<u>Objectivity and Assertoric Force</u> (a draft)

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1. Introduction

"Assertion", "thought", "judgment", "proposition", and "statement" are puzzling words. The term "assertoric force" is used as the translation of Gottlob Frege's "Behauptungskraft". As Peter Pagin notes, an account of assertoric force says what it consists in for an utterance to have assertoric force – that is, to be an assertion (Pagin, 2011, p. 97). In his *Grundlagen der Arithmetik* (1884) Frege lists his basic principles and states: "always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective (GLA, p. x). A few decades ago Thomas G. Ricketts argued that Frege's distinction between the subjective and the objective "lodges in the contrast between asserting something and giving vent to a feeling" (Ricketts, 1986, p. 71). Charles Peirce also distinguished between a proposition and an assertion and used the term "force"; force is what the speaker exercises with the intention to determine a belief in the mind of the interpreter (NE iv, 249). Frege and Peirce are certainly not the only philosophers who took it to be important to distinguish between an assertion and what is asserted.

The theory of assertion is obviously of interest to those who work in the philosophy of language. It is also important to contemporary epistemology, especially to the theory of testimony. That is particularly the case when the acts of assertion are considered a class the members of which are identified by knowledge norms. My main concern in this paper is a recent effort to try to undermine the theory of assertion, in fact, to get rid of the very concept of assertion. As there are philosophers of language who wish to reject the theory of assertion, it may be time to remind of the motivation for introducing the distinction between thought, judgment and assertion. My thesis is that the theory of assertion, or judgment, is crucially important if we are interested in objectivity.

It is not easy to make the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. Tyler Burge has listed various meanings of objectivity (Tyler Burge, 2010, p. 46 – 54). First, he lists conceptions of objectivity that apply to subject-matters. They are objectivity as constitutive mind independence, objectivity constitutive non-perspectivality, and objective subject-matter as all that is real and not illusory. Besides conceptions that apply to subject-matters, Burge lists other conceptions of objectivity, such as those which center on the objective mode of representation, those which concern law or law-likeness, and those which center on representationally associated procedures or systems, impersonality, and intersubjectivity. Burge calls the first three, objectivity as applying to subject-matters, objectivity as a mode of representation, and objectivity as having to do with law or lawlikeness, vertical conceptions, and the last three, the conceptions

that center on associated procedures or systems, impersonality, and intersubjectivity, horizontal conceptions. He claims that the root notions are the vertical ones, and that if one tries to understand the first three by means of the last three, one is an idealist. In this framework, many pragmatist efforts to understand objectivity would turn out to be idealist.

In this paper, I am not worried about being an idealist or a realist. I do not define objectivity; instead, I wish to emphasize that objectivity involves our strivings for truth and our efforts to share it with others and that these two catch some of the vertical and the horizontal dimension of Burge's distinction. My paper is basically on assertions, and I will argue that if assertions were just sayings, which is the thesis defended by Herman Cappelen (2011), there would be nothing in human communication where objectivity could reside. The vocabulary of assertions and assertoric forces is needed to keep objectivity alive. I will proceed as follows. First, I will outline the background of the theory of assertion in twentieth century philosophy. Then I will list contemporary theories of assertion, including the so-called No-Assertion View. The final part of my presentation will consist in the criticism of that view.

2. Background

J.L. Austin's distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts has played an important role in the philosophy of language and epistemology for several decades. Briefly, the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts is that between sayings and doings with sayings. Following Austin's view, assertions has been considered illocutionary acts, which have their characteristics or constitutive features that make them differ from such kinds of acts as asking questions and commanding.

The theory of assertion can be traced back to nineteenth century philosophy and even further. As is well known, one important background for Austin was Frege. In his *Begriffsschrift* (1879), Frege distinguished between a thought (Gedanke) and a judgment (Urteil), which is the acknowledgment of the truth of a thought, a thought as judged. In his conceptual notation the distinction was shown by two strokes, one being the content stroke or the horizontal stroke, and the other being the judgment stroke or the vertical stroke. Moreover, he considered assertions (Behauptungen) to be different from judgments, namely, as overt expressions of judgments. In the literature, the vertical stroke is often called the assertion sign, which refers to what happens in overt language-use or communication. For Frege, sayings would be expressions of thoughts, and assertions expressions of judgments. The conceptual notation was meant to mirror the language of thought and to be better than natural language, as it would not contain ambiguities. Hence, the basic distinction for Frege was that between a thought and a judgment. What becomes added to the thought when it is acknowledged to be true in language, is the assertoric force. Assertions are manifestations of judgments; the concept of judgment is thus primary. When we judge or assert, when we

use assertoric force, we intend to advance from the mere sense (Sinn) to the truth, that is what Frege argues (Frege, "Über Sinn und Bedeutung", 1892).

In his "Logik" (1897) Frege states that even where we use the form of expression 'it is true that … ', the assertoric force of a sentence ("die Form des Behauptungssatzes") is essential (NS, p. 140; "Logic", PW, p. 129). In "Einleitung in die Logik" (1906), he remarks: "In fact at bottom the sentence 'it is true that 2 is prime' says no more than the sentence '2 is prime'. If in the first case we express a judgement, this is not because of the word 'true', but because of the assertoric force we give the word 'is'." (NS, p. 211; "Introduction to Logic", PW, p. 194.) In his "Meine grundlegenden logischen Einsichten" (1915) he writes: "In language assertoric force is bound up with the predicate" (NS, p. 272; "My basic logical insights", PW, 252). Earlier in his "Was kann ich als Ergebnis meiner Arbeit ansehen?" (1906) Frege states that his most important discoveries are mostly tied up with his conceptual notation. He lists several discoveries and then points out that he should have begun by mentioning the judgment-stroke, the dissociation of assertoric force from the predicate (der Urteilsstrich, die Ablösung der behauptenden Kraft vom Prädikate (NS, p. 200; " What may I regard as the Result of my Work?", PW, p. 184).

3. Theories of Assertion

It has been a commonplace in the analytic tradition that the distinction between a proposition and asserting the proposition catches something important and that it is one of philosophers' task to propose theories of assertion. As Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen point out, much of contemporary discussion of assertion "focuses on the idea that assertion is governed by a norm that imposes epistemic requirements on appropriate assertion" (Brown and Cappelen, 2011, "p. 1). For example, Timothy Williamson (1996, 2000) argues that assertion is governed by the knowledge norm, which says that "one must: assert p only if one knows that p". The suggestion that assertion is governed by the knowledge norm has been one of the much discussed topics in recent epistemology.

Williamson's view of what constitutes assertion is not the only theory available, not even among those theories that individuate assertions by norms. In those theories, the norms for sayings are the rules of the game that is being played. The rules may be truth rules, warrant rules, knowledge rules, as it is the case in Williamson's theory, or belief rules. According to other authors, for example, according to Robert Stalnaker (1978) and Max Kölbel (2011), assertions are individuated by effects on what is presupposed in conversation, effects on the so called conversational score, or background assumptions. Still others, such as Robert B. Brandom (1994), think that assertions are individuated by commitments. Assertions can also be individuated by their causes like beliefs and intentions concerning the hearer's beliefs. That kind of view is proposed by Bach and Harnish (1979), for example. Cappelen proposes and defends what Brown and Cappelen himself (2011) call a debunking view. That is the view that "assertion" is largely a philosophers'

term, and we can use it to pick up many kinds of things. In reality, Cappelen argues, there are no assertions. Hence, Cappelen does not wish to distinguish between assertions as a special kind of illocutionary acts; unlike asking questions or commanding, assertions are merely sayings.

4. The Problems of the No-Assertion View

Cappelen rejects the assumption that it is theoretically useful to single out a subset of sayings as assertions. He writes: "What philosophers have tried to capture by the term "assertion" is largely a philosophers' invention. It fails to pick out an act-type that we engage in and it is not a category we need in order to explain any significant component of our linguistic practice." (Cappelen, 2011, p. 21) He argues that the central notion is "saying", but we do not play the assertion game, assertion is not a theoretically useful category. He argues that there are sayings and that sayings are governed by variable norms, none of which is essential to, or constitutive of, the act of saying. Sayings are acts of expressing propositions. They are evaluated by non-constitutive, variable norms. On Cappelen's view, norms vary widely across contexts and cultures, over time, and across possible worlds, but none are constitutive.

Many of Cappelen's critical points hit their target. For example, there is a problem in Williamson's and others' views related to essentialism or to the constitution of assertion. If an assertion is a saying essentially governed by one or more norms, then we should say that the person who breaks a norm, does not even manage to assert. Cappelen may be right in that the norms that govern our speech acts are not essential or constitutive. There is no problem in his argument that the norms have their being in contexts; in some contexts we tend to rely on belief norms, in others we are less liberal and require knowledge norms; in still others, we are ready to argue with Brandom that assertions commit us to all kinds of things. What is a problem in Cappelen's criticism is that he ignores the origin of the very distinction between propositions as uttered and assertions. He does not pay attention to the fact that the distinction was introduced because philosophers realized that it is clearly one thing to say something, namely, to utter a proposition, and another thing to say something with assertoric force. What is even more, "in the ontological order", in the order of human practice, assertions are prior to sayings. We do not simply express propositions; our sayings normally carry assertoric force, unless we indicate something else. That is because in conversation we wish to move "from sense to truth" and share our moves with others. Still, that idea is compatible with Cappelen's thesis that there are various contextual norms that govern our speech acts.

5. Conclusion

It is a task of philosophy to introduce concepts and conceptual distinctions. That is precisely what Frege and Peirce, among others, did. The important distinction made was that between a thought, or a proposition, and a judgment, and further an assertion. An assertion is a serious matter, both epistemically and morally. I

agree with Cappelen that our requirements may vary, that on some occasions, the knowledge norm is applicable, in others the belief norm applies, and in still others, it is natural to think that our assertions are governed, even if not constituted, by commitments. Still, the question is about our assertions, strivings for truth and efforts to share it with others, not merely about sayings.