Assertions, Denials Questions, Answers & the Common Ground

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*My **Aim***

To better understand the speech acts of *assertion* and *denial*, their relationships to *other* speech acts, and connections between speech acts and logical notions, including the Gentzen's sequent calculus.

My ***Prompt***

I want to revisit some themes
(and expand on some of the claims)
from my 2005 paper
"Multiple Conclusions."

The behaviour of two kinds of speech acts:

(1) *polar* (yes/no) *questions*,

and (2) *justification requests*.

Assertion and Denial

Polar Questions

Positions and Rules

Justification Requests

ASSERTION AND DENIAL

$$X \succ Y$$

Don't *assert* each member of X
and *deny* each member of Y.

Structural Rules

$$X, A \succ A, Y \; Id \qquad \frac{X \succ A, Y \quad X, A \succ Y}{X \succ Y} \; Cut$$

These rules govern assertion and denial *as such*.

Defining Rules for Logical Concepts

$$\frac{X, A, B \succ Y}{X, A \wedge B \succ Y}\wedge Df \qquad \frac{X \succ A, B, Y}{X \succ A \vee B, Y}\vee Df \qquad \frac{X \succ A, Y}{X, \neg A \succ Y}\neg Df \qquad \frac{X, A \succ B, Y}{X \succ A \to B, Y}\to Df$$

$$\frac{X \succ A(n), Y}{X \succ \forall x A(x), Y}\forall Df \qquad \frac{X, A(n) \succ Y}{X, \exists x A(x) \succ Y}\exists Df \qquad \frac{X, Fa \succ Fb, Y \quad X, Fb \succ Fa, Y}{X \succ a = b, Y}=Df$$

Terms & conditions: the singular term n (in $\forall/\exists Df$) and the predicate F (in $=Df$) do not appear below the line in those rules.

These rules can be understood as *definitions* of the concepts they introduce (below the double line).

See (Scott 1974; Došen 1980, 1989; Restall 2019).

In appealing to norms governing assertion…

… I was wading into a pre-existing literature about assertion. A *very large* literature.

It is fruitful to think of assertion
as an act governed by *norms*.

*For **me**: Production Norms*

Aim to say what is *true*!

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Only say what you *know*!

*For **me**: Production Norms*

Aim to say what is *true*!

Only say what you *know*!

Be prepared to *back it up* when requested!

*For **you**: Consumption Norms*

The hearer is entitled to re-assert.

*For **you**: Consumption Norms*

The hearer is entitled to re-assert.

You can refer back to the asserter
to *vouch for* the assertion.

*For **us**: Our Common Ground*

To assert is to bid for the content asserted
to be added to the COMMON GROUND,
the body of information that
we (together) take for granted.

Stalnaker on Common Ground

To presuppose something is to take it for granted, or at least to act as if one takes it for granted, as background information as common ground among the participants in the conversation. What is most distinctive about this propositional attitude is that it is a social or public attitude: one presupposes that ϕ *only if one presupposes that others presuppose it as well.*

— "Common Ground" *L&P* (2002)

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This does not help distinguish
denial from *retraction*, or
from other speech acts.

Let's address this issue…

… by examining polar questions,
and their answers,
in the light of our background
interest in assertion and its norms.

POLAR QUESTIONS

This is a distinct speech act
with its own norms.

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It raises an *issue*.

*There are two ways to **settle** the issue*

Yes

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Yes *No*

If I say *yes* and you say *no*
to some polar question p?,
then we DISAGREE.

That is, we take *different* positions on p.

The two ways ***clash***

If I say *yes* and you say *no*
to some polar question p?,
then we DISAGREE.

That is, we take *different* positions on p.

There is no *shared* position
incorporating both of our answers.

Other responses don't settle the issue

Other responses, like

Other responses don't settle the issue

Other responses, like

maybe

Other responses don't settle the issue

Other responses, like

maybe · *I don't know*

Other responses don't settle the issue

Other responses, like

maybe · *I don't know* · *I think so*

Other responses don't settle the issue

Other responses, like

maybe · *I don't know* · *I think so*

are acceptable responses to p?,

Other responses don't settle the issue

Other responses, like

maybe · *I don't know* · *I think so*

are acceptable responses to p?,

but they don't answer the question.

They don't settle the issue of p.

Settling answers are assertions

A *yes* or a *no* to p? counts as an assertion.

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A *yes* or a *no* to p? counts as an assertion.

(Either answer is governed by all of the assertion norms we've seen.)

What does a "no" to p? ***assert***?

Presumably ¬p.

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However, I prefer to think of
a *yes* to p? as ruling p *in*,
and a *no* to p? as ruling p *out*.

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This way, we can distinguish practices
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and those with more limited expressive resources.

(Nothing important *here* hangs on this distinction.)

$$[X : Y]$$

a pair of sets of sentences

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Think of this as part of the *conversational scoreboard*.
There are also our public *individual* commitments,
the questions under discussion, and much more.

Denial and Retraction

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ELOISE: No, he is in the kitchen.

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PARTIAL ANSWER

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WEAK DENIAL

ABELARD: Is Astralabe in the study?

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STRONG DENIAL

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- To *weakly deny* p is to *block* the addition of p to the *positive common ground*, or to bid for its *retraction* if it is already there.

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Strong and Weak Denial, and the Common Ground

- Strong *or* weak denials of p are appropriate responses to an assertion of p, because the assertion of p is a bid to add p to the positive common ground.

- A strong denial of p is one way to settle the question p? — to settle it negatively.

- A weak denial of p is not generally an appropriate response to the polar question p?, as the polar question does not place p in the positive common ground, and the question is inappropriate if p is already in the positive common ground, so there is no p to block or retract.

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*Strong and Weak Denials, and Strong and Weak **Assertions***

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- STRONG ASSERTION: add to the positive common ground.
- WEAK DENIAL: retract (or block) from the positive common ground.
- WEAK ASSERTION: retract (or block) from the negative common ground. — "Perhaps p."

That's one way to understand the relationship between assertion and denial, and how to distinguish strong denial from other negative speech acts.

One Consequence

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Eloise blocks from the common ground (weakly denies)
a *logical consequence* of the common ground (the axioms of geometry),
for the same kind of reason we accept for other weak denials.

This would be impossible if the common ground was simply a set of worlds.

Logical Consequence and Strong or Weak Denial

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But this example shows that
it *need not* be out of bounds to
strongly assert each member of X
and *weakly deny* each member of Y.

Any position $[X, A : A, Y]$
in which A has been
strongly asserted and
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If $X \succ Y$ is not derivable then $[X : Y]$ is *available*.

A Word on ***Cut***

$$\frac{X \succ A, Y \quad X, A \succ Y}{X \succ Y}\ \mathit{Cut}$$

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(After all, isn't the issue A? thereby *implicitly* settled by [X : Y]?)

POSITIONS AND RULES

Defining Rules

$$\frac{X, A, B \succ Y}{X, A \wedge B \succ Y} \wedge Df \qquad \frac{X \succ A, B, Y}{X \succ A \vee B, Y} \vee Df$$

$$\frac{X \succ A, Y}{X, \neg A \succ Y} \neg Df \qquad \frac{X, A \succ B, Y}{X \succ A \rightarrow B, Y} \rightarrow Df$$

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These are kinds of *definitions*, showing how to treat assertions or denials of the *defined* concept in terms of the assertions or denials of their components.

Derivations

$$\dfrac{\dfrac{\dfrac{\neg p \succ \neg p}{\succ p, \neg p}\,\neg Df}{\succ p \vee \neg p}\,\vee Df}$$

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$$\dfrac{\dfrac{\dfrac{p, q \vee r \succ p \wedge q, q \vee r}{p, q \vee r \succ p \wedge q, r, q}\,\vee Df \qquad \dfrac{p \wedge q, q \vee r \succ p \wedge q, r}{q, p, q \vee r \succ p \wedge q, r}\,\wedge Df}{p, q \vee r \succ p \wedge q, r}\,Cut}{p, q \vee r \succ (p \wedge q) \vee r}\,\vee Df}{p \wedge (q \vee r) \succ (p \wedge q) \vee r}\,\wedge Df$$

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- They don't have the same *shape* as proofs.
- (Where is the *conclusion* in $p \vee q \succ p, q$?)
- A endsequent $X \succ A$ doesn't tell you to *infer* A *from* X — it merely tells you to not assert all members of X and deny A.

Let's make this problem ***sharp***

"Well, now, let's take a little bit of the argument in that First Proposition—just *two* steps, and the conclusion drawn from them. Kindly enter them in your note-book. And in order to refer to them conveniently, let's call them *A*, *B*, and *Z*:—

(*A*) Things that are equal to the same are equal to each other.

(*B*) The two sides of this Triangle are things that are equal to the same.

(*Z*) The two sides of this Triangle are equal to each other.

Readers of Euclid will grant, I suppose, that *Z* follows logically from *A* and *B*, so that any one who accepts *A* and *B* as true, *must* accept *Z* as true?"

"Undoubtedly! The youngest child in a High School—as soon as High Schools are invented, which will not be till some two thousand years later—will grant *that*."

"And if some reader had *not* yet accepted *A* and *B* as true, he might still accept the *sequence* as a *valid* one, I suppose?"

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The Tortoise never asserts A and A → Z while denying Z,
but he doesn't accept A and A → Z *as a reason* for Z.

JUSTIFICATION REQUESTS

What is a justification request?

ABELARD: Astralabe is in the kitchen.

ELOISE: *Really*?

ABELARD: I saw him there five minutes ago.

ELOISE: OK.

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ELOISE: *Are you sure*? He's been in the study with me for the last half hour.

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ABELARD: Astralabe is in the kitchen.
ELOISE: *Really*?
ABELARD: I saw him there five minutes ago.
ELOISE: Yes, but he was in the study two minutes ago.

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in order for the request to be met.

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This reason is another assertion [or denial]
which must be *granted*, (added to the common ground)
in order for the request to be met.

Granting the given reason is *necessary* but not *sufficient*
for satisfying the justification request.

Definitions and Justification Requests

ACHILLES So … this is an *equilateral* triangle.

TORTOISE I'm sorry, I don't follow, my heroic friend. I've not heard that word before: what does '*equilateral*' mean?

ACHILLES Oh, that's easy to explain. '*Equilateral*' means having sides of the same length. An *equilateral* triangle is a triangle with all three sides the same length.

TORTOISE OK. That sounds good. You may continue with your reasoning.

ACHILLES Well, as I was saying, the sides of this triangle are all one cubit in length, so it is an equilateral triangle.

TORTOISE Perhaps you will forgive me, Achilles, but I still don't follow. I grant to you that the sides of this triangle all have the same length. I fail to see, however, that it *follows* that it is an equilateral triangle. Could you explain why it is?

If I accept the definition $A =_{df} B$,
then I should accept granting A as meeting
a justification request for the assertion of B
and ruling out A as meeting a justification
request for B's denial and *vice versa*.

A failure to accept this is a sign
that I have not mastered the definition.

What goes for a definition of the form $A =_{df} B$ can also go for *defining rules*:

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It is a mistake to grant A and grant B
and to look for something more to discharge
a justification request for an assertion of $A \wedge B$,
if you take $\wedge Df$ as a *definition*.

Justification Requests and Defining Rules

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Justification Requests and Defining Rules

$$\frac{X, A \succ B, Y}{X \succ A \rightarrow B, Y} \rightarrow Df$$

It is a mistake to rule A in and rule B out
and to look for something more to discharge
a justification request for a denial of $A \rightarrow B$
if you accept $\rightarrow Df$ as a definition.

Justification Requests, Defining Rules and Derivations

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Consider this *focussed* derivation:

$$\frac{A \rightarrow Z \succ \boxed{A \rightarrow Z}}{A \rightarrow Z, A \succ \boxed{Z}} \rightarrow Df$$

- Read the *premise* as telling us that in a position in which $A \rightarrow Z$ is already ruled in, we have an answer to the justification request for $A \rightarrow Z$'s assertion.

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A *little* more work is required to show why granting A and $A \rightarrow Z$ is enough to meet a justification request for Z's assertion.

Consider this *focussed* derivation:

$$\frac{A \rightarrow Z \succ A \rightarrow Z}{A \rightarrow Z, A \succ Z} \rightarrow Df$$

- Read the *premise* as telling us that in a position in which $A \rightarrow Z$ is already ruled in, we have an answer to the justification request for $A \rightarrow Z$'s assertion.
- Then applying $\rightarrow Df$ we see why we have an answer to the request concerning Z's assertion, in a context in which $A \rightarrow Z$ and A have both been ruled in. (In granting $A \rightarrow Z$ and A we have settled Z positively. Its denial is ruled out, since to assert A and deny Z amounts to denying $A \rightarrow Z$.)

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Focussed Derivations and Justification Requests

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(Note: it's the *derivation* that shows how to meet the justification request, not the mere validity of the sequent.)

Details

See the handout for details on
derivations with *focus*
and meeting *justification requests*.

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- Since the common ground from which the request is met can contain assertions and denials, we derive sequents of the form $X \succ A, Y$ and $X, A \succ Y$.
- The making of an *inference* is a (possibly preemptive) answer to a justification request.
- A derivation of a sequent $X \succ A, Y$ [$X, A \succ Y$] can be transformed into a *procedure* for meeting a justification request for an assertion of A [denial of A] in any available position, appealing only what is granted in [$X : Y$], and to the defining rules used in that derivation.

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- The *negative* view of the bounds is seen in the clash between assertion and denial, and the *positive* view is found in the answers we can give to justification requests.
- Adopting *defining rules* is one way to be *very* precise about the norms governing the concepts so defined, combining *safety*, *univocity* and *expressive power*.

THANK YOU!

http://consequently.org/presentation/2020/assertion-denial-qa-common-ground-acu