

RITUALS AND PERFORMATIVES

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I

The domain of rituals encompasses a bewildering variety of social actions. They comprise such diverse activities as handshakes, everyday television viewing, coronations, prayers, vows, taking oath of an office, declaring allegiance to a government, marriage and funeral rituals, *upanayana*, initiation rituals of coming of age and many other varieties covering categories from the religious and the secular, indigenous and colonial, political and personal, archaic and modern. While almost all rituals are associated with physical movements, rituals are also closely tied up with linguistic utterances ensuring their correct and felicitous performance. The religious and marriage rituals constitute such a group. They are the acceptance of what is laid down in the script, and performing according to it. And marriage can be undone by the performance of another set of rituals just as flaws and hitches in a religious ritual performance are to be condoned by undergoing *prāyaścitta*, another variety of ritual acts. In our context, we shall deal specifically with those rituals in which the making of appropriate utterances is a part of their meaning and a necessary condition for their performance. Those rituals only will be our focus wherein covert or explicit utterances are made for the accomplishment of the rituals.

Many different definitions of ritual may be formulated. But each one of these highlights only an aspect of it. Ritual is not an exact concept like a mathematical notion and no strict definition of it can be proffered. However, rituals, share certain characteristics which are crisscrossing and overlapping. Rituals are social actions – a human accomplishment. They are special events in time and space, organized in terms of shared sequence of symbolical, formal acts and utterances which purport to alter the state of affairs obtaining at a given moment of time. They do not describe the world in which they occur. They are occasions for imagining how things could be or evaluating how they ought to be. This is a region of action governed by oughts.

From this we can further characterize rituals as communicative and not informative. It is true that the specifics of the situation in which they occur, for example, the timing, the auspicious day, the calendrical cycles – the full moon or the new moon, the different symbols pertaining to instruments of worship, the special dress or musical instruments and other staff are indeed informative, but the rituals in their core are communicative of what is to be done and not what is. Regarded in this way, ritual actions are transcendence of the peculiarities of the situation in which they are performed. A ritual situation is so constructed as to offer transcendence of the peculiarities of social circumstances and surroundings.

Rituals are regularly recurring actions. They have been done this way before by others. They are also repetitive in another sense. They are regularly recurring. Many rituals are calendrical, being prescribed by the repetition of a cycle rather than the mere passage of time. Offering *tarpana* to the forefathers during the *Devipaksā*, the sacred ritual of *navakalebara* of Shri Jagannatha Mahāprava are cyclic and not merely a matter of passage of time. The repetition characteristic of ritual is a rational approach to producing memory or reinforcing social roles and relations. They are essential for

collective memory. This element of recurrence becomes routine and may result in boredom and drudgery. However, this is not true without qualification. We may clarify our point with reference to the ritual aspect of religion which is about the sacred.

The sacred or any sacred object – such as the grape juice used in a Protestant community or the *caranāmrta* of gods and goddesses, offered after the *pujā* or *darśana* is completed, reflect a tendency to treat some things as of a different category of importance. These objects are treated as sacred objects rather than taking into account the objects' natural properties. The criterion of sacredness is not something mythical but is the pattern of activity of the members of the community. Such patterns of activity appear to be a constant of human social life. This is the foundation of religious ritual that every human group treats some things as unquestionably serious. And there is a profound impulse to acknowledge and express this 'seriousness' in words and actions of symbolic import. The 'serious life', to use Durkheim's terminology, is society's experience of seriousness, its identification and attention to such features. The rituals which put the faithful in contact with the sacred will hardly appear as boring or drudgery. A temple or church, its architecture, furnishings, special times of attendance, the activities that conduct, control, and conclude a service or worship, are all looked upon as contact with the sacred forces. They are to be strictly observed and any deviation or flaw is harmful or even sinful. Hence, there is stereotyping of rituals but hardly any boredom.

Linguistic utterances are constitutive of many rituals alongside physical action. I propose to deal exclusively with these in my paper, and put emphasis upon their performative character. Let us now move to the second section pertaining to the concept of performatives.

II

The idea of performative utterances was conceived by the English philosopher J.L. Austin and the earliest expression of this is found in his 1947 paper "Other Minds"¹, and then, in "Performative Utterances".² This is clarified more fully in his 1955 Harvard University Lectures, posthumously published as *How to do things with Words*.³ In this work, Austin is critical of the traditional philosophical idea that the business of a statement can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs or state some facts truly or falsely. He claims that there are statements which are not properly characterized as true or false descriptions of fact but the doing of an action. He christens them as 'performatives'. In his words, a performative "...is a kind of utterance which looks like a statement and grammatically, I suppose, would be classed as a statement, which is not nonsensical, and yet is not true or false."⁴ The issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action and it is not just saying something. For example, the utterance of the sentence, "I promise" is the doing of an action, promising; that of "I order you to leave the room" is doing the action of giving an order and so forth. Austin distinguishes this class of utterances from statements or constatives. While a constative, such as "My dog is brown and lazy" is a description, is true or false, the performative is a doing and cannot be appropriately assessed as true or false. They may be performed correctly or incorrectly; felicitously or infelicitously and so on.

Austin proposes several criteria to strengthen this distinction. We need not enter into that at this juncture.. It suffices saying that he gradually became skeptical of this distinction. He felt that the distinction cannot be maintained. He came to realize that

every utterance is a performative, being the performance of an action. Stating a fact or giving a report is as much the doing of an action as is promising or congratulating. Each one is a linguistic act or speech act. The performative-constative distinction thus gives way to the concept of speech act. The speaker, in making any utterance, so to say, is performing an action. The performatives are not discarded. They are retained within the scheme of speech acts as a variety of speech act. Hence, in our discussion we shall use the two terms, performative and speech act interchangeably.

It is evident from the above that use of language or speech performance is integral to certain actions. In fact, language or speech is constitutive, that is, makes them possible. We do not claim that we have promised unless we have used the formula "I promise" or that a marriage has been solemnized unless the bridegroom says "I do" or as the case may be "*pratigrānhāmi*" when the bride is offered for marriage by the appropriate authority. There are simple kinds of acts which need not be constituted by speech. I can ask somebody to leave the room or stop talking by making appropriate gestures but the more complex acts cannot be performed without speech. We cannot apply for leave nor will a property to someone without the appropriate speech acts, like "I hereby apply for leave..." or "I hereby make a will of my property..." etc. Even where gestural communication takes place without language, it can be conceived as parasitical upon speech at a certain stage of its formation.

Austin gives a taxonomy of speech acts as locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. The locutionary act is the physical act of mouthing words; the illocutionary act is the act performed in making the locutionary act; the perlocutionary act is the act of producing certain effects on the mind of the hearer by the performance of the illocutionary act. The utterance of the words "I warn you..." is a locutionary act; the act of warning some one by making the locutionary act is an illocutionary act and alarming or frightening someone by making the illocutionary act is the perlocutionary act. The illocutionary acts have a certain force over and above their meaning and understanding this by the hearer is called by Austin "securing uptake". Although Austin speaks of the total speech act in the total situation, the achievement of the illocutionary uptake is given more importance than others.

Austin says that speech act is a kind of human transaction taking place in society. Obviously there are conventions governing the utterances. Austin states them as follows:

- (i) there must be a conventional procedure, having a certain conventional effect, which include the utterance of certain words by appropriate persons under appropriate conditions;
- (ii) in any particular case, the persons involved and the circumstances must be appropriate for the invocation of the procedure and
- (iii) for the procedure to be effective, participants must act out their parts both completely and correctly.⁵

It is the convention which makes speech acts social acts.

The question that arises is that why do we align rituals with performatives? This is because almost all of Austin's speech acts have collective and ritual context. All the original examples of performatives are of ritual origin. Naming and marrying are obviously social rituals that take place before the whole community. Promising and betting, of course, are not so clearly ritualistic because they do not possess the same public setting. To promise or bet one merely needs another person with whom to

undertake the promise or bet. But implied in the ‘local’ scene upon which we engage in everyday act of betting or promising is the equivalent understanding that our words will be evaluated according to the ‘public’ scene explicit in our more ceremonious and externalized rituals of marrying and naming.⁶ The obligation underlying a promise is a community sanction. One may be constrained to break his promise; it may be unintentional but still real. And that opinion will determine the society’s perception of him in future cases of promising by him.

III

With this background information let us now proceed with our task of understanding rituals in terms of performatives – which we have decided to call the performative approach.

Austin’s concept of speech acts has been proved fruitful in understanding, not only philosophical problems but also issues which are not strictly within the precincts of philosophy. Austin’s analysis can be extended to interpret rituals. Several different styles of analysis are indeed there to interpret rituals – the psychoanalytic approach, the ethno-sociological approach, the socio-structural approach, the symbolic approach etc. The performative approach has been adopted by such scholars as R. Finnegan (1969)⁷, S.J. Tambiah (1979)⁸, M. Block (1974),⁹ Rot A. Rappaport (1974; 1979)¹⁰, Emily Ahern (1979)¹¹ and J. La Fontaine (1977)¹². It has been argued by them that many of the rituals documented by anthropologists and ethnographers can be most fruitfully understood as being essentially similar to the performative acts. Such analyses emphasise that rituals are constitutive of the enactment of a change of state or doing something effective, e.g., the installation ceremony by a priest makes the deity installed; the ceremonial ritual of *pranpratistha* infuses life into the dead matter. It has been observed that “like some forms of linguistic utterances, ritual establishes what it described”. Not only does it directly imply a unique action that is only possible to perform through a speech act itself but it also is an action performed through a very standard and specific set of utterances.

While accepting this analysis I wish to go a step forward and venture the position that there is not merely a correspondence between performatives and rituals but there are rituals which are constituted by appropriate utterance of speech acts. In support of my contention I mention the sacrificial rituals of ancient India. The sacrifices were performed to fulfill certain desires, desire for objects one was lacking, cattle, crop, male offsprings, property, etc. There are ritualistic procedures prescribed in the *Śāstra* for that purpose. These procedures are laid down in the form of *vidhis*, prescriptions, *niśēdhas*, prohibitions and *mantra*, hymns for invocation, etc. The site of these sentences is the *Veda*. These sentences are injunctive, having imperatival force. For example, *darśapurnā amāsabhyam yajeto paśukāmo*, desiring cattle one should perform the *darśapurnā amāsa* sacrifice, and for ‘*Svargakāmo*’ *viśvajitā yajeta; kariryā vr̥śīkāmo yajeta* and so on for *putrakāmo*, or ‘*bhulikāmo*’. The principal ritual acts prescribed by the *vidhi* sentences include secondary ritual acts of “*samidho yajate*”, “*ido yajate*”, etc. The utterances are hands in gloves with the ritual practices or *anusūhānas*. The rituals are the norms and the norms are prescribed not by any ordinary person but by *Śāstric vākyas*. The authority of the *vākyas*, when uttered by the appropriate person, in this context, the *hotr*, or the *yāgñīik* prescribes the norm. The prescriptions, etc. constitute the foundation of the ritual, whether it is of gathering the

sacrificial wood, preparing the sacrificial platform – the fire alter, cooking the sacrificial sacred food, making oblation and others. The prescriptions are imperative sentences exhorting the person concerned about what kind of ritual he is to perform, ritual that will bring into existence that which is not already in existence, cattle, sons, wealth, prosperity, *svarga* and such like. The *vidhivākyas* impel the person addressed to perform the prescribed act. The possible facts prescribed in the injunctive sentences, when followed up by appropriate rituals, would be made actual. It is to be noted that as Austin put great importance on the performative verbs which is the locus of performance or doing, verbs like ‘promise’, ‘order’, ‘advise’, ‘name’, etc., the Mimāmsā philosophers who interpret the *vidhi* sentences of the Samhitās and their commentaries in the *Brāhmanas* put great emphasis on elucidating the verb in the imperative mood, delineating the *dhātu* and the *pratyaya*.¹³

There are indeed physical actions; physical movements no doubt alongside like cooking, collecting wood, baking bricks but they are contributory to the principal act of enjoining the performance, the Vedic prescription or directive. This leads us to say that many rituals are structured by speech acts of an imperatival, injunctive, exhortatory kind. The connection is too close to make us ignore the constitutive nature of the acts, that is, making possible the action exhorted

The analysis proffered here is applicable to various rituals like marriage rituals, the initiation rituals of *upanayana*¹⁴, the gateway to studentship and those of coming of age for boys and girls, whether in tribal communities or sophisticated societies. In the specific case of religious rituals, these privileged deed and words may involve induction, consecration, initiation passage, commendation, celebration, invocation, evocation, etc. The point of the analysis is that the sentences mentioned, when uttered by appropriate persons in appropriate situations, are not merely the saying of certain things but a species of doing, making possible the things to be done or to be made actual. The scene of the production of speech includes the performance.

Before we conclude let us have a quick look at the point of the efficacy of language as speech acts. What gives words this power or potency for performance? Do words have magical or mysterious power? This does not seem to be the case. There are rituals involving magic, for example, protection, healing (*jalpada*, *telpada*), and magic potions having curative property, driving away ghosts or other evil spirits. The great insight of the speech act theory and its relevance for rituals is that it brings back language to the collective scene of human community.

Notes and references:

1. Later published in *Philosophical Papers* (eds), J.O.Urmson and G.J. Warnock, OUP, 1970.
2. *Philosophical Papers*, op.cit.
3. *How to Do Things with Words* (eds), J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, OUP, 1962.
4. *Philosophical Papers*, op.cit., p. 235.
5. *How to Do Things with Words*, op.cit., pp. 14-15.
6. Van Oort, “Performative-Constate Revisited”: The Genetics of Austin’s Theory of Speech Acts, *Anthropoetics* II, No. 2, January, 1997.

7. R. Finnegan, "How to Do Things with Words: Performative Utterances Among the Limba of Sierra Leon", *Man*, 4, 1969, 537-551.
8. S. J. Tambia "The Form and Meaning of Magical Acts" in *Modes of Thought* (eds), R. Finnegan and Robin Horton, London: Faber and Faber, 1973.
9. M. Block, "Symbols, Songs, Dance and Features of Articulation: Is Religion an Extreme Form of Traditional Authority?" *Achiv. Europ. Sociol.* 15, 55-81, 1974.
10. Roy A. Rappaport, "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual" *Cambridge Anthropology* 2(1), 3-69, 1974.
11. Jean La Fontaine, "The Power of Rights", *Man* 12, 421-37, 1977.
12. Emily M. Ahern, "The Problem of Efficacy: Strong and Weak Illocutionary Acts" *Man* 14, 1-17, 1979.
13. *Śabarabhāṣya on the Mīmāṃsā-sūtra*, Vol.I, Eng.tr.by M.M. Ganganath Jha.
14. The rules for *upanayana* are given in the *Āpastambhadharmasūtra*.

