

Assertions, joint epistemic actions and social practices

Miller, SRM

DOI

[10.1007/s11229-015-0745-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-015-0745-x)

Publication date

2016

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Synthese: an international journal for epistemology, methodology and philosophy of science

Citation (APA)

Miller, SRM. (2016). Assertions, joint epistemic actions and social practices. *Synthese: an international journal for epistemology, methodology and philosophy of science*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-015-0745-x>

Important note

To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable). Please check the document version above.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download, forward or distribute the text or part of it, without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license such as Creative Commons.

Takedown policy

Please contact us and provide details if you believe this document breaches copyrights. We will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Assertions, joint epistemic actions and social practices

Seumas Miller^{1,2}

Received: 18 August 2014 / Accepted: 7 April 2015 / Published online: 23 April 2015
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2015

Abstract In this paper I provide a theory of the speech act of assertion according to which assertion is a species of joint action. In doing so I rely on a theory of joint action developed in more detail elsewhere. Here we need to distinguish between the genus, joint action, and an important species of joint action, namely, what I call joint epistemic action. In the case of the latter, but not necessarily the former, participating agents have epistemic goals, e.g., the acquisition of knowledge. It is joint epistemic action that assertion is a species of.

Keywords Assertion · Joint action · Epistemic action

John MacFarlane has usefully distinguished four different types of theories of assertion (MacFarlane 2011).¹ These are as follows. To assert is to: (i) express an attitude; (ii) make a move defined by the constitutive rules of assertion; (iii) add information to the conversational common ground; and (iv) undertake a commitment. Theorists advocating type (i) accounts include Williams (2003), Grice (1969), and Bach and Harnish (1979). The attitude expressed is belief in the case of Williams and various different audience-directed intentions in the case of Grice and Bach/Harnish. The most well-known version of type (ii) accounts is that of Williamson (1996, p. 494) according to which there is a (constitutive) knowledge rule to the effect that one must assert that

¹ I note that some versions of some of these theories have overlapping characteristics.

✉ Seumas Miller
semiller@csu.edu.au

¹ Charles Sturt University, Canberra, Australia

² Delft University of Technology, The Hague, The Netherlands

p only if one knows that p.² Other like theories deploy a truth rule or a reasonable-to-believe rule or some such (see, for example, Douven 2006). The most influential type (iii) account is that of Robert Stalnaker according to which an assertion “should be understood as a proposal to change the context by adding the content to the information presupposed” (Stalnaker 1999, pp. 10–11).³ Theorists advocating type (iv) accounts include John Searle (1969) and Robert Brandom (1983, 1994). According to Brandom, for example, “In asserting a sentence, one not only licences further assertions on the part of others, but commits oneself to justifying the original claim” (1983, p. 641).

Each of these four types of theories, at least in a pure form, is open to damaging objections, as MacFarlane and others (see, for example, Pagin 2014) have demonstrated. Yet each seems to contain at least an element of truth. On the other hand, from my own perspective each shares a common defect with the others. For each seems to be overly focussed on the assertor as opposed to the addressee. At most, the addressee is someone who has something done to them by the assertor or is provided with an opportunity by the assertor. Thus, according to Grice, the speaker intends to get the hearer to believe something, and according to Brandom, the assertor licenses further assertions on the part of the addressee.

In this paper I provide a theory of the speech act of assertion which, (a), seeks to accommodate the basic intuitions underlying (respectively) each of the four types of theory identified above and, (b), gives the addressee a central place alongside the assertor by framing assertion as a species of joint action.⁴ Moreover, I suggest that framing assertion as joint action facilitates understanding of the intuitions underlying the four extant types of theory. Further, joint action is a building block in the analysis of the notion of a social practice and, in my view, assertion is a social practice. Joint action is also a building block in the analysis of the context in which single assertions are performed, namely, various stretches of cooperative activity, such as conversations. Accordingly, it turns out that contra theorists such as Pagin,⁵ assertions are not only social actions but social actions in three distinct senses. They are interpersonal speaker-hearer joint actions. They are also instances of, and depend upon, the more complex social form of a social practice. Thirdly, single assertions are elements of cooperative enterprises, such as conversations, that provide them with context and relevance.

In elaborating my theory I am providing constitutive conditions for the speech act of assertion as opposed to merely individuating conditions.⁶ Nevertheless, these constitutive conditions will be sufficient to individuate assertion. However, some of these constitutive conditions are not particular to assertions and are not necessary

² See also Brown (2010), who discusses the idea that epistemic standards for knowledge might be different from those for assertion. For discussion of the view that epistemic standards are context relative and the implications this might have for the relation between knowledge and assertion see Hawthorne (2004).

³ For criticisms and his reply see: Hawthorne and Magidor (2009) and Stalnaker (2009).

⁴ This is a different enterprise from that of Clark and Carlson (1982) when they attempt to accommodate third party members of an audience who are not the actual addressees of assertions. Goldberg (2014) has recently argued that assertions give rise to certain hearer moral entitlements, e.g. to assume that the speaker acknowledges being responsible for having the relevant warranting authority.

⁵ Pagin (2004) argues that assertions are not social.

⁶ Williamson (1996), for example, offers only to provide one constitutive condition that, nevertheless, individuates assertions.

elements of the set of individuating conditions. For example, the relevance condition I make use of is not.⁷

With regard to (b), I rely on a theory of joint action developed in more detail elsewhere (Miller 1992, 2001, 2007). Here we need to distinguish between the genus, joint action, and an important species of joint action, namely, what I call joint *epistemic* action (Miller 2015).⁸ In the case of the latter, but not necessarily the former, participating agents have epistemic goals, e.g., the acquisition of knowledge. It is joint epistemic action that assertion is a species of.

Let me now mention the main features of the theory of assertion that I elaborate and defend below. First, assertion is a joint epistemic action. Second, assertion is social in the three senses mentioned above. Third, assertions involve expressions of judgment rather than, say, belief. Fourth, relevance is a constitutive feature of assertions and not merely an extraneous conversational principle.⁹ Fifth, the social practice of assertion has as its point or telos (*collective good* in my parlance) the provision of true and relevant (informational) content and this end is internal to the practice. I also note that if my theory of assertion as joint epistemic action proves to be correct, at least in general terms, then this has a number of wider theoretical implications. For one thing, the explanatory power of the notion of joint action will evidently have been greatly increased. It will now be viewed as central to the understanding of speech acts and (relatedly) much epistemic activity, given the centrality of assertion to both of these domains. For another, the research agenda of relational individualism within the philosophy of social action, as opposed to atomistic individualism and collectivism, will have been progressed.¹⁰

In the first section of the paper I outline the theory of joint action and various social notions derived from it that are required for my account of assertion, notably the notion of a social practice. In the second Sect. 1 outline an account of epistemic action and, specifically, joint epistemic action; again this is required for my account of assertion as joint epistemic action and, in particular, is required to account for the active role of the addressee in the social practice of assertion. In the third Sect. 1 provide my theory of assertion as joint epistemic action. In the fourth and final Sect. 1 deal with various objections to the theory.

1 Joint action

Joint actions are actions involving a number of agents performing interdependent actions in order to realise some common goal (Miller 1992). Examples of joint action are: two people dancing together, a number of tradesmen building a house and a team

⁷ Grice (1975) holds that relevance is a conversational maxim and, as such, is not constitutive of his account of speaker-meaning or assertion.

⁸ For related notions see Fallis (2007) and Corlett (2008).

⁹ Sperber and Wilson (1986) argue that communication comes with a guarantee of relevance.

¹⁰ Atomistic individualism (Taylor 1985) is associated with methodological individualism, collectivism with theorists such as Durkheim (1965) and, more recently, French (1984) and, in a somewhat different way in terms of collective minds, Pettit (2007). For a set of recent discussions of these issues see Konzelmann-Ziv and Schmid (2014).

of researchers conducting an attitudinal survey. Joint action is to be distinguished from individual action on the one hand, and from the ‘actions’ of corporate bodies on the other. Thus an individual walking down the road or shooting at a target are instances of individual action. A nation declaring war or a government taking legal action against a public company are instances of *corporate* action.¹¹ My concern in this paper is only with joint action.

The concept of joint action covers a scale from very simple joint actions to very complex ones. A very simple joint action would be one involving two co-present agents each of whom performs a simple individual action, and does so simultaneously with the other agent, and in relation to a collective end that is to be realised within the temporal horizon of the immediate experience of the agents. An example of a simple individual action is raising one’s arm; an example of a simple joint action is two people greeting one another by shaking hands.

Complex joint actions consist of multiple simpler joint actions (Miller 2001, Chap. 5; 2010, Chaps. 1 and 2). Consider, for example, the joint action of building an office block. It involves teams of bricklayers, carpenters and so on, and each team performs multiple joint actions over a period of time. Moreover, the larger complex joint action of building the office block provides the context and rationale for the simpler constitutive joint actions. Again, consider an ongoing scientific project, such as the human genome project, involving teams of scientists working together, and each team performing multiple joint actions during the course of the collective project. As in the office block example, the larger complex joint action of providing a complete description of the human genome provides the context and rationale for the simpler constitutive joint actions. However, unlike the office block example, in the case of the scientific project the joint activity is essentially epistemic in character. I elaborate the notion of joint epistemic action below and argue that, (a), single assertions are joint epistemic actions and, (b) a single assertion typically takes place in a more complex diachronic structure of speech acts, such as a conversation. It is such a diachronic structure of speech acts that provides much of the context and rationale for a given single assertion. Indeed, it is this context that gives the single assertion its relevance (or lack thereof) (Sperber and Wilson 1986).

My account of joint action is to be contrasted with three other influential theories of joint action, namely, those of, respectively, John Searle (1990), Margaret Gilbert (2014) and Michael Bratman (1992).¹² Searle’s account is collectivist in that he holds that the defining mental features of joint actions are collective intentions which are not reducible to individual intentions. According to Gilbert, joint action is inherently normative and necessarily involves a commitment (joint commitment) on the part of the participants. Here the notion of commitment is something like institutional commitment but, at any rate, is stronger than commitment in the weak sense of non-reversibility (Miller 1995). For example, at some point a high-diver’s decision to dive

¹¹ I have argued elsewhere (Miller 2001, Chap. 5; 2010; Chaps. 1 and 2) that, properly speaking, there are no such things as corporate actions that are irreducible to individual actions (taking joint actions as relational individual actions).

¹² A fourth relevant influential theorist is Raimo Tuomela (2013). However, Tuomela’s view oscillates between the views of the other three.

is non-reversible since she has taken a leap and now cannot return to the standing position on the platform. Bratman's account is individualist rather than collectivist; he also eschews commitment as a defining property. I side with Bratman against Searle and Gilbert and have provided detailed counter-arguments against Searle and Gilbert elsewhere (Miller 1995). However, on Bratman's analysis participants in joint action necessarily have intentions, rather than merely beliefs, with respect to one another's contributory actions. In my view participants have beliefs rather than intentions with respect to the contributory actions of their fellow participants in joint action (see below). The notion that each participant in a joint action necessarily has intentions with respect to the contributory individual actions of the other participants generates multiple implausible instances of over-determination, given each agent has an intention with respect to his or her own actions. At any rate, I have argued against Bratman's account in detail elsewhere (Miller 1995).

1.1 Collective ends

Joint actions are interdependent actions directed toward a common goal or end. But what is such an end? This notion of a common goal or, as I shall refer to it, a collective end, is a construction out of the prior notion of an individual end. Roughly speaking, a collective end is an individual end more than one agent has, and which is such that, if it is realised, it is realised by all, or most, of the actions of the agents involved; the individual action of any given agent is only part of the means by which the end is realised. The realisation of the collective end is the bringing into existence of a state of affairs. Each agent has this state of affairs as an individual end. (It is also a state of affairs aimed at under more or less the same description by each agent.) So a collective end is a species of individual end (Miller 1992, 2001, Chap. 2). I note that on my account intentions and ends, including collective ends, do not necessarily involve commitments in any other than the weak sense of non-reversibility. On the other hand, some collective ends do have normative force in a stronger sense and, as a consequence, generate commitments in the sense of obligations. Consider, for example, the collective end of a team of lifeguards to rescue a drowning swimmer caught in a dangerous rip. Here the collective end is also a collective good, a notion I return to below.

1.2 Mutual knowledge and openness

Mutual true belief is such that two agents, A and B have a mutual true belief that *p* if A believes truly that *p*, B believes truly *p*, A believes truly that B believes truly *p* etc (see, for example, Lewis 1969, Chap. 2; Heal 1978; Smith 1982).¹³ The collective end of a joint action is a matter of mutual true belief among the participants in the joint action.

¹³ There is a need for an excluder clause to supplement this brief description that I have offered here.

Mutual true belief is closely related to another concept, namely, that of openness. Openness is mutual sensory awareness (hereafter mutual awareness) of an object and of oneself and the other person(s) as having awareness of that object. In the case of linguistic ‘objects’, speakers and hearers have mutual sensory awareness of utterances of sentences, i.e. of certain sorts of structured sounds and marks. By sensory I mean to exclude introspectible phenomena such as bodily sensations, e.g. pains.

Openness in my sense entails mutual true belief but the reverse is not true; there can be mutual true belief without openness, e.g. two people in a room could have mutual true beliefs of an unseen object in an adjoining room. Openness is, I suggest, a primitive notion not reducible, in particular, to iterated awareness.¹⁴ Thus A and B’s mutual awareness of x is not equivalent to A is aware of x, B is aware of x, A is aware that B is aware of x etc.

Behavioural, but not mental, actions can be objects of mutual awareness in this sense. If A performs action x openly to B then A performs x intending (successfully) that his intentional performance of x be an object of mutual awareness.

1.3 Conventions and social norms

Basic joint actions can also be distinguished from, what I will call, joint procedures. An agent has a joint procedure to x, if he x-s in a recurring situation, and does so on condition that other agents x. (Procedures are different from repetitions of the same action in a single situation, e.g., rowing or skipping.) Thus British drivers have a procedure to drive on the left hand side of the road. Each Briton drives on the left whenever he drives, and he drives on the left on condition the other agents drive on the left. Moreover, joint procedures are followed in order to achieve collective goals, e.g., to avoid car collisions. Joint procedures are in fact conventions (Miller 1992, 2001, Chap. 2).

It is important to distinguish conventions from social norms. The genus social norm has a number of species. Social *moral* norms are regularities in action involving interdependence of action among members of a social group, but regularities in action that are governed by a moral purpose or principle (Miller 1992, 2001, Chap. 2). For example, avoiding telling lies is a social norm. Some regularities in action are both conventions and social norms, e.g., driving on the left hand side of the road.

In addition to conventions and social norms there are norms *simpliciter*, including epistemic norms. Such norms are principles governing some human activity, but principles that derive from, or are inherent in, that activity, as opposed to being social forms, such as conventions or social norms, that govern some such pre-existing activity. So having evidence for one’s beliefs is an epistemic norm which might exist independently of any convention or social norm to that effect. Naturally, many norms are also conventions and/or social norms; having evidence for one’s beliefs is a case in point.

¹⁴ Broad (1928) appeared to have this kind of notion in mind when he spoke of ‘extraspection’. See also Eitan et al. (2005).

1.4 Social practices

Social practices are a species of joint action and include such things as games, buying/selling transactions in a market and, importantly for our purposes here, speech acts such as assertion.

Joint actions that are instances of a social practice are comprised of a complex of differentiated, individual actions directed to a collective end, e.g. buyers and sellers, speakers and hearers. Moreover, such joint actions are regularly performed by multiple agents in a recurring situation, e.g. buyer/seller transactions in a market (A/B, B/C, C/D, A/C, A/D etc), and are convention-governed, e.g. conventions of language.

Further the constitutive individual actions of such joint actions are role performances by participants in a pre-existing structure of task defined roles, e.g. goalkeeper/wing, speaker/hearer, buyer/seller. So social practices are unlike simpler social forms such as conventions and social norms.

Finally, the joint actions that are instances of a social practice are dependent for their existence on that practice. Any particular instance of a practice, e.g. an assertion by S to H at time t_1 , cannot exist independently of the practice. In this respect assertions differ from one-off acts of so-called speaker-meaning (Grice 1957; see also Bach and Harnish 1979). For more on this point see Sect. 3.2.

2 Epistemic action

As noted above, epistemic action is action directed to an epistemic end. Here we can distinguish between so-called ‘knowledge-that’ and ‘knowledge-how’; the former being propositional knowledge (knowledge of the truth of some proposition), the latter being practical knowledge (knowledge how to undertake some activity or produce some artefact). The definition of propositional knowledge, in particular, is philosophically controversial. My own inclination is to be pluralist and assume a kind of Wittgensteinian ‘family resemblance’ conception according to which there are multiple related notions (arguably, both internalist and externalist ones). At any rate, I will assume for our purposes here that someone, A, has knowledge that p if A has a true belief that p and A has a justification for believing that p that does not rely on some other false belief (see, for example, Moser 1989). This is consistent with knowledge also being true belief and/or being true belief as a result of a reliable method that is unknown to the knower.

The methods of acquiring propositional knowledge are manifold; for example, in the case of scientific knowledge they include observation, calculation and testimony. Moreover, the acquisition of these methods is very often the acquisition of knowledge-how, e.g. how to calculate, how to use a microscope, how to ‘read’ an X-ray chart. My concern here is only with epistemic action directed at propositional knowledge.¹⁵

There is a distinction to be made between such epistemic action and what might be termed behavioural action. Behavioural action is action involving bodily action

¹⁵ See Miller (2015) for an earlier version of this notion and of the material in this section.

of some sort. The contrast with behavioural action is mental actions, e.g. judgments made on the basis of defeasible processes of inference-making.

Naturally, epistemic action can involve behavioural action however, I suggest, that this is not necessarily the case; whereas, epistemic action necessarily involves mental actions (specifically, mental actions directed at truth, knowledge, understanding or other epistemic end).

One important form of epistemic action which does involve behavioural action is assertion; in particular, assertions typically involve the production of sounds (e.g. in speech) or marks (e.g. in writing).

With respect to action, both behavioural and epistemic, there is a distinction to be made between the intentional action considered independently of any external end it might have (the core action) and the action taken as an action directed to that external end (the expanded action). Thus agent A might intentionally fire the gun having as an (external) end to kill agent B. A has, if he succeeds, performed two actions, firing the gun (core) and killing B (expanded), the former being a means to the latter.

Notice that most epistemic actions, considered independently of any external end, are mental actions and, in particular, acts of judgment. In the case of judgments the end is truth and truth is an internal end. One cannot not aim at truth and yet be making a judgment; one cannot in making a judgment be aiming at falsity.¹⁶

However, some epistemic actions have external ends and, as such, can have either epistemic or behavioural core actions. Thus gathering evidence, (e.g. putting the blood sample from a crime scene in a bag), might be a behavioural action directed to an external epistemic end, (e.g. to determine whether or not it is the suspect Jones' blood).

On the other hand, making a judgment whether or not that p might have as an epistemic end to determine whether or not that q, e.g. determining whether or not the blood sample belongs to Jones might have as an epistemic end to determine whether or not Jones was as the scene of the crime. Epistemic actions sometimes have behavioural actions as their core action and sometimes epistemic actions. If we define epistemic actions simply as actions directed to an epistemic end then both sorts of action will count as epistemic actions.

The justification of a true belief involves a process of reflection that provides good and decisive reasons for the believer to truly believe the content of the belief in question. Moreover, this reasoning is in large part theoretical, as opposed to practical, reasoning. For it is reasoning that terminates in a belief (or structure of beliefs), as opposed to an action. So justification is of two sorts; justification in relation to actions, and justification in relation to beliefs.

An important difference is that actions can often be done at will, e.g., I can raise my right arm now, whereas apparently this is not so for belief acquisition, e.g., if I believe that the world is round I cannot simply decide to believe that it is flat.

¹⁶ The idea of truth as teleological has been advanced by Dummett (1978, Chap. 1, 1981, Chap. 10).

However, this contrast between actions and beliefs should not be overstated.¹⁷ First, one can certainly in many instances freely choose to have neither the belief that p nor the belief that not p ; one can do so by refraining from inquiring or otherwise investigating whether or not it is the case that p . And, of course, in such cases typically one can freely choose to investigate whether or not that p , in which case one is in effect choosing to come to have either the belief that p or the belief that not p , depending on the outcome of the investigation. In short, one can often freely choose between an absence of belief and the presence of belief with respect to some matter. For many beliefs are, and can only be, acquired after a process of investigation, e.g. the belief that Sutcliffe is the Yorkshire Ripper (or that he is not) could not have been acquired if detectives had not decided to investigate the murders of Yorkshire prostitutes. That is, without this act of will—to conduct an investigation—the detectives would simply not have had a belief as to the identity of the Yorkshire Ripper; they would have remained in a state of ignorance.

So much for choosing whether to remain in ignorance (and hence have no belief with respect to the matter in question) or come to have knowledge (and, therefore, belief) with respect to the matter. However, what of cases in which one can freely choose between having the belief that p and having the belief that not p ? As long as the notion of freely choosing is understood broadly, then it seems that there are many such cases.

Unlike beliefs, judgments are episodic acts and not merely dispositions.¹⁸ However, beliefs are often the result of an act of judgement. Moreover, evidence-based acts of judgement are typically freely performed. For example, an examinee comes to believe on the basis of a series of calculations that the answer to a complex mathematical problem is zero; the examinee is not absolutely certain, after all she could have made a mistake, but after checking she is fully confident of her own judgement. As it turns out the examinee gave the right answer based on valid mathematical reasoning. Surely the inference based judgement that terminated in her belief that the answer was zero was freely performed. By this I do not simply mean that she freely chose to try to answer the mathematical problem, although this is also true; rather I mean that in being ‘compelled’ by logic her act of judgement was, nevertheless, freely performed.

Now consider a second example. The belief that Sutcliffe was the Yorkshire Ripper was formed as a result of the detectives’ judgement that on the basis of the evidence

¹⁷ See Walker (1996) and Montmarquet (1993, Chap. 1) for a related defence of the sort of view I am here espousing. See also the exchange between Stern (1997) and Walker (1998). For a more recent treatment favourable to my own view and that of Montmarquet and Walker see Frankish (2007). Note that the general view I am espousing is that one can be *directly* responsible for some of one’s beliefs, i.e. that one’s responsibility for some of one’s belief is not dependent on one’s responsibility for some action that led to those beliefs. In short, doxastic responsibility does not reduce to responsibility for actions. Note also that there are different accounts of this general view that one can be directly responsible for some of one’s beliefs. For example, I disagree with Walker in that I hold that the judgment that p is partially independent of the desire or goal to know whether or not that p . A further point is that if the general direct responsibility view shared by myself, Montmarquet, Walker and Frankish turned out to be incorrect, the basic arguments in this paper for joint epistemic action could be recast in terms of a notion of *indirect* moral responsibility. However, obviously from my perspective such recasting would not be entirely satisfactory.

¹⁸ For the classic defence of this view see Geach (1957).

gathered he was the Yorkshire Ripper. Naturally, their judgement was not freely made in the sense that they could make any old judgement that they felt like making, including a judgement that was completely inconsistent with the evidence. But freely performed judgements are not to be identified with capricious or irrational judgements.

In this respect judgements are akin to actions in general; an action that is ‘compelled’ by reason does not thereby cease to be a freely chosen action. Suppose A desires to go home immediately after work to relax and have dinner, and A has also promised A’s spouse that A will do so; suppose further that A has no other competing desires or obligations, and the only available means is to take the bus. Therefore, A takes the bus home. A has good and decisive reasons for taking the bus home, and A has no reasons to perform any competing action. So A’s taking the bus home is ‘compelled’ by reason; but it is no less a freely performed action for being so. Naturally, A could have chosen to do otherwise than take the bus home, albeit this might have been somewhat psychologically difficult for A given A is a rational being.

So the sharp contrast drawn between, on the one hand, comings to believe and, in particular, judgments and, on the other, actions—with respect to being freely chosen—does not hold up.

As is the case with non-epistemic action, much epistemic action—whether it be propositional or practical epistemic action or, more likely, an integrated mix of both—is joint action, i.e. joint epistemic action. Joint epistemic action is knowledge acquisition involving multiple epistemic agents seeking to realize a collective epistemic end. For example, a team of scientists seeking knowledge of the cure for cancer is engaged in joint epistemic action (Miller 2013).

In cases of joint epistemic action there is mutual true belief among the epistemic agents that each has the same collective epistemic end, e.g. to discover the cure for cancer. Moreover, there is typically a division of epistemic labour. Thus in scientific cases some scientists are engaged in devising experiments, others replicating experiments, and so on. So, as is the case with joint action more generally, joint epistemic action involves interdependence of individual action, albeit interdependence of individual epistemic action.

As we saw above, knowledge of the cure for cancer, for example, is joint epistemic action that involves a collective epistemic end and also involves a division of epistemic labour and interdependence of epistemic action. The further point to be made here is that there is interdependence in relation to such collective epistemic ends. This is because, given the need for replication of experiments by others, each can only know that *p* is the cure for cancer—to continue with our example—given that others also know this, i.e. there is interdependence in relation to the collective end of knowledge.

A collective epistemic end can be both a collective intrinsic good—and thus end in itself—and also the means to further ends. Knowledge of the cure for cancer is a case in point. Such knowledge consists of propositional and practical knowledge; knowledge of the cure for cancer and knowledge how to produce it. However, this knowledge has as a further (collective) end the actual production of the cure (say, a drug). And this end has in turn a still further end, namely, to save lives.

3 Assertion

Many truth-aiming attitudes or actions, such as beliefs, inferences, perceptual judgements, assertions to one-self, and so on are individual, not joint, actions or attitudes. However, I contend that assertions are joint actions and, in particular, joint epistemic actions.

Assertions presuppose acts of communication; speakers communicate to hearers as part of the means by which to assert to hearers.¹⁹ But what is an act of communication? I suggest that it is a joint action comprised of an individual speaker-action and an individual hearer-action, both directed to a collective end. Essentially, the speaker says something to the hearer and the hearer interprets the speaker's saying; the collective end aimed at by both speaker and hearer is that the hearer understand what the speaker is saying.

Specifically, the speaker, S, openly says that p to the hearer, H, where 'saying' is intentionally uttering a sentence, U, and, thereby, expressing the thought that p to H with the intended illocutionary force of an assertion; the latter assertoric force being indicated by the mood of the sentence (typically, the indicative mood in English) taken in conjunction with the communicative context. The hearer, H, interprets the speaker's utterance, U, as S saying that p with the intended illocutionary force of an assertion: H understands U. That H comes to understand U is the collective end of both S and H, and S and H mutually truly believe that each has performed their contributory action in the service of this collective end. Therefore, this conjunct of individual actions is a joint action; communication, thus understood, is a joint action. What of assertion?

Assertion is a social practice in the sense described in Sect. 1 above, and individual assertions are joint actions which are instantiations of this social practice. Accordingly, individual assertions have the aims (collective ends) of the social practice of assertion or, more precisely, speakers and hearers by virtue of having performed a joint act of communication (with intended assertoric force) represent themselves as having these aims and, in particular, do not openly not have these aims.

The constitutive aims of the social practice of assertion are, I suggest, twofold: (i) relevant (informational) content, and; (ii) truth.

The first point or aim or collective end of the practice of assertion is relevant (informational) content with respect to the situation in question, whether it be a conversation, formal setting of communication such as a courtroom setting, or merely a non-communicative situation (e.g. a situation of danger) calling for a one-off communicative response (e.g. a warning by means of an assertion such as, 'The ice is thin over there'²⁰).

If relevance is a constitutive aim of assertion then there will be a presumption on any occasion of a putative assertion that the speaker is aiming at relevant (informational) content and that the hearer judges that s/he is so aiming; indeed, the speaker represents

¹⁹ For an early influential account of communication and (relatedly) speaker-meaning see Grice (1957). For the recent influential so-called 'Knowledge Account' of assertion see Williamson (2000, Chap. 11). For an account of the communication/assertion distinction and their relation see Sperber and Wilson (1986, Chap. 3).

²⁰ This example is famously discussed by Strawson (1971).

him/herself as aiming at relevant content and the hearer represents him/herself as trusting the speaker in this regard i.e. as judging that the speaker is aiming at relevant content.

This aiming-at-relevance presumption can, of course, be offset by, in particular, the speaker *openly* not aiming at relevance or being *openly* taken by the hearer not to be so aiming. Accordingly, I suggest that there is no assertion (the putative assertion is null and void) if the speaker is *openly* not aiming at relevance, e.g. makes an obviously irrelevant, flippant remark, and/or the hearer *openly* judges (or otherwise openly expresses the belief) that the speaker is not aiming at relevance. There is no act of assertion since a constitutive aim of the social practice is openly not being aimed at. This relevance condition is, I suggest, the way to accommodate the intuition informing those theories of assertion, such as Stalnaker's, which emphasise a context to which information is added.

On the other hand, an intended assertion is an unsuccessful assertion (but still an assertion) if: (i) the speaker attempted but failed to be relevant and/or; (ii) the hearer merely judges that the assertion is not in fact relevant (but not that the speaker did not aim at relevance).

The second constitutive aim of assertion is truth and the presumptive conditions parallel those that obtain for the aim of relevance. If truth is a constitutive aim of assertion then there will be a presumption on any occasion of a putative assertion that the speaker is aiming at true content and that the hearer judges that s/he is so doing; indeed, *the speaker represents him/herself as aiming at truth and the hearer represents him/herself as trusting the speaker* in this regard i.e. as judging that the speaker is aiming at truth. This condition accommodates, I suggest, the intuition informing the knowledge account of assertion (and closely related accounts).

If the speaker is aiming at truth in asserting that p then the following two conditions obtain (and are mutually known to obtain by both speakers and hearers): (i) the speaker does not have the occurrent belief that not p, and; (ii) the speaker has an epistemic warrant for p.

This truth-aiming presumption can, of course, be offset by, in particular, the speaker *openly* not aiming at the truth or being *openly* taken by the hearer not to be so aiming. Accordingly, there is no assertion (the putative assertion is null and void) if the speaker is openly not aiming at truth, e.g. makes an obviously false, flippant remark, and/or the hearer openly judges (or otherwise openly expresses the belief) that the speaker is not aiming at the truth. There is no act of assertion since a constitutive aim of the social practice is openly not being aimed at.

Note that if the two constitutive conditions are met and the speaker is aiming at both truth and relevance then the speaker is making a *judgment*. Indeed, for the speaker to aim at both relevance and truth in the contexts in question *is* for the speaker to make a judgment. Moreover, as mentioned above, the upshot or result of an act of judgment is typically a belief state.

Note also that if the speaker is openly aiming at both truth and relevance then the speaker is *expressing her judgment* and, typically, doing so by uttering a sentence in the indicative mood. This is, I suggest, the substance of the intuition informing expressivist theories of assertion.

Note further that if the speaker represents himself as aiming at the truth, i.e. does not offset the presumption by openly not aiming at the truth, and yet the hearer openly expresses the view that the speaker is not aiming at the truth, then the speaker will have attempted to perform an act of assertion but will have failed to perform an act of assertion. For in such a case, the presumption in favour of hearer-trust has been offset by the hearer. In such cases the presumption in favour of hearer-trust has to be offset prior to the speaker's completion of his assertoric act; or, at least, the presumption cannot be offset retrospectively. Consider the following example. A would-be hearer states to the speaker, "On this topic every statement you make is a lie and always has been; don't even waste your breath asserting to me that *p* because you know that I know that you believe that not *p*". The speaker, nevertheless, 'asserts' that *p* and the hearer responds, "Like I just said; on this topic you are a liar". In such a case the speaker has attempted to assert that *p* but failed to do so.

On the other hand, an assertion is unsuccessful (but still an assertion) if: (i) the speaker openly aimed at truth by, for example, expressing his judgment that *p* by saying that *p*, but failed i.e. *p* is false and/or; (ii) the hearer judges that *p* is false (e.g. because the hearer believes that the speaker's epistemic warrant is inadequate.)

If the above account of the social practice of assertion is correct then a successful act of assertion by *S* to *H* that *p* (by means of utterance *U*) will consist of the following.

- (1) *S* and *H* perform a joint action of communication of *p* (with intended assertoric force);
- (2) *S* aims at truth (by making a judgment) and *H* trusts *S* (by making a judgment);
- (3) *S* has as an end (in saying that *p* with intended assertoric illocutionary force) that *H* judge that *p*: i.e. *S* asserts that *p* [given conditions (1) and (2)];
- (4) *p* is true;
- (5) *H* judges that *p* (at least in part on the basis of an inference from *S*'s assertion that *p*);
- (6) *S* and *H* mutually truly believe that *p*²¹;
- (7) Collective end, *E*, of practice of assertion is realized, namely, that *S* and *H* mutually truly believe that *p**

Here it is important to understand the meaning of the asterisk attached to the proposition that *p*. When the collective end is realized then *S* and *H* mutually truly believe that *p*. However, prior to its realization the content of the collective end is not the proposition that *p*; since *H*, in particular, does not know, believe or judge that *p*. Rather the content of the collective end is something to the effect that—in the case where it is simply a matter of determining whether or not *p* is true or false—either *p* or not *p* (whichever is true, assuming both are relevant). In the case where the question at issue is open-ended, e.g. Who is the Yorkshire Ripper?, then it is not simply a matter of determining whether *p* is true or false; rather the answer is some proposition the

²¹ Hence the paradoxical nature of G. E. Moore's assertoric form 'I believe that *p* but not *p*'. There is a voluminous literature on this issue but see, for example, Pruss (2011). Here I note that on my account such an assertion is not strictly logically inconsistent with having the collective end of mutual true belief that *p*. Perhaps it is openly infringing the requirement to aim at the truth. If so, then it is not an assertion on my account. On the other hand, it might be that one is making a judgment that is inconsistent with one's prior belief in which case it could well be an assertion. I cannot pursue this issue further here.

content of which is unknown by H (as opposed to the truth or falsity of known content being unknown by H). For simplicity, I shall use the asterisk to refer to both kinds of case.

I note that this phenomenon of the content of the collective end necessarily being unknown by at least some of the participants is a feature of joint epistemic action but not of joint behavioral action. In joint behavioral action the aim is to bring into existence the state of affairs specified in the content of the collective end, whereas in the case of joint epistemic action the aim is in fact to provide the required specification of the content of the collective end.

In conclusion, then, successful assertion is a joint epistemic action (having a constitutive joint action of communication as part of the means to its collective end).

3.1 Formal and informal assertions

Before turning to objections to this account and making replies to these objections, I must note an important distinction between different types of assertion, namely, formal and informal assertions.

Formal assertions are assertions in which there is a convention (or law etc) in force to the effect that performing a joint action of communication counts as making an assertion. In the case of informal assertions there is no such convention (or law etc.)

An example of a formal assertion would be a signed statement made by a witness to a crime. Notice that even if the witness and the police officer who takes the statement (and the members of the court who subsequently listen to the statement in court) mutually truly believe that the witness is lying and has no epistemic warrant for what they have said, the assertion stands; so, for example, the witness can be charged with the crime of knowingly making a false assertion, if good and decisive evidence to this effect came to light.

By contrast, in the case of informal assertions there is no such convention (or law etc.) and so such mutual true belief of the speaker's insincerity may well render the speaker's assertion null and void. The point here is that there is no convention to, so to speak, guarantee that the acts of communication in informal settings count as assertions.

This distinction between formal and informal assertions impacts on the notion in play in our definition of assertions of 'openly not aiming at truth (and/or relevance)'. Openly not aiming at truth will render a putative assertion null and void, whether it be a formal or informal assertion. However, what counts as openly not aiming in some context of an assertion is affected by the existence or non-existence of the convention. In formal assertions the existence of the convention renders various modes of openly not aiming inoperative. Thus the speaker might assert that *p* while at the same time providing evidence to the hearer that what he is saying is false, e.g. asserting that he is unable to lift heavy objects while simultaneously showing a photo of himself lifting a heavy object. If this was a putative informal assertion then it may well be rendered null and void, but not so if it was a formal one.

3.2 Truth is internal to assertion

I suggest that judgments and assertions have three important features in common. Two of these features have already been discussed, namely, that they are truth-aiming and relevance-aiming acts. The third feature that they share is practical necessity. For rational creatures, such as human beings, judgment making is a practical necessity; it is an unavoidable feature of rational agency. Moreover, for rational *social* creatures, such as human beings, assertion is a practical necessity; it is an unavoidable feature of the social and, therefore, communicative life of rational agents. I return to this point below.

We saw earlier that truth is internal to judgments; one cannot judge and yet not aim at truth, i.e. one cannot in making a judgement aim at falsity. The (collective) ends of some social practices are, I suggest, internal to those practices and assertion is a case in point. So assertion is analogous to judgment. However, assertion is a social practice and not a mental act; so the analogy should not be pressed too far. In particular, one can perform an assertion without aiming at the truth, e.g. by telling a lie. So what is the difference between those social practices in which the collective end is internal to the practice and those in which it is external to the practice?

Let us contrast the social practice of assertion with the social practice of producers selling to buyers in a competitive market. Let us assume that truth is the internal (collective) end of the former, and (by means of the much vaunted ‘invisible hand’) the production of an adequate quantum of reasonably priced goods is the external (collective) end of the latter.

I now suggest that the collective end, E, of some social practice, e.g. a competitive market, is *external* to that practice only if:

- (i) On all or most occasions the participants in the practice can perform the constitutive joint action which is the means to E, but not in fact aim at E, e.g. they can do so in a competitive market in which the ultimate collective end is to produce an adequate quantum of reasonably priced goods (and market actors agree to regulation to achieve this collective end), but the proximate individual end of each participant (producer-seller) to sell as much goods at the highest price possible (and vice-versa for buyers);
- (ii) Participants on any one occasion - but not on all or even most occasions—can perform the constitutive action which is the means to E, (e.g. a sell/buy transaction) and in doing so openly not aim at E (e.g. not aim at producing an adequate quantum of reasonably priced goods).

Note that a social practice, whether it has a constitutive external or constitutive internal collective end, will cease to exist if its constitutive collective end is not realised reasonably often. However, since the external collective end of a market is only contingently related to the actions of the buyers and sellers, it follows that the collective end of the market might, or might not, be realised if it is not aimed at by most of the market actors. Accordingly, it is not a necessary condition of a social practice with an external end that most of the participants aim at that collective end most of the time (although, it is a necessary condition of such a practice that most of them do not openly not aim at the collective end in question most of the time).

By contrast, the collective end, E, is *internal* to a social practice, e.g. the social practice of assertion, only if:

- (i) It is not the case that on all or even most occasions the participants can perform the constitutive joint action which is the means to E (e.g. S asserts that p to H) and not aim at E (e.g. not aim at truth);
- (ii) No participant can on any occasion perform the constitutive joint action which is the means to E (e.g. S assert that p to H) but in doing so openly not aim at E (e.g. S openly does not aim at truth).

Thus, by contrast with competitive markets, if assertors mostly aim at falsity the social practice of assertion will collapse. Moreover, assertors have to avoid openly not aiming at truth on every occasion, on pain of rendering their putative assertion on any occasion on which they openly do not aim at truth null and void.

What are the normative consequences of these two properties of the social practice of assertion given that, as we saw above, participation in the social practice of assertion is a practical necessity for rational social animals, such as human beings?

First, each human being is committed to the continuation of, and their participation in, the social practice of assertion in the strong sense that it is not a practice that he or she could do without.²² Participation in the social practice of assertion is not simply something desired or capriciously aimed at. Rather it is a practical necessity in light of the unavoidable need that human beings have to inform and be informed. More specifically, as we saw above, the social practice of assertion realises the collective end of mutual possession of relevant true beliefs on an ongoing basis: it realises this collective *good* that none of us can do without (Miller 2010, Chap. 2, 2014). Second, since truth is a constitutive collective end of the social practice of assertion then truth-aiming is a requirement of the act of assertion. These are the premises of my argument. What is the conclusion?

Given that the social practice of assertion realises a collective good that none of us can do without and given, also, that truth-aiming is a rationally derived requirement placed on all assertions, it follows that each of us is committed, i.e. has an obligation, to aim at the truth. Moreover this is an obligation that we possess notwithstanding the possibility of an assertor of any given assertoric act considered on its own refraining from so aiming, e.g. by telling a lie.²³

In the light of our above account of assertion, this obligation entails not telling lies or making assertions for which one has no epistemic warrant. Moreover, being an obligation derived from a good, as opposed to being derived from a mere end or goal, it takes the form of a social norm and is not merely a convention (see Sect. 1 above for the distinction.)

²² Or perhaps ‘most’ given the possibility there are some extreme cases of, say, autism for which this is not true, although it is by no means clear that such persons could engage in judgment making independent of some participation the social practice of assertion.

²³ Telling a lie on any given occasion is parasitic on most aiming at the truth most of the time (Miller 1986).

Further, this social norm is not necessarily infringed if one asserts what is false. Here there is a threefold distinction. On my account, if one openly aims at falsity then one has not asserted. If one lies or asserts without epistemic warrant then one has asserted but has infringed the social norm to aim at the truth and, therefore, one is blameworthy. If one aims at the truth but one's assertion, nevertheless, is false then one has asserted, but one is not necessarily blameworthy. However, one's assertion is unsuccessful. It is unsuccessful qua assertion since the point or telos (collective good, in my parlance) of assertion is, as I have argued above, (relevant) truth.²⁴

Finally, I note that the existence of this derived (from my account) obligation to aim at the truth accommodates the intuition informing theories of assertions as commitments.

4 Objections and replies

4.1 Objection 1: Hearer's coming to believe that *p* is not an action

4.1.1 Objection

One cannot freely choose to believe a proposition and, therefore, the hearer coming to believe some true proposition that the speaker intends the hearer to believe is not an action. Accordingly, assertion is not a joint action, since one of the alleged individual actions, i.e., the hearer's coming to believe some proposition, is not really an action.

4.1.2 Reply

Doubtless, many comings to believe are not under the control of the believer, e.g., perceptual beliefs. However, as argued above in Sect. 2, judgment in relation to the truth of certain matters is a form of action—one akin to judgments in relation to what actions to perform—and the theory of assertion outlined in Sect. 3 above is in terms of such judgements. The hearer, I suggest, is typically engaged in an act of judgment in relation to what a speaker asserts for the simple reason that the hearer is engaged in a process of defeasible inference-making, firstly, to the speaker's intentions, ends and beliefs and, secondly, from those intentions, ends and beliefs to the truth of the proposition asserted. In particular, the hearer knows that in principle the speaker might be insincere, or might be sincere but mistaken.

Sincerity is itself often an act of will; one can simply *decide* to tell a lie. Accordingly, an audience needs to *trust* a speaker. Trust in this sense is not simply reliance; it is not simply a matter of the audience reasonably believing on the basis of, say, inductive evidence that the speaker will not tell a lie. For the speaker can make a decision to tell a lie on this occasion here and now, notwithstanding his history of telling the truth; and the audience knows this. So, at least in the typical case, the audience over time in effect

²⁴ Thus my account is able to escape some of the pejorative criticisms made of those theories, such as Williamson's which hold that the norm in question is to the effect that the assertor not simply aim at knowledge, truth or the like but actually 'hit' it. See, for example, Koethe (2009).

decides to trust the speaker.²⁵ So the possibility of the speaker lying at will ensures that the audience's trust and, therefore, the audience's coming to believe the speaker, has an element of will itself; trust in this sense is in part a matter of decision-making.

Moreover many, if not most, communications involve a process of reflective reasoning on what the speaker has asserted; this reasoning is in part a process of testing the truth and/or validity of the propositions being advanced by the speaker (and believed by the speaker to be true). Indeed, the speaker often expects the audience to engage in such reflection and testing.

The upshot of all this is that the hearer's coming to believe what the speaker asserts is a process mediated by an act of inferential judgment with an element of volition; for this reason the comings to believe in question are appropriately described as *the result* of a joint action, the main component actions of which are; (a) the speaker's complex intention to get the hearer to judge some proposition to be true, and; (b) the hearer's judgement that the proposition being advanced is true (a judgment based in part on the inference that the speaker intends the hearer to judge the proposition to be true and would not intend to get the hearer to believe a false proposition).

It is consistent with this conception of assertions as joint actions that assertions, nevertheless, are joint actions in an importantly different—indeed weaker sense—than joint actions that do not have as their collective end the transmission of cognitive states.

4.2 Objection 2: Self-evidently true assertions

4.2.1 Objection

There are some cases of assertion, e.g. 'S asserts that nothing is coloured both red and green all over', where the hearer judges that *p* on the basis of the self-evidently true content of *p* and not on the basis of the speaker's judgement that *p* (not on the speaker's testimony, so to speak). In such cases the hearer does not infer that *p* on the basis of the speaker's judgment that *p*.

4.2.2 Reply

Clearly there are some cases of assertion in which the hearer, *H*, infers that *p* at least in part on basis that *H* believes *S* believes *p*, (e.g. *S* asserts, "I have a toothache"). However, as the objection states, there are other kinds of case in which *H* will infer that *p* on the basis of other considerations such as the intuitive credibility of *p*. However, in *all* cases *H* makes an inference from 'S judges that *p*' to the content of what *H* is to make a judgement with respect to (as opposed to its truth or falsity) viz. *p*. Accordingly, these self-evident truth examples do not constitute counter-examples to my account of assertion.

²⁵ This is consistent with trust being a default position in the sense that one trusts unless one has reason not to. For even in the latter case a reason based decision to, for example, continue to trust because one has no good reason not to, is called for from time to time.

4.3 Objection 3: Assertions to oneself

4.3.1 Objection

A speaker can make an assertion that *p* to herself but in such a case she is not intending to get herself to judge that *p*, much less does she have a collective end that she judge that *p*; after all, there is no other person to share this collective and participate in any such joint action. In such a case the speaker is not engaging in a joint (epistemic) action; she is just asserting that *p* to herself.

4.3.2 Reply

We need to distinguish between making a judgement that *p* and a speaker asserting to herself. Judgments are not assertions, although assertion presuppose judgments and judgments are (typically) made in a language by means of a sentence (but without assertoric force).

Speakers can assert to themselves and, in particular, to their future selves. Thus a person making a note for herself to remind herself to do something in the future might be such an assertion. Again, a diarist asserts that this and that happened to her. Here the diarist is asserting to her future self, e.g. a year later the diarist might consult the entry in order to find out what happened to her on that day a year before. In such cases of a speaker asserting to her future self there is a speaker (present self) who utters *U* having as an end that the hearer (future self) judge that *p*, and a collective end, namely, that the hearer (future self) judge that *p*. Such cases are instances of joint epistemic action.

4.4 Objection 4: Speakers sometimes assert that *p* knowing that hearers strongly believe that not *p* and, therefore, will not judge that *p*

4.4.1 Objection

This is an objection originally made to Paul Grice's theory of speaker-meaning as intending to get the hearer to believe that *p* by means of recognition of that very speaker-intention. While my theory is a theory of assertion—and even the presupposed theory of communication is not identical with Grice's account of speaker-meaning—the reply made by Grice to this objection is germane.

4.4.2 Reply

Consider a speaker who states that *p* (e.g. that Obama should raise the taxes of the richest 1 % of Americans) knowing that the hearer (e.g. a member of the Tea Party) will not judge that *p* but who, nevertheless, intends that the hearer know that he, the speaker, believes that *p*. I suggest that in these cases the speaker is actually asserting that he (the speaker) *believes that p* (as opposed to 'that *p*'). So the speaker could replace his uttered sentence 'Obama should raise the taxes of the top 1 % of the richest Americans', with the uttered sentence, 'I believe that Obama should raise the taxes of the top 1 % of the richest Americans'.

4.5 Objection 5: Assertions with individual but not collective ends

4.5.1 Objection

Speakers sometimes assert that *p* to hearers who prefer not to know about *p*, e.g. speaker is trying to annoy the hearer, i.e. it is not a cooperative exchange and, therefore, there is no collective end. One kind of example here is someone who is talking at someone who is refusing to listen by putting their hands over their ears. Another kind of example is a UK speaker who insists on telling an Australian hearer the latest UK and Australian gold medal tally in the 2012 Olympic Games in order to annoy the Australian hearer, given the UK is winning many more gold medals than Australia.²⁶

4.5.2 Reply

In relation to the first kind of example of someone who is (successfully) refusing to listen, I suggest that the speaker is *attempting to assert* something but is failing, i.e. there is no assertion (in part because there is no communication).

In the second kind of example there is an assertion (and, therefore, uptake of illocutionary assertoric force) and there is also a further perlocutionary effect aimed at by the speaker (but not by the hearer).²⁷ However, the assertion has a collective end, even if the perlocutionary effect, e.g. to annoy the hearer, is not a collective end but only an individual one. In so far as the hearer is prepared to listen to the hearer, e.g. does not go out of earshot, then the hearer interprets the speaker's uttered sentence (with respect to both content and illocutionary force) and judges whether or not what the speaker is asserting is true or not. Indeed, in the example, the hearer judges that what the speaker is asserting is in fact true, namely, that the UK has (say) 25 gold medals and Australia only 8. So there is a joint act of a communication which is in part the means to a joint action of assertion. There is, in addition, truth-telling on the part of the speaker and trust on the part of the hearer. So the speaker and the hearer have the two collective ends constitutive of the joint acts of communication and assertion, respectively. Indeed, that the hearer judges that *p* is a necessary condition for the perlocutionary effect, i.e. the hearer's annoyance.

4.6 Objection 6: Irrelevant assertion

4.6.1 Objection

On my account of assertion relevance is a constitutive (collective) end of assertions. But irrelevant assertions can be assertions, even ones in which the speaker's is openly irrelevant and taken to be so by the audience. In Grice's famous example a referee for an applicant for a philosophy job refrains from commenting on the applicant's

²⁶ This example was provided by an anonymous attendee at the Collective Intentionality VIII conference held at Manchester University in 2012.

²⁷ We owe the notions of illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect to Austin (1962).

philosophical ability but instead says of the applicant that he is a fine tennis player. Surely the speaker has made the assertion that the applicant is a fine tennis player but yet this assertion is irrelevant and mutually believed to be so by both the speaker and the hearer. Indeed, according to Grice, it is precisely because the assertion is intended by the speaker to be taken by the audience to be irrelevant that the speaker can conversationally imply that the applicant is a poor philosopher.

4.6.2 Reply

You will recall that my account holds that cases in which the speaker *openly* does not aim at relevance and, specifically, openly aims at irrelevance are not cases of assertion. While I agree that cases such as these alleged counter-examples are assertions, I deny that they are cases of openly irrelevant assertions. Qua communications, they operate at two levels. At one level they are intended to be relevant and at another level irrelevant. However, at neither level are they *openly* intended not to be relevant.

The remark about the applicant, for example, is highly relevant and, as such, is entirely unlike the cases I mentioned above in which the speaker simply utters a series of unconnected sentences in the indicative mood without relevance to any conversational topic or other matter of interest to either the speaker or the audience. Let us look more closely at Grice's example (Grice 1975; see also MacFarlane 2011).

The assertion that the applicant is a fine tennis player is intentionally *explicitly* relevant in the following respects: (1) It is a well-formed sentence in the indicative mood and written in the context of a letter of reference for the applicant, e.g. the letter identifies itself as a reference written on behalf of the applicant, is signed by the referee, is on letterhead etc.; (2) The sentence purports to be about the applicant's academic abilities. So the illocutionary force of the uttered sentence is openly intended to be assertoric and to be relevant to the issue at hand, viz. the applicant's academic abilities. On the other hand, the content of the assertion is irrelevant since it concerns the applicant's tennis playing ability. Moreover, the referee and the audience mutually know that it is irrelevant. However, the referee has not *openly* aimed at providing irrelevant content; on the contrary, the referee is *pretending* to provide relevant content, albeit this pretence is something he intends to be a matter of mutual knowledge. Indeed, it would vitiate his enterprise and destroy this pretence if, for example, he were to have immediately thereafter made the explicit assertion: 'Of course, my claim about his tennis playing ability is intended to be entirely irrelevant to any communicative purpose we might have; it is entirely gratuitous.'

On this analysis the speaker has asserted that the applicant is a fine-tennis player and, in so doing, he openly intends to be making an assertion and is not openly intending the content of his assertion to be irrelevant. So this example, and others of its type, are not counter-examples to my account.

4.7 Objection 7: Circularity

4.7.1 Objection

The definition of assertion provided is circular by virtue of the stipulated necessary condition that the speaker *intends* the illocutionary force of his uttered sentence to be an *assertion*. The speech act of assertion is what is to be defined but the definiendum appears in the definiens.

4.7.2 Reply

We need to distinguish between the constitutive properties (defining properties) of an entity or action and the conditions necessary and/or sufficient for it to come into existence (existence conditions). Thus *homo sapiens* is (by definition) a rational animal and God is (by definition) the only omniscient and omnipotent being; but to know these things is not to know whether God exists or how *homo sapiens* came into existence (e.g. by evolution or according to creationism).

By analogy we need to distinguish between the defining elements of the speech action of assertion and its existence conditions, i.e. the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for an assertion to (as it were) come into existence. In the above discussion of assertion I suggested a number of such existence conditions. One such condition was the existence of the social practice of assertion; this is a necessary background condition for someone to make an assertion. However, from the fact that one needs to mention the social practice of *assertion* as a necessary *existence* condition for the performance of any particular act of *assertion* does not render the *definition* of assertion circular. Likewise the fact that one needs to mention the speaker's intention that his uttered sentence have assertoric force as an *existence* condition for making an assertion does not render the *definition* of assertion circular. Indeed, it is at least conceivable that there could be a formal assertion in the absence of an intention that the uttered sentence have assertoric force (although not in the absence of any communicative intention); after all, the key existence condition for formal assertions is that the relevant law or convention governing the making of assertions has been complied with (see section on formal assertions above). At any rate, I conclude that the objection has not demonstrated that my definition of assertion is circular.

References

- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bach, K., & Harnish, R. M. (1979). *Linguistic communication and speech acts*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brandom, R. (1983). Asserting. *Nous*, 17(4), 637–650.
- Brandom, R. (1994). *Making it explicit*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bratman, M. (1992). Shared cooperative activity. *Philosophical Review*, 101, 327–341.
- Broad, C. D. (1928). *The mind and its place in nature*. London: Kegan Paul.
- Brown, J. (2010). Knowledge and assertion. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 81(3), 549–566.
- Clark, H. C., & Carlson, T. B. (1982). Hearers and speech acts. *Language*, 58(2), 332–373.

- Corlett, J. A. (2008). Epistemic responsibility. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 16(2), 179–200.
- Douven, I. (2006). Assertion, knowledge and rational credibility. *Philosophical Review*, 115, 449–485.
- Dummett, M. (1978). *Truth and other enigmas*. London: Duckworth.
- Dummett, M. (1981). *Frege: Philosophy of language*. London: Duckworth.
- Durkheim, E. (1965). *The rules of sociological method*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Eitan, N., Hoerl, C., McCormack, T., & Roessler, J. (2005). *Joint attention: Communication and other minds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fallis, D. (2007). Collective epistemic goals. *Social Epistemology*, 21(3), 267–280.
- Frankish, K. (2007). Deciding to believe again. *Mind*, 116, 523–547.
- French, P. (1984). *Collective and corporate responsibility*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Geach, P. (1957). *Mental acts*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Gilbert, M. (2014). *Joint commitment: How we make the social world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldberg, S. (2014). Assertion and the ethics of belief. In J. Matheson & R. Vitz (Eds.), *The ethics of belief* (pp. 261–283). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grice, H. P. (1957). Meaning. *Philosophical Review*, 66(3), 377–388.
- Grice, H. P. (1969). Utterer's meaning and intention. *Philosophical Review*, 78, 147–177.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and Conversation. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics 3: Speech acts* (pp. 113–127). London: Academic Press.
- Hawthorne, J. (2004). *Knowledge and lotteries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hawthorne, J., & Magidor, O. (2009). Assertion, context and epistemic accessibility. *Mind*, 118, 377–397.
- Heal, J. (1978). Common knowledge. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 28, 116–131.
- Koethe, J. (2009). Knowledge and the norms of assertion. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 87(4), 625–638.
- Konzelmann-Ziv, A., & Schmid, H. B. (Eds.). (2014). *Institutions, emotions and group agents: Contribution to social ontology*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Lewis, D. (1969). *Convention*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- MacFarlane, J. (2011). What is assertion? In J. Brown & H. Cappelen (Eds.), *Assertion: New philosophical essays* (pp. 79–96). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, S. (1986). Truth-telling and the actual language relation. *Philosophical Studies*, 49(2), 281–294.
- Miller, S. (1992). Joint action. *Philosophical Papers*, 21(3), 275–299.
- Miller, S. (1995). Intentions, ends and joint action. *Philosophical Papers*, 24(1), 51–67.
- Miller, S. (2001). *Social action: A teleological account*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, S. (2007). Joint action: The individual strikes back. In S. L. Tsohatzidis (Ed.), *Intentional acts and institutional facts: Essays on John Searle's social ontology* (pp. 73–92). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Miller, S. (2010). *The Moral Foundations of Social Institutions: A philosophical study*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, S. (2013). Collective Responsibility, epistemic action and the dual use problem in science and technology. In B. Rappert & M. Selgelid (Eds.), *On the dual uses of science and ethics: Principles, practices and prospects* (pp. 185–206). Canberra: ANU Press.
- Miller, S. (2014). Joint actions, social institutions and collective goods: A teleological account. In A. Konzelmann-Ziv & H. B. Schmid (Eds.), *Institutions, emotions and group agents: Contribution to social ontology* (pp. 99–115). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Miller, S. (2015). Joint epistemic action and collective moral responsibility" *Social Epistemology*. doi:10.1080/02691728.2014.971908.
- Montmarquet, J. A. (1993). *Epistemic virtue and doxastic responsibility*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Moser, P. (1989). *Knowledge and evidence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pagin, P. (2004). Is assertion social? *Journal of Pragmatics*, 36, 833–859.
- Pagin, P. (2014). Assertion. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition). <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/assertion/>. Accessed 8 Dec 2014
- Pettit, P. (2007). Responsibility incorporated. *Ethics*, 117, 171–201.
- Pruss, A. R. (2011). Sincerely asserting what you do not believe. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 90(3), 541–546.
- Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. R. (1990). Collective intentions and actions. In P. Cohen, J. Moran, & M. Pollack (Eds.), *Intentions in communication* (pp. 401–415). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Smith, N. V. (Ed.). (1982). *Mutual knowledge*. London: Academic Press.
- Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1986). *Relevance: Communication and cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Stalnaker, R. (1999). *Context and content*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stalnaker, R. (2009). On Hawthorne and Magidor on assertion, context and epistemic accessibility. *Mind*, 118, 399–409.
- Strawson, P. F. (1971). Intention and convention in speech acts. In P. F. Strawson (Ed.), *Logico-Linguistic papers* (pp. 149–169). London: Methuen.
- Stern, C. (1997). Walker on the voluntariness of judgment. *Inquiry*, 40(2), 175–186.
- Taylor, C. (1985). Atomism. In C. Taylor (Ed.), *Philosophy and the human sciences: Philosophical papers 2* (pp. 187–210). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tuomela, R. (2013). *Social ontology: Collective intentionality and group agents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Walker, M. T. (1996). The voluntariness of judgment. *Inquiry*, 39, 97–119.
- Walker, M. T. (1998). The voluntariness of judgment: A reply to stern. *Inquiry*, 41(3), 333–339.
- Williams, B. (2003). *Truth and truthfulness*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Williamson, T. (1996). Knowing and asserting. *Philosophical Review*, 105(4), 489–523.
- Williamson, T. (2000). *Knowledge and its limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.