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## Why Austin still matters *Por que (com) Austin ainda (se) conta*

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### ABSTRACT

*I review in this paper how J. L. Austin relativizes the question of truth to contexts of the use of sentence-tokens, especially to the specific purposes with which a given user employs them. This has the consequence that truth becomes more matter of only being 'roughly' accurate, relative to a certain uses of sentence-tokens, rather than an inherent property of sentences in their putative correspondence to the world 'out there'. Austin's unease with the way philosophers have traditionally handled the question of truth thus stands out independently of his trademark thesis of verediction taking precedence over verum, the latter only taking its strength from the authority commanded by the one behind the former. This in turns opens up several new avenues of research, a fact that goes to prove that Austin has a lot to teach future generations of researchers.*

**Key-words:** *J. L. Austin; truth/falsity; descriptions; France as a hexagon.*

## RESUMO

*Examino neste trabalho como J. L. Austin relativiza a questão da verdade a contextos de enunciações, em especial a propósitos específicos para os quais o usuário as emprega. Isso redundando em que a verdade se torna algo de ordem mais ou menos acurada, relativamente a determinadas enunciações, e não um atributo inerente a sentenças em sua putativa correspondência ao mundo 'lá fora'. Assim, o desconforto que Austin sentia em relação à forma como os filósofos tradicionalmente lidaram com a questão da verdade desponta como independente da sua celebrada tese de veredicação ter precedência sobre verum, sendo que este se legitima graças à autoridade de quem está por trás daquela. Isso, por sua vez, abre novos caminhos para pesquisa, fato que comprova que Austin ainda tem muito que ensinar futuras gerações de pesquisadores.*

**Palavras-chave:** J. L. Austin; verdade/falsidade; descrições; França como hexágono.

### 1. A geometrical nickname and what it has to do with philosophy

A posting on the Internet, dated March 20, 2013, a chance finding by me, a self-confessed occasional net surfer, read:

At some point during my first year in France I was watching the news when I became very confused. The news anchor was referring to something as "l'hexagone." Up until that point, I had been completely unaware that France was nicknamed the Hexagon. Despite being quite skilled in shapes when I was [in] elementary school, I did not immediately make the connection between France and a hexagon. Yet, when I looked again, I saw that indeed the country has six sides of roughly equal distance. (<http://howtoliveinfrance.com/french-culture/why-is-france-nicknamed-the-hexagon/>)

Upon navigating further on the Internet, yet another surprising find: a reference to an academic paper entitled 'The idea of the French hexagon' (Smith 1969), where the author declares right at the outset: "Though *l'Hexagone* has only within the last two decades become recognized as synonymous with "France," the idea of France as a hexagon has a history whose length and variety will prove surprising to most."

My attention was captured by what I instantly recognized as something that appears on the very front cover of the edition I have in my home library of J. L. Austin's classic book *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin, 1978 [1962]), a detail that had always aroused my curiosity, despite some discussion about it in the final pages (more on this towards the end of this paper). Here it appears as an affirmative sentence that says 'France is hexagonal' enclosed within one of the thought-bubbles emanating from a man seated on a stool, all hunched up and presumably lost in his thoughts (philosophical musings?). Clive Collins, the cover illustrator, it seems to me, was extraordinarily successful in capturing the essence and the most important insight of the great English philosopher (not always adequately appreciated as such in the literature) as well as giving us a vital clue to his uncanny, often unsettling style of going about tackling philosophical themes – his abiding, often unsettling, sense of humour, for instance (Rajagopalan, 2000 [2010]a).

In what remains of this paper, I shall try to take up separately each of these two issues, namely, Austin's philosophical message and his peculiar way of putting it across and then proceed to show why, in my view, we have still a lot to learn from him.

## 2. Austin's philosophical message

The 'hexagonality' of France speaks directly to an important philosophical theme that was very dear to Austin. And the way he positions himself in respect of it is crucial to an understanding of what he was trying to get at. To begin with, let us grant that it has nothing to do with France, nor, for that matter, the supposed hexagonality of its territorial extension. Another example that readily comes to mind is the reference to Italy as boot-shaped, utilized by many cartoonists for a long time, one of the most recent ones being the one by Pfohlmann in *Der Spiegel*, where she makes an acerbic commentary on the fate of refugees desperately fleeing from war-ravaged countries of north-Africa by showing a boot-shaped Italy threatening to kick them back to where they came from.

The question that hexagonal France and boot-shaped Italy bring to the fore is how or if at all the issue of truth has any bearing on them. To

take the specific case of the use made of the analogy by Clive Collins, does the sentence 'France is a hexagon' admit of being evaluated as to its veracity or not. And if the answer is 'yes', well, is it or does it qualify as true or false (as it has to be one or the other, if we play by the rules of standard truth-conditional, two-valued logic)?

The question posed above is not all that as simple as it might strike at first sight. France is a hexagon, depending on how you look at it and, perhaps more importantly, *what your reasons for doing it are*. If you are, say, an artist interested in designing a catchy logo for a French state enterprise, you may wish to represent the country as a hexagon, availing yourself of the vague similarity to the familiar polygon-shape in geometry that a photograph of the country taken from a satellite high up in the sky would reveal. But one does not have to stretch one's imagination to think of cases where such a crude analogy will not be of any use whatsoever, in fact, might even land you in deep trouble!

### 3. Austin on truth

Towards the end of his book *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin, 1978 [1962]), Austin surprises his readers with his (sincere?) confession to having had, all along, "an inclination to play Old Harry with" two age-old distinctions, one of which was "the true/false" fetish (the other, viz. "value/fact", does not interest us at this moment, for, among other things, the fact that its resolution depends *inter alia* on what one decides about true/false, the distinction that putatively yields 'facts').

In his famous Aristotelian society presentation, Austin (1950: 117) was straight to the point (well, in his own peculiar fashion!) when he writes:

'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer. Pilate was in advance of his time. For 'truth' itself is an abstract noun, a camel, that is, of a logical construction, which cannot get past the eye even of a grammarian. We approach it cap and categories in hand: we ask ourselves whether Truth is a substance... or a quality... or a relation... But philosophers should take something more nearly their own size to strain at. What needs discussing rather is the use, or certain uses, of the word 'true.' In vino, possibly, 'veritas,' but in a sober symposium 'verum.'

And, later on, he goes to observe something that brings us very close to where we started off from:

Is it true or false that Belfast is north of London? That the galaxy is the shape of a fried egg? That Beethoven was a drunkard? That Wellington won the battle of Waterloo? There are various degrees and dimensions of success in making statements: the statements fit the facts always more or less loosely, in different ways on different occasions for different intents and purposes.

The truth or falsity of  $x$  being to the north of  $y$  depends on the location of the observer with respect to  $x$  and  $y$ . But what about Beethoven being a drunkard or the Duke of Wellington having come out victorious from the battle of Waterloo? Surely, these are run-of-the-mill declaratives that would be regarded as full-blooded truth-bearers or, in Austin's terms, constatives. Yet, what Austin suggests is that there are no hard and fast criteria that would help us determine whether they are true or false. Truth and falsity is a *gradient* concept. And so is the idea of constativity.

Note that this ultimate undermining of the very concept of constativity – let us not forget, the one bedrock of certainty there was when Austin set out on his long intellectual journey – is different from, and even more damaging than, the idea of all constatives turning out to be, and to have been all along, performatives *masquerading* as such (the metaphor, let us not forget, is Austin's). What the claims made in the last quote underscore is that the very attempt to define constatives independently by means of an appeal to the criterion of truth vs. falsehood is doomed to flounder.

#### **4. Austin: an analytic philosopher with a continental outlook**

It is in his treatment of the concept of 'truth' that Austin reveals himself as a veritable 'dog in the manger' of Austro-Anglo-American analytic philosophy. It is also here that his affinity with the Continental philosophy becomes most striking. Central to the Continental approach to the question of truth, one that pervades several prominent thinkers of the likes of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Bourdieu and so forth, is that

truth just cannot be viewed as the imminent property of anything. Austin's remark that in virtue of its being "[...] an abstract noun, a camel, that is, of a logical construction, which cannot get past the eye even of a grammarian," it is futile to look for truth in any one object or a cluster of objects, available for everyone to feast their eyes on. For the continental philosopher, therefore, rather than worry about truth itself, it is much more worth the while to ask what ancillary circumstances make it the case that a given object (call it a 'fact') becomes a candidate for truth value ascription.

Austin's answer to the last question is of a piece with what his colleagues on the other side of the Channel characteristically think: "it depends." It depends on a number of attendant circumstances. Who makes the claim, for what purpose and under what constraints? France can be truthfully a hexagon and Italy no less truthfully boot-shaped, if you are a designer interested in coming up with a logogram for a new State undertaking. But for some other person, say an army general or a geophysicist, well, it is a different story.

### **5. Why Austin's take on truth has a bearing on the whole thesis about speech acts and all the rest**

It should not take a great stretch of the imagination to perceive that what Austin has to say on truth has resonances far beyond the resolution of this age-old issue in philosophy. So the Jesting Pilate should not be allowed to get away with it all. To shift gears, one has to take the bull by its horns and see what consequences it has on what Austin says (is said to have said) about a number of other key things.

The first thing to recognize about Austin's discussion about the nature of truth is that it permeates a number of other cornerstones of his conceptual architecture. Notice first of all that Austin (1961[1979]a:32) was never at ease with the very concept of a concept, declaring that he had no clue as to whether they were *a priori* or *a posteriori*, simply because he had no idea as to what concepts were to begin with, hence *a fortiori* obviating the possibility of any discussion of the dilemma.

Also, it is important to realize that Austin's uncertainty as to what a genuine truth-bearer can be and how one can ever know when and if

at all one has isolated it directly affects the identity of the object one has chosen to zero in on. As he himself puts it, “[t]he truth or falsity of statements is affected by what they leave out or put in and by their being misleading and so on.” (pp. 144-145). And readers of the text of *How to Do Things with Words* are all too familiar with Austin’s successive attempts and fiascos in trying to identify his prized object: the illocutionary act. The following passage culled from Lecture XII leaves no doubt whatsoever in this regard:

The doctrine of the performative/constative distinction stands to the doctrine of locutionary and illocutionary in the total speech act as the *special* theory to the *general* theory. And the need for the general theory arises simply because the traditional ‘statement’ is an abstraction, an ideal, and so is its traditional truth or falsity. (Austin 1978 [1962]: 148)

As Derrida (1982: 322) remarked: “Austin had to free the analysis of the performative from the authority of the value of truth, from the opposition true/false, at least in its classical form, occasionally substituting it for the value of force, of difference of force (illocutionary or perlocutionary force).”

But, then, hot on the heels of this claim comes what Austin himself calls one of a series of “fireworks”: “The total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating.”

But this “*only actual* phenomenon” remains for ever elusive, although Austin never gives up the chase – a gesture which famously made Max Black exclaim whether a most suitable sub-title for Austin’s *oeuvre* would not have been ‘In Pursuit of a Vanishing Distinction.’ (Black, 1969: 401). Incidentally, the phrase “vanishing distinction” is Austin’s own and he uses it while teasing out the several subtle nuances of the term ‘circumstances’. Here is what he says: “This again is a roughish and vanishing distinction, yet not without importance (in, say, the law).” (Austin, 1962 [1978]: 35)

But what I wish to call the readers’ attention is to the bit that says “and so is its traditional truth or falsity.” Even as he recognizes full well that truth is an abstraction, an ideal, Austin sees it as a quarry worth pursuing. The question is: what is the point of doing it? For many of his

readers, the idea of pursuing an object one knows in advance will never be within his grasp would make no sense. It is rather like reenacting the pointless life-routine of the mythical figure Sisyphus, condemned to roll a boulder uphill, only to watch it roll back down again.

It is truly amazing to see Austin do it time and time again. Early on, on page 13, we have Austin saying: “So far then we have merely felt the firm ground of prejudice slide away beneath our feet. But now how, as philosophers, are we to proceed? One thing we might go on to do, of course, is to take it all back: another would be to bog, by logical stages, down”.

But the English philosopher wouldn't give up all that easily without a fight either. Then on page 67, we see him exclaim ‘The thing seems hopeless from the start [...]’. Again, on page 91, another moment of stock-taking: “It is time to make a fresh start on the problem.” On page 123, we find: “Many of you will be getting impatient at this approach – and to some extent justifiably. You will say ‘Why not cut the cackle?’”

“It is important,” he says, “to take the speech situation as a whole.” (p. 138). And on page 148, we have what turns out to be essentially a variation and at the same time a most categorical and definitive reiteration of the same idea: the one, cited earlier, where he says “the total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating.”

This brings us to another crucial question that surfaces time and again in Austin's writings: how do we lay our hands on our ultimate object of enquiry and, even more importantly, how can we ever be certain as to whether one has managed to capture it?

An excerpt from page 115 should throw some light on Austin's thinking on this last question:

We should not, if we were to insist for some reason and in some sense on ‘going back’ from the illocution to the phonetic act [...], be going back to a minimum physical action via the chain of its consequences, in the way we supposedly go back from the death of the rabbit to the movement of the trigger finger. The uttering of noises may be a consequence (physical) of the movement of the vocal organs, the breath,



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&c.: but the uttering of a word is *not* a consequence of the uttering of a noise, whether physical or otherwise.

The above passage gives us an important insight into a fundamental tenet of Austin's thinking, one that may be come across in the thinking of many others who frequented the Oxford group that came to be known as linguistic philosophers (as distinct from philosophers of language) or Ordinary Language Philosophers. Indeed it is surprising that passages like this have simply been glossed over by many readers of Austin for reasons that do not concern us here (Rajagopalan, 2000 [2010]b).

The tenet mentioned in the foregoing paragraph has to do with Austin's firm conviction that all attempts to trace complex, phenomena of interpretation to something deep down, solid as a bedrock, be it concrete or in any other sense 'irrefutable' is bound to fail. The 'movement of the trigger finger' to which he makes a reference in the passage cited above is part of an elaborate argument he marshals to debunk all attempts to look for such bedrocks to base one's interpretations. Here's the gist of the argument he produces in his essay 'Truth'. Under what circumstances can one be absolutely certain that *x* murdered *y*? None, says Austin. To say that '*x* murdered *y*' it is not enough to show that *y* died, not even that *y* died as a result of a bullet fired by *x*. Not even the fact that there was a witness at the crime scene ready to vouch that the bullet came off the barrel of the gun in virtue of 'movement of the trigger finger' of the accused. Even such a movement could have been the result of a nervous tic, and so on. Austin's whole point is that attributing deliberate intention to the accused (which is what the law demands for the killing to be typified as a murder and not manslaughter) can never be a done deal. There is always a fatal slip between the cup and the lip.

It is clear that Austin's stance on this crucial, million-dollar question has a ripple effect on a number of issues dear to both linguists and philosophers. First and foremost, there is the question of what constitutes a factum or datum or whatever one wants to call it. Naïve empiricists are given to thinking that raw data are there everywhere, ready for the theorist latch onto and start theorizing about them. But then what are raw data? Many would say they are raw because they have been, as it were, untouched by human hands. In other words, there is

no human participation in isolating them, let alone ‘fabricating’ them. In other words, they were always already there as physical entities of some sort, long before any sentient being had the idea of contemplating them.

It is precisely here that a fatal flaw in the whole argument lies – so Austin would argue. For the physical reality that is argued to be there independently of the sentient mind is only available to us through an interpretation and this interpretation invariably amounts to an act of intervention. Just the way it is in the case of Austin’s analysis of the alleged murder and tracing it back to the ‘movement of the trigger finger’ of the accused.

All this takes us right back to where we set off from: the ‘hexagonality’ of France. Here is how Austin goes about discussing the issue on page 143:

Suppose that we confront ‘France is hexagonal’ with the facts, in this case, I suppose, with France, is it true or false? Well, if you like up to a point; of course I can see what you mean by saying it is true for certain intents and purposes. It is good enough for a top-ranking general, perhaps, but not for a geographer.

And he goes to conclude: “It is just rough, and that is the right and final answer to the question of the relation of ‘France is hexagonal’ to France. It is a rough description; it is not a true or false one”.

Austin is saying that, even in the case of declarative, statement-making sentences (i.e. sentences *qua* sentences, not as their enunciations as speech acts) – often considered the safe haven of truth and falsity, the idea of their being *always*, *invariably* and *necessarily* either true or false does not hold. In the ultimate analysis, then, Austin is putting forward a powerful thesis that has far-reaching implications for standard truth-conditional semantics which many see as capable of serving as the foundation of a theory of meaning. Austin’s whole point is that, no matter how hard you try, the question of truth will always be subject to a number of presuppositions about the world, about what aspect of the world we wish to focus on and under what conditions we approach it, with what intent and so on. In his own words (p. 147): “This is a wide field and certainly will not lead to a simple distinction of ‘true’ and

‘false’; nor will it lead to a distinction of statements from the rest, for stating is only one among very numerous speech acts of illocutionary class”.

Incidentally, this is just where Searle (1969) made his most egregious mistake. In seeking to posit a propositional content at the very heart of a speech act, in spite of Austin’s repeated and unequivocal warnings against it (cf. Rajagopalan, 2010).

All interpretations are inherently and irremediably fallible (at the very least, liable to contestation) and so too, all interventions, in spite of the best of intentions with which they may be carried out, run the risk of backfiring or being counterproductive. But here is where the crucial question comes up – one that prevents the whole issue from going down the slippery slope all the way down the hill to total skepticism and most stultifying relativism.

There is plenty of textual evidence as well as first-hand witness reports from those who knew him personally to the effect that Austin was in no way eager to present a fully-fledged doctrine about anyone of the subjects he addressed along the way. A most eloquent testimony to his desire to relegate the outstanding problems to his listeners/readers comes in his parting words at the end of lecture/chapter XII. Here he says one of the things he has no interest in doing – although, in a way, he has ended up actually doing or at least gesturing towards that – is ‘producing a programme, that is, saying what ought to be done rather than doing it’ (p. 164). But then he hastens to remedy matters, adding “I should very much like to think that I have been sorting out a bit the way things have already begun to go and are going with increasing momentum in some parts of philosophy, *rather than proclaiming an individual manifesto.*”

## 6. Concluding remarks

In this paper my main concern has been to drive home the crucial point, not often adequately appreciated by Austin readers and, to be sure, often painstakingly skirted by linguists who otherwise pay lip service to the English philosopher and his ground-breaking ideas, that the question of truth is at the very centre of his whole thinking.

It is not for nothing that, very early on in his career, he undertook a translation into English of Gottlob Frege's 1884 book *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik* and published it under the title of *The Foundations of Arithmetic*. As is widely known, Frege was laying the founding ideas of what later became known as 'logicism' – the thesis that all of mathematics should ultimately be reducible to logic. In choosing to translate that work, it is clear that Austin was somehow struggling with the whole idea of logic as the ultimate loadstar. No wonder that he targeted truth as the chief quarry in his own philosophical musings.

Unfortunately, many scholars still work under the illusion that it is possible to give Austin due credit for having drawn everyone's attention to the existence of locutions that fly in the face of truth-value evaluations, while at the same time going back to their business as usual, which is confining their own attention to familiar truth-bearers – that Austin famously re-baptized 'constatives'. As it happens, Austin's ultimate *coup de grâce* consisted in making it clear to all and sundry that *there are no such things as constatives*. In so doing, he was pulling the carpet from beneath the feet of all those contended themselves doing familiar truth-conditional semantics and illuding themselves by thinking that they were taking care of everything of interest to meaning-making in language.

But then, having pointed out that, we must once again take up his cautionary words mentioned at the end of the previous section – against the idea of proclaiming a whole new manifesto for philosophy. Austin refuses in these words to be interested in inaugurating a new paradigm. It is clear that he had no empire-building ambitions. His whole purpose in pursuing philosophical themes was to play a gentleman's parlour game, though his style, his demeanour, his 'I-don't-care-two-hoots-about-what-others-might-think' manner of tackling philosophical questions – without, at the same time, sacrificing his commitment to rigour and seriousness in the conduct of doing philosophy did earn him a formidable entourage of dotting admirers and enthusiastic followers (and, no doubt, die-hard critics too).

In these parting words, Austin was laying down a whole new approach to doing philosophy and, by extension, doing academics. Against the much commoner practice of taking a great thinker's ideas

wholesale and working out its real import for the rest of one's life, Austin is exhorting his readers to work *with* his ideas, extending them in ways he had not had the time or opportunity to develop, introducing along the process changes where they are deemed necessary and dispensing with ideas that no longer seem appealing – in effect, making important interventions.

In other words, Austin is averse to the whole idea of anyone wishing to take his incursions into linguistic philosophy as the last word. He did not believe in any such thing as a last word. “Neither a be-all nor an end all be,” was the motto he chose for a sober philosophy (1958 [1979] b: 271). For Austin, philosophizing was a collective enterprise, where every newcomer is required to tread the path cleared up for him/her by the ones who preceded them. All he or she can do is to take up the discussion from where the others left it. In his own distinctive fashion, he also saw the business of philosophy as essentially a gentleman's parlour game. This last point was what most strikingly set him off from Nietzsche with whom he otherwise shared many a trait in common (Rajagopalan, 1998 [2010]).

Austin's philosophy is multifaceted and open to many further explorations. It is in this sense that Austin still matters!

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