

# PARADOXICAL ASSERTIONS: A REPLY TO TURRI

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ABSTRACT: In earlier work, I have argued that the self-referential assertion that “this assertion is improper” is paradoxical for the truth account of assertion, the view on which an assertion is proper if and only if it is true. In a recent paper in this journal, John Turri has suggested a response to the paradox: one might simply deny that in uttering “this assertion is improper” one makes a genuine assertion. In this paper, I argue that this ‘no assertion’ response does not dissolve the paradox in the way Turri suggests.

KEYWORDS: John Turri, assertion, paradox, propriety, truth

In a recent paper in this journal, John Turri<sup>1</sup> responds to a paradox which I have raised for the truth account of assertion, the view on which an assertion is proper if and only if it is true.<sup>2</sup> The paradox itself is easily stated:

Suppose I assert that “this assertion is improper.” If my assertion is true, then it is improper. If it is false, then it is proper. Either way, it constitutes a counterexample to the truth account of assertion.<sup>3</sup>

In response, Turri argues that when I utter the words “this assertion is improper,” I do not thereby assert anything. My utterance does not constitute an assertion, any more than an utterance of “obey this command” constitutes a command. Appearances to the contrary, Turri argues, are explained by the fact that the expression ‘this assertion’ is “naturally understood as anaphorically referring to a contextually salient, antecedently existing assertion.”<sup>4</sup> Since there is no such antecedent assertion in this case, ‘this assertion’ does not refer. The question of the truth or falsity of “this assertion is improper” therefore does not arise, and there is no paradox.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Turri, “Preempting Paradox,” *Logos & Episteme* 3, 4 (2012): 659-662.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Weiner, “Must We Know What We Say?” *The Philosophical Review* 114 (2005): 227-251.

<sup>3</sup> Charlie Pelling, “A Self-Referential Paradox for the Truth Account of Assertion,” *Analysis* 71 (2011): 288.

<sup>4</sup> Turri, “Preempting Paradox,” 661.

<sup>5</sup> Turri argues that if this response works, it should also work as a response to a similar paradox which I have raised for a form of the knowledge account of assertion (in “Paradox and The

In what follows, I shall argue that this ‘no assertion’ response does not dissolve the paradox in the way Turri suggests. There is still a problem for the truth account of assertion. Before I come to criticize the no assertion view, however, I want to start by registering my agreement with Turri that it does at least *matter* whether the view is tenable.

One might doubt that if one accepted a set of claims recently advanced by Jeff Snapper.<sup>6</sup> Snapper argues that the propriety paradox is merely a disguised form of the liar paradox, and that as such it should admit of exactly the same solutions. Snapper considers a strengthened form of the propriety paradox which arises from the assertion that “this assertion is not proper.” He claims that the “only solution” to this paradox – analogous to what he sees as the only solution to the liar paradox – is *either* to reject the principle that no assertion is true and not true, *or* to restrict in some way the principle that an assertion of ‘*p*’ is true if and only if *p*.<sup>7</sup> However, this is to overlook an obvious candidate solution to the propriety paradox which is not available in the case of the liar: one might simply reject the truth account of assertion. This shows that the propriety paradox is not merely a disguised form of the liar paradox, and it also shows why the former puts a distinctive kind of pressure on the truth account. For that reason, I agree with Turri that it would be useful to advocates of the truth account if the no assertion response were available.

So what is wrong with the no assertion response? To illustrate what I see as the main problem, I want to focus on some remarks Turri makes near the end of his paper.<sup>8</sup> Turri concedes that even if we rule out the possibility of making self-referential assertions of *certain* types – such as “this assertion is improper” – we should not take this strategy too far: the scope of the no assertion view should not be too broad. The reason is that some self-referential assertions really do seem bona fide. For example, Turri observes that in the course of teaching a person English one might assert:

1. This is an example of an assertion

This is surely right: one surely can assert (1). But if so, it seems one might also assert:

2. This is an example of an improper assertion

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Knowledge Account of Assertion,” Forthcoming in *Erkenntnis*). I accept that conditional but deny its antecedent. The focus here will remain on the paradox as it arises for the truth account.

<sup>6</sup> Jeff Snapper, “The Liar Paradox in New Clothes,” *Analysis* 72 (2012): 319-322.

<sup>7</sup> Snapper, “The Liar Paradox,” 321.

<sup>8</sup> Turri, “Preempting Paradox,” 661-2.

And (2) threatens to raise the same paradox for the truth account of assertion as “this assertion is improper.” Turri considers this point but argues that (2) is not paradoxical. The reason is that in uttering (2) one actually makes two assertions:

(2a) This is an example of an assertion, and

(2b) It (2a) is improper

Neither (2a) nor (2b) are paradoxical, according to Turri: (2a) is proper and true, while (2b) is improper and false.

The problem, however, is that this ‘divide and conquer’ strategy for handling assertions such as (2) is not available across the board. For example, suppose I assert:

3. This is not an example of a proper assertion

Asserting (3) does not amount to asserting the conjunction of:

(3a) This is an example of an assertion, and

(3b) It (3a) is not proper

For if asserting (3) involved asserting (3a), then by parity of reasoning asserting (4) would involve asserting (4a):

4. This is not an example of a proper question

(4a) This is an example of a question

This is implausible, however: asserting (4) surely does not involve asserting (4a).

So the divide and conquer strategy seems to fail: whether or not it offers a convincing treatment of (2), it is in any case unconvincing as regards (3). This seems to leave Turri with a dilemma. Either he allows that utterances of (2) and (3) express genuine assertions, but then it seems that the propriety paradox for the truth account of assertion would return. Or he simply denies that (2) and (3) express genuine assertions. The trouble is that the latter approach seems to carry little independent plausibility.