

Non-Assertion and Modality: From Sextus to some Contemporary Debates

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CLPS-DWMC Symposium, 2018/06/04

1 Pyrrhonian non-assertion

2 Modal expressivism

1 Non-assertion in hellenistic philosophy: an overview

- ▶ The centerpiece of ancient greek philosophy of language is Plato's *Cratylus*
- ▶ There, however, we have a discussion of language as a *representational* device: the problem is how 'names' come to *designate* (convention vs 'naturalness'?).
- ▶ A secondary problem becomes how enunciations/*assertions* come to be *true*.
- ▶ Hellenistic philosophy broadened the scope of the discussion beyond the representational/assertion-centered view.

1 Epicureans on the origin of language

*[...] names too did not originally come into being by coining, but **men's own natures underwent feelings and received impressions** which varied peculiarly from tribe to tribe, **and each of the individual feelings and impressions caused them to exhale breath peculiarly**, according also to the racial differences from place to place. Later, particular coinings were made by consensus within the individual races, so as to make the designations less ambiguous and more concisely expressed. Also, the men who shared knowledge introduced certain unseen entities, and brought words from them into usage. <Hence some> men gave utterance under compulsion, and others chose words rationally, and **it is thus [...] that they achieved self-expression** (hermeneusai).*

(Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus, DL 10.75-6, LS19A)

1 Stoics on lekta (sayables) (I)

Utterance and speech are different, because vocal sound is also an utterance but only articulated sound is speech. And speech is different from language, because language is always significant, but speech can lack significance, e.g., blituri, whereas language is not so at all. Furthermore, saying is different from voicing. For utterances are voiced, but it is states of affairs which are said – they, after all, are actually sayables. (DL 7.57 LS33A)

[The stoics] say that a ‘sayable’ is what subsists in accordance with a rational impression, and a rational impression is one in which the content of the impression can be exhibited in language.

(Sextus Empiricus, Against the professors 8.70 LS33C)

1 Stoics on non-assertive sayables (I)

Sayables [...] are divided into complete and incomplete, the latter being ones whose linguistic expression is unfinished, e.g. '[Someone] writes', for we ask, 'Who?' In complete sayables, the linguistic expression is finished, e.g., 'Socrates writes.' So incomplete sayables include predicates, whereas ones that are complete include propositions, syllogisms, questions and enquiries. (DL 7.63)

1 Stoics on non-assertive sayables (II)

- DL 7.66-8 discusses questions, enquiries, imperatives, vocatives, 'quasi-propositions' and 'timid suggestions':

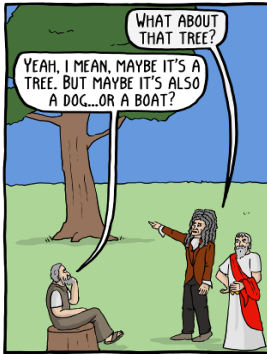
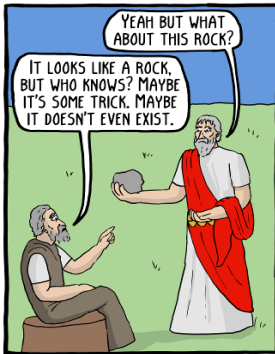
An interrogation is a thing complete in itself like a judgement but demanding an answer [...] An inquiry is something which we cannot reply by signs, as you can nod yes to an interrogation; but you must express the answer in words [...] (66)

A quasi-proposition is that which, having the enunciation of a judgement, yet in consequence of the intensified tone or emotion of one of its parts falls outside the class of judgements proper, e.g. 'Yes, fair indeed the Partenon!' (67)

There is also [...] what might be called a timid suggestion [epaporetikon], the expression of which leaves one at a loss, e.g. 'Can it be that pain and life are in some sort akin?' (68)

- These sayables are neither true nor false.

1 What about Pyrrhonism?



1 Non-assertion in (late) Pyrrhonism

- ▶ The stoic discussion of sayables is at the background of Sextus' own discussion in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Their acknowledgement of non-assertive language enables his account of how Pyrrhonians can express themselves.
 - In other points Sextus disagrees: for example, he takes sides with conventionalism, against the stoics (OP II.xviii).
- ▶ The account of non-assertion answers the question of how come a Pyrrhonian like Sextus does not adopt *quietism*.
- ▶ One can either ascribe Sextus (*pace* himself) a distinct account of non-assertion, or say that he makes dialectical use of an extant account (probably of stoic origin, as above). The second is more likely, although his own observations are more subtle than the stoics'.

1 Sextus on non-assertion

[...] Non-assertion is refraining from assertion in the general sense (which we say covers both affirmation and negation), so that non-assertion is the feeling we have because of which we say that we neither posit nor reject anything. (OP I.xx.192)

- ▶ The skeptics feel this way in relation to matters under investigation; 'non-assertion' is not a *mood* about nothing in particular.
- ▶ The 'skeptical phrases' are used to convey this feeling:

When we use of [the modes] [...] we utter certain phrases which manifest a sceptical disposition and our feelings. (OP I.xviii.187)

- ▶ The stoic idea of a 'timid suggestion'/dubitative seems to be a special case of this: in that case, one is at a loss about some question.

1 ▶ Pyrrhonian possibility claims and non-claims

- ▶ Pyrrhonian use of modals like ‘possibly’ (*exesti*), ‘perhaps’ (*tacha*) and ‘maybe’ (*endexetai*) follows the pattern of non-assertion:

We take ‘perhaps’ and ‘perhaps not’ in the sense of ‘perhaps it is and perhaps it is not’; ‘maybe’ and ‘maybe not’ for ‘maybe it is and maybe it is not’; ‘possibly’ and ‘possibly not’ for ‘possibly it is and possibly it is not’. [...] Now it is, I think, clear that these phrases are indicative of non-assertion. For instance, someone who says ‘perhaps it is’ implicitly posits what is thought to conflict with it, namely ‘perhaps it is not’, insofar as he does not make an affirmation about its being so.

(OP I.xxi.194-5)

1 How does the Pyrrhonian manage to argue with the dogmatics?

- ▶ Sextus says that the Pyrrhonians will use these modal expressions in this way, but what about his dogmatic dialectic interlocutors, and the Pyrrhonians' engagement with them?
 - ▶ Two issues:
 - *Logical inference*: from Sextan principles, it turns out that possibility excludes necessity, but that does not capture some widely shared intuitions, in particular, certain intuitions some of the stoics seem to have had (cf. DL 7.75).
(Here, Pyrrhonians appear to side with Aristotle.)
If we consider the Megarian notion of possibility, the problem becomes even more difficult.
 - *Reports*: How does the Pyrrhonian report third-person/dogmatic modal claims?
 - Zeno says that it will possibly rain tomorrow \neq Zeno says that he feels that he cannot decide whether it will rain tomorrow or not.
- This issue should arise even for reports of what other Pyrrhonians say.
- ▶ These issues are instances of an *embedding* problem.

1 The plan

- ▶ How would one go around solving these issues?
- ▶ I think some contemporary discussions (on what is called *expressivism*) are pertinent.
- ▶ They can provide tools to deal with the historical case.
- ▶ ... and the historical case highlights some difficulties for the contemporary problems.

1 Pyrrhonian non-assertion

2 Modal expressivism

2 Expressivism: the basic idea

- ▶ Some expressions in language seem to have the function to convey the speaker's attitude only, instead of representing (part of) a state of affairs:

Gee, that's not suprising!

- ▶ *Expressivism* is the term for views which propose that it is not only particular expressions that have this feature: significant classes of expressions have it (for example, moral terms, modals, even logical connectives...)
- ▶ *Modal expressivism* is the view that holds that modal language serves an expressive role.

2 Local vs. global expressivism?

- ▶ When we have a part of language for which an expressivist account is given, that account can be:
 - a) independent of a more encompassing account, in which case we are dealing with *local* expressivism.
 - b) dependent on a more encompassing account. In the limiting case where that account deals with the whole of language, we are dealing with *global* expressivism.
- ▶ Since language can be partitioned in such a way that its parts can have parts, we can introduce a relative sense of being global.

2 Revisionary vs. descriptive expressivism?

- ▶ Expressivism can be *descriptive* if it aims to describe the conditions in which language is *de facto* used.
- ▶ It can be *revisionary* if it aims to provide a revised set of linguistic rules and conventions.

2 Recasting Sextus's account of modals in expressivist terms

- ▶ Sextus account of modal language seems to fit expressivism:
 - It is thoroughly non-representationalist, modal claims are not truth/falsity apt
 - Local/global? Most likely, local.
 - Descriptive/revisionary? Prima facie, descriptive (I will return to this later).
- ▶ If that is correct, it is (probably) the earliest form of it (contra the common view that expressivism dates back to Spinoza or Hume)
 - Furthermore, it somehow explains why expressivism appears in modern philosophy (through the recovery of skeptic ideas).
- ▶ There should be some way to expand on the view using contemporary tools...

2 Schneider on speech act expressivism

- ▶ There are several expressivist accounts of modals available (Yalcin 2007; Thomasson 2007, 2010; Schroeder 2011), but here I will focus on Schneider's (2009):
 - SAE (1) If a modal μ is used in an epistemic sense and combined with a sentence s , the resulting $\mu|s$ does not differ from s in content
 - (2) In uttering $\mu|s$, a speaker performs a speech-act that consists in presenting himself as having a certain epistemic stance of a certain strength (determined by the meaning of μ) towards the content of s
 - (3) In uttering $\mu|s$, a speaker does not generally make any assertion.

2 Embeddings

- ▶ Yalcin (2007; 2011) raises the following embeddings as problematic:
 - a) It is raining and it might not be raining.
 - b) Suppose it is raining and it might not be raining.
 - c) If it is raining and it might not be raining, then I will get wet.
- ▶ Schneider: the required speech-act structure cannot be satisfied

2 Other embeddings

- ▶ The following embeddings seem fine:
 - d) If Fred comes, I might leave.
 - e) Perhaps he will come and perhaps he won't
- ▶ How to account for this?

2 Two explanatory strategies

- 1) Appeal to the massive ambiguity of modals.
- 2) Describe the cases as admissible compositions of speech acts.

2 A problem with the first strategy

- ▶ Consider
 - f) Perhaps the problem might be solved that way
- ▶ A reading: an *epistemic* 'perhaps' embeds an *objective* 'might'
- ▶ Epistemic modals don't iterate:
 - g) Fred will certainly perhaps come
- ▶ Consider:
 - h) It might be that the problem is perhaps solved that way
- ▶ What is the correct reading of this?

2 The global embedding problem about modality

- ▶ How does the class of expressivist modals embed in the broader context of (modal) language?
- ▶ Three options:
 - 1) Hold on to *Local Expressivism*.
 - 2) Reject local expressivism and adopt *Global Descriptivism*.
 - 3) Reject local expressivism and adopt *Global Expressivism*.
- ▶ Schneider adopts (1).
- ▶ The problem remains: why is there a split between objective and epistemic modal language?

2 Schneider's proposal

- ▶ Expressivist language exists because it fulfills the role of giving 'a way of putting forward the content of a belief without the detour of explicitly ascribing the belief to oneself' (p. 606)
- ▶ Expressivist idioms allow the signaling of different kinds of *focus*.
- ▶ A problem: why can't focus be accounted for in purely descriptivist terms?
- ▶ If the only benefit is convenience, why not give a pragmatic account, instead of a semantic one?
- ▶ This all puts pressure on either adopting Descriptivism or a global version of expressivism.

2 Back to the Pyrrhonians

- ▶ The Pyrrhonians' issue *is* the Global Embedding Problem.
- ▶ They did not conceive of a global expressivism (probably because of the stoic influence), but it would have solved some of their problems.
- ▶ A descriptive expressivi strategy might not be enough.
- ▶ So, skeptics will keep on searching (*zetousin*).

Thanks!



^oProtogenes throwing a sponge to his painting of Ialysus. Cf. the story of Apelles, OP 1.28.