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Performativity and the “True/False Fetish”

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If you hurl a tomato at a political meeting (or bawl “I protest” when someone else does—if that is performing an action) the consequence will probably be to make others aware that you object ...: but this will not make either the throw or the shout true or false (though they may be, even deliberately, misleading).

Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*

Introduction

J. L. Austin took it to be a defining feature of the sorts of utterances that he came to call “explicit performative utterances” that they are neither true nor false, despite being utterances of declarative sentences, which are traditionally regarded as paradigms of truth-evaluability; and he did not feel compelled to give arguments for his non-truth-evaluability thesis, pointing out that he considers it to be too obvious to require defence. Wedded as they have been to a truth-conditional conception of linguistic content, subsequent philosophers of language have refused to accept Austin’s non-truth-evaluability thesis –not surprisingly, since maintaining both it and the truth-conditional conception of content would force them to conclude that explicit performative utterances have no content at all. And since those philosophers, along with everyone else, do acknowledge both the contentfulness of explicit performatives and the significance of the phenomenon of performativity to which Austin was the first to pay systematic attention, they have sought to explain what is special about explicit performatives by devising accounts of them that not only do not

incorporate Austin's non-truth-evaluability thesis but positively require precisely what Austin was ruling out –accounts, that is, according to which what is distinctive about explicit performatives cannot be understood *unless* they are taken to be bearers of a truth value.

The belief that such accounts are reliable, together with the absence of arguments on Austin's part, appears to be the main reason why Austin's thesis that explicit performatives are truth-valueless "is denied by almost everyone nowadays," as Hornsby (2006: 904) notes in an overview of post-Austinian work on performativity. But that denial would be apt for reconsideration, if it could be shown that anti-Austinian explanations of explicit performativity face insuperable problems that are due precisely to their assumption that explicit performatives are truth evaluable. This essay proposes to make a step towards such reconsideration. After a reminder of some characteristics of explicit performatives that are acknowledged by all parties to the dispute, I argue that attempts to justify the denial of Austin's non-truth evaluability thesis by producing explanations of performativity that essentially depend on the hypothesis that explicit performatives are truth-evaluable cannot succeed for at least two types of reason: on the one hand, because utterances that, on the proposed explanations, should be capable of being explicit performative ones turn out to be incapable of being explicit performative ones; on the other hand, because utterances that, on the proposed explanations, should be incapable of being explicit performative ones turn out to *be* capable of being explicit performative ones. Since the source of these explanatory failures turns out to be none other than the adoption of the hypothesis that explicit performatives are truth-evaluable, I suggest that they strongly undermine the anti-Austinian view and vindicate Austin's thesis, in favour of which I then sketch an independent argument based on the behaviour of explicit performatives in deductive inferential contexts (specifically, on the fact that their behaviour in

such contexts could not be reconciled with the hypothesis that they are truth-evaluable unless one denied the applicability, in those contexts, of certain logically fundamental inference rules). My conclusion is that the Austinian thesis can by no means be regarded as having been superseded, and that Austin's opponents might even have to seriously consider adopting it if some of their own broader interests were to be safeguarded.

Performativity and the anti-Austinian view

The sorts of utterances to which Austin was focusing attention when he came to use the label “explicit performative utterances”, and which are commonly discussed under that label today, are utterances of grammatically declarative sentences each of which is such that (a) its speaker, referring therein to himself/herself in the first person singular, predicates of himself/herself an illocutionary act named by a simple present tense, active main verb (and its object, if it has one), and (b) its issuance in the right circumstances constitutes the performance, by the speaker, of the act that he/she thereby predicates of himself/herself. Thus, an utterance, in the right circumstances, of the sentence, “I deny that arithmetic is complete”, can constitute a speaker's denial that arithmetic is complete, and so can be an explicit performative utterance; whereas an utterance of the sentence, “I prove that arithmetic is incomplete”, can under no circumstances constitute a speaker's proof that arithmetic is incomplete, and so cannot be an explicit performative utterance. Similarly, an utterance, in the right circumstances, of the sentence, “I recommend the *Hammerklavier* sonata” can constitute a speaker's recommendation, to some hearer or hearers, and for some purpose or purposes, of the *Hammerklavier* sonata, and so can be an explicit performative utterance; whereas an utterance of the sentence, “I perform the *Hammerklavier* sonata”, can under no circumstances constitute anyone's

performance of the *Hammerklavier* sonata, and, therefore, cannot be an explicit performative utterance.

Two constraints on explicit performativity, both of them noted by Austin, are generally acknowledged and would be worth keeping in mind in the present context. The first is that a declarative sentence otherwise conforming to the type of declarative sentence described above is not, in general, performatively usable —i.e., usable in such a way that its production by its speaker can constitute the performance, by that speaker, of the act named by its active main verb—, if its active main verb occurs in a grammatical person other than the first person or in a grammatical tense other than the (usually, simple) present tense: Although “I request your support” can constitute my request of your support and “I offer you my car” can constitute my offer to you of my car (and so, can be explicit performative utterances), neither “I requested your support” nor “I offered you my car” can constitute my request of your support or my offer to you of my car, and so cannot be explicit performative utterances. Furthermore, although my saying to you “I request your support” can constitute my request of your support, and my saying to you “I offer you my car” can constitute my offer to you of my car, it is not the case that *your* saying to me “You request my support” can constitute *my* request of your support, or that *your* saying to me “You offer me your car” can constitute *my* offer to you of my car, which means that neither of these latter utterances can be an explicit performative utterance.

The second constraint on explicit performativity is that, even when a sentence fully conforms, as regards the grammatical features of its main verb, to the type of declarative sentence described above, it is, in general, only some, and not all, interpretations of those grammatical features that are compatible with the sentence’s explicit performative use. In particular, if the present tense of the sentence’s main verb is interpreted in a way that allows

utterance-time and reference-time to diverge, the sentence cannot normally be used performatively. Thus, “I promise never to lie again” can constitute my promise never to lie again (and so, can be an explicit performative utterance), if the present tense of its main verb is understood as referring strictly to the time of speaking (as it would normally be, if the utterance was, for example, my response to your utterance of the imperative, “Promise me never to lie again!”). But it cannot constitute my promise never to lie again, if, in uttering it, I am simply explaining to you what I do whenever I am caught lying (as in, “Each time I am caught lying, I promise never to lie again”); or if, in uttering it, I am simply describing to you the commitments I have undertaken in a letter that I have posted earlier today (as in, “In the final paragraph of the letter I have posted earlier today, I promise never to lie again”); or if, in uttering it, I am simply rehearsing what I plan to do in an upcoming important meeting (“Here is my plan for tonight’s meeting: First, I thank them for accepting to see us. Second, I apologise for having lied yesterday. Third, I promise never to lie again.”) It is, in short, only on specific interpretations of its grammatical features –and, in particular, on the (relatively uncommon) interpretation of the present tense as referring strictly to the time of speaking– that an utterance of a declarative sentence of the sort described above can normally be an explicit performative utterance.

Austin called “explicit performative verbs”, or simply “performative verbs”, the verbs that, under the constraints just noted, can be used as the main verbs of explicit performative utterances. And, in moving from the exposition of his doctrine of explicit performative utterances to the exposition of his doctrine of illocutionary acts, he suggested (1975: 149-150) that, if one wants to obtain a minimally comprehensive list of the types of illocutionary act that are commonly recognized in a language, there is no better method than to compile (as he himself had set out to do for that purpose) a list of the explicit performative verbs of that language –that is, a

list of those verbs that can be used as the main verbs of explicit performative utterances whose issuance in appropriate circumstances would constitute the acts that the verbs name¹.

Apart from their use in providing him with what he regarded as an appropriate point of entry into his nascent theory of illocutionary acts, the main use that Austin has made of explicit performative utterances (and the one that is our primary concern here) was a polemical one. For, Austin took it to be a defining feature of explicit performative utterances not only (i) that their speakers, by issuing them in appropriate circumstances, accomplish the illocutionary acts that they thereby predicate of themselves, but also (ii) that, in predicating those acts of themselves, they do *not* produce, nor do they intend to produce, a truth-evaluable representation of themselves as accomplishing the acts in question (and so, cannot be supposed to be accomplishing them by way of describing themselves as accomplishing them, or by way of stating that they are accomplishing them, or by way of

¹ In expounding his doctrine of illocutionary acts, Austin occasionally used the term “performative” not merely as a shorthand for “explicit performative”, but also in a different, extended, sense, in which it refers to *any* utterance accomplishing some speech act or other, whether or not the utterance *names* (in the way his “explicit performative utterances” do) the act it accomplishes. Coupled with Austin’s thesis that *every* natural language utterance normally accomplishes some speech act or other, this terminological choice has the unfortunate consequence that every normal natural language utterance is “performative” in the extended sense, and thus deprives the notion of performativity in the extended sense of any clearly distinctive theoretical role. In this essay I use “performative” only as a shorthand for Austin’s “explicit performative” –that is, only by reference to utterances that *name* (in their first-person present-tense active main verbs) the illocutionary acts they accomplish–, and *not* in Austin’s inflationary extended sense; similarly for “performativity”.

It seems that Austin became aware of the problem created by his occasional use of “performative” in the extended sense when it was too late for him to correct it: the editors of *How to Do Things with Words* tell us in their Appendix that, at the point in Austin’s lecture notes where the transition to the doctrine of illocutionary acts (and to the inflationary use of “performative”) is effected, there is “a marginal note dated 1958” in which Austin writes, “All this isn’t clear!” and asks rhetorically, “Won’t all utterances be performative?” (Austin 1975: 167). Unlike Austin, some of his commentators, and all of his popularizers, appear not to realize that the use of “performative” in the extended sense risks trivializing the notion of performativity; what is worse, they sometimes advance arguments where conclusions about performativity in the strict sense (that is, explicit performativity) are fallaciously drawn from premises concerning performativity in the extended sense, or conversely.

declaring that they are accomplishing them, or by any other way that would require of them to be producing, in accomplishing them, a truth-evaluable representation of themselves as accomplishing them). However, explicit performative utterances are utterances of grammatically declarative sentences; and since, on the view that was prevalent in the philosophy of Austin's time, utterances of grammatically declarative sentences (if such sentences did not belong to those that were condemned as nonsensical for positivistic reasons) were assumed to be, and to be intended to be, truth-evaluable representations of reality, the existence of explicit performative utterances constituted, for Austin, a distinctive and decisive type of evidence against the aforementioned assumption, which he dubbed "the descriptive fallacy" and against which he has found additional occasions to position himself in his work².

Post-Austinian philosophers of language are, if anything, even more unwilling than some of Austin's own contemporaries might have been to

² Austin's non-truth evaluability thesis regarding explicit performatives is asserted in all three of his extended treatments of them that have followed his brief, incidental, discussion of the topic in his 1946 article "Other Minds": the 1955 Harvard lectures posthumously published as *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin 1975), the 1956 BBC talk posthumously published as "Performative Utterances" (Austin 1979: 233-252), and the 1958 Royaumont Abbey talk posthumously published as "Performatif-Constatif" and translated as "Performative-Constative" (Austin 1963). On all three of these occasions, the non-truth-evaluability of explicit performatives is presented as evidence against what Austin calls the "descriptive fallacy", a view that he had already targeted under that name in "Other Minds" (1946:174; 1979:103). The non-truth evaluability of explicit performatives is also asserted, and presented as evidence against the "descriptive fallacy", in Austin's 1950 article "Truth", which mentions other kinds of utterances of declarative sentences besides explicit performatives that, in Austin's view, are not truth-evaluable despite their declarative grammatical form (1950: 125-127; 1979: 130-132).

It may be worth noting that Austin's teacher, H. A. Prichard, in a paper on promising written, according to its first editor, circa 1940, and published posthumously in 1949 (see now Prichard 2002: 257-265), explicitly associates what Austin was later to call explicit performativity with non-truth-evaluability. Commenting on the promise made in uttering "I promise not to reduce the rates", Prichard writes that "while everyone would allow that a promise may be made either in good or in bad faith, no one would allow that it could be either true or false", and adds that "promising resembles asking a question or issuing an order in that it consists not in making a statement" (Prichard 2002: 258).

accept Austin's claim that explicit performative utterances are truth-valueless, since most of them have come to subscribe to truth-conditional theories of linguistic content; if Austin were right, therefore, their accounts of linguistic content should be acknowledged to have the undesirable consequence that they constrain them to claim, about certain obviously contentful utterances of natural language sentences, that they have no content at all. On the other hand, post-Austinian philosophers of language would have even less an excuse than Austin's contemporaries might have to claim that the truth-evaluability, and hence (for them) the contentfulness, of explicit performatives simply *follows* from their declarative grammatical form, since that claim, besides begging the question against Austin, would beg the question against grammatical theory itself: whatever else a grammar of a natural language is, it is nowadays widely agreed that it is *not* something that is capable of delivering verdicts as to which linguistic objects are truth-evaluable and which aren't. It is therefore not surprising that those post-Austinian philosophers of language who have attempted to seriously address the issue raised by Austin should have sought to resist his non-truth-evaluability claim about explicit performatives in a way that, at least in appearance, neither begs the question against Austin nor makes gratuitous assumptions about imaginary pronouncements of grammatical theory. And the way that most of them have found to be adequate to that task can best be represented as a kind of abductive argument in favour of the denial of Austin's claim –an argument, specifically, that purports to justify the *hypothesis* that explicit performatives are truth evaluable by claiming that, if one assumes, *contra* Austin, that they are truth evaluable, then one can *explain* the most distinctive feature of explicit performatives that both Austin and everyone else acknowledges, namely that their speakers can accomplish, in uttering them, the acts that they thereby name. According to the proposed explanation, an explicit performative utterance can accomplish, by being

issued, the act that it names because it is a truth-evaluable utterance of a declarative sentence which, unlike truth-evaluable utterances of other types of declarative sentences, has the special property that its truth-condition is such that it can be satisfied, thus rendering the utterance true, by the utterance's own issuance. (Thus, what accounts for the fact that an utterance like "I deny that arithmetic is complete" can be an explicit performative utterance –that is, can constitute a denial that arithmetic is complete– whereas an utterance like "I prove that arithmetic is incomplete" cannot be an explicit performative utterance –that is, cannot constitute a proof that arithmetic is incomplete– is that, although they both are truth-evaluable utterances of declarative sentences, the truth condition of the former, unlike the truth condition of the latter, is such that it can be satisfied, thus making the utterance true, by the utterance's own issuance). And, according to the abductive argument that I am here reconstructing, it is precisely because it affords this explanation of what explicit performativity really is that the hypothesis that explicit performatives are truth evaluable is justified, and can be upheld in opposition to Austin's thesis that they aren't.

In a section of his *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century* entitled "A Lesson about Explicitly Performative Sentences", Scott Soames expresses this currently widespread anti-Austinian understanding of explicit performativity in these terms:

[T]he explicitly performative sentence *I promise to return the book* has a straightforwardly descriptive meaning that represents the world as being a certain way, and so imposes truth conditions on it. What makes this sentence special, and performative, is that one can bring it about that these truth conditions are satisfied (i.e., one can bring it about that the proposition expressed by the sentence is true) simply

by uttering the sentence in the right circumstances. (Soames 2003: 127)

Soames mentions Lemmon (1962) and Lewis (1979) as exponents of versions of this view, but a far more influential twentieth century philosopher, Quine, could have been mentioned as well. In his contribution to a symposium on Austin held in 1965 and first published in its entirety in 1969, Quine acknowledges that Austin's discussion of explicit performatives utterances in *How to Do Things with Words* was directed against what Austin there calls –identifying it as one of the principal targets of his work– the “true/false fetish” (Austin 1975: 151), but claims that explicit performative utterances do not justify “Austin's animus against the true/false fetish”, since what is special about an explicit performative utterance –in Quine's view– is not, as Austin thought, that it lacks a truth condition, but rather that its truth condition is such that it can be satisfied by the utterance's own issuance, thus rendering the utterance one that is true:

“I bid you good morning” is true of us on a given occasion if and only if, on that occasion, I bid you good morning. A performative is a notable sort of statement, I grant; it makes itself true; but then it is true. (Quine in Urmson, Quine and Hampshire 1969: 90)

Variouly embellished, the view that Quine here expresses underlies almost all post-Austinian accounts of explicit performatives, including the two currently most popular (and otherwise antagonistic) ones, due respectively to Kent Bach (1975) and to John Searle (1989). According to Bach, explicit performative utterances are “statements” that “are true in virtue of being made” (Bach 1975: 230); and according to Searle, “performative utterances are those in which saying something makes it true” (Searle 1998b: 115).

I will call the kind of view just outlined “the anti-Austinian view”, and it will be the object of critical attention in what follows. It should be noted that although all proponents of the anti-Austinian view agree that explicit performative utterances are truth evaluable utterances of declarative sentences whose truth conditions are such that they can be satisfied, thus making the utterances true, by the utterances’ own issuance, they need not agree, and in fact they rarely do agree, on the question as to *why* explicit performatives utterances happen to have (whereas truth-evaluable utterances of other types of declarative sentences happen not to have) truth conditions of that special kind. Since examining, on a case by case basis, the conflicting answers to that question given by various anti-Austinians would be relevant only if one had no doubt about the correctness of the basic anti-Austinian claim to which they all subscribe, and since it is the correctness of that basic claim that I doubt, I will have nothing further to say about internal disputes within the anti-Austinian camp in this essay.

Against the anti-Austinian view, Part I

Suppose, as the anti-Austinian view has it, that the explicit performativity of an utterance (that is, the fact that it can constitute the act that it names) is due to its having a truth condition that is such that it can be satisfied, thus making the utterance true, by the utterance’s issuance. It follows from this that any utterance that has *the same truth condition* as the truth condition that, by hypothesis, a given explicit performative utterance has will also be capable of constituting, through *its* issuance, the act that it names: if the capacity of an utterance to be used performatively is correctly explicable as resulting from its truth-condition’s being such as to be satisfiable by the utterance’s issuance, then issuances of any utterances that *share* an explicit performative’s supposed truth condition should also share its capacity to be used performatively.

Call this consequence of the anti-Austinian view Thesis T. Among the ways of seeing that Thesis T is false, and that, therefore, the anti-Austinian view cannot be right, a simple one consists in assuming the nowadays standard, Kaplanian, view of the interpretation of indexicals, and in considering the effect of replacing, in certain contexts, the first-person indexical subject term of an explicit performative utterance with a co-referential second-person indexical subject term. The relevant part of the standard view of the interpretation of indexicals is simply the thesis that singular indexicals are directly referential expressions, and can be expressed as follows: given a declarative sentence containing a singular indexical, the indexical's contribution to the truth condition that, relative to a context of use, the declarative sentence has is *just* the referent of the indexical in that context of use, rather than any 'way of presenting' or any 'way of fixing' that referent in that context of use (notice that the standard view does not deny that different 'ways of presenting' or different 'ways of fixing' their referents may be associated with distinct singular indexicals as parts of their distinct linguistic meanings; what it asserts is that it is *only* their referents, and not those 'ways of presenting' or 'ways of fixing' their referents, that the indexicals contribute to the context-relative *truth conditions* of the sentences where they occur; cf. Kaplan 1989a,b). It follows from this that if the *only* difference between two truth-evaluable declarative sentences is that they contain distinct singular indexicals that are co-referential relative to a context of use, then the two sentences have exactly *the same truth condition* relative to that context of use. For example, relative to a context in which John produces a token of (1a) while Maria, addressing John, produces a token of (1b),

(1a) I am Italian.

(1b) You are Italian.

(1a) and (1b) have exactly the *same* truth condition, namely the condition that John is Italian; and relative to a context in which Maria produces a token of (1a) while John, addressing Maria, produces a token of (1b), (1a) and (1b) have exactly the same truth condition, namely the condition that Maria is Italian.

But now, if the standard view of the interpretation of indexicals is taken to apply to explicit performative utterances, as it must be taken to apply *if* explicit performatives are assumed to be truth-evaluable, then the anti-Austinian view is constrained to derive the obviously false conclusion that a host of utterances that are clearly incapable of being explicit performatives ones are in fact capable of being explicit performatives ones, since those utterances will have exactly the same truth conditions as the explicit performative ones, and so their issuance will be capable of satisfying those conditions just as much as the issuance of the explicit performative ones does. Consider a context in which John produces a token of (2a) while Maria, addressing John, produces a token of (2b), and in which the present tense markers of both John's and Maria's tokens have the same present time reference:

(2a) I deny that arithmetic is complete.

(2b) You deny that arithmetic is complete.

Assume –as it can certainly be the case– that John's token is an explicit performative one (that is, in producing it, John accomplishes the act, which he names, of denying that arithmetic is complete). Then, given the standard view of the interpretation of indexicals, the anti-Austinian view entails the obvious falsehood that not only John's but also *Maria's* token can constitute *John's* denial that arithmetic is complete. For, on the assumption that John's

explicit performative token is truth-evaluable, the standard view of the interpretation of indexicals will entail that John's and Maria's tokens have exactly *the same* truth condition –namely, the condition that John denies that arithmetic is complete. And on the further assumption that a token's explicit performativity is due to its having a truth condition that is such that it can be satisfied by the token's issuance, it will follow that the issuance of *either one* of the two tokens can satisfy their identical truth condition, and can thus be an explicit performative token –it will follow, in other words, not only that John's token of (2a) can constitute his denial that arithmetic is complete, but also that Maria's token of (2b) can constitute *John's* denial that arithmetic is complete. Since, however, it is obvious that, although John's token of (2a) can constitute John's denial that arithmetic is complete, Maria's token of (2b) cannot constitute John's (or, for that matter, anyone else's) denial that arithmetic is complete, the conclusion must be that the anti-Austinian view cannot explain the explicit performativity of (2a) without falsely attributing explicit performativity to (2b).

This point is obviously generalizable to indefinitely many cases, indicating that the explanatory failure of the anti-Austinian view that it signals is a failure on a massive scale. Take *any* pair of utterances of present tense declarative sentences of the forms “I Φ ” and “You Φ ”, naming an illocutionary act of Φ -ing, of which the first can be an explicit performative utterance (that is, can *constitute* the act of Φ -ing that it names) while the second cannot be an explicit performative utterance (that is, cannot constitute the act of Φ -ing that it names), and in which the present tense forms have the same present time reference and the first- and second-person singular indexicals are co-referential. Then, on the anti-Austinian assumption that the utterance of the form “I Φ ” is truth-evaluable, the standard view of the interpretation of indexicals will entail that “I Φ ” and “You Φ ” have exactly the same truth condition. And this, together with the

further anti-Austinian assumption that the performativity of an utterance is due to its having a truth condition that is such that it can be satisfied by the utterance's issuance, will entail the obvious falsehood that "You Φ " can be an explicit performative utterance just as much as "I Φ " can –in other words, will entail that the issuance of "You Φ " can constitute the act of Φ -ing that it names just as much as the issuance of "I Φ " can constitute the act of Φ -ing that it names.

In order to avoid this explanatory collapse while remaining true to his or her anti-Austinianism, the anti-Austinian would have to defend the extraordinary claim that an explicit performative utterance of the form "I Φ ", even though it is, by anti-Austinian lights, truth-evaluable, *cannot* have the same truth condition as a corresponding non-performative utterance of the form "You Φ ", when the present tense forms of both utterances have the same present time reference, and their first- and second-person indexicals are co-referential. But it is very hard to see how this claim could be credibly defended, since its defence would require revisionary assumptions, which hardly anyone would be willing to accept, about either the interpretation of indexical expressions or the interpretation of performative verbs. If the claim's defence were meant to rely on a revisionary assumption about the interpretation of indexical expressions (rather than of performative verbs), the claim would be rejected, since the requisite assumption would have to be nothing less than the assumption that it is impossible for the members of a set of truth-evaluable declarative sentences to have the same truth condition, relative to a context of use, when those members differ *only* in that they contain distinct singular indexicals that are co-referential relative to that context of use. But taking this to be impossible entails denying that, for example, "I am fifty years old", said by me to you today, can have the same truth condition as "You

are fifty years old,” said by you to me today. And any theory of indexicality that is constrained to deny *that* would most likely be rejected.

If, on the other hand, the defence of the anti-Austinian claim were to rely on a revisionary assumption about the interpretation of performative verbs (rather than of indexical expressions), then it would be rejected too, since the requisite assumption about the interpretation of performative verbs would have to be that every apparently unambiguous performative verb is ambiguous between at least two necessarily divergent senses, in the first of which the verb has *only* first-person present-tense occurrences and in the second of which it has *only* non-first-person non-present-tense occurrences (on that account, that is, the reason why, for example, “I deny that arithmetic is complete”, said by me to you, and “You deny that arithmetic is complete”, said by you to me, would, allegedly, have necessarily disjoint truth conditions would be that the verb ‘deny’, as used in the first utterance, is *not* the same verb as, and has necessarily a different meaning from, the verb ‘deny’ as used in the second utterance). But the assumption that every apparently unambiguous performative verb is ambiguous in this highly peculiar way, besides being one that every anti-Austinian is on record as emphatically denying, is one that would entail that explicit performative utterances, as normally understood, do not exist at all, and would, if only for that reason, be rejected. For, on the normal understanding of performativity, an explicit performative utterance of the form “I Φ ” is, among other things, one whose issuance by a speaker would have satisfied an imperative utterance of the form “ $\Phi!$ ” that would have been addressed to that speaker (if you were to address to me the imperative “Promise never to lie again!”, my utterance of the performative “I promise never to lie again” would have satisfied your imperative; if you were to address to me the imperative “Admit that you are guilty!”, my utterance of the performative “I admit that I am guilty” would have satisfied your imperative; and so on).

On the assumption under consideration, however, no explicit performative of the form “I Φ ” could ever satisfy a corresponding imperative of the form “ $\Phi!$ ”, since, despite all appearances, the act that the utterer of the performative would be naming and performing would, of necessity, *not* be the act whose performance the utterer of the imperative would have solicited. And this is surely a consequence that no account of performatives (or, for that matter, of imperatives) would tolerate.

Since the anti-Austinian has no credible way of avoiding the explanatory collapse engendered by the falsity of Thesis T, the claim from which Thesis T follows –namely, that the explicit performativity of an utterance is due to its having a truth condition that is such that it can be satisfied by the utterance’s issuance– must be rejected. And there are, of course, many other types of case that lead to the same kind of explanatory collapse. One type of case that is particularly striking (and indicates that trying to make the anti-Austinian explanation more restrictive would not remove its explanatory impotence) becomes apparent if one considers the effect of replacing, in certain kinds of context, the indexical subject term of an explicit performative utterance with a co-referential proper name, and if one assumes (as it is very widely assumed) that, at least in that sort of syntactic position, proper names are as much directly referential expressions as indexicals are (that is, contribute *only* their referents to the truth conditions of the sentences containing them). Suppose that Steven Stevens is amnesiac about his name, and that, fully believing that he is someone *other* than Steven Stevens, he makes what he takes to be a conjecture about Stevens’s current deeds by saying,

(3a) Steven Stevens denies/bets/concludes that there is life in other planets.

It is clear that Stevens would *not* have thereby denied/bet/concluded (unbeknownst to himself, as it were) that there is life in other planets. On the other hand, if the amnesiac Stevens were to say instead,

(3b) I deny/bet/conclude that there is life in other planets.

he *would* have thereby denied/bet/concluded that there is life in other planets. The anti-Austinian view, however, cannot acknowledge the explicit performativity of (3b) without falsely attributing explicit performativity to (3a). For since, if both (3a) and (3b) were truth-evaluable, they would, in the circumstances, have exactly the same truth condition, the anti-Austinian view would wrongly entail that the issuance of (3a) could constitute the act of denying/betting/submitting that it names just as much as the issuance of (3b) could.

Indeed, it is not even necessary to invoke atypical conditions like a *speaker's* ignorance of his or her own name in order to produce cases with just this effect. Far from atypical conditions like an *addressee's* ignorance of a speaker's name would do as well. Suppose that I am Philip Philips and know full well what my name is, but that *you* don't know what my name is, and I am fully aware of the fact that you don't know what my name is. If, in these circumstances, I were to say to you,

(4a) I condemn/applaud your actions.

I *would* have thereby condemned/applauded your actions. But if, in the same circumstances, I were to say to you,

(4b) Philip Philips condemns/applauds your actions.

I would *not* have thereby condemned/applauded your actions, no matter what I might be ‘privately’ taking myself to be doing. However, if both (4a) and (4b) were truth evaluable, then, relative to a context in which they would be uttered by me and addressed to you, they would have exactly the same truth condition; and this, given the anti-Austinian explanation of performativity, would lead to the obviously false conclusion that my utterance of (4b) could constitute my act of condemning/applauding your actions just as much as my utterance of (4a) could.

It is important to bear in mind, in considering all these counterexamples, that the anti-Austinian explanation of performativity is best viewed as purporting to enable an *abductive* argument in favor of the anti-Austinian thesis that performatives are truth-evaluable: It is not as if the anti-Austinian thesis were somehow *obviously* true, and should be accepted *whether or not* it led to an adequate explanation of the phenomenon of performativity; rather, its leading to an adequate explanation of the phenomenon of performativity would provide the principal reason for thinking that it *is* true; consequently, its *not* leading to such an adequate explanation removes the principal reason for taking it to *be* true, and thus for undermining Austin’s thesis. Indeed, viewed from such an abductive perspective, Austin’s contrary thesis that explicit performatives are truth-valueless might now appear to offer the simplest explanation of the fact, revealed in the above discussion of the counterexamples, that certain non-first-personal utterances that should behave exactly as explicit performatives utterances do, *if* the latter were truth-evaluable in the way the anti-Austinian view supposes, do not so behave: they do not so behave, the Austinian would hold, because they *are* truth-evaluable utterances, whereas explicit performatives *aren’t*.

Against the anti-Austinian view, Part II

The argument of the previous section was that anti-Austinian explanations of performativity cannot be correct since there exist utterances that, on those explanations, should be capable of being used performatively, but nevertheless turn out to be incapable of being used performatively. The argument of the present section will be that anti-Austinian explanations cannot be correct for the complementary reason that there exist utterances that, on those explanations, should be incapable of being used performatively, but nevertheless turn out to *be* capable of being used performatively.

Suppose again, as the anti-Austinian view proposes, that the explicit performativity of an utterance (that is, the fact that it can constitute the act that it names) is due to the fact that its truth condition is such that it can be satisfied, thus making the utterance true, by the utterance's own issuance. From this it follows that nothing could be an explicit performative utterance if, considered as something truth-evaluable, it would entail something that happens to be false. For, if something that is truth-evaluable entails something that happens to be false, it cannot itself be true. And if something cannot be true, it cannot be true by virtue of being issued. So, if an explicit performative utterance is something truth-evaluable that is true by virtue of being issued, then nothing can be an explicit performative utterance if, considered as something truth-evaluable, it entails something that happens to be false.

Let us call this consequence of the anti-Austinian view Thesis F. There are several types of counterexample showing that Thesis F is false, and that, therefore, the anti-Austinian view cannot be correct, but I shall here concentrate on a particular type of case, which is connected to the important topic of the role of the concepts of sincerity and insincerity in accounts of linguistic action. Consider the following utterances,

- (5) I sincerely assert that I haven't been here before.
- (6) I sincerely wish you a speedy recovery.
- (7) I sincerely apologize for my last remark.
- (8) I sincerely promise to pay all my debts to you.

concerning which the following statements indisputably hold: First, each one of them can constitute, by virtue of being issued, the act (of asserting, of giving one's wish, of apologizing, and of promising, respectively) named by its first-person present-tense main verb –in other words, each one of them can be an explicit performative utterance. Second, each one of them can constitute the act named by its first-person present-tense main verb (and so, can be an explicit performative utterance) *even when its utterer does not satisfy the characteristic sincerity expectation* associated with performances of the act in question –that is, even when its utterer does not believe what he asserts (in the case where the act he names and performs is an assertion), does not desire or hope what he is giving his wish for (in the case where the act he names and performs is the act of giving his wish), does not feel regret over what he apologizes about (in the case where the act he names and performs is an apology), and does not intend to do what he promises to do (in the case where the act he names and performs is a promise). Thus, I can successfully assert, in uttering (5), that I haven't been at the place of my utterance at a time prior to the time of my utterance, even though I do not believe that this was the case, and indeed even if I *know* that it was not the case (I may simply, in making my assertion, be lying to a police officer who is conducting a murder investigation); similarly, I can successfully, in uttering (6), give you my wish for your speedy recovery, even though I don't really want you to recover soon, and indeed even if I secretly hope that you will *not* recover soon; again, I can apologize, in uttering (7), for a previous remark of mine, even though, far from feeling the slightest regret about

having made it, I am secretly delighted about having made it, noticing that it has had the damaging effect that I had intended; and of course, I can promise, in uttering (8), to pay all my debts to you, even though I do not have the intention of paying any of my debts to you, but am simply trying to gain time in order to better organize my disappearance.

The phenomenon that these cases exemplify is perfectly general, and it is one that no adequate account of linguistic action should fail to recognize: for any illocutionary act that generates a characteristic sincerity expectation (in the case of assertions, the expectation that the speaker believes what she asserts; in the case of apologies, the expectation that the speaker regrets what she apologizes about; in the case of promises, the expectation that the speaker intends to realize what she promises; and so on), a speaker can successfully perform the illocutionary act –by, among others, explicit performative means, when such are available– *without* satisfying its associated sincerity expectation. And, of course, serious attempts at constructing theories of illocutionary acts routinely recognize, under various terminologies, this fact. For example, Searle and Vanderveken, who call the characteristic sincerity expectation generated by an illocutionary act the “sincerity condition” on that act, rely, in their *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic*, on a fundamental distinction between, on the one hand, “success conditions” on illocutionary acts (that is, conditions whose non-satisfaction entails the *non*-performance of the acts) and, on the other hand, “non-defectiveness conditions” on illocutionary acts (that is, conditions whose non-satisfaction does *not* entail the non-performance of the acts), and clearly acknowledge that all so-called “sincerity conditions” on illocutionary acts are merely conditions on illocutionary non-defectiveness and *not* conditions on illocutionary success (Searle and Vanderveken 1985: Chapter 1). And although Searle and Vanderveken misleadingly suggest (Searle and Vanderveken 1985: 13) that Austin “fails”

to draw such a distinction, the truth is that Austin makes an exactly parallel distinction, and an exactly parallel acknowledgment, in his long discussion, in *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin 1975: Lectures II–IV), of the conditions under which an explicit performative utterance naming an illocutionary act may be, in his terms, “infelicitous” with respect to the performance of the act that it names. For, Austin there sharply distinguishes between two fundamental types of such conditions (and, correspondingly, two fundamental types of “infelicity”): on the one hand, those whose non-satisfaction (called by him a “misfire”) entails the *non*-performance of the act named by the performative verb, and, on the other hand, those whose non-satisfaction (called by him an “abuse”) does *not* entail the non-performance of the act named by the performative verb; and he explicitly assigns all conditions having to do with characteristic sincerity expectations associated with performatively usable illocutionary verbs (these are the conditions belonging to sub-class “Γ.1.” in his classification of felicity conditions) to the category of conditions whose non-satisfaction would merely constitute an illocutionary “abuse” and *not* an illocutionary “misfire”.

But although it is evidently true, and widely recognized, that an illocutionary act denoted by a performative verb can be accomplished even when its agent does not satisfy the characteristic sincerity expectation associated with that act, the implications that this phenomenon has on the analysis of utterances such (5)-(8) have not been investigated, and are especially significant in the present context. For, speakers of these utterances not only can accomplish the acts they name without satisfying their associated sincerity expectations; they can accomplish them in that way *in spite of the fact* that they present themselves as *satisfying* those expectations. And this means that, *considered as truth-evaluable utterances*, these utterances

could not fail to be *false* when they thus accomplish the acts they name and accomplish.

The key fact to notice in order to appreciate this point is that, although the bare statement that an agent performs a certain illocutionary act does not entail (as just noted) that the agent satisfies the sincerity expectation associated with that act, the statement that an agent *sincerely* performs a certain illocutionary act *does* entail that the agent satisfies the sincerity expectation associated with that act –that is why, for example, third-person statements like (9)-(12) are not contradictory, whereas corresponding third-person statements like (13)-(16) *are* contradictory:

(9) He asserted that he hadn't been there before, even though he didn't believe that this was the case, and indeed knew that it wasn't the case.

(10) He wished her a speedy recovery without really wanting her to recover.

(11) He apologized for his remarks, even though he never felt regret about those remarks.

(12) He promised to pay all his debts to her, without having the slightest intention of paying any of his debts to her.

(13) He sincerely asserted that he hadn't been there before, even though he didn't believe that this was the case, and indeed knew that it wasn't the case.

(14) He sincerely wished her a speedy recovery without really wanting her to recover.

(15) He sincerely apologized for his remarks, even though he never felt regret about those remarks.

(16) He sincerely promised to pay all his debts to her, without having the slightest intention of paying any of his debts to her.

Once this point is appreciated, however, it is not difficult to see that the undeniable fact that speakers of explicit performative utterances such as (5)-(8) can be performing the illocutionary acts they name without satisfying the sincerity expectations that they therein *present themselves* as satisfying is simply inconsistent with the anti-Austinian explanation of performativity. Suppose that, anxious to avoid the possibility of being enlisted as a murder suspect, I produce, responding to a relevant inquiry by a police officer, the following utterance:

(5) I sincerely assert that I haven't been here before.

My utterance of (5) would certainly constitute the *assertion* that it names – namely, the assertion that I haven't been at the place of my utterance at a time prior to the time of my utterance–, even though I might not, while uttering it, *believe* that I haven't been at the place of my utterance at a time prior to the time of my utterance, and might even know that I *have* frequently been there in the past. (Notice that if the police officer later discovers that I have frequently been there in the past, he could rightly accuse me of having *asserted*, falsely, that I have not been there in the past; and that I could hardly defend myself against that accusation by claiming that, since I never *believed* that I hadn't been there in the past, I have *not* made that assertion at all, and so cannot have made it falsely.) On the anti-Austinian account, however, if I were to utter (5) without believing that I haven't been at the place of my utterance at a time prior to the time of my utterance, I *could not* thereby be *asserting* that I haven't been at the place of my utterance at a time prior to the time of my utterance, and my utterance of (5) *could not* have been an explicit performative utterance. For, on the anti-Austinian view, an explicit performative utterance is a truth-evaluable utterance that is rendered *true* by being issued. Considered as a truth-

evaluable utterance, however, my utterance of (5) would, in the envisaged circumstances, be certainly *false*, since what it would *entail* –namely, that *I believe* that I haven't been at the place of my utterance at a time prior to the time of my utterance– would itself be false. And since an utterance that is false cannot at the same time be true, let alone true in virtue of being issued, my utterance of (5) would wrongly be taken, on the anti-Austinian view, to be an utterance that could not possibly be an explicit performative utterance.

For exactly analogous reasons, the anti-Austinian view makes obviously incorrect predictions about a host of relevantly similar cases. For example, in uttering (6), (7) and (8),

(6) I sincerely wish you a speedy recovery.

(7) I sincerely apologize for my last remark.

(8) I sincerely promise to pay all my debts to you.

I may, respectively, be *giving you my wish* for your speedy recovery without really *wanting* you to recover, be *apologizing* for a previous remark of mine without really *regretting* that remark, and be *promising* to pay my debts to you without in the least *intending* to pay my debts to you. On the anti-Austinian view, however, none of these things could possibly happen; for, (6), (7) and (8) cannot, on that view, be used for performing the illocutionary acts they name unless they are truth-evaluable utterances that are rendered *true* by being issued; and, since, considered as truth-evaluable utterances, (6), (7) and (8) would, in the envisaged circumstances, be *false* rather than true – given that what they would respectively *entail* about my desires, my regrets, and my intentions would be false– it would follow, contrary to fact, that (6), (7) and (8) could not possibly be, respectively, my wish for your speedy recovery, my apology for my remark to you, and my promise to pay my

debts to you. Indeed, there is literally no end to the wrong predictions that the anti-Austinian view would commit its adherent to in this area: For *any* illocutionary act that is associated with a characteristic sincerity expectation, and that a speaker performs through an explicit performative utterance in which he or she *purports* to be satisfying the act's associated sincerity expectation without in fact satisfying it, the anti-Austinian view will wrongly entail that the illocutionary act itself is not performed at all, and hence that what is in fact an explicit performative utterance is not an explicit performative utterance.

There is exactly one way in which the anti-Austinian might try to remain anti-Austinian in view of this new explanatory impasse, but I don't believe that anyone, including the anti-Austinian, would, on reflection, be willing to employ it: It would consist in stipulating that nothing is to count as an illocutionary act unless its associated sincerity expectation is in fact satisfied (thus, no one is to count as asserting something unless one believes what one asserts, no one is to count as apologizing for something unless one feels regret over what one apologizes about, no one is to count as promising something unless one intends to do what one promises to do, and so on). The problem with this stipulation, of course, is that it would oblige the anti-Austinian to define out of existence a great many things that without any doubt exist –for example, lies. Suppose that you are suspected of having committed a crime, and that, in response to a relevant inquiry, you defend yourself by saying:

(17) I sincerely assert that I am innocent.

Everyone would agree that, in saying this, (a) you would be *asserting* that you are innocent, and (b) you might be *lying* about your innocence. According to the stipulation under consideration, however, that would be quite

impossible: if your utterance is an assertion that you are innocent, then it *cannot* be a lie about your innocence, since assertions that can be lies simply *do not exist*. This is the sort of consequence that, I suppose, would force everyone, including the anti-Austinian, to reject the stipulation under consideration as a defensible way of saving the anti-Austinian view from its new explanatory impasse. And since no other decent way appears to be available, no salvation appears to be forthcoming.

Since what causes this explanatory impasse is the falsity of Thesis F, the claim from which that thesis follows –namely, that an explicit performative utterance is a truth-evaluable utterance that is rendered true by virtue of being issued– must be rejected. And if that claim is rejected, it can of course provide no motivation whatsoever for the anti-Austinian view that explicit performatives are truth-evaluable. On the contrary, it is the Austinian view that performatives are *not* truth-evaluable that, if accepted, would help one understand why there has been an impasse here in the first place: if explicit performatives are not truth-evaluable, then they do not literally *have* entailments, and so the question of what happens to ‘their’ truth values when ‘their’ entailments turn out to be false does not even begin to make sense.

Against the anti-Austinian view, Part III

I will now give an independent argument in favour of the Austinian claim, which, if correct, undermines the anti-Austinian view at an even earlier juncture than the previous ones, since it focuses simply on the thesis that explicit performatives are truth evaluable utterances rather than on the more specific thesis that they are truth evaluable utterances that are rendered true by being issued. The argument is based on the simple idea that if explicit performative utterances were truth-evaluable, they should be able, while retaining their performativity, to participate as premises in deductive

arguments that would be recognized as instances of valid argument forms. For, since recognizing such an argument as an instance of such a form requires only that its premises be recognized as truth evaluable, rather than as true, nothing more –and, of course, nothing less– than its truth-evaluability would be required of any explicit performative utterance in order for it to be able to participate as a premise in a deductive argument that would be recognized as an instance of a valid argument form. So, an explicit performative’s *inability* to participate as a premise in an argument of that kind would constitute evidence that its performativity is incompatible with its truth-evaluability.

That performativity and truth-evaluability are indeed incompatible for this reason can be seen by considering (among many other similar cases) the sharp contrast in perceived validity between the ‘argument’ in (18*) and the argument in (18),

(18*) If you don’t have a gun, I don’t guarantee your safety.
I guarantee your safety.
Therefore, you have a gun.

(18) If she didn’t have a gun, he didn’t guarantee her safety.
He guaranteed her safety.
Therefore, she had a gun.

or the equally sharp contrast in perceived validity between the ‘argument’ in (19*) and the argument in (19):

(19*) If you don’t like pepper, I don’t recommend to you the *poulet au poivre*.
I recommend to you the *poulet au poivre*.
Therefore, you like pepper.

(19) If she didn’t like pepper, he didn’t recommend to her the *poulet au poivre*.
He did recommend to her the *poulet au poivre*.
Therefore, she did like pepper.

No one, I suppose, would claim that the ‘arguments’ in (18*) and (19*) are in any sense valid arguments if their respective second premises are read as explicit performative utterances (that is, if the second premise of (18*) is read as *being* the guarantee that it names, and the second premise of (19*) is read as *being* the recommendation that it names). On the other hand, everyone would accept that the arguments in (18) and (19), where the second premises *cannot* be read as explicit performative utterances, are classically valid arguments. But these sharply contrasting judgments about validity cannot be squared with the hypothesis that the second premises of (18*) and (19*) are *truth-evaluable* when they are read as explicit performative utterances. For, if the second premises of (18*) and (19*) *were* truth-evaluable when read as explicit performative utterances, it would be arbitrary in the extreme, and disrespectful of every compositionality requirement, *not* to formalize (18*) and (19*) as instances of the *same* argument schema that the formalizations of (18) and (19) would be instances of. And since that schema is classically *valid*, one would be forced by classical logic to take the patently *invalid* ‘arguments’ in (18*) and (19*) to be exactly on a par, in respect of their validity, with the clearly valid ones in (18) and (19). As a result, the only way to reconcile the parallel formalizations with the sharply contrasting judgments about validity would be to reject classical logic—in particular, to deny that *modus tollens* is an unrestrictedly reliable inference rule.

And, of course, if *modus tollens* were to be given up on such grounds, it should not be surprising that *modus ponens* would have to be given up as well. No one, presumably, would accept that the ‘argument’ in (20*) below is a valid argument, if its second premise is read as an explicit performative utterance (that is, if its second premise is read as *constituting* the request that it names):

(20*) If I ask you to have dinner with me, you pretend you are busy.
I ask you to have dinner with me.
Therefore, you pretend you are busy.

On the other hand, everyone would accept that the argument in (20), where the second premise *cannot* be read as an explicit performative utterance, is a classically valid argument:

(20) If he asks me to have dinner with him, I pretend I am busy.
He asks me to have dinner with him.
Therefore, I pretend I am busy.

But this sharp contrast in perceived validity cannot be squared with the hypothesis that the second premise of (20*) is *truth evaluable* when read as an explicit performative utterance; for, if the second premise of (20*) *were* truth evaluable when so read, it would be compositionally irresponsible *not* to formalize (20*) as an instance of the *same* argument schema that the formalization of (20) would be an instance of; and since that schema is classically valid, one would be forced by classical logic to conclude that the obviously *invalid* ‘argument’ in (20*) is exactly on a par, in respect of its validity, with the obviously valid one in (20). Consequently, the only way to reconcile the parallel formalizations with the sharp contrast in perceived validity would again be to reject classical logic, concluding this time that *modus ponens*, no less than *modus tollens*, is an unreliable inference rule.

But rejecting classical logic would be quite an exorbitant price to pay in order to save the hypothesis that explicit performatives are truth-evaluable. And I am reasonably confident that those who have been attracted by that hypothesis would be quite unwilling to pay that price, and not pleasantly surprised to learn that the defence of their hypothesis would require them to become wanton logical revisionists. I therefore conclude that it would be in their best interests to reject that hypothesis and to accept

that explicit performatives are *not* truth evaluable, just as Austin, without offering arguments, has been urging.

Conclusion

Austin, as I mentioned in the beginning, claimed that his thesis that explicit performatives are not true or false is too obviously true to require argument: “It needs argument”, he wrote (1975: 6), “no more than that ‘damn’ is not true or false.” It is clear in hindsight that, in making that claim, Austin was greatly overestimating the degree to which subsequent philosophers would be prepared to accept without argument the view that explicit performatives are truth-valueless. I have tried to show, however, that Austin’s opponents can be given some good reasons for accepting that view, and that their best argument for not accepting it (namely, that by rejecting it they could explain how explicit performatives manage to accomplish the acts they name) turns out to be fatally flawed. If I am right, it is perhaps time to start suspecting that Austin’s opponents may have been just too hasty in supposing that they have successfully neutralized the serious threat that explicit performatives pose to the bundle of prejudices that Austin was referring to as “the descriptive fallacy”.

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