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Speech Acts: Natural or Normative Kinds?

The case of assertion

Brian Ball

Abstract

There are two views of the essences of speech acts: according to one view, they are *natural kinds*; according to the other, they are what I call *normative kinds* – kinds in the (possibly non-reductive) definition of which some normative term occurs. In this paper I show that speech acts can be normative but also natural kinds by deriving Williamson's account of assertion, on which it is an act individuated, and constitutively governed, by a norm (the knowledge rule), from a consideration of the natural characteristics of normal cases of its performance.

1. Introduction

Speech is an intentional phenomenon - a kind of action. Indeed, as is well known since the pioneering work of Austin (1975), we do many things when we speak: we produce sounds; we utter words, phrases, and sentences; we make assertions and conjectures, and issue commands and requests; and finally, sometimes, if all goes well, we induce belief, or even action, in our audience. But it is the third of these groups of acts with which we shall be concerned here, those Austin called *illocutionary acts*; I shall simply call them *speech acts*.

When we speak of acts we may have in mind particular occurrences, performed by a given agent at a given time and place – in short, an individual, *token* act; or we may be thinking of a repeatable *type* or *kind* of act. It should be clear, however, that assertion, for instance, is an action type; and more generally, the speech acts with which we are concerned are generic in character – they are kinds. It is also worth noting a second point, namely that speech act types are not correlated one to one with grammatical sentence types. One can make an assertion using an indicative sentence; but equally, one can use such a sentence merely to make a conjecture. Similarly, one can issue a command using

an imperative sentence; or, in a different tone of voice, one might simply make a request. So speech acts are not simply sentence types.

This essay investigates the metaphysics of speech acts. More specifically, it is concerned with the *essences* of these acts. What are speech acts? What is it, for instance, to make an assertion, or issue a command? How are these speech act types distinguished and individuated?

In general, the essence of a kind is given by its definition - an account, given in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, of what it takes for an individual to be a member of the kind.[1] This assumes that every kind has a definition; but the assumption is not as robust, nor therefore as controversial, as it might seem. For first, I do not assume that any (possible) individuals whatsoever constitute a kind; rather, the individuals in question must, intuitively speaking, have something in common. Second, and more importantly, I allow non-reductive definitions. More specifically, I do not require kinds to be defined by some list of intrinsic features which their instances share; instead, I allow their relational features to figure in their definitions.[2] Thus, even kinds which are conceptually primitive can have definitions in my sense.

There are broadly two views of the essences of speech acts represented in the literature: on one view, they are *natural* kinds; on the other, they are what I shall call *normative* kinds. A natural kind is one in the definition of which only descriptive terms occur – these terms being manifestly naturalistically acceptable; whereas, by contrast, a normative kind is one in the definition of which some normative expression such as 'ought' or 'may' occurs.[3] The question with which we shall be concerned is: are speech acts natural or normative kinds?

[1] The view that metaphysics is concerned with essences, which in turn are given by definitions, was given a clear and influential articulation by Fine (1994).

[2] More specifically, I have in mind that definitions in the style of Ramsey (1990: chapter 6) and Lewis (1970) are admissible. We will see an example of such a definition when we come to consider the Williamsonian account of assertion below.

[3] The notion of a normative kind is, of course, a new one, and so there is no precedent to answer to in my application of it: but my use of the term 'natural kind' is, it must be admitted, somewhat unorthodox; for instance, the kind named by Goodman's (1954) predicate "grue" comes out as natural on the above account,

It might be thought that the answer to this question must be either that speech acts are kinds of the one variety, or that they are kinds of the other, but that they cannot be both. Thus, Williamson writes: 'That assertion has [constitutive] rules' - a thesis which he endorses and which, as we shall see, involves him in a commitment to the view that it is a normative kind – 'is by no means obvious; perhaps assertion is more like a natural phenomenon than it seems' (2000: 238-39). The implied contrast in Williamson's words is clear: our two categories, he suggests, are mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, in this essay I will argue for an ecumenical view: speech acts are normative kinds, but they are not *irreducibly* so; they are also natural kinds. The normative expressions occurring in the definitions of these acts can, I claim, be replaced by equivalent but descriptive terms.

I will begin by laying out in more detail the view that speech acts are natural kinds; and I will then do the same for the alternative view that they are normative kinds. Finally, focussing on the case of assertion, I will show that we can capture the normative theorist's position in terms that are naturalistically acceptable. This will involve two steps. First, I will argue at some length that in certain special cases of assertion – the 'normal' ones - speakers conform to the knowledge rule, the norm which Williamson (2000) regards as essentially governing this act; and that these cases can be distinguished from others in naturalistically acceptable terms. Second, and more briefly, I will show that speakers have prudential reason to make their assertions normal in this sense, so that even when the acts in question do not conform to the knowledge rule, they are governed by it.

2. Speech Acts as Natural Kinds

The view that speech acts are natural kinds can be traced to Grice's seminal work (Grice 1989), in which it is argued that a speaker can mean something by producing an utterance with a certain sort

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whereas it might be thought to be paradigmatically unnatural. Yet many philosophers, following Lewis (1983), take naturalness in this sense to be a relative matter; on this approach, the kind picked out by "grue" is relatively unnatural, at least when compared to those picked out by "blue" or "green". I prefer to treat naturalness as an absolute matter. Moreover, the way I use the term "natural kind" is true to (at least one aspect of) the spirit with which Quine (1969) introduced it: in particular, on Quine's view a natural kind was one a term applying to all and only the members of which might figure in a lawlike generalization; and it is clear that he took a generalization to be lawlike to the extent that it might figure as a law of *nature* – that is, a *descriptive*, rather than *prescriptive*, law.

of intention, namely a *reflexive* one – one whose fulfilment consists in part in its recognition. Moreover, Grice held that what a speaker means is determined by what effect she reflexively intends to bring about in her audience. So, for instance, in producing an utterance u, a speaker might intend to induce the belief that p in her audience by means of his recognition of her intention that he do so; if so, then she means something by uttering u, and what she means is that p.

Given this account of speaker meaning, Grice hoped to account for linguistic meaning: a complete utterance type – i.e. a sentence – means whatever speakers typically or conventionally mean by it. With these two pieces in place, Grice could then define a technical sense of the verb 'to say': a speaker *says* something in this sense just in case she means it using a sentence which means it. So, for instance, a speaker says that p if, and only if, she utters a sentence which means that p intending to induce the belief that p in her audience by means of the recognition of her intention that he do so.[4]

This series of explanations puts the Gricean in a position to define the various speech act types in terms of what speakers mean in performing them - together, perhaps, with how it is intended that the reflexively intended effect is to be achieved. So, for instance, the Gricean might claim that to assert that p is to utter a sentence which means that p, reflexively intending to induce the belief that p in one's audience. This contrasts with commands, in which one intends to induce not belief but action, or at least the intention to act (Grice 1989: 123), on the part of one's audience; and it contrasts with implicature in which one intends to induce the belief that p, but does not use a sentence which means that p to do so.

On this Gricean view, speech acts can be regarded as natural kinds, assuming that psychological kinds are.[5] The reason is that, as we have seen, speaker meaning is explained in terms of the

[4] To say something in this sense is not necessarily to assert it: for instance, one might utter the sentence 'Go home Smith!' meaning by it that Smith is to go home; if so, one has said (but not asserted) that Smith is to go home.

[5] It is possible to take the view that speech acts are to be defined in the manner suggested by Grice while denying that they are natural kinds; for one might not regard mental state types as natural kinds. Boghossian

psychological notion of intention; moreover, the intended effects themselves are psychological, namely, belief, or intention.[6] Sentence meaning is then explained in terms of speaker meaning as well as convention – which in turn, it might be hoped, can be understood, following Lewis (1969), in terms of psychological regularities. Finally, the speech acts themselves are explained in terms of speaker meaning and sentence meaning; and so their definitions bottom out in psychological notions.

This view of speech acts as natural kinds individuated principally by the intentions of the speaker performing them has faced a number of objections in the form of purported counterexamples, the most compelling of which concern the necessity of the analysans to the analysandum.[7] For example, a spy might tell her foreign counterpart that p, knowing full well that he knows that not p, and that he therefore won't come to believe that p on the basis of her assertion; she might, for instance, simply wish him to believe that she and her government believe that p. Since one can't intend what one knows one won't accomplish, she therefore does not intend, reflexively or otherwise, that he believe that p; yet she asserts that p. Searle (1969: 44) offered a diagnosis of the problem: to perform an illocutionary act such as assertion is not simply, as this Gricean account effectively claims, to intend, or attempt, to perform a perlocutionary act such as inducing belief.

Perhaps in response to such concerns, Grice himself in his later work, and Bach and Harnish amongst others, have advocated the alternative, though similar, attitude expression account of speech acts. On this view, to express an attitude is, roughly, to reflexively intend one's hearer to believe that one has that attitude (Bach and Harnish 1979: 15); speech acts are then individuated by the attitudes of which they are expressions. For instance, according to Bach and Harnish (1979: 42), to assert that p

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(1989), for instance, takes the view that there is an irreducible normativity in mental states deriving from the fact that they are content bearers. This does not affect my point, however, which is that it is possible to regard the Gricean approach as an attempt at a naturalistic reduction of the speech acts.

[6] For simplicity of exposition I have chosen here to formulate the point here in terms of Grice's later view on which commands are aimed at inducing intention to act, rather than action itself, despite finding the earlier view intuitively more plausible. In any case, the point goes through if we allow that it is hearer action, rather than intention, which is reflexively intended in issuing a command; for actions themselves are simply events which are either caused, or partly constituted, by certain psychological states.

[7] I will consider objections to the sufficiency of the analysans below; I do not find them convincing.

is to express both the belief that p and the intention that one's hearer believe that p. Hindriks has given a variant of this account which retains an appeal to the notion of linguistic meaning; on his view (2007: 400), to assert that p is to utter a sentence that means that p and thereby express the belief that p. Again, it should be clear that, if psychological kinds are natural, on this view so too are speech act types: for they are defined in terms of speaker intentions, and intended psychological effects, together, perhaps, with the notion of linguistic meaning.

But this view is also faced with counterexamples based on the thought that one can perform a speech act without having the intentions posited by the account. A speaker might, for instance, know full well that her audience knows that she doesn't believe that p and yet nevertheless assert that p; she simply, and manifestly, lies. But as MacFarlane (2011: 82-83) has noted, it is difficult to make sense of the thought that someone might take one's utterance as evidence for a proposition which he knows not to obtain; and since, again, one cannot intend what one knows one won't succeed at, it seems that such a speaker must fail to express the belief that p, in Bach and Harnish's sense – yet this does not prevent her from asserting that p.

Perhaps motivated by concerns such as these, some theorists have pursued the alternative view that speech acts are normative kinds. I turn now to elucidating this cluster of positions.

3. Speech Acts as Normative Kinds

The view that speech acts are normative kinds derives from the work of Austin and Searle, who stressed the social character of (both speaker and sentence) meaning, and the need for shared practices if speech acts are to be performed. Searle, in particular, rejected Grice's view in part on the grounds that 'it fails to account for the extent to which meaning can be a matter of rules' (1969: 43). But if speech acts are governed by rules, it follows that they can be performed correctly or incorrectly - in accordance with or in violation of those rules. Thus, for theorists of this kind, speech acts are normative kinds, defined in part by when they may be correctly performed.

To focus our attention I would like to look in more detail at one specific proposal of this kind. According to Williamson (2000), assertion is governed by a *constitutive* norm, which also serves to *individuate* it. The norm in question is the *knowledge rule*:

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

Williamson claims that 'a rule will count as constitutive of an act only if… necessarily, the rule governs every performance of the act' (2000: 239); and it is individuating just in case that act, and that act alone, is subject to the rule. Taken together, the claims that KR is both constitutive and individuating of assertion amount to the suggestion that this act is *defined* by the knowledge rule, thus:

> Assertion is that speech act A such that necessarily, one must: A that p only if one knows that p.

This definition contains a normative modal expression, namely the deontic 'must': Williamson says that this word 'expresses the kind of *obligation* characteristic of constitutive rules' (2000: 241, my italics). Thus, on Williamson's view, assertion is a normative kind; and, of course, there is no reason to think that he takes assertion to be special in this respect.

It is worth stressing that a constitutive norm is not conventional in character. As Williamson notes, conventions are arbitrary; accordingly, they are contingent. More fully, if it is a convention that one must perform an action A only if some condition C obtains, then there must be some action kind B, serving as an alternative to A, such that it could have been the case that one was obliged, as a matter of convention, to perform B only if C obtained. If some such possibility had been realized, however, then one would (most likely) have been free to perform A even if C didn't obtain. (This is what makes B an *alternative* to A.) But, as we have seen, constitutive norms govern the action types of which they are constitutive as a matter of necessity. So, constitutive norms are not conventional. Thus, the question whether speech acts are normative kinds is distinct from, though perhaps related

to, the question whether they are essentially conventional.[8] It is, of course, the former question with which we are concerned here, not the latter.

Williamson's view that assertion is constitutively governed by the knowledge rule (KR) has not gone without criticism. Objections are of broadly two kinds. Some claim that assertion simply isn't subject to a knowledge norm; perhaps it is subject to a belief norm, or a truth norm, or a norm of reasonable belief (Lackey 2007; Weiner 2005). Others argue, by contrast, that if assertion is subject to a strong norm such as the knowledge rule, that norm is nevertheless not constitutive of the act (Hindriks 2007; Maitra 2011).

I will not dwell here on objections of the first kind. I think that assertion is subject to the knowledge rule: as Unger once put it, 'If someone asserts, states, or declares that something is so, then it follows that he represents himself as *knowing* that it is so' (1978: 253, italics original). The case for this is both strong and well known: the hypothesis explains (i) why it is inappropriate to assert, rather than joke or conjecture, that a given ticket in a fair lottery will lose; (ii) why it is appropriate to respond to an assertion with the question, 'How do you know?'; and (iii) why Moore-paradoxical sentences of the form *P but I don't know that P* are always inappropriate, or odd. To this I would add only that (iv) it also accounts nicely for both of the norms that we might expect to be generated by Williams' (2002) two values of truthfulness, namely the norms of *accuracy* - assert only what is true - and *sincerity* - assert only what you believe; for knowledge entails both truth and belief.

Critics of the second variety object to the claim that speech acts are normative kinds; and they are, I think, motivated in part by the thought that it is difficult to see how any kind of action could be normative in its character. Those who press this type of concern may wonder: How can an act be defined in part by the conditions under which it may be performed? Doesn't one need to know what

[8] I hope to address the question whether speech acts are essentially conventional in future work. This will turn, at least in part, on whether there is a notion of linguistic meaning which allows us to pair sentences with propositions relative to what Bach (2005) has called *narrow* rather than *broad* contexts. See note 9 below.

an act is prior to knowing when it may legitimately be performed? In short: How is it possible for there to be an act which is constitutively governed by a norm?

In what follows I aim to show, in naturalistic terms, how assertion could be constitutively governed by the knowledge rule, thus answering these concerns. My argument contains two parts. First, I aim to show that it ought to be the case, in an impersonal sense, that the objects of assertion are known. Second, I argue that speakers are personally and rationally committed to this impersonal norm. Since both the impersonal and the rational norms can be understood naturalistically, I will, in this way, vindicate the Williamsonian view that assertion is a normative kind; but I will do so in a way which reveals it also to be a natural kind.

4. Assertion and the Knowledge Rule

In order to show that assertion is a normative kind, constitutively governed by the knowledge rule (KR), but that this fact can be given a naturalistic explanation, we will do well to start with what is right in standard naturalistic accounts. In my view, the original Gricean account above correctly describes certain normal cases of assertion: in particular, I believe that it articulates sufficient, though not necessary conditions for the performance of the act. We have already seen the reasons for doubting that it is necessary, if one is to assert that p, to reflexively intend one's audience to believe that p. Some have worried, however, that having such intentions is not sufficient for meaning that p. If this were correct, then assertion could not be explained, as the Gricean hopes, in terms of this notion of speaker meaning together with linguistic meaning. It will be instructive, therefore, to see what is wrong with such concerns.

In an attempt to clarify Grice's analysis of speaker meaning, Strawson (1964) reformulated it as involving three separate, though nested, intentions. He suggested, however, that possession of these intentions is not sufficient for communicatively meaning something; and he added a fourth condition, which he regarded as necessary, but perhaps still not sufficient. This lead some (Sperber and Wilson 1995) to worry that the approach would lead to the need for infinitely many nested

intentions, a condition which is obviously not satisfied by any human agents, and which therefore cannot account for any actual case in which a speaker means something. As Bach (2003) has noted, however, and we have already seen, Grice originally appealed not to a cluster of nested intentions, but rather to one self-referential intention. Such concerns are accordingly ill-placed.

It might be thought, nevertheless, that it is, for some reason, impossible to possess a reflexive intention. Grice (1989: 300) himself, for instance, articulated (though did not clearly endorse) a worry to the effect that if we were to attempt to spell out the content of such an intention we would need to employ infinitely many clauses to capture its content; and again, since no human agent can have an intention whose object is specifiable only with an infinitely long content clause, such an intention cannot be employed in any actual case of someone meaning something. However, in formulating this worry, Grice restricted himself to using non-self-referential means of specifying the content: accordingly, his argument shows at best that a reflexive intention is not equivalent to any finitely specifiable non-reflexive intention; it does not show that there is anything which prevents a human from having a genuinely reflexive intention. Absent an argument to the contrary, I assume that such intentions are possible; and indeed, that they are present in certain actual cases.

Now, suppose that a speaker does what I claim is sufficient to assert that p – that is, she utters a sentence which means that p reflexively intending that her hearer come to believe that p.[9] This will be advantageous to the speaker only if her hearer comes to believe that p as a result; for if he does

[9] One might be concerned that there is no notion of (literal) meaning which pairs sentences with propositions, even relative to an index, or sequences of contextually determined parameters - see, for instance, Bach (1994) and Recanati (2004); for if not, one might fear that it will be impossible for anyone to assert that p by uttering a sentence which means that p while reflexively intending to induce the belief that p. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this point.) However, it is not obvious to me that the current proposal requires that there be such a notion of meaning: it might suffice, for my purposes, if it were possible to pair sentences with propositions relative to a broad, rather than narrow, notion of context – one including the 'mutual beliefs and presumptions among participants… in a conversation' (Bach, 2005: 43), such as that proposed by Stalnaker (1999), and perhaps even more besides. (I aim to address this issue in more detail in future work – see note 8 above.) In any case, nothing in the argument that follows in the main text relies on the supposition that a sentence meaning that p is used: the crucial considerations surround the existence of the intention (which need not even be reflexive, as far as the argument is concerned) to induce the belief that p; and I have included the further condition in my hypothesis only because I do not see, at present, how else to differentiate assertions from e.g. implicatures.

not, her intention will not be satisfied, and she will have expended effort unnecessarily and to no effect. But of course, the hearer will gain some advantage in accepting the proposition which the speaker intends him to believe only if he thereby acquires some information – that is, only if in so doing he acquires a *true* belief; for false beliefs are, in general, disadvantageous. But if we assume that the hearer's cognitive processes are functioning normally, he will, in accepting the proposition the speaker intends him to believe, acquire a true belief only if he thereby comes to know that proposition; for knowledge is nothing other than true belief acquired when one's belief-forming mechanisms are working normally.[10] But the hearer will acquire knowledge in accepting the proposition that the speaker intends him to believe only if she herself knows that proposition; for otherwise the belief he acquires will be, though true, unsafe – that is, easily false – and so will fail to qualify as knowledge. I will spell out this argument in more detail below; but it seems, on the face of it, that in special cases such as this, speakers assert only what they know.

These special cases, however, are – I claim - just those that Millikan (1984) calls 'normal'. Roughly speaking, on Millikan's view, a token of a device type functions *normally* (or *properly*) if, and only if, it does what tokens of that type did in past cases in which they contributed to the evolutionary success of the organism type possessing or employing the device, thus serving to explain the persistence of the organism type, and of the device type. A case in which a device is used is *normal* just in case the device functions normally in that case. This account of normalcy is not statistical; it could be that the cases which are normal in this sense occur relatively rarely. Nevertheless, it should be clear that the account is perfectly acceptable from a naturalistic point of view: the normal cases of the employment of a device type are picked out by appeal to their role in causing the perpetuation of its tokening; and causal explanations are paradigmatic natural explanations.

Plausibly, however, it is because of cases such as the above, in which a speaker knows that p, and produces an utterance which means that p with the reflexive intention that her hearer believe that

[10] Although this may be controversial I will have a little more to say below by way of its defence. See also Ball (2012).

p, and in which, moreover, her hearer accepts that p, thereby coming to know that p, that there is such a practice as that of making and accepting assertions. For it is in just such cases that it is advantageous to both speaker and hearer to assert and to accept respectively; and it is the fact that asserting something is sometimes advantageous to both participants in a conversational exchange that explains the fact that assertion persists. And so, it seems, in normal cases of assertion, speakers assert only what they know.

It will be worth revisiting my argument to this point, and spelling it out in a little more detail. I began by defending the claim that it is possible for a human being to mean something by uttering something with a reflexive intention against objections. I then hypothesized that in normal cases of assertion speakers do, in this way, reflexively intend to induce belief in their hearers; and I argued on that basis that in such cases, speakers assert only what they know. That argument is as follows:

(P1) In normal cases, speakers assert only if they intend to induce belief.
(P2) In normal cases, speakers intend to induce belief only if hearers come to believe.
(P3) In normal cases, hearers come to believe only if they thereby come to know.
(P4) In normal cases, hearers come to know only if speakers know.

Therefore,

(C) In normal cases, speakers assert only if they know.

The first premise (P1) is simply our hypothesis. The thought is that if this hypothesis has plausible consequences, then it is likely to be true. But it does have plausible consequences: (C) follows from it, together with other well-supported premises, by the transitivity of “only if”; but (C) itself has plausible consequences (as we shall see). So, by inference to the best explanation, we have reason to believe the hypothesis (P1).

The second premise (P2) is supported by the thought that it is, in the first instance, advantageous to speakers to utter something intending to induce belief in a proposition only if hearers accept that

proposition.[11] This, I think, will prove relatively uncontroversial; and taken together with the definition of the normal cases, it yields the premise.

In any case, our uncontroversial point can be defended. For instance, one might argue that, typically, it is advantageous to agents to have intentions only in cases in which those intentions are fulfilled - together with the thought that speakers are not atypical agents. Alternatively, the point can be made by way of a direct consideration of the communicative exchanges in question. For suppose that speakers gain some advantage even when hearers don't believe what they say. It is hard to see what this might be that would outweigh the concomitant cost to hearers: it is inconvenient to hearers to have to actively ward off the formation of beliefs! Yet hearers belong to the same biological species as speakers, and so it does not seem that it would be generally advantageous to members of the species to have speakers intending to induce belief in hearers simply because it was advantageous to speakers; cases in which speakers receive benefits without hearers forming beliefs therefore can't be normal.[12]

The third premise (P3) is supported by the claim, now widely accepted, that knowledge is the norm of belief; or as Williamson has put it, '[k]nowledge sets the standard of appropriateness for belief' (2000: 47). I prefer to put the point slightly differently: knowledge simply is normal belief, where 'normal' is again used in Millikan's sense; that is, knowledge is belief which performs the role it

[11] I don't mean to suggest that a speaker cannot, under any circumstances, gain an advantage from making an assertion which her audience does not accept. As Stalnaker (1999: 87) has noted, 'A person may make an assertion knowing it will be rejected just as Congress may pass a law knowing it will be vetoed, a labor negotiator may make a proposal knowing it will be met by a counterproposal, or a poker player may place a bet knowing it will cause all the other players to fold. Such actions need not be pointless, since they all have secondary effects, and there is no reason why achieving the secondary effects cannot be the primary intention of the agent performing the action.' But crucially, 'one generally explains why the action has the secondary effect it has partly in terms of the fact that it would have had certain essential effects had it not been rejected.' To say that these effects are secondary is, in our terms, to say that they are explained in terms of the normal effects. (One might also compare Millikan's notion of *focussed* function (1984: 36) in this connection.) This is why I say that *in the first instance* asserters only gain advantage if hearers accept what they say. Note also that the agents in question do not have the intentions of the speakers with which we are concerned in our premise.

[12] In fact, the point does not ultimately rely on the idea that the selective pressures which favour the practice of assertion over its absence are biological in character; they might be cultural, and yet the argument would go through. The key thought is simply that communicative exchange such as those under consideration are cooperative, not competitive, endeavours; and that cooperating, on the hearer's part, consists in accepting what he's told.

(belief) performed when selected for. I cannot defend this claim in any detail here[13] – it would take us too far afield. But clearly such belief must be true, for it is, in the first instance, belief which is true that is advantageous to a subject. Moreover, it will not be accidental that such beliefs are true, but will rather be due to the way in which the subject is embedded in his environment that is responsible for the truth of such normal beliefs; but that is just to say that such beliefs will be safe – i.e. not easily false. Meeting the two most widely accepted conditions on knowledge, it seems there is no reason to deny such beliefs that status.[14]

This does not yet establish the premise, however; for it (P3) concerns the normal cases of assertion, whereas I have so far only shown that in normal cases of belief one knows what one believes. It remains to be shown that normal cases of assertion involve normal cases of hearer belief.[15] But acceptance, which must accompany assertion in normal cases, is itself a method of forming beliefs. It must, therefore, have yielded true beliefs in the cases in which it was selected for; and it must have done so non-accidentally. So, it must have yielded knowledge in those cases. But the normal cases of acceptance just are the normal cases of assertion. So, the normal cases of assertion are normal cases of hearer belief; they are accordingly cases of hearer knowledge, and the third premise is established.

The fourth and final premise (P4) is supported by the claim that knowledge requires safety; that is, 'one is in a position to know only if one is safe from error in the relevant respect' (Williamson 2000: 126). If, in normal cases, the hearer is to acquire knowledge by accepting what the speaker asserts, the belief he acquires must be non-accidentally true, or safe. It follows that the speaker must, in

[13] But see Ball (2012).

[14] It is perhaps worth remarking that, in arguing that knowledge is the norm of assertion on the basis of the claim that knowledge is the norm of belief, we have nevertheless made progress in naturalizing our normative kind. For first, the normativity appealed to in connection with knowledge and belief is itself naturalistically acceptable, as explicated above. But second, the claim that knowledge is the norm of belief is derived more simply than is the claim that knowledge is the norm of assertion; the second derivation, in which we are currently engaged, involves an interaction between speaker and hearer, whereas the former concerns only the cognitive functions of a single organism, and is accordingly more direct. (Of course, this second point is principally epistemic; the key thing from a metaphysical point of view is that it should be true that knowledge is normal belief - and that the first point holds.)

[15] Given, of course, that they involve hearer belief at all; but that is just what the second premise claims.

those cases, believe what she asserts; for otherwise the belief acquired by the hearer would be, at best, true by sheer luck, with no robust relationship to the fact serving as its object. But it is not sufficient to guarantee the non-accidental truth of the hearer's belief that the speaker believes what she asserts; her belief in turn must be non-accidentally true. In short, the hearer's belief will only be safe if the speaker knows what she tells him; and thus, the final premise (P4) holds.

The conclusion (C) of this argument is that in normal cases of assertion speakers conform to the knowledge rule (KR). That this is so, however, allows us to define assertion as that speech act A such that it ought to be the case that one As that p only if one knows that p. This definition contains the normative expression 'ought', and assertion is accordingly classed as a normative kind. Yet the definition is not irreducibly normative, for the phrase 'it ought to be the case that' is synonymous with, and so can be replaced by, 'in every normal case', which can in turn be given a naturalistic explanation.

One might be concerned that the norm which occurs in this definition is impersonal: it concerns what ought to be the case, but it does not impute responsibility to any particular agent or agents to ensure that what ought to be is. This initial thought might then lead to the more specific worry that the knowledge rule (KR) does not have normative force for speakers, and even that, for this reason, it is not, properly speaking, a norm at all. But this concern is, I think, misplaced.

We began with the familiar thought that speech is an intentional phenomenon. In particular, assertion is an intentional action. In saying this I do not mean to suggest that whenever we assert we consciously deliberate about and plan whether to speak, and if so what to say - though we certainly do sometimes; I am simply saying that it is up to us whether to assert something or not. Assertion is not a mere reflex. As a corollary of this, however, I suggest that it follows that when we assert something, we know (in some sense) what we are doing; this is what makes our doing it intentional. But as we have seen, assertion is something which, in normal cases, produces hearer knowledge: indeed, it seems fair to say that producing hearer knowledge is the cause of the perpetuation of

assertion – that it is, in Millikan's naturalistic sense, the purpose (or proper function) of assertion. So when we assert, we knowingly and intentionally do something the purpose of which is the production of hearer knowledge. Thus, when we assert we (in some sense) intend hearer knowledge. But of course, the means by which hearers acquire knowledge through testimony is that speakers assert (only) what they know. Moreover, it is in general rational to intend an end only if one also intends the means to that end. Thus, insofar as one intends hearer knowledge when asserting, one ought to assert only what one knows. But this is just to say that when asserting, speakers are rationally governed by the knowledge rule (KR).

In giving this argument I do not mean to suggest that liars, for instance, are ultimately irrational. A speaker might have very good reasons for lying to her audience; and in such a case her reasons for lying might outweigh her reasons for conforming to the knowledge rule. Nevertheless, even in such a case, that her possible future action will be an assertion that p is, *pro tanto*, a reason for her to perform it only if she knows that p; for it is asserting only what one knows that sustains the possibility of asserting anything at all. Thus, the knowledge rule (KR) governs every possible assertion, including cases such as this, even if its normative force is overridden by other considerations. Much more could be said about this; but I hope that I have made it plausible that the "ought" occurring in the above definition of assertion is, despite its naturalist credentials, a genuinely normative expression – one which has normative force for speakers.[16]

Before concluding I will make one final point. Each of the premises of my argument in this section is, of course, questionable: any of them could be false. But equally, and crucially, they are all perfectly coherent: they could conceivably be true. This shows, however, that there is no problem of principle in the thought that speech acts might be both natural and normative kinds. Thus, even if the specific derivation of the Williamsonian account of assertion that I have given is deemed a failure, it will, I

[16] I should note that I simply assume, in this essay, that the norms of prudential rationality can be understood in naturalistic terms: crudely, it is good for one (for instance, by contributing to evolutionary success) that one is rational in this sense. A defence of this claim is well beyond the scope of the present work.

hope, be conceded that I have succeeded in showing that a normative account of the essence of speech acts is compatible with naturalism about those acts.

5. Conclusion

We have seen that there are two views of the metaphysics of speech acts: on one sort of view, which can be traced to the work of Grice, speech acts are natural kinds individuated (principally) by the intentions with which they are performed; on the other, deriving from the work of Austin and Searle, they are normative kinds, defined in part by the rules determining their correct performance. I have argued that speech acts are indeed normative kinds, governed by rules, and that assertion in particular is governed by Williamson's knowledge rule (KR); but I have also sketched an account of how such a norm might naturally arise. In particular, I have suggested that in certain normal cases of assertion, which can be picked out naturalistically, speakers reflexively intend their hearers to form a belief, just as Grice held; and I have argued that it follows from this that in such cases they conform to the knowledge rule, asserting only what they know. This fact makes it possible to define assertion as that speech act A such that it ought to be the case that one As that p only if one knows that p. Finally, I have suggested that this normative definition, though naturalistically acceptable, is personally and rationally motivating for speakers.

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