 2.335). However, he later claims that one who swears an affidavit does so "with a view to thus causing other men to be affected just as they would if the proposition sworn to had presented itself to them as a perceptual fact" (1931-58, 5.31 [1903]).

a certain *socially recognized speech-act kind*, one whose function is to facilitate communication of true claims by allowing speakers to assume liability for what they say. One could then argue that wagers aren't instances of any speech-act kind fitting this description. Notice, however, that to say that assertion is a social institution isn't to say that it's conventionally determined which performances count as assertions. That might still be a matter of the speaker's intention, namely their overtly expressed intention to perform an act of the relevant kind (Green 2013, 399-405).

Liability accounts promise to explain three key *explananda* for any theory of assertion. These are why an assertion that *p* generally expresses belief on the speaker's part that *p*, why it can warrant a hearer in believing that *p*, and why it can be retracted (MacFarlane 2011; Goldberg 2015). In the first two cases, the details will depend on one's theories of expression and warrant, but the main idea is fairly straightforward. Generally speaking, if someone didn't believe that *p*, and moreover believe so for good reason, they wouldn't subject themselves to adverse consequences in the event it's not the case that *p* (Green 2009, 157).[12] A retraction can be understood as an act with the effect that one is no longer conditionally liable. Until one retracts the assertion, one may remain conditionally liable even if one has already suffered a penalty for having asserted falsely.

Despite these virtues, liability accounts face a basic objection. It's widely held that asserters are obliged to justify their assertions when appropriately challenged. (In Section 5, we'll consider whether this rule has exceptions.) Expositions of Peirce's account sometimes assume that he takes it to imply such obligation: "by taking responsibility for the truth of a proposition one undertakes a commitment to provide reason to believe the proposition one is asserting" (Boyd 2016, 23; also Marsili 2014, 115). And others have agreed that "[w]arranting the truth of what one says entails an obligation to justify that assertion if challenged" (Leland 2015, 551). Watson (2004, 66-70) argues that the responsibility to "'make good' on your claim, if you are relevantly challenged" is a "secondary commitment" deriving from the "primary commitment" undertaken in an assertion. Here it's immaterial that Watson explains this primary commitment as responsibility for the *defensibility* of the asserted proposition, not its truth.

However, it's not clear why guaranteeing a proposition's truth (alternatively, its defensibility), or performing an instance of some speech-act type whose function involves such guaranteeing, would involve assuming responsibility to provide reasons. Say that as a result of

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[12] Here I'm noncommittal about *how* this general claim figures into a hearer's warrant for believing that *p* (for example, whether knowledge of the claim plays a role in the warrant).

detective work, I declare "I'll eat my hat if it turns out Smith isn't guilty" (alternatively, "if it turns out to be indefensible to claim that Smith is guilty"). Someone challenges me with a purported proof of Smith's innocence. To avoid having to eat my hat, I must explain why I don't view the evidence as exonerating; I'm obliged to justify myself in the sense of *neutralizing* my interlocutor's challenge. Yet say my interlocutor instead demands that I give reasons pointing to Smith's guilt. It's not clear I'm under any obligation to produce such reasons, or even that I lose credibility by replying "Just wait and you'll see." And if I'm under obligation to produce reasons, it may be because my conditional commitment to eat my hat either counts as one way of *asserting* that Smith is guilty, or at least conveys my readiness to assert that proposition, and the speech act of assertion can be explained in some independent way that accounts for the obligation to provide reasons. Such an explanation is offered by dialectical norm accounts.[13]

2. Dialectical norm accounts

Dialectical norm accounts explain the speech act of asserting in terms of its role in the "game of giving and asking for reasons" that its proponents regard as essential to linguistic practice (Brandom 1983b, 403-5; 1994, 141). This role concerns how asserters are obliged to respond to challenges, and how assertions can be used to meet such obligations. Introduced by philosophers of the Erlangen School (see note 1) and independently by Brandom (1983a; 1983b, 401-3; 1994, 170-5), the dialectical norm approach is endorsed by MacFarlane (2005; 2007), Rescorla (2007; 2009), and Kukla and Lance (2009).[14] Also of relevance is the extensive history of theorizing about assertion's role in various types of regimented disputation and dialogue.[15] Here, I'll focus on the general type of account I find most defensible and illuminating, that of Brandom.

According to Brandom, what's constitutive of asserting is that it's an act by which "one not

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[13] Perhaps assuming liability in the event that *I prove unable to defend a proposition's truth when challenged* does make me responsible for defending it when challenged. (Recall Ritter 1971 on undertaking "to be able … to defend" a claim.) For our purposes, we may treat a liability account of this form as a dialectical norm account.

[14] I adapt the label "dialectical" from Rescorla (2009), whose "dialectical model" characterizes assertion by its "role in reasoned discourse." While opposing any analysis of asserting, Price (1988, 145; 2003, 181) too stresses asserting's normative role in "reasoned argument." Aspects of the dialectical norm approach are endorsed by Green (2009; 2013; 2017; this volume) and McKinnon (2015, 12, 28, 62). Brandom (1983b) claims that his account explicates "Heidegger's notion of assertion."

[15] See Kibble (2006) and Rescorla (2007). As Walton and Krabbe (1995) recount, the topic traces to medieval treatments of "*obligatio* disputation" (Hamblin 1970, 126-34; Dutilh Novaes 2011) and was revived in Lorenzen's "dialogical logic" ([1960] 1978) and in "argumentation theory" and "formal dialectic" following Toulmin ([1958] 2003) and Hamblin (1970). Notions of commitment figure prominently in these traditions.

only licenses further assertions on the part of others, but commits oneself to justifying the original claim" when challenged (Brandom 1983a: 641; 1994, 171-2). Each of these two clauses specifies an aspect of assertion's dialectical role: the "dimension of authority" and the "dimension of responsibility" (1983a, 643; 1994, 170-5). They are "coordinate" dimensions, neither of which can be understood independently (1994, 179, 238).[16] The *committing oneself* involved in asserting is a matter of both dimensions: in the parallel case of promising, Brandom speaks of "both authority and responsibility, adding up to commitment" (1994, 165). As his inclusion of licensing or authorizing as a component of assertional commitment shows, he doesn't straightforwardly equate asserting with committing oneself to *do* anything (see MacFarlane 2010).

We can formulate a generic dialectical norm account as follows, where (i) captures the responsibility and (ii) the authority involved in asserting.[17]

(DN) Asserting is the speech-act type constitutively characterized by its playing the following role: a speaker S who asserts that *p* says that *p* in such a way as to make it the case, for as long as S doesn't retract her assertion, that

(i) S is obliged to respond to appropriate challenges by either citing some warrant in support of the truth of the proposition that *p*, neutralizing the challenge, or retracting her assertion, and

(ii) in the absence of defeating conditions, one way a hearer H may meet his obligation to respond to an appropriate challenge to his own asserting that *p* is to claim, as his warrant for the truth of the proposition, that S asserted that *p*, thereby deferring justificatory responsibility to S.

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[16] Though Brandom comes to identify authority and responsibility as two "aspect[s] of endorsement" (1994, 170), he initially describes them instead as the "dimension of endorsement" and "dimension of commitment" (1983a, 640-1). He also says his "account of assertion is largely a footnote to Sellars's seminal discussion of the dimension of endorsement" (1983a, 649n14). In view of the reference he provides (to Sellars [1956] 1963, §§12-20), he may have in mind Sellars's claim that when we assert "Jones sees that *p*," we "endorse" a so-to-speak "assertion" made by Jones's *visual experience* (§16). If so, I find little relevance to Brandom's account of assertional authority and responsibility. While we can defer justificatory responsibility to Jones by saying "Jones asserted that *p*," we can't do so by saying "Jones sees that *p*." Rescorla (2009, 98) attributes the "dialectical model of assertion" to "Sellars and Brandom." The attribution to Sellars seems unwarranted. In an early paper, Sellars speaks of "*asserting*" as a "concept of which we have offered no analysis" (1953: 330-1), and I'm unaware of subsequent attempts by Sellars to explain what asserting is. Moreover, when speaking of rules governing assertion, Sellars consistently abstracts from the "Austinian" phenomena of "statings, avowals, giving arguments, tellings that, tellings to, and the like," which provide for language's "role as social glue" (1967, 157, 112n1).

[17] Condition (i) resembles, in part, the "Default-Challenge Norm" of Rescorla (2009, 103-4).

Here the "hearer" needn't be someone addressed by the speaker but may be anyone who learns that the speaker performed the speech act she did.

As Brandom fills in (DN), an appropriate challenge takes the form of "an incompatible assertion with an equal, prima facie claim to entitlement" (1994, 238). There are three ways obligation (i) can be met by citing warrant (1994, 174, 227, 532). One can *inferentially justify* the proposition by asserting other propositions from which it follows and which one is entitled to assert. One can invoke one's *observational authority*. Or one can *defer* to another speaker, as summarized in (ii). A fourth way to meet obligation (i) is to *neutralize* the challenge by showing that the challenger *lacks* entitlement for her incompatible assertion. But Brandom doesn't hold that neutralizing the challenge is required: speakers aren't in general required to *rebut* challenges to their assertions on pain of having to retract, as they are in some kinds of regimented disputation.[18] Conditions that would defeat H's deferral to an assertion by S include S's *lacking entitlement* to her assertion, where this may be in virtue of her having failed to respond to an appropriate challenge (1983a, 642; 1994, 178, 193). Another defeating condition will be important below: this is H's having himself asserted, and not since retracted, an *incompatible* proposition (1994, 192).

There's room for alternative ways of filling in (DN). For one thing, challenges might take more forms than Brandom recognizes. Rescorla (2009, 103) favors an account on which *any* request to justify an assertion is an appropriate challenge. Furthermore, one might recognize "Socratic" challenges, consisting of showing that the proposition S has asserted is incompatible with others S has asserted or goes on to assert, or concede, when queried. In this case, one way to neutralize the challenge would be to retract one or more of the other assertions or concessions. Finally, regardless what form a challenge takes, one way to neutralize it might be to show that the asserted proposition follows from premises the *challenger* asserts or concedes. I note here that *concessions*, which have figured prominently in formal regimentations of disputation and dialogue,[19] play no role in Brandom's own description of the game of giving and asking for reasons.

Dialectical norm accounts yield explanations of the three above-mentioned *explananda*. The explanation for how assertions normally express belief is like that in the case of liability accounts (again, details will depend on one's theory of expression). Generally speaking, if

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[18] Brandom thus doesn't endorse Rescorla's "Retraction Norm" (2009, 104).

[19] See Hamblin (1970, 271) and Walton and Krabbe (1995, 186), who write: "What one is committed to, in the case of a concession, is not to object to it."

someone didn't believe a proposition, they wouldn't place themselves in the position of being responsible for citing warrant in support of its truth (MacFarlane 2011, 94). That assertions can provide hearers with warrant for the truth of the asserted proposition is now built directly into the account of what asserting is, as stated by (DN). And (DN) also builds in the role of retraction as cancelling the assertion's normative effects.

It's important not to misunderstand Brandom's appeal to "committing oneself" in his account of assertion. A central notion in his philosophy of language and mind is that of an agent's *being committed to a proposition*. Yet his account of asserting doesn't presuppose that notion, one barely prefigured in Brandom (1983a). For Brandom, asserting a proposition isn't the only way one can acquire the status of being committed to that proposition. Rather, agents have unacknowledged "consequential commitments" to propositions that in fact follow, perhaps unbeknownst to them, from ones they have asserted (1994, 257, 507, 596). Commitment to a proposition is understood in terms of the role that possessing this "normative status" plays in the game of giving and asking for reasons: the moves that result in a player's acquiring the status, and the consequences of having it for the moves a player is permitted or required to make (MacFarlane 2010). That role isn't characterized by (DN). For one thing, unacknowledged consequential commitments needn't bring with them any obligation to respond to appropriate challenges.[20] Their theoretical role is different: they affect what propositions speakers are entitled to assert, since commitment to a proposition precludes entitlement to assert incompatible ones (Brandom 1994, 191-2). Such considerations extend well beyond Brandom's explanation of the act of asserting.

Earlier, we found that liability accounts have difficulty explaining dialectical obligations. Can dialectical norm accounts explain liability? It would seem so. If, in asserting a proposition, a speaker undertakes an obligation to respond to challenges, then failure to fulfil this obligation can be expected to have adverse consequences. Toulmin ([1958] 2003, 13) describes asserting as "staking our credit upon" a proposition in the sense that we "put ourselves at risk" if we can't meet a challenge of the form "What have you got to go on?" Similarly, Brandom (1994, 165) argues that in addition to the primary "responsibility to perform" by responding to challenges, the asserter undertakes a "second sort of responsibility," which "is a becoming liable to be held

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[20] There may be *simple* consequences such that whenever S has asserted the premises, S is obliged to respond to challenges to the conclusion, even if S hasn't asserted the conclusion (Hamblin 170, 264; Kibble 2006, 199; Walton and Krabbe 1995, 36-7), and such that H could defend an assertion of the conclusion by deferring to S. Not all cases of consequential commitment will be like this.

responsible (taken to be responsible) for failure to perform," in this case for one's failure to respond to the challenge to one's assertion.[21] The penalties might include loss of "testimonial authority" (Brandom 1994, 193, 532). In other words, past failure to meet one's dialectical obligations can count among the defeating conditions in (ii), preventing others from meeting their obligations by deferring to one. This might also happen simply in virtue of one's assertions turning out to have been *false* sufficiently often. Finally, just as dialectical norm accounts explain the liability incurred by asserters, they explain why *retraction* needn't come without normative residue. A pattern of making assertions lightly, only to retract them whenever challenged, may lead to loss of testimonial authority.[22]

3. Commitment accounts and correctness

Liability and dialectical norm accounts are different ways of understanding assertion in terms of a normative assessment of speakers. These accounts share a feature that may give them an advantage over a third kind of normative account, an account in terms of correctness rules.

The feature I have in mind lies in the vicinity of distinctions by MacFarlane and Rescorla. According to MacFarlane (2011, 91), correctness rule accounts appeal to "'upstream' norms," whereas commitment accounts appeal to "'downstream' norms." Upstream norms specify the normative bearing on an assertion of the circumstances in which it's made. Downstream norms specify the normative bearing of an assertion on the resulting circumstances. This contrast is less clear than it might seem, however. According to (i) of (DN), an assertion's "downstream" normative consequences include the obligation to respond to challenges. Yet (ii) singles out something "upstream" of the assertion as affecting the permissible responses, namely previous assertions the speaker is aware of. Moreover, accounts that invoke a correctness rule may additionally recognize "downstream" obligations to retract assertions.[23] Nor is it unproblematic to say, as Rescorla (2009, 99-100) does, that commitment accounts appeal only to norms that concern *defending or retracting* assertions, whereas correctness rule accounts also appeal to

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[21] Here he's discussing *promising*, but since he does so as a model for asserting, the point should carry over.

[22] Brandom thus doesn't face the "problem of retraction" afflicting some argumentation theorists, concerning how retraction can be permissible without being cost-free (Walton and Krabbe 1995, 9-12).

[23] Admittedly, such obligations may perhaps be derived from the correctness rule, as MacFarlane suggests (2011, 88). The simplest principle would hold that retraction is required if the correctness rule would presently forbid assertion of the asserted proposition. MacFarlane himself would reject this principle, since he wants to leave room for time-neutral propositions such as the proposition *that it's raining in Berkeley*.

norms that concern *making* assertions.[24] Here the problem is that one way to defend an assertion is to make other assertions.

The most telling contrast seems a different one. It concerns the *kind of deontic characterization* given by each type of account. Correctness rule accounts evaluate an assertion in terms of whether it's *categorically permissible*. (Of course, what's at issue is whether it's categorically permissible *qua assertion*—this could be so even if it were categorically *morally* impermissible.) For instance, according to Williamson (1996, 492-3) a categorically "correct" assertion is one that doesn't violate the prohibition against asserting what one doesn't know. By contrast, on dialectical norm accounts an assertion can only be evaluated for whether it's permissible *as a way to discharge a specific justificatory responsibility*. And on liability accounts, it can only be evaluated for whether it's permissible *with a view to avoiding a certain liability*. To be sure, here too the contrast may be questioned. Rescorla claims that Brandom's version of a dialectical norm account includes a "Warrant Norm" specifying conditions under which a performance is *correct qua assertion*: "One should only assert propositions that one believes with 'sufficient' warrant" (2009, 99).[25] But this is the wrong way to understand the role of "entitlement" in Brandom's account of assertion. Brandom doesn't explain asserting in terms of a norm stating that one should only assert propositions for which one has sufficient warrant. Rather, he explains how the warrant S has for a proposition makes a difference to the warrant H can gain by deferral to S's assertion.[26]

Commitment accounts should thus be attractive to those who doubt that an account of assertion can presuppose a notion of categorical *correctness* that's applicable to an assertion *qua assertion*, and that's distinct from the notions we express by 'true', 'warranted', or 'knowledgeable' (or whichever other notion is used in stating the purported condition for assertoric correctness). In the next section, I'll show that (DN) *does* underwrite a notion of categorical correctness applicable to assertions as such. But as this notion depends on that account of assertion, it won't be a notion that can be used to give a rival account.

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[24] MacFarlane too elucidates "upstream" norms as "norms for *making* assertions" (2011, 91).

[25] On the dialectical norm account presented by Kukla and Lance, "assertions are properly performed if they are, or can be, doxastically justified" (2009, 14).

[26] Admittedly, Brandom does say that "making a claim one is not entitled to … is a kind of impropriety, the violation of a norm" (1994, 179). But his explicit aim here is to explain how *taking someone's assertion to be unwarranted* makes a "practical difference." The explanation is that one will decline to defer to the asserter. As we'll see, he thinks that attitude can be understood, on the basis of (DN) alone and thus without any additional Warrant Norm, as one's *taking there to be something amiss* with the assertion.

4. Dialectical norm accounts and truth

Dialectical norm accounts explain two ways assertion is widely held to be connected to *truth*. The first connection has been taken to support correctness rule accounts that invoke a truth or knowledge requirement, but the second connection remains a challenge for those approaches.

4.1 Truth as a norm

The commitment accounts formulated in Sections 1-2 don't presuppose any sense of 'correct' that applies to assertions *qua* assertions. It may therefore be objected that we *do* criticize assertions we take to be false, and not just for violating norms of etiquette or morality.[27] Fortunately, a dialectical norm account of form (DN) yields a sense of 'correct' that underwrites the following claim:

 (C) In taking someone to have asserted falsely, one takes them to have asserted incorrectly.
How can a dialectical norm account support (C)?[28] When we take someone to have asserted a false proposition, we're prepared to assert that proposition's negation. (Here I'm assuming a context in which only considerations relevant to "giving and asking for reasons" are in play.) This means that all we need to do in order to understand why (C) holds is explain why, as Price (2003, 176) observes, "we are prepared to make the judgment that a speaker is *incorrect* … simply on the basis that we are prepared to make a contrary assertion," even in cases where the speaker can't also be criticized on other grounds (such as insincerity or lack of warrant). I'll now argue that we can account for Price's observation in terms of clause (ii) of (DN), according to which the assertion, in the absence of defeating conditions, entitles the hearer to assert the same proposition on the asserter's authority. As the phrase "defeating conditions" indicates, (DN) involves a view of assertional practice on which cases of actual transmission of entitlement to a hearer are the *non-defective* cases of assertoric communication. In defective cases, the fault may be either with the asserter or the hearer. But *something has gone wrong*: the interaction hasn't proceeded as it's supposed to, in accordance with the function of asserting.

 Now suppose H holds that in asserting that *p*, S asserted a false proposition, one whose negation H is thus prepared to assert. Then H will implicitly treat his preparedness to assert that not-*p* as among the *defeating conditions* that "void the … communicative authority" (Brandom

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[27] Marsili (2014, 117-8). For skepticism about this claim, see Rescorla (2009, 123-5).
[28] The following discussion expands on that in Shapiro (2004, 158-9; 2014, 153-4).

1994, 178) claimed by S vis-à-vis H. For asserting that not-*p* would preclude H from vindicating his entitlement to the claim that *p* by deferral to S. H will thus take S's interaction with H to be one of the *defective* cases just discussed. Again, this isn't yet to fault the assertion, since the *hearer* may be responsible for the failure of communicative authority. Still, when H, prepared as he is to assert that not-*p,* takes S's assertion that *p* to lack its claimed communicative authority vis-à-vis himself, that *does* count as a criticism by him of S's assertion. After all, H isn't criticizing his own preparedness to assert that not-*p*. Of course, rather than take S to have asserted falsely, H may instead come to accept that *p* on S's authority. The point is only that while H takes S to have asserted falsely, he attributes a normative failing to S's speech act.

A Brandomian dialectical norm account thus vindicates (C). However, even if one's taking someone to have asserted falsely involves one's taking them to have performed incorrectly, that doesn't imply that one takes it that *all false assertions are incorrect*. (Compare: even if your taking a proposition to be true involves your taking it that you believe that proposition, this won't imply that you take it that all truths are believed by you.) In the sense of "correct" we've been discussing, someone may have asserted falsely yet entirely correctly: their assertion may not be to blame for any defective communicative interaction. Indeed, their assertion may carry communicative authority vis-à-vis everyone who ever learns of it. It's just that one can no longer take someone to be in that situation when one takes them to have asserted falsely.

4.2 Presenting as true

The second connection between assertion and truth is sometimes attributed to Frege, who appears to elucidate "asserting force [*behauptende Kraft*]" as follows:

(PT) One who asserts a proposition presents it (or puts it forward) as true.[29]

Citing Frege, Bar-On and Simmons (2007, 83) endorse (PT) and comment on its significance: "presenting as true is a special kind of presenting. And our use of 'true' … indicates what it is that is distinctive about this kind of presenting." Yet they don't explain how the use of 'true' in these locutions serves to indicate the nature of the presenting. And doing so isn't easy. For example, one natural strategy would be to elucidate the special kind of presenting in terms of a special kind of *uptake* of what's presented. This might involve the schema

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[29] Frege contrasts "expressing a thought" with "presenting it as true [*als wahr hinstellen*]," which we do when we "make an assertion" (e.g. 1979, 198, 177, 233). Watson (2004, 58), Green (2017, note 5), and Rudy Hiller (2016, 31-2) criticize (PT) as an elucidation of assertion on grounds that even *conjecturing* is presenting as true. I'll suggest a construal of "presenting as true" on which this is false (cf. Alston 2000, 72n).

(PT$_u$) A hearer who takes someone to assert that p takes them to perform a speech act that's correct only if the proposition that p is true.

However, in each instance of (PT$_u$) "true" is eliminable: "the proposition that p is true" is replaceable by "p." On this elucidation of asserting in terms of presenting as true, then, "true" would figure only in its familiar expressive role of making it possible to replace the schema (PT$_u$) with a generalization over its instances. We would abandon the claim, which Bar-On and Simmons regard as a Fregean insight, that truth talk is required in order to state an important fact about what one does when one asserts that p. As I'll now argue, a dialectical norm account can do justice to this claim.

According to dialectical norm accounts, when S asserts that p, she licenses H to do so *on S's authority*. That is to say, S makes available deferral to S as a way for H to defend his own assertion that p. On being challenged, H might express this deferral by responding "S asserted that p." The key point is now this: a necessary condition for H's response to count as deferral is that H represents S as having asserted a true proposition. The attempted deferral would be cancelled were H to add "but she wasn't speaking the truth." In issuing the *deferral license*, then, S expresses the proposition that p, and licenses H to represent her as having in doing so expressed a true proposition. In that sense, S puts the proposition that p forward as true.

(PT$_{dl}$) One who asserts that p expresses the proposition that p and licenses any hearer to represent them as having thereby expressed a true proposition.

The use of "true" in an instance of (PT$_{dl}$) isn't eliminable.[30]

5. Objections to commitment accounts

Critics of commitment accounts typically deny that they are "extensionally adequate" (Pagin 2004, 837). The charge has been that the account is "too narrow" in that it's possible to assert without committing oneself in the relevant way, or that it's "too wide" in that it's possible to commit oneself in the relevant way without asserting. (Of course, both charges might be justified.) The bulk of this section is devoted to such objections. First, though, I consider one that doesn't challenge extensional accuracy.

Goldberg (2015, 19) argues that commitment accounts are *explanatorily inferior* to constitutive rule accounts. That's because "the rule-based account can provide the mechanisms

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[30] I don't, however, wish to claim that the function of "true" in an instance of (PT$_{dl}$) goes beyond the generalizing function stressed by the "conceptual deflationism" Bar-On and Simmons are criticizing.

by which one commits [to a proposition's truth] … thereby enabling us to *derive* the core features that the commitment view would ascribe to assertion." In other words, the normative role that (DN) makes constitutive of assertion can be explained in terms of a correctness rule. However, proponents of commitment accounts may question the possibility of such an explanation, since it depends on the intelligibility of a notion of a *correct assertion* other than the one we've found to be explicable using a dialectical norm account. Nor it is clear why the derivation of dialectical norms promised by Goldberg would yield a more explanatory account of assertion. As regards the need to explain the mechanisms by which a linguistic practice incorporates the respective normative features, dialectical norms and correctness rules appear on a par.

5.1 Too narrow?

Narrowness objections hold that it's possible to assert that something is the case without, in the relevant sense, committing oneself to its being the case. As directed against a simple liability account, substantiating the objection *by counterexample* would require showing that someone can turn out to have asserted falsely without becoming liable to adverse consequences. That isn't straightforward. A person may be liable to sanctions even in the presence of considerations that speak against sanctioning, or when they can't be sanctioned (e.g. when the asserter's identity remains unknown to those who discover the asserted claim's falsity). And finding a counterexample will be more difficult if the account merely requires that an assertion be an instance of a *speech-act type* whose function involves assuming the liability at issue. The plausibility of the claim that a liability account extends widely enough will thus rest on the account's explanatory virtues.

It may seem easier to direct a narrowness objection against dialectical norm accounts. Here we have an explanation for why, despite their virtues, they may be too narrow. The explanation is that they may be the result of "over-generalizing from seminar-room assertions to assertions in general" (MacFarlane 2005, 334-5; cf. Rescorla 2009, 104). Dialectical norm accounts may illuminate specialized "games of giving and asking for reason," but perhaps not *assertion*. One kind of narrowness objection holds that an asserter may *disavow* the responsibility to address a challenge. This is a natural construal of the difficulty MacFarlane goes on to raise.

> Suppose someone were to say: "You've given some very good reasons to doubt the truth of what I asserted. I have nothing to say in answer to your objections, yet I continue to stand by my claim."… [W]ould we cease treating her as an asserter at all? (MacFarlane 2005, 335)

Indeed, we wouldn't. But why *can't* the dialectical norm theorist regard such a speaker as having made an assertion? Brandom seems to have just this possibility in mind when he discusses "bare assertions": cases in which the asserter *undertakes* a commitment yet "disavows" the responsibility involved, because they aren't "prepared to shoulder the justificatory burden" (1994, 228-9; 1983a, 643). He explains that assertional practice requires that asserters don't *in general* disavow the justificatory responsibility they undertake, since in that case the communicative authority of assertions would be unintelligible. (This is because such authority is a matter of putting propositions forward as ways for hearers to fulfill their justificatory responsibility.) But assertional practice is compatible with there being cases of "bare assertion."

The response just given assumes it's *possible* to undertake justificatory responsibility while at the same time disavowing such responsibility. Rudy Hiller (2016, 38-46) argues that this isn't possible, whence appealing to "bare assertion" won't help. He imagines a speaker who announces to a fellow employee

(1) Sorry, I won't say more, but there is a downsizing coming in a couple of weeks.

thereby disavowing justificatory responsibility. He compares this to

(2) I promise to φ, but my φing depends on whether I feel like φ-ing when the time comes.

In (2), the second clause cancels what would otherwise have been a speech act of promising. So why doesn't "Sorry, I won't say more" in (1) cancel what would have been an act of undertaking justificatory commitment? In fact, it seems to me, the cases aren't parallel. It's plausible that "a necessary condition for an utterance to count as the issuing of a promise to φ is the speaker's presenting herself as intending to φ" (Rudy Hiller 2016, 44; also Searle 1969, 62). By contrast, dialectical norm accounts needn't hold that an asserter essentially *presents herself as* undertaking justificatory responsibility—as she would if she uttered "I undertake responsibility to respond to any appropriate challenge to the claim that *p*." Rather, she simply *undertakes* the responsibility.

A parallel narrowness objection may be raised based on an asserter who disavows communicative authority. Consider someone who says "I think one should never rely on anyone's say-so, but *p*." Advocates of (DN) should reply that disavowing assertional authority needn't cancel it, as retraction does. Rudy Hiller's own example, "Don't quote me, but *p*," may mislead, since it could be understood as introducing overriding *moral* considerations against deferring to the speaker. That also applies to a narrowness objection by McKinnon (2015, 30), involving cases where there's an "implicit understanding that the hearer should keep the speaker's confidence." Finally, while a disavowal of the form "I wouldn't put any stock in this claim if I were you, but *p*" needn't cancel the speech act's endorsing effect, what it reveals about

the asserter's perceived epistemic standing may count as a defeating condition in (ii) of (DN).

According to a second kind of narrowness objection, even a speaker who *doesn't* issue a disavowal may assert a proposition without triggering the dialectical consequences summarized in (i) and (ii) of (DN). Again, this would seem difficult to establish by counterexample. Any putative violation of (i) might be explained instead as a case where the challenge is inappropriate, or where moral, legal, or other reasons override the speaker's obligation as asserter to reply to the challenge. As for (ii), McKinnon (2015, 27-30) points to circumstances that may interfere with a hearer's "license to re-assert" on a speaker's authority, such as the length of an "testimonial chain" or the hearer's belief that the asserter is unreliable. But these factors can count among the defeating conditions mentioned in (ii).

5.2 Too wide?

Wideness objections hold that it's possible to commit oneself to something's being the case, in the sense used by the target account, without asserting that it's the case. In discussing Peirce's liability account, I responded to one form of wideness objection, involving wagering, but then raised my own such objection: it's unclear why assuming the relevant liability would typically involve assuming justificatory responsibility, as asserting seems to.

Johnson presses a radical form of wideness objection against dialectical norm accounts, arguing that even questions and commands meet their conditions for being an assertion.

> "What makes you ask?" is an appropriate challenge. When challenged, the questioner has the option to either give her reasons for asking or to *retract*. We … can be called to take back questions, and promises, and commands, and suppositions, as well as assertions. (Johnson 2018, 63; cf. Marsili 2014, 117)

However, this objection won't apply to accounts of form (DN). Let's first consider clause (i). Defending one's entitlement to ask a question, issue a command, promise to do something, or issue a supposition for the sake of argument never takes the form of citing warrant for the truth of something that's asked, commanded, promised, or supposed. These speech acts are excluded by clause (ii) as well, which additionally excludes conjectures. For example, it isn't part of the constitutive role of conjecturing that deferring to someone else's conjecture counts as a way of citing warrant for the truth of a proposition one has asserted or conjectured.

The most discussed wideness objection involves a special kind of speech act, an explicit performative. Pagin (2004) uses this objection to criticize both liability accounts and dialectical norm accounts. Here I'll consider how it applies to Brandomian accounts of form (DN). Pagin

asks us to consider a speaker S who utters the performative

(3) I hereby authorize you to claim … [that] *p* and I undertake the responsibility of justifying [the proposition that] *p*. (Pagin 2004, 840)

The objection consists of two contentions:

(A) By uttering (3), S doesn't assert that *p*.

(B) By uttering (3), S brings it about that conditions (i) and (ii) hold, when performative utterances of (3) are included in the class of assertings that *p*. In other words, S becomes obliged to respond to appropriate challenges, and a hearer H becomes entitled, barring defeating conditions, to defend his own asserting that *p* by deferring to S.

One reply, by MacFarlane (2011) and García-Carpintero (2013), is that the proponent of a Brandomian account should reject (A). Here I can't discuss whether there's independent reason to be skeptical of (A). A second reply concedes (A) and (B), but formulates the Brandomian account so as not to conflict with them. Thus we could add to (DN) the requirement that one who asserts that *p* does so by means of a sentential utterance expressing the proposition that *p* (Searle 1979; Alston 2000).[31] Rather than address whether this requirement is too demanding, as MacFarlane argues it is (2011, 81, 92), I'd like to point to a way of questioning (B) instead.

The idea is that while there may be circumstances in which (3) fails to be an assertion that *p*, these will always be circumstances in which (3) is a *failed attempt at a performative*. A speaker may fail to authorize a hearer to assert that *p* by uttering (3), even when they *would* be in a position to do this by asserting that *p*. Pagin dismisses this type of reply, when directed at the utterance "I hereby commit myself to the truth of [the claim that] *p*" (2004, 849). If committing oneself is only a matter of *assuming responsibility* to defend a proposition, that may indeed be something one can accomplish by declaring that one does so, in any circumstances in which one could succeed in asserting the proposition. But the *authorizing* at issue here, understood as providing hearers a way to meet their own responsibilities, doesn't appear to work like this.

Varying MacFarlane's (2011, 95) example involving a defense lawyer, imagine a spokesperson who undertakes, by signing a contract, to vindicate against all challenges the falsity of some rumor about their client. According to MacFarlane, the spokesperson hasn't thereby asserted that the rumor is false; MacFarlane suggests that what's missing is the Brandomian dimension of authority. Yet imagine that the contract signed by the spokesperson

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[31] In response to a "paratactic" version of (3) Pagin formulates to satisfy this requirement, we could further require that the effect doesn't depend on the utterance being a part of any more complex one (Pegan 2009).

instead reads as follows: "I hereby undertake to vindicate the falsity of the rumor. Furthermore, readers who wish to assert that the rumor is false are hereby licensed to meet their justificatory obligations by citing this contract." Arguably, including the second sentence won't entitle a reader of the contract to such deferral, even in circumstances where including "I hereby assert that the rumor is false" could do so.[32]

At issue is the core of Pagin's critique of commitment accounts of assertion, a distinction he draws between assertions and non-assertive speech acts, such as promises and commands. The latter kind of act, he says, "communicates its own social significance" (2004, 834). For instance, a command communicates that the hearer is under a certain obligation to the speaker. Moreover, Pagin seems to hold that such an act comes by its social significance in virtue of communicating that it has that significance. It should then follow that one can also perform the act by *explicitly describing* its social significance (2004, 857). The mistake he finds in commitment accounts is that they construe assertion on the same model. Again, his idea seems to be that on commitment accounts an assertion acquires its social significance—for example, the Brandomian dimensions of responsibility and authority—in virtue of communicating that it has that significance. In that case it would follow that one can perform an assertion by describing its social significance using an explicit performative. But this misrepresents dialectical norm accounts. In asserting that *p*, on Brandom's account, speakers *license hearers to assert that p on their authority*. That doesn't entail that speakers can do this by communicating that they're doing it.

6. Subjective assertion and agent-relative commitment

In the initial presentation of his dialectical norm account, Brandom adds an intriguing endnote to his description of how a speaker who asserts a proposition licenses hearers to assert that proposition and others that follow from it:

> The practical scope of an assertion is then indicated by the audience to whom such warrant extends. A declarative sentence uttered by an actor on stage licenses inferences in the desired sense only for other characters, not for those watching the play. (1983a, 649n7)

The second sentence may obscure the interest of the first, given the plausibility of Frege's claim that actors only *make as if* to assert: "If an actor pronounces assertive sentences [*Behauptungssätze*] on stage, he does not after all really assert anything, and is not responsible

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[32] Pagin (2004, 854-7) goes so far as to deny that one can assert that *p* using the explicit performative "I hereby assert that *p*." He is criticized by García-Carpintero (2013, 15).

for the truth" (1903/1960, 371/12; my translation). Still, Brandom's remark about the "practical scope of an assertion" suggests a liberalized account of the dimension of authority.[33]

Here we can appeal to a distinction Kukla and Lance (2009) use in describing a speech act's practical scope. They distinguish "agent-relative" from "agent-neutral" normative statuses.

> [W]hen considering a normative status, … we can ask whether it is *in virtue of its pragmatic structure* (as opposed to in virtue of its content, for instance) indexed to specific people inhabiting specific normative positions, or whether it is "for everyone," that is, structurally blind to distinctions among agents. (2009, 17)

Like Brandom (1994, 238-43), they illustrate this by contrasting assertions with orders. The obligation conferred by an *order* is agent-relative: it "targets a specific, personalized audience" (Kukla and Lance 2009, 18). By contrast, they maintain that *assertions* bring about agent-neutral normative statuses: they target all potential audience members (Kukla and Lance 2009, 26; Brandom 1994, 239).

Against this, I've elsewhere proposed that when an asserter uses certain kinds of vocabulary, the assertion's practical scope may be agent-relative. The idea is that such an assertion carries its licensing potential not vis-à-vis its entire potential audience, but rather vis-à-vis a target audience restricted to those who share some perspective (Shapiro 2014, 154). This promises to accommodate phenomena that have been taken to support accounts of such discourse in terms of relativized propositional truth. Consider the much-discussed "predicates of personal taste." Many think the following is possible: one person asserts the proposition that sea cucumbers are tasty, an interlocutor (or eavesdropper) asserts the negation of that very proposition, yet there is no normative clash between the two speakers. Relative truth theorists account for this by holding that the proposition is *true relative to each speaker's context*, given the standard of taste supplied by that context, whence each assertion is performed correctly (Kölbel 2004; MacFarlane 2014).[34]

However, understanding the entitlement-transmitting function of assertion as *agent-relative* allows an alternative treatment of such cases. On such a view, in asserting that sea cucumbers are tasty, S doesn't put that claim forward for *all* potential hearers to assert on her authority.

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[33] Brandom (1994, 242) allows that one person's recognition of another as having "assertional authority" might in practice be tied to their belonging to a "subcommunity" consisting of "specialists" or adherents to one of several "competing schools of thought." But he doesn't suggest, as I will, that there are *concepts* whose functioning must be understood in terms of the "practical scope" of assertions involving them.

[34] MacFarlane (2005; 2007) explains these phenomena using a dialectical norm account of assertion, but relativizes *propositional truth* rather than assertion's practical scope. MacFarlane (2014) uses a correctness rule account instead.

Rather, S targets a narrower audience, limited to those with a relevantly similar taste standard. Hence, if H is revolted by sea cucumbers, H's assertion that sea cucumbers aren't tasty *won't count as a challenge* to S's assertion; it won't call into question S's implicitly claimed authority to entitle her targeted audience to the claim that sea cucumbers are tasty.[35] By thus revising Brandom's view of the "social articulation of the … practice of giving and asking for reasons" (1994, 54), we can use a dialectical norm account of assertion to explain phenomena cited by truth relativists without relativizing propositional truth.[36]

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[35] More precisely, Shapiro (2014) proposes that at *t´*, the audience targeted by an assertion made by S at an earlier *t,* and still in force, comprises anyone whose taste standard relevantly resembles that possessed by S at *either t or t´*. This yields a result MacFarlane stresses (2014, 109). Say S asserts at *t* that sea cucumbers *aren't* tasty, but comes to enjoy their flavor by *t´*, at which time she asserts that they *are* tasty. S's second assertion then counts as challenging her first, resulting in a clash S may resolve by retracting the first assertion. We thus preserve Brandom's idea (2002, 53-4) that a linguistic agent is a diachronic "locus of conceptual commitment and responsibility."

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