

Assertions Only?

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Abstract It is standardly believed that the only way to justify an assertion in the face of a challenge is by making another assertion. Call this claim *ASSERTIONS ONLY*. Besides its intrinsic interest, *ASSERTIONS ONLY* is relevant to deciding between competing views of the norms that govern reasoned discourse. *ASSERTIONS ONLY* is also a crucial part of the motivation for infinitism and Pyrrhonian skepticism. I suggest that *ASSERTIONS ONLY* is false: I can justify an assertion by drawing attention to something that clearly makes the assertion true, or likely true.

Keywords assertion, justification, regress, infinitism, Pyrrhonian skepticism

Abe: Looks like it will rain tomorrow.

Bea: *Why think that's true?*

Abe: The weatherman said so.

Bea: *Why think that's true?*

Abe: I saw him say so on the television.

Bea: *Why think that's true?*

Bea repeatedly challenges Abe's assertions. And Abe repeatedly responds by making another assertion. But is there another way he could respond? Consider the following claim:

(ASSERTIONS ONLY) The only way to justify an assertion in the face of a challenge is by making another assertion.

The phrase “justify an assertion” can mean either of two things. First, it can mean to make warranted the *making* of an assertion. Perhaps knowledge justifies an assertion in this sense. Or perhaps a proposition that is simply true – and not known – can appropriately be asserted. Second, to “justify an assertion” can mean to *defend* an assertion that has already been made. I will be concerned with this second sense of the phrase.

ASSERTIONS ONLY is standardly taken to be true. I will suggest that it is false – that I can defend an assertion by drawing attention to something that clearly makes the assertion true, or likely true. First I illustrate why the issue matters.

Besides its intrinsic interest, ASSERTIONS ONLY is relevant to deciding between dialectical foundationalism and dialectical egalitarianism. Dialectical foundationalists hold that some assertions require no defense in the face of challenges such as Bea’s – i.e. challenges unaccompanied by reasons for doubt. Dialectical egalitarians claim that every assertion should be treated equally; when an assertion is challenged, it should either be defended or be withdrawn. Egalitarians such as Michael Rescorla say that to do otherwise would violate the norms of reasoned discourse, “the activity through which we rationally assess propositions by providing one another with arguments and counter-arguments” (2009a, 2009b).¹

Foundationalists and egalitarians generally agree that if egalitarianism is correct, then a dialectical regress cannot be stopped in the face of a tireless interlocutor such as Bea. That’s because

¹ The terminology of “dialectical egalitarianism” and “dialectical foundationalism” is Rescorla’s (2009a, 2009b). For more on the norms of reasoned discourse, see his 2009c.

foundationalists and egalitarians generally assume *ASSERTIONS ONLY*. And, given *ASSERTIONS ONLY*, it follows from egalitarianism that a speaker who will not withdraw her initial assertion will be obliged to keep making more assertions *ad infinitum* when confronted with continual challenges. Foundationalists claim that egalitarianism's commitment to such unstoppable dialectical regresses casts doubt on egalitarianism. Rescorla has responded that egalitarianism's commitment to unstoppable regresses is not, in fact, problematic (2009a, 2009b). But if *ASSERTIONS ONLY* is false, then egalitarianism need not be committed to unstoppable dialectical regresses. For in that case an assertion might be defended by way of something which is not itself an assertion and for which justification cannot be asked.²

Rescorla insists that “we must sharply distinguish the state of holding a justified belief from the activity of justifying propositions to one another” (2009a). Perhaps my belief that *p* is justified if it is based on my perceiving that *p*, even if I cannot give *you* justification for believing *p*. After all, I cannot give you my perceptual states!

With this distinction in mind, we can turn to the second illustration of the relevance of *ASSERTIONS ONLY*. *ASSERTIONS ONLY* has played a crucial role in motivating several important views about *having* knowledge or justified belief, rather than – as above – simply about the activity of *giving* justifications to each other. It is often thought that if a subject is not capable of defending a proposition in the face of continual challenges, then she cannot know that proposition. Something like this thought seems to have motivated the Pyrrhonian skeptics:

² Both foundationalism and egalitarianism have attracted numerous adherents. Rescorla counts as foundationalists Aristotle (citing Barnes 1990: 120-123), Toulmin (1958: 222-228), Sellars (1963), Wittgenstein (1969), Austin (1979), Brandom (1994: 176-178), Norman (1997), Williams (1999, 2004), Adler (2002: 159-185), and Leite (2004, 2005). For egalitarians, he lists the Pyrrhonian skeptics, Neurath (1983), Klein (1999, 2003), and van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004: 135-140).

[I]f you say that the proof is true [...] you will be asked for a proof of the fact that it is true – and another proof for that, and so *ad infinitum*: and it is impossible to prove infinitely many things. Therefore it is impossible to know that some things are true. (Sextus 2000)

Here Sextus Empiricus moves from considering the prospects of *defending* an assertion in the face of continual challenge, to a conclusion about the possibility of *knowing* the asserted proposition. Peter Klein places similar emphasis on the regress that results from persistent questioning, using this regress to argue for infinitism and against coherentist and foundationalist accounts of epistemic justification. Klein suggests that such a dialogue can take place within the head of an individual rather than between two speakers (2004: 171, 2005: 133), but this is irrelevant to the matter at hand. Either way, Klein joins the Pyrrhonists in believing that persistent questioning results in a dialectical regress that can be escaped only by circular reasoning or by dogmatically insisting on an arbitrary stopping point. Klein parts company with the Pyrrhonists, however, by claiming that knowledge does not require an infinite chain of justifying reasons. An infinite chain would be needed for *maximal* justification, Klein thinks, but not for knowledge.

One way to preclude the conclusions of Klein and the Pyrrhonian skeptics is to reject ASSERTIONS ONLY and hold that an assertion can be defended by way of something which is not itself an assertion and for which justification cannot be asked. In that case, requests for justification would come to an end rather than generating a regress that could be used to motivate skepticism or infinitism. (Another strategy for preventing such a regress, of course, would be to endorse dialectical foundationalism and hold that some assertions require no defense in the face of a challenge unaccompanied by reasons for doubt. Critics such as Klein allege, however, that such a strategy

amounts to dogmatically insisting upon a disputed premise.)

Return to the quote from Sextus Empiricus. The ellipses conceal that Sextus *also* draws the skeptical conclusion in this passage based on the worry that it is impossible to demonstrate that some things are true without *presuming* that some things are true. After all, one might think, how can you defend the claim that some things are true without using premises *that you presume are true*? But this worry need not arise if ASSERTIONS ONLY is false – in particular, if the assertion that some things are true can be defended by way of something that is not itself an assertion, cannot be true or false, and hence need not be presumed true.

Having illustrated the relevance of ASSERTIONS ONLY, I turn to casting doubt upon it. Suppose I say that my pocket watch is broken. You then challenge this assertion, saying, "Why think that's true?" I respond to this challenge by pulling my visibly broken watch out of my pocket and showing it to you. "Look," I say. It would not be appropriate for you to remain silent, awaiting my response. *You already have my response.* I have defended my original assertion, and I have done so without making any additional assertions. It is now *your* turn – to concede that the proposition in dispute is true, to raise a new challenge, etc.

At this point you could ask, "Why think that the watch is really broken?", but this question would not constitute a continuation of a dialectical regress. Such a regress exists when each justifier itself stands in need of justification. However, neither my watch nor my showing you the watch can stand in need of justification. No justification can appropriately be requested because such things cannot be justified. And such things cannot be justified because only things capable of truth or falsity can be justified. Plausibly, to justify an assertion in the face of a challenge is to give a reason to believe that the

assertion is true.³ By showing you my visibly broken watch, I have given you a reason to believe that my original assertion is true. But I cannot give you a reason to believe that either my watch or my showing you the watch is true – indeed, such things cannot be true (or false) at all.

The pocket watch case is simply an illustration, and perhaps it is not a typical one. For I need not draw your attention to something that clearly makes my assertion *true* – something that clearly makes my assertion *likely* will suffice. Suppose I say that Billy has gotten into the cookie jar again. “What makes you think that?” you incredulously ask. “This,” I respond, displaying the empty cookie jar, “And that,” pointing to the trail of crumbs leading to Billy’s room. I have answered your challenge. I have given you a reason to believe that my original assertion is true. And I have done so merely by drawing your attention to things that clearly make the assertion *likely*.

Interestingly, although Rescorla repeatedly endorses *ASSERTIONS ONLY*, his own work contains the seeds of an account such as the one I have just sketched. Here is an anecdote Rescorla (2009b) relates from Charles Rosen (1998):

The great pianist Edward Steuermann once was approached after a concert by a man who told him that he had written an essay to demonstrate why one cannot play twelve-tone music from memory. “But I do play twelve-tone music from memory,” replied Steuermann. The man, dismayed, was silent for a moment, but he finally found a solution: “You’re lying,” he said.

And here is part of Rescorla’s commentary:

[E]ven as we mock Steuermann’s interlocutor, must we not admit that he enjoys a temporary dialectical advantage? If Steuermann wants to continue the argument, doesn’t the burden fall on

³ For example, Green (1999) says that a speaker “is committed to giving reasons for [an assertion] if presented by [the hearer] with a legitimate challenge.”

him to establish that he can play twelve-tone music by memory? Since his word is evidently not good enough for his interlocutor, shouldn't he justify his assertion?

One way for Steuermann to discharge his "burden" to "establish that he can play twelve-tone music from memory" is *by playing* twelve-tone music from memory. That would establish the proposition in question with more certainty than would merely asserting another proposition. Indeed, Rescorla says that the interlocutor's accusation "is quixotic, since presumably *Steuermann can respond by playing a twelve-tone piece from memory*" (emphasis added). Yet Rescorla does not seem to realize that the possibility of such a response falsifies his claim that "[t]he *only* way to discharge a dialectical commitment is to assert propositions as premises, thereby undertaking additional dialectical commitments" (ibid.).

Perhaps Rescorla would respond that Steuermann cannot discharge his dialectical burden simply by playing twelve-tone music from memory – that he must also *assert* that he has just played twelve-tone music from memory. Or perhaps Rescorla would say that Steuermann's performance involves an *implicit* assertion to the effect that he is playing twelve-tone music from memory. Indeed, Michael Dummett allows that one can make an assertion without uttering a complete sentence when "the context supplies a supplementation of the words spoken that amounts to a sentence embodying them" (1981: 3). Why not allow the context to supply *all* of the words?⁴

There seems to be little reason to adopt either of these responses, however, other than to save

⁴ Incidentally, I do not take my denial of ASSERTIONS ONLY to challenge Dummett's claim that to "make a move in the language-game" one must either utter a complete sentence or have one's utterance appropriately supplemented by the context (ibid.). After I draw your attention to something that clearly makes my assertion likely to be true, it is "your move," so to speak – your turn to say or do something. But it is crucial to my thesis that I have *not* made a move in the language-game, i.e. I have not performed a linguistic act. For if I have performed a linguistic act, then it is plausible that in doing so I have made an assertion, in which case we would not have a counterexample to ASSERTIONS ONLY.

ASSERTIONS ONLY. After all, the idea that non-linguistic actions can provide justificatory reasons is not strange. Plausibly, your brandishing of a knife gives me a reason to keep my distance. Just as plausibly, it gives me a reason to believe your assertion that you've gotten into the knife drawer again.

Further, the idea that non-linguistic actions can discharge commitments undertaken via language is a familiar one. If I promise to return your umbrella, I undertake a commitment to do so. But I can discharge that commitment without any further linguistic acts. Similarly, if I make an assertion perhaps I undertake a commitment to defend or withdraw that assertion if challenged. But, as before, I can discharge that commitment without any further linguistic acts. Plausibly, to defend my assertion is to give you a reason to believe it is true. And what better way to do that than to draw your attention to something that clearly makes the assertion true, or at least likely?

Reflecting on some of Robert Brandom's remarks on assertion supports this line of thought. Granted, it is unlikely that Brandom believes an assertion can be defended by something other than another assertion. After all, defending an assertion involves *giving a reason* in favor of the assertion, and Brandom holds that "assertings" are "what giving a reason always consists in" (1994: 167). But arguably Brandom *should* believe that an assertion can be defended by something other than another assertion. He suggests that in making assertions, subjects are "*undertaking* a specific task *responsibility*, namely the responsibility to show that they are *entitled* to the commitment expressed by their assertions, should that entitlement be brought into question" (173, emphasis original). And Brandom also says that "[o]ther things besides assertional commitments can entitle interlocutors to assertional commitments" (167). So subjects should be able to fulfill the responsibility they have undertaken by making an assertion *without* making another assertion. They should be able to "show

that they are entitled to the commitment expressed by their assertion” by drawing attention to one of those “other things besides assertional commitments” that “can entitle interlocutors to assertional commitments.” This alone would falsify *ASSERTIONS ONLY*.⁵

I would *further* suggest, however, that one of those other things that can entitle a subject to the commitment expressed by her assertion is a perceptible object, fact, or state of affairs. To defend the assertion, then, the subject can show that she is entitled to her assertional commitment by drawing her interlocutor’s attention to that object, fact, or state of affairs. I rest this further suggestion on the plausibility of cases such as those I have considered above, as well as on the claim that there seems to be no good reason to deny what such cases seem to show.

Here is an objection to my account. Suppose I make some mathematical claim *p* and you challenge my claim. And suppose there is a set of propositions, *q*, that clearly entails *p*. If I assert *q*, then you can challenge that assertion and begin a regress. But it seems that my account so far suggests the following. It seems to suggest that I can defend my claim that *p* without allowing a regress by simply calling your attention to *q* (without *asserting q*). Perhaps I simply instruct you to entertain *q*, thereby drawing your attention to something that clearly makes *p* true. But, according to my account, that is to justify my claim that *p* and it is to do so in a manner that prevents regress. For I have made no additional assertion – beyond the assertion of *p* – and hence I have made no additional assertion that you can challenge. But this is a cheap trick! I *might as well* have asserted *q*, and I should incur the same dialectical burden as if I did. If my account licenses this trick, then that bodes ill for my account.

⁵ The only example Brandom gives of one of those “other things” is “*reliability* in the responsive acquisition of assertional commitments of a certain kind.” He says that, for instance, “being a reliable reporter of currently visible red things who responsively acquires a disposition to claim that there is something red in the vicinity may entitle someone to that commitment” (167).

Here is my response. I have claimed that an assertion *can be* defended by drawing attention to something that clearly makes the assertion true, or at least likely. I have not said that an assertion *always will be* successfully defended by drawing attention to something that clearly makes it true, or likely. My argument has rested on the intuitive plausibility of cases and on the claim that there is no good reason to deny what such cases seem to show. I have *not* given an account of why in these cases it is sufficient to appropriately direct the attention of one's interlocutor, and hence I have not given an account that might yield unacceptable verdicts about cases such as the mathematical case. I can accept that sometimes justification is not provided by drawing attention to an item that clearly makes an assertion true. I can also accept that sometimes drawing attention to a proposition involves an implicit assertion – perhaps the math case is like this.

Let us begin to draw some conclusions. Recall the illustrations I gave of the relevance of ASSERTIONS ONLY, the claim that the only way to defend an assertion in the face of a challenge is by making another assertion. I said that if ASSERTIONS ONLY is false, then:

- (1) dialectical egalitarianism need not be committed to unstoppable dialectical regresses,
- (2) persistent questioning need not generate a regress that can be used to motivate skepticism or infinitism, and
- (3) defending the claim that some things are true need not involve circular reasoning.

I have suggested that ASSERTIONS ONLY is indeed false, but my suggestion has clear application only to empirical propositions, propositions for which the senses furnish evidence. Still, if I am right, then it seems egalitarianism *about empirical propositions* need not be committed to unstoppable dialectical regresses, and persistent questioning need not generate a regress that can motivate skepticism or

indefinitism *about empirical propositions*.

Note that (3) can be had without qualification – without relativizing the claim to empirical propositions. Consider the following exchange.

Abe: Some things are true.

Bea: *Why believe that?*

Abe: Well, for one thing, the claim that I can do a handstand is true.

Bea: *You're begging the question!*

Abe: Not if I can *independently establish* that the claim (that I can do a handstand) is true.

At this point Abe does a handstand. By doing so, he gives Bea a reason to believe that the claim (that Abe can do a handstand) is true, and thereby gives Bea a reason to believe that some things are true. And Abe does so without relying on a proposition that he merely *assumes* is true and hence without begging the question.

I have only considered challenges to a speaker's premises that focus on their *truth*. But an interlocutor can also challenge the *relevance* of a premise to the speaker's conclusion. Consider the following variation on the dialogue with which we began.

Abe: Looks like it will rain tomorrow.

Bea: *Why think that's true?*

Abe: Because the weatherman said so.

Bea: *Why think that's relevant?*

Abe: Because he's been trained to predict the weather!

Bea: *Why think that's relevant?*

Here Bea is challenging whether the considerations Abe presents in fact *support* his original claim, quite apart from the truth of those considerations.

This second type of dialectical challenge seems more problematic than the first. For we cannot stop the regress that results from *this* type of challenge by drawing attention to a perceptible object, fact, or state of affairs. It isn't clear that such a perceptible item could clearly make *relevant* (rather than make *true*) the speaker's previous assertion, but let us put that worry aside. One's interlocutor is free to question the relevance *of the perceptible item*. While it is inappropriate to ask "Why think that's true?" when I show you my visibly broken pocket watch, it is not similarly inappropriate to ask "Why think that's relevant?" While neither my watch nor my showing you the watch can be true or false, both can be relevant or irrelevant to various claims – they can support or fail to support such claims.

Dialectical foundationalists, then, can note that if dialectical egalitarianism is correct, defending an assertion against persistent challenges *of this second type* generates an unstoppable regress.⁶ Klein can claim that *this* regress can be escaped only by circularity or dogmatism and hence that infinitism is the right account of epistemic justification. And skeptics can point out that it is impossible to demonstrate the *relevance* – rather than, as before, the *truth* – of infinitely many things. They can also point to our inability to demonstrate that some things are relevant to the truth of other things without *presuming* that some things are relevant to the truth of other things. Perhaps that's all correct. But at the very least we'll know which type of dialectical challenge to attend to when formulating and evaluating

⁶ Technically, since egalitarianism is only a claim about how we must respond when an *assertion* is challenged, the egalitarian could say: "When I draw your attention to some perceptible item and you ask, 'Why is that relevant?', I owe you no response – for I made no *assertion* – and hence there is no unstoppable regress." However, this does not seem to be in keeping with the spirit of egalitarianism.

such arguments.⁷

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