

Chapter IV

Austin's Speech Act Theory and Its Phenomenological Interpretation

A: Intentionality thesis :

The concept of intentionality from the phenomenological standpoint provides a clue to understanding Austin's 'performative' as constitutive of a "word-cum-world" and thereby making language a part of reality. Before we proceed to consider Austin's 'Performative' in this light it is necessary to give an account of the phenomenological notion of 'Intentionality'.

The phenomenological notion of 'intentionality' must be distinguished from 'intentionality' in the psychological sense. In ordinary language, words like 'intention' and 'intentional' are used to refer to some sheer psychological states or mental states which are generally expressed in the forms of the sentences like 'I did not have intention to hurt you', 'Her intention was not bad', 'He has not done this intentionally', etc. Here the word 'intention' or 'intentionally' is used in order to describe certain mental acts or psychological acts like desire, wish, purpose etc. all of which are descriptions of mental experiences or psychological experiences. In general, the word like 'intention' or 'intentional' is used in ordinary as mental phenomenon as contrasted with physical phenomenon. In this sense 'intention' and 'intentionality' is related to the subject and indicates some mental states or psychological as its object. From the phenomenological standpoint too the concept of intentionality is related to the subject, but it does not refer to any

psychological state or mental state, i.e., to any sheer subjective aspect. From the phenomenological standpoint 'intention' or 'intentionality' is not interpreted as certain states of consciousness. In phenomenology it is regarded as 'intentionality of consciousness'. It signifies the 'intentional' nature of consciousness.¹ In phenomenology *intentionality* can be best understood from the Husserlian standpoint. According to Husserl, the concept has more an epistemological bearing than an ontological bearing, or a psychological bearing. Epistemologically, the phenomenological concept of *intentionality of consciousness* explains a new relationship between the subject and the object. Phenomenology is regarded neither as subjectivism nor as objectivism but as a combination of both. The concept of '*intentionality of consciousness*' is inseparable from this relationship between the subject and the object and without this neither the subject nor the object can be explained. The difference between the ordinary usage and the phenomenological usage of the concept under discussion is that while in the former case the concept is inseparable from consciousness or states of consciousness, in the latter case the concept is inseparable from the relationship between consciousness and its object. For this reason Brentano's interpretation of the notion of intentionality is rejected by Husserl because his explanation has a psychological bearing when he regards it as 'Intentional inexistence' or 'mental inexistence'². However, in phenomenology, the 'intentional object' need not necessarily be an existing object, it may also be a non-existent object because the *object of intentionality* is interpreted epistemologically and the ontological background of the *object of intentionality* is not sought. The 'intentional object' may be a physical object or a mental object. In the

phenomenological interpretation *the intentionality of consciousness* signifies that consciousness is always a ‘consciousness of something’³.

Husserl understood under ‘intentionality’ the unique peculiarity of experiences ‘to be the consciousness of something’. In Husserlian explanation the term ‘intentional’ acquired the meaning of ‘*directedness toward an object*’. According to Husserl, the acts thus directed were called “intentions” and were referred to “intentional objects”, i.e., objects that were the targets of intentions. According to Husserl, the expression “Intentional” and “Intentionality” stood for the rational property of having an intention or being aimed at by it. From the phenomenological standpoint intentionality is always of consciousness but it does not mean that intentionality alone is limited to consciousness. Because consciousness is never empty. Consciousness is always consciousness of something. That something is the object of consciousness. An empty consciousness is no consciousness at all. But the converse is also true. A distinct object or unrelated object which may be called in the phenomenological language ‘*an unintended object*’ is no object at all. From the phenomenological standpoint the very definition of experience is the objects being perceived within the reach of consciousness which may be regarded phenomenologically the object’s being intended (not in a psychological sense) by the consciousness. The relationship between consciousness and its object is reciprocal. The phenomenological interpretation of the relationship between consciousness and its object may be compared with Kant’s famous saying “Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind”⁴. But the difference between Kantian interpretation and the phenomenological interpretation is that in the former case there is no such ‘*directedness of consciousness*

toward its object'. Moreover according to Kant, the phenomenon is not the real thing or 'thing-in-itself'. There is noumenon behind the phenomenon which is the 'thing-in-itself'. That is Kant is concerned with the ontological background of phenomenon which is regarded as the noumenon by Kant. Though phenomenological investigation may have certain ontological implications it is basically an epistemological and methodological investigation and not a meta-physical one. There is no such distinction between phenomenon and noumenon in phenomenology. All that is there in phenomenology is the phenomenon which is regarded in the phenomenological term the 'given' or 'thing itself'. The principle motto of phenomenology is 'back to thing itself'. Phenomenological method is epistemological in the sense that it is concerned with knowledge, i.e., with experience and in this respect it investigates *that which appears* in experience which is the 'given' or phenomenon. Its ontological implication centre around the nature of consciousness and object of experience. But its main concern is neither the consciousness as such nor the object as such. It is primarily concerned with experience as a whole. By consciousness we mean conscious acts. 'Directedness of consciousness' means the directedness of conscious acts, like perceiving, remembering, judging, surmising, etc. Every act has its object. I am perceiving or judging something but there is no object of perception or judgment, this is not possible. The experience-field is always structured in the act-object polarity.

The attempt of phenomenology was not to construct any theory regarding the object of experience. Nor was it concerned with the possibility or impossibility of knowing the object of experience. Phenomenological investigation does not inquire into the logical status of

the object of consciousness. Such questions do not arise in the field of phenomenology. Phenomenology was mainly concerned with experience. And the notion of '*intentionality of consciousness*' is the main basis of experience. That is why '*intentionality of consciousness*' is the core of the phenomenological investigation.

B: Austin, Speech Acts and the Intentionality Thesis:

The classification of speech acts has been of much interest to philosophers of language and linguists¹. It may also be linked with the broad stream of continental phenomenology which was primarily concerned with the world as we experience it. The relation that we have specially in mind is the relation of performatives and constatives as forms of speech act with the phenomenological concept of intentionality.

From the phenomenological standpoint '*intentionality*' has a directionality in terms of its '*acts*' upon something other than itself. To treat an object of knowledge phenomenologically it has to be reduced from its natural order to a phenomenological order, i.e., it has to be brought within the preview of the acts of consciousness.

Now the phenomenological treatment of '*Perfoemative*' can be understood from two angles, viz., (i) from the viewpoint of a suspension of the notion of thinghood of meaning content towards which speech acts are directed, (ii) from the standpoint of a mutual intentionality. Let me elaborate (i). Speech acts, locutionary, illocutionary or perlocutionary are to be conceived in a phenomenological perspective for two reasons. First, they are preceded by a suspension of the notion of thing as such or thing in itself. Fundamentally, they are concerned with meaning in terms of

communication. They point to *objects* or *states-of-affairs* which are meant, and therefore not things. Meaning cannot be the primary focus of performatives unless the concept of thing beyond the meaning giving function of the speaker is suspended.

There is still a stronger thesis involved here. It is that human beings are capable in intervention in nature in a way no other creatures are, as a result of conscious decision to intervene. This is what gives human beings the possibility of quiet literally creating their own environment. A second and related point is the capacity which human beings have to *map* the structure of the world. This capacity to map the actual world may be a passage to map the possible world. Austin's theory of speech acts is working against this natural tendency to think that the only function of language is to reflect reality truly or falsely. He reminds us that there are many uses of language and the idea of people as agents is deeply embedded in the idea of them as language users.

In the case of a speech act when the speaker is uttering a word or a sentence in order to perform some act he must have some meaning as the object toward which his intentionality is directed i.e. the meaning is the object of consciousness and the real thing or thing in itself is not the object of consciousness. That is why the meaning content of an utterance is included within the purview of intentionality of consciousness. And as a speech act is performed between a speaker and a hearer in a particular context the question of mutual intentionality between the speaker and the hearer naturally arises. And this mutual intentionality between the speaker and hearer in a circumstance makes communication possible. So the performance of a speech act presupposes communication. Let us discuss these aspects respectively.

Speech act is the performance of an act by uttering words or sentences in a particular context. There must be a speaker and a hearer to make a speech act possible. From the phenomenological standpoint the meaning of an utterance is given by the speaker. That means the meaning of an utterance is that which the speaker wants to convey to the hearer in a situation and the meaning is not the actual thing or thing-in-itself. To speak in the phenomenological term the 'thinghood' is to be 'bracketed' and attention should be given to the meaning the speaker wants to convey to the hearer, i.e., a suspension of the thing as such or thing-in-itself beyond the meaning giving function of the speaker is to be made. Certainly the meaning of an utterance is determined both by the speaker and the hearer i.e. both by the attempt of the speaker to convey the meaning and the attempt of the hearer to recognize the meaning, speech act may be regarded as a correlation between the speaker and the hearer in a situation through an utterance. If a word or a sentence is uttered by speaker in a situation and if its meaning is limited to the speaker alone and is not conveyed to the hearer it is not at all a speech act except in the sense that here the speaker speaks to himself. Now if the thinghood is not 'suspended' or 'bracketed' neither would it be possible for the speaker to communicate anything to the hearer nor would it be possible for the hearer to recognize what the speaker is saying. If in the case of an utterance the thinghood or the thing in itself is not bracketed and if attention is given to this thinghood instead of the meaning the speaker wants to communicate then it would be a mere description of the actual thing or a mere reference to the actual thing. But speech act is not the description of reference to things in the world. Speech act is the performance of some acts like the act of promising, advising,

commanding, requesting, stating, etc. The concept of speech act implies that any utterance must be construed with the meaning the speaker wants to convey and the listener's recognition of the meaning in a circumstance. For example if a speaker utters the word 'dangerous' to a person walking on a road behind whom a bull is coming and if the listener does not 'bracket' the thing-in-itself behind the meaning giving function of the speaker and concentrates on the word 'dangerous' then certainly he would get a knock by the ox. In order to recognize the meaning the speaker wants to convey in a circumstance the listener has to bracket the actual thing and concentrate on the meaning giving function of the speaker.

In *How to Do Things with Words* Austin wishes us to relook at words as used by men in situations². He is not asking us to relook at things or facts that make up the universe but the whole nexus of man doing things in the world by way of using words. Performatives as a form of speech act is an act of elucidating the meaning which the speaker communicates or fails to communicate.

So, meaning of an utterance is not prior to the utterance rather utterance rather utterance is prior to meaning because meaning is not an isolate factor, but it is determined with reference to a situation and within the realm of interaction between the speaker and the hearer.

Pointing to *objects or states of affairs* which are meant involves a directedness of consciousness of the speaker. Speaker's intention in any kind of speech acts is manifested in the act of relating his/her speech act to something other than his/her consciousness. For example, promising something indicates a possible future event, bringing into existence or

producing something which does not already exist; speech act, in this sense, is a noetic act.

Performatives are to be conceived phenomenologically with a special stress on the aspect of communication, philosophical theory of speech act is a phenomenological account of 'meaning' in an existential sense of interpersonal communication while elucidating the classification of speech acts Austin on several occasions, speaks of the 'uptake' of an illocutionary act. It means the understanding by the hearer what the speaker is meaning. This again confirms the communicative aspect of speech acts. The account suggests that meaning can be best understood phenomenologically as the mutual intentionality (i.e. Husserl's sense of an object of consciousness) of a speaker and a listener with reference to an object or state-of-affairs.

Communication is the understanding between the speaker and the hearer regarding an utterance. The utterance of the speaker is conveyed to the hearer. The recognition of the utterance-which the speaker wants to convey-by the hearer makes communication possible. Austin explains in his *'How to Do Things with Words'*. "A speech act is dependent upon the listener's securing uptake"³. Communication is the basis of speech act because if an utterance whether it be a word or a sentence is uttered and if it is not communicated to the hearer then it is not at all a speech act because the speech act is the performance of an act through an utterance and in the utterance is not communicated to the hearer then the act is not at all performed. For example if an utterance is made in the form of an order but if the hearer takes that to be a request then the act the speaker wants to perform is not performed at all and this is due to lack of communication. In this sense we can say that speech act is purposive.

And the purpose of a speech act is the purpose of performing some acts of requesting, commanding, ordering, stating, etc. which may be regarded in a wider sense the purpose of communicating because all these speech acts are whether it be a request or a command or an order-different forms of communication. These linguistic actions are performed by uttering some words or sentences or group of sentences which are the units of communication. From the phenomenological standpoint these units of communication are meaningless when considered separately; they get their meaning when they are being used by some conscious user under certain circumstance. They must be used by a speaker in order to perform an act according to some rules in a circumstance. Searle, in his *Speech Acts*, rightly said that “The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word or sentence, or even the token of the symbol, word or sentence, but rather the production or issuance of the symbol or sentence in the performance of the speech act”⁴. The concept of communication presupposes the understanding of the speaker’s utterance by someone other than the speaker under a particular circumstance. In order to make understanding possible one must have to suppose that what he tries to express must also be understood by the hearer, i.e., there must be the possibility of the hearer’s knowing what the speaker wants to convey. Such a conception necessarily leads us a linguistic atmosphere under a circumstance. Searle in his ‘*Speech Acts*’ wrote, “When I take a noise or a mark on a piece of paper to be an instance of linguistic communication, as a message, one of the things I must assume is that noise or mark was produced by being or beings more or less myself and produced with certain kinds of intentions”⁵. Therefore, the conditions necessary for communication is the performance of

linguistic action by a speaker, which is governed by some rules under a specific circumstance for which the performance of the action is understood by other. The rules of uttering a word or a sentence or a set of sentences in a society or community constitute the form of a performative which makes the hearer's understanding possible. It is like the grammar or syntax of a linguistic action. But we know that in a language the grammar or syntax is not the only thing but the application of the rule in the game is also essential. There is also the content or semantics of a language. It is true that without knowing the grammatical or syntactical aspect of a language one is not able to speak and understand that language. But there must also be some contents or semantics for whom the grammars are made or in other words on which the grammars are to be applied. This is the meaning aspect of a linguistic action. The object of communication is the meaning which the speaker intends to communicate.

Communication is the interaction between a speaker and a hearer in a circumstance through an utterance. There must be some object which the speaker wants to convey to the hearer by uttering a word or a sentence. The hearer after hearing the utterance tries to recognize it. If the recognition is of that object which the speaker wants to convey, i.e., if the hearer recognizes exactly what the speaker wants to convey then communication is made and consequently, the speech act of a particular kind with reference to the utterance is performed. But if the object which the speaker wants to convey to the hearer is not conveyed or if the hearer fails to recognize what the speaker wants to convey then communication is not made. Austin says that even in the case of misunderstanding between the speaker and the hearer there is a communication.

Misunderstanding is not the inability of the hearer to understand but it is the inability of the hearer to understand what the speaker is saying, i.e., it is not the case that the hearer does not have any understanding; the point is the hearer does have the same understanding as the speaker.

The notion of communication can be interpreted phenomenologically from the standpoint of mutual intentionality between the speaker and the listener. From the phenomenological standpoint communication is possible through the mutual intentionality between the speaker and the hearer. Phenomenologically any object in order to be experienced must be within the realm of consciousness and as consciousness is always intended toward something it must be experienced with the purview of 'Intentionality of consciousness'. In the performance of a speech act the must be performed within the realm of consciousness and not only within the realm of consciousness but 'Intentionality of consciousness'. Now in a speech act the speaker has the purpose of communicating a particular kind of act like the act of requesting, ordering, commanding, etc. That very act is the object toward which the consciousness of the speaker is directed, which is regarded as the 'intended act', in the phenomenological term and the speaker's directedness to the intended act is the "intentionality of consciousness. But in order to perform a speech act the factor of the speaker's 'intentionality of consciousness' is not sufficient because the speaker's intention is to be communicated. The counterpart of the speech act, i.e., the hearer is not at all involved in this act. In order to make speech act possible the utterance is to be received by the hearer. And if the hearer is able to recognize the utterance as the same which the speaker wants to communicate then only communication between the speaker and the

hearer is made and speech act is successfully performed. This recognition of the utterance of the speaker by the hearer is due to the factor of 'Intentionality of Consciousness' on the hearer's side. The hearer's recognition of the intended act is due to the directedness of the consciousness toward the intended act, i.e., intentionality of consciousness. This is called the mutual intentionality between the speaker and the hearer through which communication is made between them and the speech act is performed.

Austin classifies the illocutionary act as the distinguishing feature of an act because here lies the force of an act. The illocutionary act characterizes an act as an act of requesting, ordering, commanding stating etc. The illocutionary act contains the meaning aspect of an utterance because the force of an act determines the meaning the speaker wants to convey. The force of the illocutionary act clarifies what the speaker wants to convey. The perlocutionary act makes the recognition of the speaker's meaning by the hearer because it contains the effect of the utterance upon the hearer. In *'How to Do things with Words'* Austin describes the perlocutionary act as the effect which brings about the understanding of the meaning of the speaker's utterance.⁶ He says that the perlocutionary act is the result of saying something, which has effect upon the feelings though or actions of the audience. Therefore, the illocutionary part of a speech act contains the force of an utterance which is the meaning of the utterance. And the perlocutionary part of a speech act contains the effect of the utterance on the hearer. It contains the recognition of the meaning of the speaker by the hearer, i.e., it is the perlocutionary part of a speech act which makes the understanding by the hearer of the speaker's meaning possible. These two aspects of speech act

together make communication between the speaker and the hearer possible. The illocutionary part which is the subjective aspect becomes inter subjective through the understanding by the hearer of the speaker's meaning.

The inter-subjectivity of meaning and the social dimension of language is thus made apparent in this approach to Austin. The world becomes a meaningful world of humanity as a whole after a suspension of any abstraction of it as a mere physical world and bringing it in relation with actual human linguistic performance. Intentionality thesis of phenomenology has been taken here as a clue to understanding Austin's concept of 'performative' or 'speech act' in a new light to solve the problem of word-world relationship in philosophy of language.

References

A

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