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# When Alston Met Brandom: Defining Assertion

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**Abstract**: In this paper I give a definition of assertion that develops William P. Alston's account. Alston's account of assertion combines a responsibility condition R, which captures the appropriate socio-normative status that one undertakes in asserting something, with an explicit presentation condition, such that the speech act in some way presents the content of what is being asserted. I develop Alston's account of explicit presentation and add a Brandomian responsibility condition. I then argue that this produces an attractive position on the nature of assertion.

## 0.   Introduction[1]
In this paper I give a definition of assertion in the *Alstonian* tradition. William P. Alston's definition of assertion combines a responsibility condition R, which captures the appropriate socio-normative status that one undertakes in asserting something, with a presentation condition, such that the speech act in some way presents the content of what is being asserted. In this way, Alstonian theories avoid the problems of individuation faced by *purely* social definitions of assertion, which rely only on a responsibility condition R[2]. Exploring the account given by William P. Alston, I will suggest that, given appropriate changes, an Alstionian account gives a very attractive definition of assertion. Not only does an Alstonian account with a Brandomian responsibility condition appropriately individuate assertion, I suggest that the account is suitably complex to deal with the challenge put forward by Peter Pagin (2004, 2009) for social accounts of assertion.

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[2] The roots of purely social accounts of assertion can be found in Peirce, who claims that «to assert a proposition is to make oneself responsible for its truth» (Pierce, quoted in Macfarlane, 2011: 90). Whilst positions of this type have been held by many, including John Searle (1969), I shall only engage with a recent version of the position here, given by Robert Brandom.

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## 1. Alston's Account

William P. Alston gives two questions that any satisfactory theory of assertion must be able to answer if it is to individuate assertion. First, what is it that distinguishes the expression of a psychological attitude from the assertion that one has that attitude? Second, what is the distinction between what is asserted and what is presupposed? (Alston, 2000: 115). To this, he adds a third question for theories of assertion that rely on a notion of commitment or responsibility — if assertion is simply the commitment to (the truth of) some proposition, then why is it that in other speech acts, such as promising and ordering, I am not asserting the content and necessary preconditions of those speech acts? To see why this might be a problem, take the following order, uttered by the Major: "Polish your boots, Private!" Here the Major is committed to the following:

> That the private will polish her boots.
> That it is possible for the private to polish her boots.
> That the private has boots.
> That there is a private.
> That the private will be placed under an obligation by the utterance of this
> order.
> And so on...[3]

Thus, if assertion is understood as mere commitment, the Major is asserting all of the above. Thus the problem for any sufficient account of assertion is telling us why the above commitments are not asserted when orders, promises, or other non-assertoric speech acts are performed.

### 1.1 Explicit Presentation

These problems, and a frustration with contemporary accounts of assertion lead Alston to his fundamental insight:

> we assert that $p$ when we "come right out and say that $p$ *in so many words*", when "we *explicitly* say that $p$". This suggests that the difference between asserting that $p$ and R'ing that $p$ without asserting it lies in the verbal means employed in the utterance, rather than in the psychological attitudes or in any other inner factor. Furthermore it suggests that the crucial feature of the sentential vehicle is the "explicitness" with which it "presents" the $p$ in question. Where the $p$ R'd is "explicitly presented", it is asserted; where not, not (Alston, 2000: 117).

Alston spells out this notion of 'explicit presentation' in terms of semantic isomorphism. That is, a sentence $S$ explicitly presents a proposition $p$ iff $S$ and $p$ are semantically isomorphic. $S$ and $p$ are semantically isomorphic iff for each semantic element of $S$ there is a corresponding element of $p$ (and vice-versa) and the elements of

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[3] It is fairly obvious that a good answer to Alston's second question will eliminate all but the first commitment on this list as a problem. The first commitment on this list is the propositional content of the order, and seems to be explicitly presented by the order. I am certainly less worried than Alston about saying that in making an order or promise one also asserts the content of the order or promise (see, for a defence of this position, Marsili: 2016). Consider Gary Watson's example: «Consider also giving directions to the library solely by a series of imperatives: "Go to the next corner, turn right, and continue on to the northeast corner of the first intersection with a traffic light. "I take it that one has told [asserted to] one's interlocutor that the library is on the corner of that intersection» (Watson, 2004: 74). Thus despite using this problem to show (in part) why Alston is motivated to take his position, I will take it that an appropriate response to Alston's second question dissolves Alston's third question.

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*S* and *p* are each combined in corresponding ways. Thus the proposition that the door is open is semantically isomorphic to the following sentences: "the door is open", "that door is open", "it's open". In each of the above sentences, there are semantic elements corresponding to each semantic element of the above proposition — a referring expression for the door ('the door', 'that door', and 'it') which refers to the door in question, a predicative term describing that something is open, and the relation of predication between the referring expression and the predicative term (Alston, 2000: 117).

Thus in addition to a responsibility condition R (the details of which will be spelled out shortly), Alston gives an explicit presentation condition that must be met if one is to count as asserting that *p*. Thus: «U asserted that *p* in uttering *S* iff both: R: U R'd that p. EP: *S* explicitly presents the proposition that *p*.» (Alston, 2000: 120-121).

Alston rightly suggests that this deals with his three questions quite nicely. When I say "Wow!" or "Eww!" I do not explicitly present the proposition that I am excited or the proposition that I am disgusted, thus Alston's account correctly categorises such expressions of emotion as not being assertions. Further, when one asserts "The cat is on the mat", the proposition that there exists a cat is not explicitly presented by the sentence and thus this and other presuppositions of assertions do not count as assertions. Finally, when one orders another thus: "Close the door!" (despite one R'ing that there exists a door and R'ing that one has the authority to order another in such a way) neither the proposition that there exists a door nor the proposition that one has the authority to order another in such a way are explicitly presented by the utterance. Thus *prima facie* all three problems are solved by the introduction of the explicit presentation condition.

However, the explicit presentation condition cannot be as simple as I have presented it here. There are cases where we assert that *p* in uttering *S*, where *S* is not semantically isomorphic to *p*. Take the following case suggested by Alston: «Alice: "What did you have for lunch?". Bobby: "Soup."» (2000: 120). Here Bobby seems to be asserting that they had soup for lunch, but the utterance "Soup" is certainly not semantically isomorphic to the proposition that Bobby had soup for lunch, as it lacks both the semantic elements designating Bobby and lunch, along with the predicate 'had for lunch' and the appropriate tripartite predication relation between had for lunch and the three subjects Bobby, soup and lunch. To deal with cases such as these, Alston introduces ellipsis, arguing that the utterance need not explicitly present the proposition that *p*, but need only be elliptical for a sentence that does. Therefore Bobby's utterance does count as an assertion, as "Soup" is elliptical for "I had soup for lunch" which explicitly presents the proposition that Bobby had soup for lunch. Thus Alston's modified analysis of assertion is as follows:

> U asserted that *p* in uttering *S* iff both:
> R: U R'd that *p*
> EP$_e$: *S* explicitly presents the proposition that *p*, or *S* is uttered as elliptical for a sentence that explicitly presents the proposition that *p*.

However EP$_e$ causes more trouble for Alston than it prevents. Take the following utterance: «Clara: "Joanna batted well today"». Clara's utterance here is correctly analyzed by Alston's account as an assertion that Joanna batted well today. However, we might worry that Clara's utterance is elliptical for the sentence "Joanna batted well and played cricket today" and even simply "Joanna played cricket today". Thus Clara is, according to Alston, asserting that Joanna batted well and played cricket today, and asserting that Joanna played cricket today, alongside innumerable other propositions

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which are explicitly presented by sentences that the original utterance is elliptical for. Given that these propositions are, intuitively, not asserted by Clara, then the introduction of the EP$_e$ means that Alston's second problem, of distinguishing assertions from their presuppositions, rears its ugly head once more. In attempting to account for assertions like "Soup", Alston has fallen victim to the very problem he posed for other accounts of assertion[4].

It seems then, that adding ellipsis is too clumsy a move — it lets too much into the category of assertion. I propose however, that Alston was on the right track with this move — it is merely that we need to specify the right *kind* of ellipsis. Anaphoric dependence, I claim, specifies the right *kind* of ellipsis to individuate assertion. Anaphoric dependence is a linguistic phenomenon whereby the content of one token utterance is passed on to another token utterance. Take the example given by Brandom: «Have I read *the book*? I haven't even taught *it* yet» (Brandom, 2005: 239). Here, 'it' anaphorically refers to 'the book' and thus the content of 'it' is determined by the content of its referent — 'the book'. 'It' is of course a pronoun, but there are also 'prosentences', expressions whose anaphoric reference can be an entire declarative sentence. Take, for example 'yes', which Brentano first described as a prosentence in 1904: «Danny: "Does Tim like the library?". Emma: "Yes."» (Grover et al., 1975: 87-88). Here, Emma's utterance anaphorically refers to the sentence "Tim likes the library" (which can be derived from the context — Danny's utterance) and derives its content thereof. Thus in this context the sentence "Yes" anaphorically refers to the sentence "Tim likes the library". Note that that Tim likes the library is precisely the proposition that we take Emma to be asserting when she utters "Yes". We can thus use the notion of a prosentence anaphorically referring to another sentence in our definition of assertion:

> U asserted that *p* in uttering *S* iff both:
> R: U R'd that *p*
> EP$_a$: *S* explicitly presents the proposition that *p*, or *S* is a prosentence anaphorically referring to a sentence that explicitly presents *p*.

To understand how this definition solves the problems faced by Alston's account, let us return to the 'soup' example. Bobby's utterance of "Soup" as a response to the Alice's question "What did you have for lunch today" is a prosentence that anaphorically refers to the sentence "I had soup for lunch". We derive this from the context – Alice's utterance. Remember the Brentano case: just as Danny's utterance of "Does Tim like the library?" gives us the anaphoric referent "Tim likes the library", which Emma then refers to in her utterance of "Yes", Alice's utterance of "What did you have for lunch" tells us that the anaphoric referent of Bobby's utterance is the sentence "I had soup for lunch". "I had soup for lunch" explicitly presents the proposition that I had soup for lunch. "Soup" is thus correctly categorised as an assertion. The cricket counterexample is also dispatched, as Clara's utterance of "Joanna batted well today" does not anaphorically refer to any sentence. There is no relevant context and thus no anaphoric reference. Thus the only proposition that is asserted by Clara is that which her utterance explicitly presents: that Joanna batted well today.

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[4] We might think that the ellipsis condition also means that Alston no longer has a satisfactory response to his first problem. Take the utterance "Wow". It is an expression of enthusiasm, but we might read it as elliptical for the sentence "I am enthusiastic", which explicitly presents the proposition that I am enthusiastic. "Wow", according to EP$_e$, thus becomes an assertion. EP$_e$ would thus mean that Alston falls victim to his own first problem.

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One might worry that a more challenging example comes when there is an anaphoric context providing a sentence to which the utterance refers in addition to a proposition explicitly presented by the sentence uttered: «Florence: "Did Joanna DJ today?". Gareth: "Joanna spun records well today"». Here it seems that Gareth's utterance anaphorically refers to the sentence "Joanna did DJ today and spun records well today" or "Yes she did, and Joanna spun records well today" or simply "Joanna did DJ today" and therefore Gareth counts as asserting that Joanna did DJ today. Yet given the context of Gareth's utterance, it seems less than clear to me that this is not the correct result. Analogous to the soup example, intuitively Gareth is asserting that Joanna did DJ today in this context[5]. $EP_a$ thus provides the appropriate ellipsis relation for Alston's account to correctly include assertions and rule out presuppositions.

## 1.2 Alstonian Responsibility

One might think that an account of assertion could be given just in terms of an explicit presentation condition. However, such an account would fail to individuate assertion from supposition and conjecture. In conjecturing "The rain today will be especially hard" the speaker explicitly presents the proposition that the rain today will be especially hard, and would, on this naïve account, wrongly count as asserting. Thus any such account would do well to be supplemented by a clause that accounts for the distinctive force of assertion — that in asserting that $p$ one is somehow responsible for $p$'s being the case, in a way that one is not if one merely conjectures that $p$, or supposes that $p$ for the sake of argument. We therefore need a responsibility condition R. For Alston: «$R_A$: U R's that $p$ in uttering $S$ iff: In uttering $S$, U subjects their utterance to a rule that, in application to this case, implies that it is permissible for U to utter $S$ only if $p$» (Alston, 2000: 60). Where this rule is a social norm concerning what it is acceptable to say in a given language game, and lays the speaker open to criticism if they break that rule. Alston points out that this responsibility condition implies that if one asserts "The cat is on the mat" one R's not only the propositional content of the assertion, but all of the presuppositions of the assertion, such as the presupposition that there is a cat (Alston, 2002: 114-115). After all, it would be impermissible for one to utter "The cat is on the mat" if there was not a cat. Thus alone this condition would not individuate assertion from presupposition – it needs to be combined with an explicit presentation condition. The condition does, however, allow individuation of assertion from conjecture and supposition, acts which meet the explicit presentation condition, but not Alston's requirement that one only perform them if one subjects one's utterance to the rule that one may make that utterance only if the content of that utterance is the case.

It might appear that Alston's R'ing condition is simply a constitutive norm of assertion, as endorsed by a tradition coming out of the work of Timothy Williamson[6]. However, we should not be quite so hasty to characterise Alston as a member of that tradition. For one, Williamsonian and other similar accounts only require that assertions be governed by some rule, whilst Alston requires that not only does assertion need to be governed by some rule, but that the rule governance must also be instituted by the speaker. Second, given that the R'ing condition is combined with an explicit presentation condition in Alston's final account, complaints that the definition of assertion is not rich enough (see Macfarlane 2011 on 'Boogling') will have a tougher time gaining traction. Nevertheless, Alston does take the norm that the R'ing condition

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[5] Does my $EP_a$ version of Alston's position fall victim to Alston's first worry? Plausibly not. It seems hard to see how "Wow" or "Eww" could anaphorically refer to sentences such as "I am disgusted".

[6] See, for instance, Williamson (1996) and (2000), Jennifer Lackey (2007), Martin Montminy (2013), Matthew Weiner (2005), Keith DeRose (2002), and Igor Douven (2006).

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describes, along with his explicit presentation condition, to be constitutive of assertion (Alston, 2000: 253).

If the Alstonian R'ing condition is (with these caveats in place) a norm of assertion, where do we place it in the taxonomy of those accounts? At first glance, it might be tempting to characterise it *simply* as a truth-norm of assertion (henceforth the T-rule). After all, if one may only assert that $p$ only if $p$, and as is generally accepted, the T-schema holds, then one may assert that $p$ only if 'p' is true. However, whilst Alston does take his rule to be the T-rule, he also thinks that his rule entails two other formulations of the R'ing condition, whilst maintaining that $R_A$ (the T-rule) "is the most fundamental formulation": «$R_{AP}$: U R's that $p$ in uttering $S$ — In uttering $S$, U purports to know that $p$. $R_{AR}$: U R's that $p$ in uttering $S$ — In uttering $S$, U represents $p$ as being the case.» (Alston, 2000: 63).

Alston argues that $R_A$ entails $R_{AP}$, as one subjects oneself to that rule that one may assert that $p$ only if $p$ – and thus one cannot purport to follow the rule without thereby purporting to know that one does so. Alston argues that $R_{AR}$ follows from $R_A$, as when one subjects something to a rule that requires that $p$, one represents $p$ as being the case (Alston, 2000: 63).

Given that Alston regards $R_A$ as entailing $R_{AP}$ and $R_{AR}$, if we can find counterexamples to these conditions, then by *modus tollens*, Alston ought to reject $R_A$. As it happens, there are cases where we do not purport to know that $p$ in uttering $S$, and yet still assert that $p$. Think of cases of openly insincere assertions, as used by Macfarlane to argue against Bach and Harnish's account of assertion (see Macfarlane, 2011: 82), in such examples, it is common knowledge between myself and my interlocutor that I do not believe $p$, and yet I still assert that $p$. Think of a hopelessly lost position in a football game. Both myself and my team know that I know we will lose — we are 4-0 down with five minutes to play. Here, I might assert "We're still in this — we have a chance to win here"[7]. Further, even if Alston were to change his mind and reject the inference from $R_A$ to $R_{AP}$, $R_A$ itself is vulnerable to the objections Williamson has made against the truth norm of assertion[8]. It seems, then, that if we are to have an account of assertion of this sort, we had better have a different responsibility condition.


## 2. Brandom's Account

For such a responsibility condition, we might turn to Robert Brandom's account of assertion, which is given solely in terms of a responsibility condition. I will suggest that, alone, Brandom's account fails, as it cannot individuate assertion from presupposition. However, I will suggest that precisely because this is a problem that is nicely solved by Alston's explicit presentation condition, using Brandom's account to provide the responsibility condition R for Alston's account gives us a very attractive position on the nature of assertion. Brandom's account of assertion attempts to frame assertion in terms of the social statuses we undertake or acknowledge when making an assertion. Such social statuses are normative, and constituted by members of a conversation treating the speaker as so committed. Borrowing the notion of a conversational score from David Lewis (1979), Brandom thinks that members of a conversation keep score of the deontic statuses undertaken by themselves and other members of the conversation,

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[7] For further discussion of such examples, see Michaelson, 2018.

[8] See Williamson 2000. Certainly, the T-norm has a much harder time making sense of things like "How do you know that" responses to assertions and Moorean 'paradoxes'. See also the objections to factive accounts of assertion given by Dodd 1999, Lackey 2007, McKinnon 2013, Marsili 2018 and Kneer 2018.

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attributing to themselves and others the appropriate commitments and entitlements[9]. For Brandom, asserting some claim is to undertake or acknowledge two such statuses. It is to endorse the claim, enabling others to use it as a premise in inference, and to commit[10]. oneself to the claim, undertaking a conditional task-responsibility to justify it if challenged (Brandom, 1994: 170-173, 1983: 640-641).

Endorsement is a deontic status that one can undertake. In so doing (perhaps via an utterance) one states that one has the authority to make some claim, and that others may, on the basis of that authority, use that claim as a premise in further inference. In the context of an assertion, if the assertion goes unchallenged, or is justified appropriately in response to challenges, an assertion has the effect of the speaker endorsing that which the assertion claims[11]. In this technical Brandomian sense of endorsement, the assertion (via the deontic status undertaken by the speaker) authorises further assertions, including the re-assertion of the original claim and those claims which are entailed (logically or materially) by the original claim. The audience of the assertion are thus offered what we might call an 'inference ticket', licensing further assertions. The ticket metaphor is a useful one. Suppose I offer you a ticket to attend a performance of *Twelfth Night* by the Royal Shakespeare Company. In doing so I am offering you a socially significant license to perform further social acts, specifically those to do with sitting and watching a play. In the same way, my asserting to you "Shakespeare was a better playwright than Marlowe" offers you a license to perform social acts, including asserting that "Shakespeare was a better playwright than Marlowe"[12]. In this way, assertions have a role in what Brandom calls 'the game of giving and asking for reasons' — asserting something gives a reason for further assertions, and can serve as a response when one is asked for a reason.

However, assertion involves not only endorsement, but commitment:

> In asserting a claim one not only authorizes further assertions, but commits oneself to vindicate the original claim, showing that one is entitled to make it. Failure to defend one's entitlement to an assertion voids its social significance as inferential warrant for further assertions. It is only assertions one is entitled to make can that serve to entitle others to its inferential consequences. Endorsement is empty unless the commitment can be defended (Brandom, 1983: 641).

In asserting, «one undertakes the conditional task responsibility to justify the claim if challenged» (Brandom, 1983: 641-642). Where a 'task-responsibility' is defined as a

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[9] As an anonymous reviewer has helpfully noted, there is a difference between Brandom's and Lewis's notions of the conversational score. Whilst Lewis and his followers generally take the scorekeeper to be an objective asserter, Brandom takes the scorekeepers to be the participants of the conversation themselves. Importantly, this allows for A and B's scorecards to differ, and, so Brandom suggests, A and B's recognition of this fact grounds intentionality and representation.

[10] Brandom unhelpfully uses commitment in two senses. The first sense is a broad commonsense notion of any normative status that demands some action, the latter sense a technical term referring to a specific normative commitment detailed below. Hereafter I shall refer to the former as commitment, the latter as commitment$_b$.

[11] This is because, according to Brandom, entitlement has a «default and challenge structure» (Brandom, 1994: 243).

[12] The metaphor goes further. Suppose the ticket I gave you to attend the theatre with was a bad one (I used a photocopier to produce a forgery). Upon seeing the ticket, you can challenge me about the goodness of the ticket, or if you decide to attempt to use it anyway, the guard at the door of the theatre will challenge you about the legitimacy of the ticket. So too for licenses to assert (see Brandom, 1994: 161).

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responsibility which requires the fulfillment of a task (in this case, the task of justifying the claim) in order to be fulfilled. Thus, one commits$_b$ oneself to some claim if one is willing to justify it in some way if challenged. There are three ways in which this justificatory task can be fulfilled. First, there is the appeal to the authority of another, who has also asserted the claim, and upon whose authority one bases one's own assertion. Second, one can make further assertions, justifying the content of the first assertion. Third, one can invoke one's own authority as a reliable reporter of non-inferential information (as one does in cases of reporting how one feels, or in cases where one is the only person who has observed some phenomena) (Brandom, 1994: 174). Note that in each of these ways of fulfilling the justificatory task, one is passing the justificatory buck, whether to another speaker, other assertions, or one's own reliability as an observer. These authorities for one's assertion can themselves be challenged and defended in the same ways as the original assertion. Of course, this leads to a potentially endless chain of further justifications, but this need not be problematic, given that the justifications are only required *when the asserter is challenged to provide them* – the task responsibility is, after all, a *conditional* task responsibility. This commitment$_b$ aspect of assertion captures a second distinctive aspect of assertion, its force – that when we assert something, we are somehow responsible for what we have asserted.

Challenging obviously plays a central role in this definition of assertion, but Brandom is a little unclear on what exactly it consists in. Thankfully Jeremy Wanderer has provided a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that are implicit in Brandom's *Making it Explicit*:

> The first (C1) is that the successful act of challenging must provide the condition requiring the challenged asserter to undertake the task of demonstrating entitlement to the challenged claim. The second (C2) is that the effect of a successful challenge, according to a scorekeeper, is to remove the default entitlement associated with a claim, suspending entitlement to the claim pending successful defence. The third (C3) is that the challenge must be an act that can be performed appropriately or inappropriately; it must be susceptible to being challenged itself, so that successfully challenging the challenge is one way of restoring the entitlement to a claim (Wanderer, 2010: 100).

Whilst Wanderer and Brandom (see Brandom, 2010) take this definition to imply that all challenges are assertions of incompatible propositions, I fail to see how this follows. Indeed, what I take to be nice about the above definition, put in terms of the effects of a speech act, is that it allows for challenges to take a plurality of forms. The challenge need not be a question, but could be an assertion, or even a promise or order.

Suppose Johann utters "The moon is made of cheese". All the following responses to that utterance, count as challenges on Wanderer's account, and I take it that it is intuitive that we would ordinarily count them as such:

> Jamelia: "Are you sure?"
> Josephine: "The moon isn't made of cheese."
> James: "I promise you, you're wrong."
> Jackie: "You are going to have to show me where it says that on the NASA website before I accept that."
> Jennifer: "Prove it!"

Accounting for the variety of utterances that can count as challenges, and having given fairly rigorous conditions for which acts count as assertions, I think that Brandom and his followers should be happy to rely on Wanderer's definition.

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## 3.  Individuating Assertion: A Problem for Brandom's Account

Despite capturing two important aspects of assertion, Brandom's account is not without its difficulties. I suggest that, just like the 'commitment-only' account of assertion put forward by Alston prior to adding his explicit presentation condition, Brandom's fails to distinguish assertion from presupposition[13]. Brandom's account gives a simple answer to the question of how to individuate assertion from conjecture or supposition. In the case of conjecture or supposition, the responsibility condition is not met, whilst in the case of assertion, it is. When one makes a supposition, whilst one does enable others to use the content as a premise in inference (albeit conditionally) one is only suggesting the content of the speech act. Thus one does not undertake an obligation to justify it if challenged – thus one is not committed$_b$ to the content. I take it that the same is true of conjecture.

However, Brandom's account struggles to distinguish that which is asserted from that which is presupposed. *Ceteris paribus* if I say "The cat is on the mat" I presuppose that there is a cat, yet in doing so I both endorse and commit$_b$ myself to the claim that there is a cat and so according to Brandom I assert that there is a cat. I endorse the claim, as after I have said "The cat is on the mat", others are entitled to use the claim that there is a cat as a premise in inference. Meanwhile, I am committed$_b$ to the claim that there is a cat, as in uttering "The cat is on the mat", I undertake an obligation to justify the claim that there is a cat[14]. Thus Brandom's account treats many presuppositions as assertions and is thus insufficient for a definition of assertion, as it fails to properly individuate assertion from presuppositions.

Brandom might respond *contra the above* that assertions are unique (and therefore individuated) as according to him, only they both perform the role of being that which reasons are asked for, and that which giving a reason consists in. Thus whilst one can ask what the reason for (the justification of) an action was, one cannot offer an action as a reason for anything[15]. Meanwhile, whilst one can offer the reliability of an observer as a reason for believing that observer, one cannot ask for the reason for (in the sense of a justification of) the reliability of the observer. My assertion of some claim, however, can both provide a reason and stand in need of reasons to justify it (Brandom, 1994: 167). However, presuppositions also stand in this dual relation to a reason. If I assert "My job application's rejection letter came through today", which presupposes that I sent off a job application, not only would an interlocutor be quite within their rights to demand justification for (reasons for) accepting the claim that I sent off a job application, but they would also be acting legitimately were they to take the claim that I sent off a job application itself as a reason[16]. Assertion, then, cannot be individuated by reference to

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[13] See Alston 2000 and Marsili 2015 for further discussion.

[14] After all, it would be fine for someone to use my utterance as justification for not letting someone with a cat allergy come near us, and it would be fine for someone to challenge me on my utterance by saying, "What? What do you mean there's a cat?", or "There's no cat!"

[15] It is unclear whether this is in fact the case. Ordinary language suggests that actions can play the role of reasons in this sense – we can quite easily imagine a bartender who, when asked why they threw a punter from their bar would reply "They punched another customer!", or show a CCTV video of the punch, or mimic the act of punching. Whether this is surface 'grammar' misleading us as to the underlying metaphysical nature of reasons notwithstanding, contemporary debates in the metaphysics of reasons are inconclusive, and we should not be quick in accepting Brandom's claim here.

[16] Suppose, for example, that I utter "The library will close in an hour". Here I assert that the library will close in an hour, and presuppose that the library is currently open. My interlocutor could quite reasonably take this presupposition as a reason for action, for instance, immediately leaving to return some books to the library.

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the unique relation that assertions have to the notion of a reason, as presuppositions also incur these sorts of commitments[17].

This said, Brandom's account captures something important about assertion, that is, the normative force that assertions carry. In the next section, I will outline Alston's position, before showing how combining it with the Brandomian picture both answers the individuation question and retains this nice account of assertoric force.


## 4. The Alstonian-Brandomian Account

I therefore suggest that we incorporate Brandom's responsibility condition into Alston's account, along with the changes I proposed to the explicit presentation condition, in order to adequately deal with cases of ellipsis. In outlining the account, I will (perhaps somewhat unfaithfully to Brandom) give his R conditions a representationalist framing, but given that Alstonian account are committed to a form of representationalism, I take it that this is no major issue.

> U asserted that $p$ in uttering $S$ iff both:
> $EP_a$: $S$ explicitly presents the proposition that $p$, or $S$ is a prosentence anaphorically referring to a sentence that explicitly presents $p$.
> R: U R'd that $p$
> Where U R's that $p$ in uttering $S$ iff both:
> $R_{B1}$: U endorses that $p$, offering license to make inferences from $p$,
> $R_{B2}$: U commits$_b$ to $p$, undertaking a justificatory responsibility for $p$.

I take this to be the correct account of assertion. In what follows I shall show that it adequately individuates assertion, and explains a number of linguistic data that are often canvassed in favour of rival accounts. Finally I shall show that it adequately responds to a couple of putative objections.


### 4.1 Individuating Assertion

My Alstonian account of assertion individuates assertion from conjecture and supposition on the one hand, and presupposition on the other, by incorporating the best aspects of Brandom and Alston's accounts. The following indicates how the conditions individuate assertion:

|  | $EP_a$ | $R_{B1}$ | $R_{B2}$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| Assertion | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Presupposition | X | Sometimes | Sometimes |
| Conjecture/Supposition | ✓ | ✓ | X |
| Expression of Emotion | X | ? | ? |
| Speech Act Commitments | X | Sometimes | Sometimes |

In asserting that $p$, all three conditions are met. Meanwhile, when one presupposes that $p$, one does not explicitly present the proposition that $p$. Take my utterance "Cal is stuck

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[17] An anonymous reviewer has suggested that Brandom and his followers might be able to produce machinery that allows them to distinguish between assertion and presupposition. If so, then this objection can be read as an invitation to provide such machinery. As the reviewer who pushed me on this has pointed out, it minimally looks like this would take a great deal of work, and I myself am unclear on how it might be achieved. In any case, a full development of such a dialogue between the Brandomite and their sceptical opposition goes beyond the scope of this paper, which is largely interested in harvesting the Brandomian account for parts to improve the Alstonian account.

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in the well." Here, I presuppose (amongst other things) that there is a well which one can get stuck down – yet my utterance does not explicitly present that proposition, nor does my sentence anaphorically refer to a sentence that explicitly presents the proposition that there is a well to get stuck down. Thus $EP_a$ is not met. Further, in some cases, one does not R the presuppositions of one's utterances[18]. In conjecturing that $p$, or supposing that $p$, as in "For the purposes of argument, metaphysical zombies exist," one explicitly presents the proposition that metaphysical zombies exist, and thus one's conjecture meets $EP_a$. One also endorses that $p$ – indeed, one of the main functions of supposition is as the putting forward of some claim as a premise for further inference. However, one is not committed$_b$ to the utterance, and is under no obligation to justify that claim, thus conjecture does not meet $R_{B2}$[19].

As to the expression of emotion, which gave rise to Alston's first question, it is quite clear that Tess does not explicitly present the proposition that she is elated at her victory when she shouts "Yes!" It also seems difficult to see how such an utterance could anaphorically refer to the sentence "I am elated at my victory". Finally, to Alston's third question, the addition of the $EP_a$ condition rules out the commitments of other speech acts counting as assertions[20]. The Major's order, "Polish your boots Private!" does not explicitly present the proposition that the private will be placed under an obligation by the utterance of the order, nor does the order anaphorically refer to a sentence which explicitly presents that proposition.

## 4.2 Pagin's Objection

In *Is Assertion Social?* Peter Pagin provides an objection to theories that rely on what he calls *social significance* to define assertion. One type of social significance condition that Pagin considers is what I have been calling responsibility conditions for assertion, and he regards theories based on such conditions as extensionally inadequate, including utterances that we would not ordinarily count as assertions in the category of assertions. Pagin considers what I take to be a Moorean (see Moore, 1962) responsibility condition: «To assert that $p$ is to commit oneself to the truth of $p$» (Pagin, 2004: 838). He points out that if assertion is defined according to this definition, then the utterance of any of the following would count as an assertion that p: «P1: "I hereby commit myself to the truth of $p$". P2: "I guarantee that $p$". P3: "I promise that $p$"» (*ivi*: 838-839)[21].

According to Pagin, none of these seem to be assertions of $p$, but all would be counted as assertions of $p$ by a definition of assertion that relied solely on a Moorean responsibility condition. More pertinently to my project, Pagin presents a similar counterexample to Brandom's definition of assertion. He neatly puts Brandom's definition as: «To assert that $p$ is to authorize the audience to claim whatever follows from $p$ and to undertake the responsibility of justifying $p$» (*ivi*: 839). Which, he claims, wrongly categorises the following as an assertion of p: «P4: "I hereby authorize you to

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[18] For example, I take it that a child does not endorse or commit$_b$ to the axioms of mathematics when they utter "1+1=2".

[19] An anonymous reviewer has suggested there are other options open to the Alstonian here. They might, for instance, suggest that $R_{B1}$ requires completely *unconditional, unqualified* endorsement of $p$. As such, in cases of conjecture or supposition, where some $p$ is put forward in a qualified or conditional sense, $R_{B1}$, in addition to $R_{B2}$ is not met. Full discussion of the interesting question of conjecture and supposition goes beyond the scope of this paper, but see however Labinaz 2018.

[20] Subject to my earlier reservations regarding the propositional content of the speech act itself intuitively counting as an assertion.

[21] I am unsure as to whether or not we would ordinarily characterise P2 and P3 as assertions of $p$ (see footnote 2). Nonetheless, P1 is enough to underline Pagin's point here.

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claim whatever follows from *p* and undertake the responsibility of justifying *p*."» (*ivi*: 840).

Pagin thus produces a mechanism for producing counterexamples to theories defined in terms of an R'ing condition — any utterance of the form "I hereby x", where x is the definition of assertion, will be counted as an assertion of some *p* by the theory, but will be unlikely to be intuitively thought to be an assertion of that *p*.

Yet whilst this is a counterexample to Brandom's theory[22], as Philip Pegan points out, Pagin's counterexamples will only do as a response to theories of assertion that are expressed wholly in such terms (the R'ing condition being necessary *and* sufficient for assertion) and not those theories that claim that social effects are merely necessary for assertion (Pegan, 2009: 2557-2558). Thus my Alstonian theory of assertion is untroubled, as it would not count P4 as an assertion, because P4 does not meet $EP_a$.

Pegan does, however, offer a potential counterexample generator to theories that rely on something like an explicit presentation condition:

> P5: "In making the following utterance I intend to undertake a commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed by the sentence I utter: The Red Sox won."
> P6: "In uttering the sentence I next utter, I intend to undertake a commitment to the truth of the proposition it expresses: The Red Sox won" (*ivi*: 2561).

Applying this counterexample generator to my Alstonian theory, we get a putative counterexample: «P7: "In making the following utterance, I hereby authorize you to claim whatever follows from it and undertake the responsibility of justifying it: The Red Sox won."».

Yet it is less than clear to me that P7 (and for that matter P5 and P6) are not what we would ordinarily characterise as assertions. It is simply that in each case the implications of the last clause (the assertion proper) are made explicit in the earlier clauses. Indeed, I take it that P7 is mostly an exercise in redundancy, wherein one asserts that the Red Sox won after having made explicit what it means to assert that the Red Sox won. Both Pegan (2009: 2561) and Pagin (2009: 2565-2566) believe that there are non-assertoric readings of the 'the Red Sox won' clause. Pegan does not take the non-assertoric reading of 'the Red Sox won' to be a counterexample to Alstonian theories, whilst Pagin does. I, for one, simply cannot see what a non-assertoric reading of such an utterance amounts to *when embedded in such a sentence* – and given that such examples are designed with the aim of contradicting our intuitions with regards to what counts as an assertion, I do not feel the force of Pagin's objection here.

It might be further objected that the real issue is that the utterance P7 can be correct, or accurate, even if the Red Sox do not win (thank you to the editors for pushing me on this point). Thus, we might think, the account of assertion offered here is odd, in that it allows an assertion of p to be correct or accurate, even if p fails to be the case. Certainly, it might look like a desideratum of a theory of assertion that it should not allow a case in which *p* is asserted correctly or accurately when *p* is not the case. However, in defence of the Alstonian account, we can say a few things. The first is that accepting this desideratum flies in the face of the ordinary intuition that uttering 'I hereby assert that *p*' counts as an assertion of *p* (see Macfarlane, 2011: 93). Second, even if we accept this desideratum, we must note that the Alstonian account only allows such problematic cases when those cases have a very specific form, that is, the form given by P7 – and as such, these problematic cases turn out to be extremely fringe cases. Third, even in those fringe cases, it is not as if nothing is 'going wrong' so to speak, even if the assertion is

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[22] I will not discuss potential Brandomian responses for want of space.

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accurate or correct. In cases with the specific form of P7 where 'the red sox won' or another equivalent *p* is not the case, we can say that the utterer has R'd something that is not the case, and is therefore criticisable[23].


## 5. Conclusion

I take it that if the reader finds the above convincing, they ought to at least take the account of assertion I have offered seriously. Whilst it goes beyond the scope of this paper to argue for the inadequacy of rival accounts, should the reader already have their misgivings regarding such alternatives, the Alstonian-Brandomian account becomes a rather attractive account of assertion.

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[23] The editors have further suggested that Pagin points out a further issue: his 'inferential integration test' suggests that supposed assertions of the type we have been considering fail to allow us to draw the kinds of standard inferences that we should like to draw (Pagin, 2004: 851). However, note that there are good reasons to think that Pagin's argument here is not a knockdown one – see Jary (2010: 58-59) and Macfarlane (2011: 92-93) for compelling arguments to this point.

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