

PREEMPTING PARADOX

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ABSTRACT: Charlie Pelling has recently argued that two leading accounts of the norm of assertion, the truth account and a version of the knowledge account, invite paradox and so must be false. Pelling's arguments assume that an isolated utterance of the sentence "This assertion is improper" counts as making an assertion. I argue that this assumption is questionable.

KEYWORDS: paradox, assertion, self-reference, knowledge account of assertion, truth account of assertion, Charlie Pelling

Charlie Pelling has recently argued that two leading accounts of the norm of assertion, the truth account (TA) and a version of the knowledge account (BKA), invite paradox and so must be false.¹ Both of Pelling's arguments focus on an isolated utterance of the sentence,

(A1) This assertion is improper.

Each argument assumes that to utter A1 is to make an assertion. But, I will argue, that assumption is questionable. I will also explain away contrary intuitions.

My response to Pelling differs fundamentally from Jeff Snapper's.² Snapper accepts that uttering A1 amounts to asserting and contends that an adequate response to Pelling "must" be analogous to one or another of the responses to the Liar Paradox in the literature. Responses include appealing to vagueness, "adopting a non-classical logic for assertions" or "restricting the T-schema ... to assertions that do not use metalinguistic predicates." Snapper might be right that one or more of those responses is workable. But my discussion shows that we aren't "required" to go that route, because we may simply reject the root assumption that we're dealing with an assertion to begin with. It is advantageous to also have this simpler response at our disposal.

I'll begin by briefly introducing Pelling's arguments. Pelling's argument against TA is elegant and impressively brief.

The truth account of assertion states that an assertion is proper if and only if it is true. Suppose I assert that 'this assertion is improper'. If my assertion is true, then

¹ Charlie Pelling, "A Self-Referential Paradox for the Truth Account of Assertion," *Analysis* 71, 4 (2011): 688, "Paradox and the Knowledge Account of Assertion," *Erkenntnis* (2012), DOI: 10.1007/s10670-012-9360-0.

² Jeff Snapper, "The Liar Paradox in New Clothes," *Analysis* 72, 2 (2012): 319-322.

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it is improper. If it is false, then it is proper. Either way, it constitutes a counterexample to the truth account of assertion.³

The argument assumes that to utter A1 is to make an assertion. The argument against BKA is more complex but for present purposes the important point is that it also assumes that to utter A1 is to make an assertion. The argument begins, “Suppose I make the self-referential assertion that ‘this assertion is improper’.”⁴

Pelling offers no argument in support of the crucial assumption that to utter A1 is to make an assertion. Perhaps it will be thought that the assumption is intuitive. But I don’t find it intuitive, and there is reason to be suspicious of it, as I will now explain.

From the fact that a self-referential utterance describes itself as a speech act of a certain type, it doesn’t follow that it is a speech act of that type. It doesn’t even make it likely. In fact, utterances that share A1’s profile seem *unlikely* to be of the relevant type. To begin with, notice that to utter either of these sentences,

(C1) This command is improper.

(C2) Obey this command.

is not to issue a command, where ‘this command’ purportedly self-refers. Aside from amusement, the most natural reaction to such utterances is to wonder, “What command?” Consider also the sentences,

(Q1) This question is improper.

(Q2) Is this question improper?

It’s clear that uttering Q1 is not a way of posing a question, and it’s not clear that uttering Q2 is either. Again, aside from amusement, the natural first reaction is to wonder, “What question?”

My reaction to an utterance of A1 follows precisely that pattern: I’m left wondering, “What assertion?”

It might be objected that I have unfairly compared assertions to commands and questions, which differ from assertions in direction of fit and purpose. Even limiting ourselves to illocutions that are “in the same line of business” as assertions⁵ – that is, the family of ‘assertives’ or ‘alethic speech acts’ – similar examples are easy to come by.

³ Pelling, “A Self-Referential Paradox.”

⁴ Pelling, “Paradox and the Knowledge Account.”

⁵ John Searle, *Expression and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 13. See also John Turri, “Epistemic Invariantism and Speech Act Contextualism,” *Philosophical Review* 119, 1 (2010): 77-95.

- (G1) This guess is improper.
 (J1) This conjecture is improper.
 (R1) This guarantee is improper.
 (B1) This boast is improper.
 (H1) This hypothesis is improper.
 (N1) This announcement is improper.
 (D1) This declaration is improper.

These are not ways of guessing, conjecturing, guaranteeing, boasting, hypothesizing, announcing, or declaring. We should be skeptical that uttering A1 is a way of asserting.

It might superficially appear that ‘this assertion’ in A1 refers, and that to utter A1 is to make an assertion. But that’s only because ‘this assertion’ isn’t naturally understood as an attempt at self-reference. Instead it’s naturally understood as anaphorically referring to a contextually salient, antecedently existing assertion. Similarly, it can appear that ‘this command’ in C1 refers, and that to utter C1 is to issue a command. But that’s only because it too is naturally understood as referring to a contextually salient, antecedently existing command. So not only is there reason to be suspicious of the crucial, undefended assumption, there is an explanation for why people might unwittingly find it intuitive.

It might be objected that assertion is a performative, so we ought to be able to *make it the case that* we assert by uttering A1.⁶ We need only use the right formulation in an appropriate context. And if we can assert by uttering A1, then Pelling can run his arguments featuring an appropriate example. In response, this objection fails because in order to performatively assert by uttering “I hereby assert...,” *one must indicate the proposition that one thereby asserts*. The typical way to do this is to replace the ellipsis with a declarative sentence. “I hereby assert,” all by itself, doesn’t magically produce an assertion. And “I hereby assert *this*” fares no better.⁷ It works the same way for commanding, questioning, guessing, declaring, and all the others discussed earlier.

Despite those general reasons to be skeptical that uttering A1 amounts to asserting, I observe that at least some felicitous self-referential illocutions seem possible. For example, in the course of teaching someone the language, one might

⁶ John Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). Set aside the fact that Austin (*How to Do Things*, 5) denied that a performative ‘describes’ or is ‘true or false,’ since he was wrong about that.

⁷ I limit my remarks to occasions where ‘this’ purportedly self-refers, of course.

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say, “This is an example of an assertion.” Or someone learning the language might ask, “Is this asking a question?” In each case, ‘this’ arguably self-refers to what the speaker is doing in uttering those words. Will the following serve Pelling’s purposes, then?

(A2) This is an example of an improper assertion.

No, it won’t. For although it self-refers, it doesn’t *paradoxically* self-refer. To utter A2 is to make *two* assertions, namely:

(A2a) This is an example of an assertion.

(A2b) It [i.e. A2a] is improper.

A2a is true, known to be true, and proper to assert, so it can’t cause trouble for TA or BKA. A2b is false and improper to assert, so it can’t cause trouble either.

In conclusion, although Pelling’s arguments are elegant and intriguing, we’ve not yet been given a genuine example of a self-referential assertion apt to generate a paradox for either TA or BKA. We’re not faced with a straightforward counterexample. At this point the burden shifts to those who would defend the crucial assumption. Moreover, we should bear in mind the considerable theoretical and empirical evidence strongly favoring a factive account of the norm of assertion.⁸ If defending Pelling’s crucial assumption requires introducing theoretical apparatus less compelling than the independent evidence favoring a factive account, then we should accept my treatment of A1, and Pelling’s argument is overcome.⁹

⁸ For example, Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch. 11, John Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Jonathan Schaffer, “Knowledge in the Image of Assertion,” *Philosophical Issues* 18 (2008): 1-19, Matthew Benton, “Two More for the Knowledge Account of Assertion,” *Analysis* 71 (2011): 684-687, John Turri, “Prompting Challenges,” *Analysis* 70 (2010): 456-462, John Turri, “The Express Knowledge Account of Assertion,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 89 (2011): 37-45, John Turri, “Knowledge Guaranteed,” *Noûs* DOI:10.1111/j.1468-0068.2011.00849.x, John Turri, “Promises to Keep: Speech Acts and the Value of Reflective Knowledge,” *Logos and Episteme* 2 (2011): 583-590, John Turri, “Pyrrhonian Skepticism Meets Speech-Act Theory,” *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 2 (2012): 83-98, John Turri, “Knowledge and Suberogatory Assertion,” under review, John Turri, “The Test of Truth: An Empirical Investigation of the Norm of Assertion,” under review.

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