

Constitutive Rules

- What's a constitutive rule?
 - * Well, it's a rule! It's something that (at least in part) tells you when you're doing the activity correctly.
 - * That it is a rule is part of what makes it the activity it is.
E.g. maybe it's constitutive rule of tennis that you have to play with rackets. A game played without rackets cannot be tennis.
- Assertion is something that, in some sense, you can do correctly or incorrectly.
 - * E.g. saying it's raining when you have checked your weather app vs. saying it's raining when you know it isn't raining.
 - * Doing it wrong seems to make you blameworthy, in some sense.
- Williamson's additional thought is that maybe whatever makes your assertion correct or incorrect is something which makes it an assertion in the first place (and not some other speech act).
- Even if you don't buy into the idea of constitutive rules for conversation, still an interesting question here:
what standards are required for responsible assertion?

Options

- What could the constitutive rule for assertion be? There are at least three options:
 - * Assert p only if p is true. (Truth norm)
 - * Assert p only if you're justified in believing p . (Justification norm)
 - * Assert p only if you know p . (Knowledge norm)

What might the constitutive rules for other speech acts be, like commands or questions?

Which would you have said is most plausible, before reading Williamson?

Two Objections to the Truth Rule

- "Sometimes we say true things by accident; but nonetheless that doesn't mean our assertion was warranted."
- *Response:* Even if the truth rule doesn't itself require evidence, we can get this derivatively.
 - * An analogy: you should only cross the street if there are no cars coming.
 - * But basically the only way for you to apply the rule is for you to check what your evidence says.
 - * So even though the primary norm is only cross if there are no cars coming, it will be a derivative norm that you should only cross if your evidence tells you there are no cars coming.
- Tentative objection: truth rule can't be constitutive because other speech acts aim at truth.

Williamson's examples: guessing, conjecturing.

Are you convinced that these speech acts have a truth norm?

The Main Objection

- Consider a lottery with a thousand tickets. We all have bought tickets. The lottery has been drawn in the next room, but we don't know the results yet.
 - * Do you *know* your ticket didn't win? No.
 - * Do you *justifiedly believe* your ticket didn't win? Arguably yes.
- Now suppose that someone asks you whether your ticket won. (Suppose as a matter of fact your ticket didn't win.)

You say:

(1) No, my ticket didn't win.

This doesn't seem like the right thing to say here.

- This is a problem for both the truth rule and the justification rule:
 - * according to both, you should be able to assert that your ticket won!
 - * after all, you're justified in believing that your ticket won.
- So the argument has two premises:
 1. If the truth/justified belief were the norm of assertion, you would be able to assert that your ticket lost.
 2. You cannot assert that your ticket lost.

C. So the truth/justified belief is not the norm of assertion.

How do you think a fan of the justification/truth account would reply here?
Which premise might they try to deny?

Some responses

- *Objection!* Maybe this is just because lottery propositions are weird; maybe the justified belief/truth rule looks just fine when we consider normal cases.
- *Response.* No, because anything can be turned into a lottery case.
 - * Suppose you all entered the lottery; the results have been drawn but you don't know what they are yet.
 - * You also want to know whether your friend Arthur has been spreading rumours about you. I know the answer but I swore not to tell you
 - * So I try to find a workaround: on all the losing tickets I write the *false* answer to your question; and on the winning ticket I write the true answer.
 - * You look at your ticket and see that on it I have written "Arthur has been spreading rumours".
You breathe a sigh of relief: for probably your ticket is the losing ticket so probably it's *false* that Arthur has been spreading rumours.
 - * Nonetheless, says Williamson, you cannot now turn to your other friends and assert that Arthur has not been spreading rumours on you.
(Do you agree?)
- *Objection!:* What about cases where you merely think you know what you assert?
 - * Suppose I think you are honest, but you have been lying to me. I tell the rest of my friends that you are honest.
 - * Looks like I have done nothing wrong. But obviously I didn't *know* you were honest!

The argument here:

1. If knowledge is the norm of assertion, then you have done something wrong in asserting that your friend is honest.
 2. You have done nothing wrong in asserting your friend is honest.
- C. Knowledge is not the norm of assertion.

- *Response.* Even though your assertion doesn't obey the assertion rule, it is in some way reasonable.

- *DB comment.* What Williamson actually says is a little hand-wavy here.

Can you think of how to spell out a bit better the idea he has here? Can you think of examples of where it was (strictly speaking) wrong to do something, but where it was reasonable for you to do so?

Closing Question

- Has Williamson really identified a *constitutive* rule of assertion?

Put this another way, if we found another community of people who go around “asserting” only what they justifiedly believe, would we be forced to conclude that they are not really asserting but doing something else?