A NON-PUZZLE ABOUT ASSERTION AND TRUTH

John TURRI

ABSTRACT: It was recently argued that non-factive accounts of assertoric norms gain an advantage from "a puzzle about assertion and truth." In this paper, I show that this is a puzzle in name only. The puzzle is based on allegedly inconsistent linguistic data that are not actually inconsistent. The demonstration's key points are that something can be (a) improper yet permissible, and (b) reproachable yet un-reproached. Assertion still has a factive norm.

KEYWORDS: truth, assertion, norms, language

Recently, Neri Marsili presented what he calls "a puzzle about assertion and truth."[1] Following earlier work on the topic, Marsili assumes that the goal of research in this area is to identify the unique, exceptionless rule that normatively individuates assertion by specifying the unique characteristic C of propositions such that, "One must: assert p only if p has C."[2]

Marsili's discussion is intended to adjudicate between factive and non-factive proposals in this area. A proposal is *factive* if its candidate C requires p to be true, in which case speakers must assert only facts. A proposal is *non-factive* if its candidate C does not require p to be true, in which case speakers needn't always assert only facts.

The data of the puzzle consist of two pairs of claims:[3]

Improper Falsity:

- Intuition: false assertions are improper in virtue of their being false.

- Behavior: false assertions are reproachable in virtue of their being false.

Permissible Falsity:

- Intuition: inadvertently false ('unlucky') assertions are permissible.

- Behavior: we do not reproach unlucky assertors.

---

[1] Neri Marsili, "Truth and Assertion: Rules and Aims," *Analysis* 78, 4 (2018): 638-48, https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/any008.

[2] Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 241.

[3] Marsili, "Truth and Assertion," 640.

John Turri

Marsili claims that factive accounts seem well suited to explain Improper Falsity, whereas non-factive accounts seem well suited to explain Permissible Falsity. He then states the puzzle as follows:

> These two sets of linguistic data… seem incompatible: according to the former, false assertions are always improper; according to the latter, they are permissible under some circumstances.[4]

Marsili then offers a new argument in favor of non-factive accounts. The basic idea is that "the best available" solution to the puzzle involves a non-factive rule.[5] In particular, Marsili proposes that false assertions seem improper because truth is the *aim* of assertion, which explains the negative evaluation of false assertions, whereas unlucky assertions are permissible because the *rule* of assertion is not factive, which explains the non-reproachful response to unlucky assertions.

In response, this is a "puzzle" in name only. The two sets of data are not, and do not seem, incompatible.

With respect to the two "intuitions," from the fact that a behavior is improper, it does not follow that it is impermissible. Some permissible behavior is nevertheless improper. For example, as a professional, it is permissible but improper for a college instructor to teach class in flip-flops, jogging pants, and a ragged t-shirt. Morally speaking, it is permissible but improper to demand that one's dinner guests leave one's house before being served dinner. In such cases, agents are within their rights to behave that way, but they still shouldn't. Otherwise put, the conduct is allowed but discouraged, perhaps even strongly so, within the same domain of evaluation (e.g. a professional code of conduct, or morality).

With respect to the two "behaviors," from the fact that something is reproachable, it doesn't follow that we reproach it, or even that we tend to reproach it. Social life involves many compromises. We often extend charity, good will, forgiveness, and tolerance when deciding how to respond to others' behavior. We don't jump at every opportunity to call out transgressions. Patient forbearance can be especially tempting if it seems like the transgressor's "heart is in the right place" and the transgression is unintended.

In light of these observations, there is no puzzle to resolve. There is no incompatibility between impropriety and permissibility. And there is no incompatibility between something's being both reproachable and un-reproached.

---

[4] Marsili, 641.

[5] Marsili, 646.

Accordingly, nothing in Marsili's discussion speaks against a factive account that hypothesizes (i) assertions should express truth, according to the rules of the practice, and (ii) we refrain from criticizing unlucky assertions because we forgive them or don't think they deserve criticism. Such a factive account can explain all the phenomena discussed above.

It also has at least two advantages. On one hand, unlike Marsili's account, it doesn't require us to accept ancillary hypotheses about the aim of assertion, nor does it involve treating assertion as though its rules could be detected by analogical reasoning from institutional practices with official rule books, such as board games or organized sports. Of course, it is not illegitimate to appeal to a distinction between rules and aims, or to draw analogies. Instead the point is that every ancillary hypothesis or assumption with probability less than 1 automatically decreases the probability that one's view as a whole is correct. Accordingly, avoiding ancillary hypotheses is preferable.

On another hand, and more importantly, the proposed account coheres with a wide and increasing range of additional evidence supporting factive accounts that has been discovered in recent years.[6] By contrast, Marsili's discussion proceeds by

---

[6] Matthew A. Benton, "Two More for the Knowledge Account of Assertion," *Analysis* 71, 4 (2011): 684–87, http://doi.org/10.1093/analys/anr085; John Turri, "The Test of Truth: An Experimental Investigation of the Norm of Assertion,"*Cognition* 129, 2 (2013): 279–91,http://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2013.06.012; John Turri, "Selfless Assertions: Some Empirical Evidence," *Synthese* 192, 4 (2015): 1221-33, http://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-014-0621-0; Matthew A. Benton, "Gricean Quality," *Nous* 50, 4 (2016): 689–703, http://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-114-2-227; John Turri, *Knowledge and the Norm of Assertion: an Essay in Philosophical Science* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), http://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/397/knowledge-and-the-norm-of-assertion--an-essay-in-philosophical-science; John Turri, "Knowledge and Assertion in 'Gettier' cases," *Philosophical Psychology* 29, 5 (2016): 759–75, http://doi.org/10.1080/09515089. 2016.1154140; John Turri, "Knowledge, Certainty, and Assertion," *Philosophical Psychology* 29, 2 (2016): 293–99, http://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2015.1065314; John Turri, "Vision, Knowledge, and Assertion," *Consciousness and Cognition* 41 (2016): 41–49, http://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2016.01.004; John Turri, "Experimental Work on the Norms of Assertion," *Philosophical Compass* 12, 7 (2017): 1-12, e12425, https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12425; John Turri, "The Distinctive 'Should' of Assertability," *Philosophical Psychology* 30, 4 (2017): 481–89, http://doi.org/10.1080/09515089. 2017.1285013; John Turri, "Revisiting Norms of Assertion," *Cognition* 177 (2018): 8–11, http://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.03.023; John Turri and Yeoun Jun D. Park, "Knowledge and Assertion in Korean," *Cognitive Science* 42, 6 (2018): 2060–80, https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.12621; Ben Holguín, "Lying and Knowing," *Synthese* (2019): 1–21, http://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-019-02407-2; John Turri, "Truth, Fallibility, and Justification: New

setting aside all of the other evidence,[7] which his proposed non-factive account does not cohere with.

Marsili justifies setting aside all such evidence by claiming he is "concerned with data that supports factive accounts as a whole, as opposed to specific accounts (KR, TR, etc)," where "KR" refers to a knowledge rule and "TR" refers to a less demanding truth rule. But evidence supporting *any* factive view supports the conclusion that assertion has a factive norm, which is inconsistent with any view, including Marsili's, claiming that assertion does not have a factive norm. Whether the evidence supports "factive views as a whole, as opposed to specific [factive] accounts" is irrelevant to whether it can profitably inform theorizing about the new considerations Marsili puts forward. More generally, when aiming to advance understanding of a research topic, the bar should be set very high to set aside most evidence relevant to that topic.

Responding to my argument, one might revise the data of the problem. Focusing on the "intuition" components, one might argue that this pair is incompatible:

- Impermissibility intuition: false assertions are impermissible.

- Permissibility intuition: some false assertions are permissible.

In reply, not even this pair is incompatible. We can consistently accept both intuitions if we reject the assumption that a rule must impose an exceptionless requirement, or a perfect duty, that applies to each and every assertion. That assumption is entirely optional.[8] Instead, a factive rule might tolerate exceptions by imposing a more-or-less stringent imperfect demand. Thus the intuition, "false assertions are impermissible," could be interpreted as describing a central tendency. Of course, factive accounts positing an exceptionless requirement cannot avail themselves of this possibility, so Marsili's discussion might still pose a challenge to them. But social rules commonly tolerate exceptions, and no evidence has ever been offered that norms of assertion impose perfect duties, so it's unclear what motivation there is to retain the assumption.

Responding again in turn, one might revise the data of the problem even further by upgrading the impermissibility intuition to say, "All false assertions are impermissible." This would finally render the two claims genuinely inconsistent.

Studies in the Norms of Assertion," *Synthese* (2020): 1–12, http://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02558-7.

[7] Marsili, "Truth and Assertion," 639n2.

[8] Turri, "Knowledge and Suberogatory Assertion;" Turri, *Knowledge and the Norm of Assertion*; and Turri, "Revisiting Norms of Assertion."

In reply, this over-interprets the ordinary linguistic data that theories in this area are accountable to. In the present context, it is common ground that we intuitively evaluate false assertions negatively. But which specific form, if any, that negative evaluation tends to take is an open question. It is not simply given to us pre-theoretically that the evaluation pertains to impermissibility. Factive accounts needn't be limited to rules pertaining to impermissibility. Reflecting this flexibility, some factive accounts leave it open whether impermissibility is the relevant normative status.[9] Similar remarks apply to the "permissibility intuition." It is not a pre-theoretical observation that the intuition pertains specifically to permissibility. Instead, it might pertain to some other redeeming normative status.

One final suggestion, then, is to recast the competing intuitions in more theoretically neutral terms, such as these:

- Negative reaction: we react negatively to some aspect(s) of false assertions.

- Positive reaction: we react positively to some aspect(s) of some false assertions.

We're entitled to no more than this, I submit, as an uncontroversial starting point from the armchair. Some mix of introspection and social observation can persuade us that there is something potentially interesting to be explained here. But nothing in this pre-theoretical data sustains a claim of inconsistency — to the contrary, it is utterly commonplace for an overall evaluation to include some pros and some cons.

I furthermore submit that this, or any similar, pair of claims is inadequate to sustain detailed theorizing about assertion and its norms. Progress will require accessing more data than this. Happily, recent research has supplied this in abundance.[10]

---

[9] See Turri, "Knowledge and Suberogatory Assertion;" Turri, *Knowledge and the Norm of Assertion*; and Turri, "Revisiting Norms of Assertion."