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An Instrumental Theory of Speech Acts

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AN INSTRUMENTAL THEORY OF SPEECH ACTS

by

Zachary Ferguson

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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May 2021

ABSTRACT

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The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2021
Under the Supervision of Professor Peter van Elswyk

In this paper I present a theory of speech acts with two parts: an account of the normativity of speech acts and a method for individuating them. The first part holds that instrumental rationality gives speech acts normative force. I have in mind a simple kind of means-end normativity—given that a speaker has a desire to φ , she has an instrumental reason to adopt the appropriate means to φ . When we perform speech acts, we take part in linguistic conventions. In doing so, our desires interact with those conventions in ways that generate speech-act-specific instrumental reasons for us. For example, when I make a promise, the act of promising generates a new instrumental reason for me to follow through on that promise. This is because if I don't, I will be liable for sanctions like blame. Since I don't want to be liable for blame, I have a reason to keep my promise.

The second part of the theory holds that we should distinguish speech acts by their normative properties—the kinds of instrumental reasons they generate for the speaker. I argue that two speech acts token distinct act types just in case they differ in the kind of instrumental reasons they generate for the speaker. For example, I argue that promises, oaths, and vows are the same act type because they generate the same kind of reason to follow through. What results is a new way of taxonomizing speech acts. I call this the *Instrumental theory of speech acts*, or *Instrumentalism*.

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I present a theory of speech acts with two parts: an account of the normativity of speech acts and a method for individuating them. The first part holds that instrumental rationality gives speech acts normative force. I have in mind a simple kind of means-end normativity—given that a speaker has a desire to φ , she has an instrumental reason to adopt the appropriate means to φ . When we perform speech acts, we take part in linguistic conventions. In doing so, our desires interact with those conventions in ways that generate speech-act-specific instrumental reasons for us. For example, when I make a promise, the act of promising generates a new instrumental reason for me to follow through on that promise. This is because if I don't, I will be liable for sanctions like blame. Since I don't want to be liable for blame, I have a reason to keep my promise.¹

The second part of the theory holds that we should distinguish speech acts by their normative properties—the kinds of instrumental reasons they generate for the speaker. I argue that two speech acts token distinct act types just in case they differ in the kind of instrumental reasons they generate for the speaker. For example, I will argue that promises, oaths, and vows are the same act type because they generate the same kind of reason to follow through. What results is a new way of taxonomizing speech acts. I call this the *Instrumental theory of speech acts*, or *Instrumentalism*.

This theory has several major upshots. For starters, it offers a naturalistic explanation of the normativity of speech acts like promises and assertions. Since the normative force of speech acts comes from desire-based instrumental rationality, the account doesn't require any controversial metaphysical commitments about normativity. For example, it doesn't assume the existence of moral facts about when we should keep our promises or what is acceptable to assert. It only assumes the

¹ This is an argument originally presented in Woods (2016). This paper significantly expands this idea.

normativity of means-end reasoning. So, it is potentially useful for many speech act theorists with divergent metaethical commitments.

Additionally, the method of taxonomizing that I am proposing does a better job than previous attempts at explaining the substantive differences between types of speech acts. Taxonomists of decades past² began their investigations by assuming the existence of a profusion of speech acts—positing a different speech act for most ordinary speech-related verbs—and then trying to work out the differences between them. I take the opposite approach. I begin with a clear demarcation criterion—the instrumental reasons that the speech acts generate for the speaker—and then apply it to specific speech act families to see what acts types there are. I see two major benefits to taxonomizing acts this way. First, it explains the metaphysical differences between acts that many people assume are substantively different. Second, it shows that there are far fewer kinds of speech acts than have been traditionally assumed; many similar acts, like oaths and vows, are in fact the same act type. The distinctions I propose are highly intuitive.

Unfortunately, a full taxonomy and thorough explication of the theory is beyond the scope of a single paper. For brevity's sake I've limited the present work to explaining the key components of Instrumentalism and applying the theory to the two speech act families that are most illustrative of the kind of normativity at stake: commissives and constatives. In §1.1, I sketch two important concepts originally introduced by Woods (2016), *intrinsic* vs. *extrinsic* reasons and *blame-liability*. These concepts were initially used to explain the normative force of promises, but Instrumentalism expands them to explain the normativity of speech acts more generally. In §1.2, I apply these concepts to a paradigmatic example, distinguishing threats from promises. I show that these acts are substantively different:

² Here I have in mind the likes of Austin (1962), Searle (1965), Bach and Harnish (1979), and Searle and Vanderveken (1985), among others.

threats don't inherently generate a reason to follow through in the same way that promises do. In §1.3, I use the lessons from §1.2 to taxonomize the entire commissive family.

The second part of the paper deals with the constative family. In §2.1 I argue that the normative force of assertion comes from instrumental rationality, like it does with promises. Then in §2.2 I show that by thinking about assertion this way we can easily differentiate it from other constatives like conjecture. These acts are substantively different: we have an instrumental reason to only assert what we know, while we have no such reason to limit our conjecture. In §2.3 I discuss the benefits of my theory and then conclude.

1. THAT'S NOT A THREAT—IT'S A PROMISE.

Many people assume there is a meaningful distinction between threats and promises. Both commit the speaker to behave in a certain way in the future, but promises are a commitment to do something good for the hearer, while threats are a commitment to do something bad for the hearer. Searle (1965) makes the further claim that promises generate obligations for the speaker, while threats do not. But the distinction is not so clear cut. Consider the following discourse:

Frustrated Parent: "If you hit your sister again, I'm taking your transformers away for a week!"

Many people would call this utterance a threat. So according to traditional wisdom it doesn't obligate the speaker to follow through. But if the frustrated parent doesn't take the child's toy away, has he not made a mistake?

Threats and promises are obviously close kin. While it is common to put them in the same family of speech acts, some like Blanco Salgueiro (2010) go as far as to argue that they are an

inseparable pair.³ Clearly, we can't just stipulate that they are different and call it a day; we need a taxonomy that can individuate between different commissive speech acts in a principled way. Instrumentalism provides such a taxonomy. To demonstrate this, I begin by discussing Woods' (2016) *quasi-conventionalist* account of the normative force of promising. I then appeal to that normative force to distinguish promises from threats.

1.1 WOODS' QUASI-CONVENTIONALISM⁴

Woods (2016) introduces two important concepts. The first is the distinction between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* reasons. We have many reasons to keep our promises—moral reasons, practical reasons, perhaps even aesthetic reasons. We even have reasons—though hopefully not overriding ones—to keep immoral and conflicting promises. Some of these reasons are intimately tied to the practice of promising, whereas others are only incidental. Say I promise to wash the dishes. I have a prudential reason to follow through because I don't want to eat off dirty plates. But most people believe I have a further reason to wash the dishes, namely *that I promised to*. Preferring clean plates is *extrinsic* to the promise. But Woods argues that a promise to φ also generates an *intrinsic* reason to φ ; the mere act of promising creates a reason to follow through. I take this kind of normative force to be a result of the speech act.

This distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic reasons helps explain the universality of promissory reasons. We always have at least one reason to keep our word, even in cases of immoral and conflicting promises.

³ Wray, et. al. (2016) observe something even stronger: "In a number of theoretical frameworks ... the only difference between promises and threats, and between tips and warnings, is in terms of the polarity of the utility of the outcome event."

⁴ This paper takes quasi-conventionalism as its starting point. This section only offers a summary. For a full defense and comparison with rival views, see Woods' original 2016 paper.

Conflicting Promises: I promise to help my sister whenever she has a life-threatening allergic reaction to peanuts. I also promise to meet you for dinner on Tuesday. Thirty minutes before our dinner, my sister calls and asks me to take her to the hospital—she’s been struck by a peanut butter sandwich in a no-holds-barred food fight. There is no time to cancel on you for dinner.

Morally, I’m doing the right thing by helping my sister. It’s what I all-things-considered ought to do. However, I still have *a* reason to keep my promise to you (just not a decisive one); in a certain narrow *promissory* sense I’m doing something wrong by breaking a conventional rule that governs promising.⁵

Intrinsic reasons also explain why we should keep our promises in cases like the following:

Deathbed Promise: I promise you that I will water your plant after you die. It’s an ugly plant; not something the world will be poorer without. Moreover, it’s a pain to water the plant. I need to find the water can, fill it, then sprinkle water on the plant twice a week. No one knows about my promise. I do not water the plant. It withers and dies. I don’t feel guilty or suffer psychological trauma (Woods 2016: 80).

In a case like Deathbed Promise, where there are no obvious extrinsic reasons at play, many conventional theories of promising will underpredict promissory reasons.

An account of promising should explain how a promise generates an intrinsic reason. Woods’ quasi-conventionalism does just this. To explain, we need the second key concept: *blame-liability*. Blame-liability is distinct from both *blameworthiness* and actual blame. Woods demonstrates the concept through an analogy with legal sanctions. Sanctions are conventionally defined through the law, and judges often have discretion on how they are applied. This means that there is an important threefold distinction between whether the defendant is *liable* for sanction, whether it would be *reasonable* to sanction them, and whether they are *actually* sanctioned. Someone is liable for sanctions simply by breaking the law. Consider a non-violent drug offender. It might be within a judge’s legal

⁵ For more on the differences between authoritative normativity, domain-specific standards of correctness, and what we all-things-considered ought to do, see Woods (2018) and Maguire & Woods (2020).

right to sentence her to life in prison. However, that doesn't mean that she *deserves* life in prison or that the judge will *actually* sentence her to life in prison. Sanction-liability, sanction-worthiness, and being sanctioned can come apart.

Like the law, promises and other speech acts are conventional procedures with a system of sanctions. Very briefly, the kind of linguistic conventions I am concerned with

are a trio of rules, corresponding sanctions, and (sometimes) an internal purpose that generates a notion of reasonableness in imposing sanctions... Some of these rules set the condition of who may impose or lift the sanction when appropriate ... These rules tend to be internalized into our practice of recognizing certain individuals as having this authority—and they have this authority because we accord it to them and accept that they have it (Woods 2016: 90–91).

The sanction we use to punish promise-breakers is blame. Breaking a promise therefore gives somebody, typically the promisee, the authority to blame me. As a matter of conventional rules, promise breakers are blame-liable. When given the choice, we prefer not to be sanction-liable, even when the sanction won't actually be administered—I don't want to be convicted of a crime, even when I know I won't face punishment. In the same way, we also have *prima facie* reason to avoid blame-liability. We don't want to be in a position where others have the standing to blame us (even if they won't in fact do so).

Ultimately, it is instrumental rationality, our *desire* not to be blame-liable, that gives us a reason to keep our promises. In making a promise we give ourselves a new end—avoiding blame-liability. So, we gain a new instrumental reason to keep that promise. Blame-liability is present in every case of promise breaking, even in situations like *Conflicting Promises* and *Deathbed Promise*. Though we won't be blamed in these cases, the overarching desire to avoid blame-liability is enough to generate a

reason to keep our promise, simply for having performed the speech act.⁶ In other words, this new reason is an intrinsic reason. It arises with every promise and does so by making essential reference to the rules, sanctions, and internal purpose of promissory conventions. It shows how promises have a kind of internal normative force that results from our desires interacting with linguistic conventions, independent of moral and practical concerns.

1.2 THREATS ARE NOT PROMISES

Instrumentalism takes these two tools—blame-liability and the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic reasons—and uses them to cleanly parse the difference between speech acts like threats and promises. We always have a reason to keep our promises, but not our threats. To show how, I'll address a few arguments for why we might have reason to follow through on threats and show that they don't work.

First is the claim that if I don't follow through on my threats, then my future threats will become meaningless. For example, Blanco Salgueiro (2010) argues that while a threat won't generate a *moral* obligation, it will create strong instrumental grounds to say that the speaker ought to follow through to preserve her credibility. This is a good reason to follow through. However, it is a reason that is *extrinsic* to the practice of threatening. So, this argument is susceptible to the same kind of counterexample we saw earlier:

Deathbed Threat: As you lay frail in the hospital bed, I storm in, demanding that you bequeath me your Mickey Mouse watch in your will. I threaten to set fire to your estate if you do not. After your passing, it's revealed that

⁶ I take it to be a general fact of human psychology that we don't like to be blame-labile. But some might worry about psychologically odd agents that enjoy being blamed or sanctioned. What do we make of their promises? One response is that such a bizarre agent doesn't make promises, but rather simulates promises or pretends to promise. An alternative response is that taxonomies admit of exceptions. It is simultaneously true that ravens are black and that there are albino ravens. As with biological taxonomy, the boundaries between categories aren't perfect, and the possibility of fringe cases doesn't threaten the classification.

you did not bequeath me the watch. I start to get cold feet. Nobody knows about my threat. I do not burn down your estate. I go on to make many more threats, successfully intimidating my victims.

I don't have reason to burn down your estate in this case. My credibility is not at stake since the threat was made in private and my failure to follow through won't affect my ability to make future threats. There is no other good consequence that will come from following through, either—I would risk my own incarceration, your heirs wouldn't be able to enjoy their inheritance, the smoke from the resulting inferno would trigger the neighbors' asthma, etc. Since we have an example where there is no reason to carry out the threat, we can see that there is nothing *inherent* about threatening that generates reason to follow through.

Nevertheless, some might contend that this isn't the paradigm case of a threat. For example, Blanco Salgueiro (2010) argues that the most interesting and typical cases of threats involve witnesses. Take the case of the Frustrated Parent from earlier who threatens to take away his misbehaving child's transformers, only this time it happens in front of the child's sister. The threat now serves a dual purpose, to threaten the child and to intimidate his sister into behaving in the future. Sometimes, a threat can even benefit a third party— "I'll take your transformers and give them to your sister!"

What if we take the most extreme reading of Blanco Salgueiro's point about witnesses and claim that threats are *essentially* public? There are still counterexamples that follow the same pattern as promising.

Empty Threat: I talk a big game, but it's common knowledge in our posse that I am a coward. You call me a chicken. I threaten to smack you upside the head. You are unfazed because you know nothing will come of it. I do not smack you upside the head.

If my only reason to carry out my threat is to avoid losing my credibility for future threats, then that reason disappears if nobody takes the threat seriously in the first place. I don't have to worry about maintaining my credibility because I never had any.⁷

All the reasons we have for following through on our threats are extrinsic to the practice of threatening. That's because reneging on a threat doesn't make us blame-labile in the way that breaking a promise does. Since we conceive of promises as fundamentally good things,⁸ the default assumption is that breaking a promise is undesirable behavior. Sanctions like blame exist to discourage undesirable behavior, hence we are blame-labile for breaking a promise. The same isn't true for threats. If I threaten to break Vinny's legs when he fails to deliver the goods, the last thing he will do if I don't follow through is blame me. Not only would this be odd, it would be incoherent. Assuming Vinny doesn't want his legs broken, refraining from breaking them is *not* undesirable behavior, so it is not the kind of behavior that is liable for sanctions. This doesn't mean that I don't often have prudential reasons to follow through; worries about credibility are common and often incentivizing. However, there is no intrinsic reason produced by the act of making a threat on its own, and there is no conventional system of rules and sanctions that govern the practice.

1.3 CATEGORIZING COMMISSIVES

Comparing threats and promises helps illuminate commissives more generally. At their broadest, commissives are speech acts through which the speaker broadcasts the performance of a

⁷ Some readers have suggested that perhaps we have an intrinsic reason to maintain credibility. While I don't have a theory of credibility, there are a few reasons why I don't think this is the case. First, credibility is part of, but not intrinsic to, countless activities. I can have credibility as an *x* (philosopher, religious prophet, crime lord, etc.) and I only care about some of these things. Compare this to blame, which is restricted to certain moral practices like promises of which it is an essential part. Second, almost *any* action can contribute to credibility in some way or other. For example, some people might afford less credibility to philosophers who display Derrida or Ayn Rand on their bookshelf, or for overusing the words "like" and "dude." These aren't intrinsic to philosophy or any domain. Lastly, building credibility in one area can diminish it in another—preaching young-earth creationism might increase my credibility as a religious authority while diminishing my credibility as an evolutionary biologist.

⁸ The idea that promises are good for the hearer while threats are bad for the hearer is omnipresent in the literature, but Searle (1965) provides an early, succinct statement of the claim.

future action. I propose that threats and promises typify two kinds of commissives: *prescriptive* and *descriptive*.

Prescriptive Commissive: to perform a prescriptive commissive to φ is to broadcast the future performance of φ in a way that generates an intrinsic reason to φ to avoid blame-liability.

Descriptive Commissive: to perform a descriptive commissive to φ is to broadcast the future performance of φ in a way that does not generate an intrinsic reason to φ to avoid blame-liability.

Furthermore, I hypothesize that all commissives discussed in the literature fall into one of these two categories. Take a vow for instance. Searle and Vanderveken (1985) hold that a vow is like a promise, but that it doesn't require a hearer. On my view, a 'vow' is just another name for a promise because it appeals to the same conventions with the same rules and sanctions and the same internal purpose. Since they compel the speaker in the same way and are judged using the same set of criteria aiming at the same end, they are the same act type. A vow resembles a deathbed promise in its instrumental rationality—we are blame-labile for not following through, although we almost certainly *won't* be blamed if the act is done in private. Blame-liability will also be present in cases of swearing, guaranteeing, pledging, etc. These words all name acts that token the *prescriptive commissive* act type because they all generate an intrinsic reason for the speaker to keep her word.

The second kind of commissive is a *descriptive commissive*. In the laundry-list of commissives first offered by Austin (1962: 158), we see planning and intending.⁹ These are examples of this second act type that don't generate an intrinsic reason to follow through. Experience confirms this. Our plans are often unrealistic—I almost always fall short of my goal of going for a run every day. We don't have the standing to blame each other for failing to follow through in these cases because there is no

⁹ Here I am only concerned with the speech act (e.g. "tomorrow I plan to go for a walk") and make no claims about the mental states involved with plans or intentions.

conventional system of rules and sanctions associated with these acts.¹⁰ Of course, we have plenty of extrinsic reasons to follow through, and we often try to help hold each other accountable to our goals, but we won't be blame-liable if our plans or intentions fall through. Threats are also *descriptive commissives* in this sense. Since they lack the intrinsic normative force of promises, threats don't amount to much more than a conditional plan or an intention to harm the hearer.

With only two act types, the commissive family might initially look a bit sparse. Luckily, Instrumentalism also explains how commissives can have varying degrees of commitment. Some commitments are stronger than others—"I swear, till death do us part" is presumably a more serious commitment than a pinky promise to #loveu4ever. Blame-liability is all-or-nothing, so there is no degreed notion or partial liability that we can appeal to. But the normative force of promise-like commissives comes from our desires, and desires *do* come in degrees. The strength of the intrinsic reason generated by a *prescriptive commissive* depends on the strength of my desire to avoid blame-liability. This will vary based on the hearer and the context. There are some people to whom I have a much stronger desire to avoid blame-liability to than others. Saying "I promise I'll be back tomorrow," will generate an intrinsic reason to avoid blame-liability regardless of who I say it to, but it will generate a much stronger desire for me when I say it to my mother after she's invited me to a family dinner, as opposed to a used car salesman that I want to get off my back. Since *descriptive commissives* don't generate an intrinsic reason, our degree of commitment will be determined instead by the strength of our *extrinsic* reasons for following through. For example, if threats usually make me seem tough, my degree of commitment will depend partly on how badly I want to appear tough.

¹⁰ If there is such a system of sanctions, then that is evidence that the act is in fact a *prescriptive commissive*. Joint plans come to mind here. If we are planning on φ -ing together and my failure to follow through frustrates your plans, then you have the standing to blame me. Joint plans *do* have a conventional system of sanctions associated with them, and therefore *do* generate an intrinsic reason to follow through. Experience bears this out: "I plan on being at your parent's house at 8:00," sounds like a promise, whereas "I plan to review my Urdu flashcards at 8:00," doesn't.

Between these two act types and the means to gradate strength of commitment based on the strength of our desires, we can account for every commissive and distinguish between them. This approach is better than earlier attempts at taxonomy for several reasons. First, it doesn't appeal to primitive notions. Compare this to Searle and Vanderveken (1985), who stipulate that every speech act has an *illocutionary point*, "that purpose which is essential to its being an act of that type" (1985, 14), a primitive term that goes unanalyzed in their theory.¹¹ Instrumentalism relies instead on familiar notions, like desire, reasons and liability. Second, Instrumentalism avoids an issue that plagues early taxonomists like Bach and Harnish (1984). These early taxonomies begin by assuming the existence of a large array of different acts simply by looking at our everyday vocabulary. However, they don't provide motivation for why they analyze the specific speech acts that they've identified. This approach runs the risk of positing distinctions where none exist. My own theory avoids this problem by providing a clear criterion for determining when two acts are distinct, and the distinctions I propose align with our pretheoretic intuitions.

2. CONSTITUTING CONSTATIVES

Now that I've laid out the mechanics of Instrumentalism and applied it to commissives, I will turn to another speech act family: constatives. At their most basic, constatives are sayings that are truth evaluable. The quintessential constative is assertion, which has received significant philosophical attention.¹² Many hold that there are constraints on what is appropriate to assert, like that we should only assert what we know. Of course, there are times when we can utter declarative sentences without meeting such criteria, like when we are guessing, supposing or conjecturing. As with commissives, most believe that there is a substantive difference between assertion and these other kinds of acts. For

¹¹ This criticism of Searle and Vanderveken is also levied by Murray and Starr (2018).

¹² See MacFarlane (2011) for an overview of recent literature.

example, say our mutual friend José hasn't responded to our texts for nearly three weeks. When you ask me why we haven't heard from him, I respond in one of two ways:

- (1) He got a new phone
- (2) He got a new phone, I guess

Most people would say that (1) is an assertion that José got a new phone but (2) is not. (1) offers a presumably true, definitive answer to the question. (2) offers a potential answer, but leaves open the possibility that José was kidnapped, or simply grew tired of hanging out with philosophers. Instrumentalism explains this difference and allows us to neatly cleave constatives into two categories: those that are governed by intrinsic reasons and those that aren't.

2.1 NORMATIVE FORCE OF ASSERTION

Assertions have normative force¹³—at a minimum, we generally ought not knowingly assert falsehoods. Like promising, the normative force of assertion is quasi-conventional. There are assertoric conventions which include a system of rules and sanctions to punish those that assert incorrectly: lying under oath leads to perjury charges, claiming someone else's work as your own means expulsion from the academy, falsifying sales data gets you fired, etc. We greatly value true information, so our system of sanctions is designed to weed out unreliable informants. While there are plenty of institutional sanctions that do this, the most important sanction for us will once again be blame. We can always be blamed for asserting something false, even unwittingly:

Bad Advice: You are an electrician 20 years retired, and I call you up to ask which wire to snip to disconnect the dishwasher. You assert that I should snip the red one. Unfortunately, the right answer was blue. I get a nasty shock and the house goes dark as the smell of burning hair fills the room.

¹³ This is relatively uncontroversial, but see Pagin (2011, 2016) for a notable exception.

Importantly, you are not necessarily blameworthy. There are all sorts of exculpating reasons that might keep me from blaming you—the house was poorly wired to begin with; they’ve changed the color coding in the last 20 years; you’ve developed dementia. Given our friendship and a good excuse, I probably won’t blame you. It might be unreasonable to blame you. Nevertheless, because you asserted something false, you’ve broken a conventional rule. I still have the conventional authority to blame you, so you are still blame-liable.

Being the rational agents that we are, we want to avoid liability for sanctions like blame. Whenever we make an assertion, we make ourselves vulnerable to potential blame, and whether we are blame-liable will be determined by assertoric conventions. Recall from earlier that by convention we roughly mean a trio of rules, sanctions, and internal purpose that determines the reasonableness of applying those sanctions. They are sociological facts—patterns of conduct that we have come to internalize and expect, which we could spell out in detail with enough empirical research. I take for granted that the internal purpose of these conventions is something akin to the transmission of knowledge and that to this end convention generally dictates that we only assert things we know.¹⁴ Our desire to avoid blame-liability, then, gives us a minimal instrumental reason only to assert things we know. This reason will be an *intrinsic* reason since it arises in every case of assertion and makes essential reference to the rules and internal purpose of the convention.

2.2 ASSERTORIC & NON-ASSERTORIC CONSTATIVES

As with commissives, understanding the normativity of assertion in this way allows us to distinguish it from other constatives. I propose the following tentative classification:

¹⁴ Assertoric conventions, like promissory conventions, are messy. My goal is not to lay out exactly what they stipulate. For now, I am blithely assuming convention says we should only assert what we know. This is a common view (Williamson 2000; DeRose 2002), but there are many exceptions. Some argue that we should only assert what is true (Weiner 2005), or what is reasonable to believe (Lackey 2007). If you think an appropriate assertion requires something other than knowledge, feel free to substitute your preferred reading of assertoric conventions. Nothing important hinges on this assumption.

Assertoric Constative (assertion): To assert p is to state p in such a way as to be blame-liable should it become evident that the speaker does not know p .¹⁵

There are many English verbs that name this act-type: declare, maintain, aver, claim, etc. The acts that these words name constrain the speaker in the same way and appeal to the same set of conventions and sanctions with the same internal purpose (roughly, the transmission of knowledge). This demarcation is simple but powerful. Is my statement something I have the standing to be blamed for if it turns out false or unwarranted? If so, it's an assertion. Whether a statement counts as an assertion, then, is a contingent conventional fact. Recall our friend José. Suppose he didn't get a new phone, and he wasn't ignoring us. It turns out he was kidnapped by the mafia and has been wasting away in the cellar of an Italian grocery. If I had stated that he wasn't replying because he got a new phone, I'd be blame-liable because I didn't know that. My statement was an improper assertion.

However, I wouldn't be blame-liable for saying "he got a new phone, I guess," because we don't blame each other for guessing p when we don't know that p .¹⁶ I am likewise not blame-liable for what I suspect might happen in a hypothetical situation. The same goes for conjecturing, surmising, estimating, etc. These acts are *non-assertoric* constatives; they don't purport to transmit knowledge. Unfortunately, these acts have received far less philosophical attention than assertion. While I believe assertions can be safely classified as a single act type, the non-assertoric branch of the commissive family potentially admits of further divisions; these acts might have unique normative properties that

¹⁵ Two notes about this way of demarcating acts. First, I take 'stating' to typically be done using an utterance, though it can be done in nonverbal ways like nodding or pointing in response to prompts like "please point to the man who stole your ice cream." Second, as noted in footnote 14, the reader can substitute her preferred interpretation of assertoric conventions. Any reading will do.

¹⁶ One might argue that I can be blamed for guessing wrongly. Say there is a competition where the team that correctly guesses the number of jellybeans in the jar wins \$1,000. I guess a wildly implausible number, like 427 million. My teammates rightly blame me. But they aren't blaming me for asserting something false. They're blaming me for being a poor reasoner and for not having a strong grasp of the volume of a jellybean. These considerations are extrinsic to the practice of guessing. Had I made a more reasonable guess and still lost the competition, they would not have the same standing to blame me.

we can use to distinguish them.¹⁷ However, because these acts often occur in the context of inquiry, it will require more research to determine which normative properties obtain in virtue of conventional facts about the acts (i.e. intrinsic reasons) and which arise from epistemic norms or norms governing inquiry (i.e. extrinsic reasons).¹⁸ For now, I leave the classification coarse-grained and will investigate any further divisions in future work.

To recap, we've begun categorizing the commissive family by dividing it into two categories, distinguished by the kinds of instrumental reasons they generate for the speaker. There are *assertoric* constatives (assertions), for which we are blame-labile, thereby producing an intrinsic reason to only assert what we know, and *non-assertoric* constatives, for whose content we are not blame-labile.

2.3 UPSHOTS

There are many reasons to accept this account. First, and perhaps most importantly, any complete account of assertion must offer an account of its normativity. This is surprisingly rare in the literature; while many accounts of assertion appeal the normativity of assertion, very few explain *why* it is normative in that way that it is. For example, those that hold that assertion is governed by constitutive norms, like Williamson (2000), argue that assertion is normative in virtue of a rule that necessarily governs the practice, like the rules of a game. However, they do not explain why speech acts are governed by such rules or why we are bound by them. Other theories cash out the normativity of assertion in terms of commitment¹⁹—whereby the speaker makes herself responsible for the truth

¹⁷ Green (2000), for instance, argues that *supposing* is a unique act that allows inquirers to draw inferences from the supposition, and then assert the results as a conditional (I suppose P, infer that Q follows, and then assert $P \supset Q$).

¹⁸ For example, Green (2000) holds that supposition should aim to further some inquiry and notes that we criticize those that put forward suppositions that don't help us reach a conclusion. But it is unclear whether these normative constraints are intrinsic to the act of supposition. Take, for instance, Friedman (2020), which argues that a zetetic instrumental principle (ZIP) governs inquiry: "If one wants to figure out Q?, then one ought to take the necessary means to figuring out Q?" (p.6). If she is right, suppositions that aren't germane to Q? might violate ZIP, and reasons to avoid sanctions that arise from violating ZIP would be extrinsic to supposition.

¹⁹ See Shapiro (2018) for an overview

of what is asserted—awash with norms about when one must retract or defend what is asserted. But these views fare no better. No matter what norm we are discussing, the question remains: in virtue of *what* are these norms binding? Why are we bound by these commitments? Instrumentalism provides a compelling answer: we always have an *instrumental* reason to avoid blame-liability.²⁰ This answer is available to all assertion theorists, including constitutive norm folks and commitment theorists, though they may also argue for further norms or obligations.

Instrumentalism can also respond to objections that some accounts of assertion face. For example, commitment accounts and some norm-based accounts have trouble dealing with hedged assertions. Benton and van Elswyk (2020) point out a host of issues that arise when we consider qualifying remarks that represent the speaker as occupying some epistemic position weaker than knowledge, such as

- (a) She left the party, **I think**.
- (b) **I guess** she went home.

²⁰ One might object that there is more to the normativity of assertion than being blame-liable for not knowing *p*. For example, dialectical norm accounts hold that assertions generate an additional obligation for the speaker to defend the assertion if challenged. Examples include Brandom (1983), Rescorla (2009) and Shapiro (2018). While I will not use a word so strong as ‘obligation,’ I do agree that we ought to defend what we assert. In fact, Instrumentalism helps explain some of these data that motivate dialectical norm accounts; we have *instrumental* reason to defend the things we assert. When somebody can’t defend what’s been asserted, it is a red flag that the information is no good, and it increases the likelihood that they will be blamed. If you claim that Hillary Clinton spearheaded a sex-trafficking ring based out of a D.C. pizzeria but you can’t support your claim, I’ll be more likely to dismiss it as false and blame you. Some who defend dialectical norm accounts might contend that instrumental reason is not strong enough to capture this obligation and that we need a thicker normative notion. If so, the burden will be on those theorists to explain exactly *what* that thicker notion is. These obligations will be compatible with Instrumentalism, but I take it as a benefit of my theory that it does not require such an explanation.

Many norm-based accounts include a norm that speakers must know p to assert p . But hedged assertions represent the speaker as having an epistemic position weaker than knowledge. This creates a taxonomical problem: are hedged assertions even assertions?²¹

Instrumentalism provides a neat answer. As I argue above, we can distinguish assertions from non-assertoric constatives by looking at their normative profile. Hedged assertions will either be assertoric or non-assertoric, and often they will be close to the dividing line. In fact, the whole point of hedging is to try to straddle that line! What are we trying to do when we hedge? We want to assert p , but we don't want to be liable for p . Consider the following:

(c) "Don't quote me on this, but I'm almost certain that the CIA proved the moon landing was faked."

The goal of this statement is to make the hearer believe that the moon landing was faked. But the speaker also wants to avoid responsibility for that information. By weakening her epistemic position, she is trying to straddle the line, wanting both the authority of assertion and the lax standards of conjecture.

So is a hedged assertion an assertion? Well, sometimes. Whether an utterance counts as an assertion will depend on whether the speaker is *actually* considered liable for the veracity of her speech. Sometimes we take mildly hedged statements to be blame-liable:

(d) I'm pretty sure your phone is waterproof.

You can bet that I'll be blamed if you jump in the pool and your phone wasn't waterproof. Other times, we gladly excuse heavily hedged statements as conjecture:

²¹ One potential response is to say that propositional hedges like (b) are assertions, while illocutionary hedges like (a) are not (see Fraser 2010 for a summary of different kinds of hedging). On this reading, in (a), the parenthetical "I think" weakens the force of the propositional content "she left the party," whereas (b) is just an assertion of what the speaker guesses happened. But (d) shows that we often still take people to be responsible for the content of propositional hedges. If I utter (d), and then you jump into the pool holding your phone, it would be ridiculous for me to respond "I never asserted that your phone was waterproof! I merely made a claim about my own epistemic position!" A good taxonomy should account for this messiness between propositional and illocutionary hedging.

e) I reckon she's innocent, but I'm not sure.

If she's guilty, it would be odd (and incorrect) to blame me for asserting otherwise. But many instances of hedging aren't as clear-cut as (d) or (e). In these cases, there is usually a fact of the matter—the speaker is either held blame-labile or she isn't—even if we don't have enough information to make a judgement from the armchair. Sometimes, though, an utterance is simply indeterminate, and a good taxonomy should explain as much. It isn't always obvious from the metaphysical facts whether hedging is happening. Instrumentalism allows for this possibility. Sometimes the relevant conventions aren't well defined. Other times it isn't clear which conventions bear on the situation. In these cases, Instrumentalism correctly predicts indeterminacy.

CONCLUSION

Old-school speech act theorists were interested in creating rich taxonomies of speech acts based on speaker intention or illocutionary point. Taxonomy has fallen out of fashion, in part, I suspect, because contemporary thinkers don't find it theoretically interesting; classifying verbs doesn't tell us much about individual speech acts, nor the metaphysical differences between them. I've dispelled these myths by showing that a good taxonomy can give meaningful insight into acts like promises, threats, assertion, and conjecture. In this paper I've given a framework that shows us how to draw the lines between act types. I call this framework Instrumentalism and I've applied it to two speech act families. I've shown that classifying acts by the kinds of instrumental reasons they generate for the speaker provides intuitive distinctions without positing excessive act types. My taxonomy has more explanatory power than earlier taxonomies, and by focusing on instrumental reason I've given a simple, lucid account of the normativity of speech acts.

In future work I plan to continue this project, showing that other speech acts also have an internal normative force and that we can use this framework to demarcate them. After non-assertoric

commissives, my next target will be directives. I intend to show that the distinctions between suggesting, advising, and recommending are arbitrary, whereas the distinction between requests and recommendations is substantial. There is still work to be done to fill out the taxonomy, but I hope I have done enough to show the promise and utility of Instrumentalism.

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