Knowledge, Belief, and Assertion

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The traditional answer to the question what it is to make an assertion appeals to belief (see Grice 1989 and Searle 1969). To assert something, so the analysis goes, is to express a belief by way of uttering a sentence. Timothy Williamson claims (1) that on the traditional analysis assertion is constitutively governed by the truth rule (242):[1]

One must: assert *p* only if *p* is true.

He argues (2) that the traditional analysis is mistaken, and (3) that assertion is constitutively governed by the knowledge rule instead (243):

One must: assert *p* only if one knows *p*.

I will argue that all three of these claims are false.

Williamson and I share the view that assertion can be characterised in terms of constitutive rules. However, we disagree about what constitutive rules are. Williamson claims that constitutive rules do not specify necessary and sufficient conditions for the relevant act. I will argue that many of them do. Furthermore, the exceptions cannot be used to Williamson's advantage.[2]

1. Constitutive Rules and Regulative Rules

According to Searle, who introduced the term 'constitutive rule', the syntax of a constitutive rule is 'X counts as Y in C'; he contrasts constitutive rules to regulative rules, the syntax of which is 'Do X', or 'If Y, do X'. Neither the truth rule nor the knowledge rule has the syntax that constitutive rules have according to Searle. Reformulating the rules in such a way that they do results in manifest nonsense ('knowing *p* counts as asserting *p*' is obviously inadequate; '*p* being true counts as asserting *p*' even more so). The syntax of the truth rule and the knowledge rule is: 'One must: do X only if Y'. This resembles the structure of regulative rules more closely than that of constitutive rules. There is no mention of the phrase 'counts as'. Furthermore, it contains an imperative. Finally, no reference is made to a context or a set of conditions C.

This third point demands further attention. On Searle's view, (only) constitutive rules define what I will call 'Y terms'. Y terms stand for institutional statuses (Searle 1995). Actions that are Y are constituted by actions that are X. This suggests that Searle's choice of symbols in the second formulation of regulative rules is somewhat unfortunate. Since there are many regulative rules in which no institutional statuses occur, a better proposal would be 'If C, do X'. Similarly, one could render the syntax of Williamson's rules as 'One must: do X only if C'. This means that the Y term is missing rather than the C term, which only strengthens the suspicion that Williamson's rules are regulative rules rather than constitutive rules. Only regulative rules can do without Y terms; constitutive rules cannot. Williamson could respond by insisting that the syntax of his rules is: 'One must: do Y only if C'. The problem with this is that the formulation remains uninformative with respect to the constitution of institutional

statuses – in contrast to what one can reasonably expect from a *constitutive* rule.

All this makes one wonder why Williamson believes that the rules mentioned are constitutive rules in the first place. Williamson contrasts constitutive rules to conventions, which are a type of rule for action just as regulative rules are. On his view, the difference between constitutive rules and conventions is that, whereas conventions govern the acts to which they pertain only contingently, constitutive rules govern them necessarily. He writes: '[A] rule will count as constitutive of an act only if it is essential to that act: necessarily, the rule governs every performance of the act.' (239) Even though this may be an important feature of the difference between constitutive rules and rules for action such as conventions and regulative rules, it falls short of a full characterisation of the distinction. As said earlier, it leaves us in the dark with respect to the constitution of institutional statuses.

An obvious development of the notion of a constitutive rule would be to say that such rules specify necessary and sufficient conditions for the applicability of Y terms. This is exactly what Williamson denies (240). He has good reasons for this. However, as we will see in the next section, they fall short of establishing the adequacy of the conception of constitutive rules he proposes.

2. Constitutive Rules and Necessary Conditions

An important thing to appreciate is that constitutive rules can and sometimes do specify necessary and sufficient conditions for institutional statuses. This can easily be illustrated with a constitutive rule that applies to objects rather than actions (the point generalises to many institutional actions). I will use the institutional term 'dollar bill' as an example. Dollar bills are pieces of paper of a certain size, made of a particular kind of material with a peculiar print. Counterfeit dollar bills may have all these features. What makes them counterfeit, is that they are printed without proper authorisation. Combining these features results in the following (rough) characterisation of the constitutive rule for 'dollar bill':

A piece of paper of a certain size, made of a particular kind of material with a peculiar print, the issuing of which has been authorised by the Federal Reserve counts as a dollar bill.

My claim is that once the details of this rule have been filled in (and perhaps some minor flaws have been fixed) it specifies the conditions that are necessary and sufficient for being a dollar bill. For our purposes, it is the necessity claim that matters: no piece of paper that does not have all these features is a dollar bill.

This pure case is quite useful for diagnosing the flaws in Williamson's position. What he seems to be after is a conception of constitutive rules on which they govern actions without this entailing that the rules are obeyed. The problem with this is that it makes little sense to talk of obeying constitutive rules. Regulative rules can be obeyed or disobeyed, because they are imperatives. Constitutive rules, however, are meaning rules. They provide defini-

tions that tell us something about the constitution of the statuses to which the terms defined pertain. They do not tell us what to do. This means that they cannot be disobeyed. They can only be misapplied. In the pure cases in which the relevant constitutive rules specify necessary and sufficient conditions, whether or not they are misapplied depends on whether the relevant conditions have been satisfied. In impure cases things are more complicated than this, as we will see shortly. However, the basic point remains: constitutive rules cannot be disobeyed.

Williamson cites games and languages as examples that show that not all constitutive rules specify necessary conditions. He writes:

When one breaks a rule of a game, one does not thereby cease to be playing that game. When one breaks a rule of a language, one does not thereby cease to be speaking that language; speaking English un-grammatically is speaking English. (240)

The remark about games as such is not fully convincing. Games consist of several rules, some constitutive and some regulative (Lewis 1983). Some of these rules may contain provisions for breaches of others. If one (of the regulative) rule(s) is broken, the game may go on in virtue of a rule that specifies what to do in such a situation. At least in some sense, the set of rules of a game considered as a whole is satisfied in spite of the breach of one of the rules. This explains why the game continues, one could argue.

It is easy, however, to come up with a stronger example. Consider a soccer game during which the ball hits the net of one of the goals. If no violation (of a regulative rule) was made immediately leading up to the event and the umpire calls it, a goal has been scored. If someone was in an offside position and the umpire notices this, he will not call a goal (assuming he has not been bribed). However, if he fails to notice it and calls a goal anyway, it counts (assuming his decision is not overruled by a higher authority). One can analyse this case in the following way. Even though the condition that no one is in an offside position just before the ball enters the goal is part of the constitutive rule for 'goal', it is not a necessary condition for scoring a goal. The call of the umpire is decisive.

Williamson's second example is relevant as well. It does not involve an authoritative person such as an umpire, and should be diagnosed differently. Note first that, once again, the example is too crude. Arguably, there is no constitutive rule of speaking a language (let alone of speaking a language grammatically correct). Instead, there are various grammar rules some of which define grammatical concepts (while others regulate linguistic practices). There need not be an overarching constitutive rule that defines 'English grammar'. Independently of such a rule, it is plausible that one speaks a language if one obeys a sufficient number rather than all of its rules. However, if we suppose there is such an overarching constitutive rule, we can say that the institutional status is instantiated in spite of the fact that not all of the conditions specified by the rule are met. This is due to the fact that a sufficient number of such conditions have been met.

So it is indeed possible that the constituted act is performed even though the relevant constitutive rule has not been (fully) satisfied. Constitutive rules do not always specify necessary conditions. In some cases, an authority such as a judge or umpire plays a role. In others, the institutional status is instantiated due to the fact that a sufficient number of conditions specified by its constitutive rule has been met. Before turning to a discussion of how

this reflects on the knowledge rule and the truth rule, let me make a couple of points. First, the cases just discussed suggest that in the ideal case all the conditions specified by a constitutive rule are satisfied.[3] Someone who speaks perfect English does not violate any of the rules of grammar. Ideally, umpires make no mistakes (and are sincere). Second, even in the non-ideal cases, it is clear what constitutes the institutional status. It is the fact that a sufficient number of conditions has been met or the declaration of someone in authority, which may be based on the belief that most or all conditions have been met.

3. The Knowledge Rule, the Truth Rule, and the Traditional Analysis

A straightforward line of argument is now available against the view that knowledge is the only ingredient of the constitutive rule of assertion. First, the knowledge rule is not a constitutive rule (see section 1). Second, if knowledge were the only ingredient of a constitutive rule of assertion, we would have to know that which we assert, and we know that this is often not the case (as Williamson acknowledges; e.g. 243). If the knowledge requirement is not met, there is nothing else left to constitute the status of assertion. At least normally, there is no authority involved in making assertions. Furthermore, the sufficient number argument cannot apply if knowledge is the only ingredient. (See section 2.) It follows that assertion should not be characterised in terms of the knowledge rule.

One might want to propose a disjunctive analysis on which knowledge is only one of the ingredients of the constitutive rule. The problem with this is that the other ingredients would most likely be truth, justification, and/or belief. On the (admittedly controversial) assumption that knowledge entails all these three, it would not play an independent role. One of the three ingredients (or a combination of them) would suffice. This suggests the stronger conclusion that knowledge does not appear in the constitutive rule of assertion at all.

The preceding also indicates that the traditional analysis should not be interpreted in terms of the truth rule. The presence of an imperative already indicates it is not a constitutive rule either. Instead, the traditional analysis should be put in terms of what one might call the belief rule, which is a genuine constitutive rule:[4]

An utterance u counts as an assertion of p just if the person who utters it thereby expresses her belief that p.

In contrast to knowledge, belief does figure in the constitutive rule of assertion. The belief rule fits nicely with what Grice and Searle say about assertion. It even fits perfectly with some of the things Williamson writes. Consider the following passage: '[A]ssertion is the exterior analogue of judgement, which stands to belief as act to state.' (238) This idea is adequately captured by the belief rule.

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[3] The point requires some rephrasing in cases where multiple realisibility is relevant (think of dollars that can be made of paper as well as traces on computers). In such cases, a disjunctive analysis is called for and only one set of conditions has to be satisfied.
[4] This formulation is obviously incomplete. For one thing, the analysis does not include all conditions that make an utterance an expression of one proposition rather than another. This can be resolved by adding conditions drawn from agent-based semantics in the tradition of Grice and Lewis.

4. Conclusion

Three points have been argued for in the face of Williamson's claims to the contrary. First, assertion is not to be characterised in terms of the knowledge rule. Second, the traditional analysis should not be understood in terms of the truth rule. Third, the traditional analysis should be understood in terms of the belief rule. The arguments presented provide indirect support for the traditional analysis.[5]

References

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