

Chapter 5

PERFORMATIVES AND KNOWLEDGE

We have argued in defence of the semantic identity of performatives. We are now in a position to say with a degree of confidence that performatives are not a bogus class but constitute a class of utterances distinct from constatives. The notion of performatives is a fertile notion. It is useful towards illuminating a number of basic philosophical concepts, the concepts of knowledge and truth in particular. We have already expressed our hope to that effect. We may, now, proceed to elaborate it. The case of truth will be taken up later. We propose to begin with knowledge. To what extent, if at all, can the notion of performatives prove helpful towards understanding knowledge? Consideration of this is going to occupy us in the present chapter.

I

Knowledge is, by no means, too simple a concept. So, it behoves us to be clear about what we are going to be concerned with before we embark on the task of understanding it

in the light of the concept of performatives. One thing is certain. The word 'knowledge' is often supposed to be the name of a presumed entity of a questionable character, e.g., substance, relation and such like; but when we talk of knowledge we do not have the idea of any such entity in mind. Equally certain is another thing. Taken in its extension, 'knowledge' is often understood to designate either a true proposition or the entire body of true propositions, so that a so-called inquiry into knowledge on such a construal would, in fact, turn out to be an inquiry into the nature of propositions. We do not understand knowledge in its extension, and so a theory of propositions under the deceptive name of a theory of knowledge is not going to be of any interest to us here. But this should not be taken to mean that knowledge is being taken by us in its intension, in other words, that our interest is going to centre around any object of the Platonic kind which often goes by the name of concept or idea of knowledge. A concept or idea of this kind is a suspect in our eyes. That, however, is not our only reason to avoid it. The real reason is that taken as a concept or idea knowledge, for obvious reasons, is not amenable to investigation, at a linguistic plane which, we are, in a sense, implicitly committed to do when we undertake to make an attempt to read knowledge in the light of

performatives, a kind of linguistic utterances. One may suggest that this difficulty is, perhaps, avoidable if we leave aside such things as concept or idea of knowledge in favour of the word 'knowledge', in which case, investigation of knowledge may well count as an investigation of the word 'knowledge', an investigation conducted on a linguistic plane as desired by us. But the suggestion is not without difficulty. For, the word 'knowledge' is a substantive, and, therefore, like every another substantive, to put ^{it} in the words of Wittgenstein, is a source of 'philosophical bewilderment',¹ a cause of 'mental cramp'.² 'A substantive', says Wittgenstein, 'makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it'.³ Commenting on the difficulty of the word 'knowledge' Wittgenstein says :

...it seems that there is something wrong with the ordinary use of the word 'knowledge'. It appears we don't know what it means and that, therefore, perhaps, we have no right to use it. We would reply :
 'There is no exact use of the word 'knowledge'; but we can make several such usages which will more or less

agree with the ways the word is
actually used.⁴

A question about knowledge — the word 'knowledge' being a substantive — presents, to use the language of George Pitcher 'the aspect of a blank' and 'a very high wall : one is reduced to staring at it helplessly'.⁵ The way out of this helplessness is not hard to find. As suggested in the passage quoted above from Wittgenstein, it is to abandon the word 'knowledge' in favour of the verb 'know', a more humble and common word. This means that a philosophical inquiry into knowledge, to become a manageable endeavour, is to be transformed into a characteristic inquiry pertaining to the verb 'know'. Inquiry of knowledge in this form may proceed along different lines. It may consist in :

- (i) a discussion of what is common among all the multifarious uses of 'know' we come across;
 - (ii) an explanation of all the uses of 'know';
 - (iii) an explanation of some uses or of the most crucial use of 'know'.
- (ii) i.e., explanation of all the uses of 'know' is too difficult and cumbersome a task, if it is at all possible.

For, theoretically it is possible for a word to assume new meanings, so that in no stage are we justified in presuming that the uses of the particular word, namely, 'know' we are aware of, exhaust all the uses of it.

(i), on the other hand, rests on a number of presuppositions which cannot be taken for granted without considerable examination. The presuppositions include (a) that the various uses of 'know' have really something in common, (b) that this common something is knowable to us and such like. The fact that certain instances count as instances of the use of the word 'know' is no guarantee that these instances must share something in common. We are warned against presuming the common something by Wittgenstein's example of games;⁶ games, even though they are instances of games, strictly speaking, exhibit nothing in common except that they are called games. Hence, to account for their unity Wittgenstein invokes his famous notion of family resemblance; but to say that there is family resemblance among certain things is not to say that the things share something common, a property, a substance, or anything of that kind.

We are thus led to fall back on (iii), that is

to say, philosophical inquiry into knowledge in the sense of an inquiry into some uses or the most crucial use of the verb 'know'.

The important thing for us, now, is to see whether there really is any one use of 'know' which may be identified in some significant sense, as more important than its other uses, a use which may be called fundamental. The particular use of 'know' we have uppermost in our mind is what may be called its claimative use, i.e., the use which is embodied in the expression 'I know'. But what is it that may be said to account for the crucial character of this particular use? Granted that the expression 'I know' is used to make a knowledge-claim, is there no other use of the verb 'know', e.g. 'He knows', 'You know', and the like which also may be supposed to do the same job? Is the function of the expression 'I know' confined only to urging knowledge-claims, or may it be said to have other functions too? Such questions call for answers. A.R.White speaks of some extra-claimative uses of the expression 'I know'. For example, 'It is used... to make admissions of difficulties, to announce the coming to a decision, to agree and commiserate, to make concessions, and in many other ways'.⁷ All this may be true; we need not deny that. But despite that 'I know' stands out

predominantly as a verbal devise^c for urging knowledge-claims.

Arthur Danto begins his Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge with the observation.

... the theory of knowledge is best appreciated as the philosophical explanation of claims to knowledge.⁸

What is said by Danto in elaboration of this tends to cover most of the reasons which, we suppose, would justify the privileged position ~~we~~ assign to the expression 'I know'.

Construal of the theory of knowledge as a philosophical explanation of 'I know' has one very great advantage. It will enable us to treat knowledge at the linguistic level which, as we have said, is needed for reading knowledge in the light of performatory utterances. There are some additional advantages also. When someone says, 'X knows...'

EXPL | We do not understand what exactly corresponds to the verb 'know'. The meaning of 'know' in the sentence is, in that sense, unclear. But this is not the case with 'know' in the

sentence 'I know...' understood in the claimative sense. 'There is no comparable difficulty', says Danto, 'with claiming to know, for claiming is plainly an action of some sort'.⁹

However, it is not merely on consideration of these advantages that we have decided to highlight the claimative use of 'know' in the expression 'I know'. The particular use, we think, is, in fact, more fundamental than other uses. The reason for our so maintaining is that the expression 'I know' has to invariably accompany every assertion we make. It is true that when we make an assertion P we do not normally say 'I know that P'. That would sound 'over-emphatic' or 'pontifical'. It is, in fact, logically unnecessary. For, every assertion has to be prefixed implicitly by 'I know'. No assertion without this claimative prefix can count as an assertion. Whatever is to count as an assertion is to be either true or false; but a sentence which goes without a claimative prefix is neither and therefore, cannot pass for an assertion.

The line of argument by which we have tried to show that the most crucial use of 'know' is its use in

the expression 'I know', an expression by which we make a knowledge-claim, is not of our own. It is modelled after Kant's insight into the role of Cogito in making a judgement. According to Kant, Cogito accompanies every judgement made by us. Which means if someone asserts a judgement to the effect J then, according to Kant, it should be read as Cogito J. There is no assertion without the presupposition of Cogito. To state the matter in Kant's own words :

The, 'I think', must accompany all my representations, for otherwise something would be represented in me which could not be thought; in other words, the representation would be impossible, or at least be, in relation to me nothing. The representation which can be given previously to all thought is called intuition. All the diversity or manifold content of intuition, has, therefore, a necessary relation to the 'I think', the subject in which the diversity is found.¹⁰

Why do you say that 'I know' is not an assertion, but 'he knows' 'you know' are?

Why do you say that assertions must be prefixed by 'I know'?

'He knows', you say is not a claim, but 'I know' is. But 'he knows' being an assertion, you say, must be prefixed by (implicit) 'I know'. Thus non-claiming use of 'know' involves claiming-use of 'know', and the two uses get mixed up.

But our argument to show that the expression 'I know' exemplifies the basic use of the word 'know' or that 'I know' is the only expression which may be said to embody a knowledge-claim will remain inconclusive until one particular question is answered. The question is whether such expressions as 'He knows', 'You know', etc., can also be said to embody knowledge-claims. The question arises, we think, mainly from our inability to see the difference in the functioning of 'know' in the expression 'I know' from its functioning in 'He knows', 'You know', etc. In the former case we make a knowledge-claim and this fact is not disputed; but in the latter cases we do not make any knowledge-claim, rather, we endorse or allow or judge¹¹ a knowledge-claim made by somebody else. In the first case, the utterer's role is that of a claimant, while in the second that of a judge.

The expression 'I know', like the Kantian Cogito, is not itself an assertion; but expressions like 'He knows', 'You know', etc. are assertions, and being so, like every other assertion, must be prefixed by 'I know'. And this fact could once again point to our contention that the verb 'know' in its claimative use in the expression 'I know' is more basic than its other uses.

II

Analysis of knowledge, on our construal, then, is to count as an analysis of the expression 'I know'. According to the official view, 'I know' is supposed, in some sense, to be a description of a characteristic mental state. This descriptivist view of knowledge is not without numerous limitations for which it is not favoured by many. We shall discuss this view separately in the next chapter. Austin also is averse to this view. He says, 'To suppose that "I know" is a descriptive phrase is only one example of the descriptive fallacy so common in philosophy'.¹² Because of the alleged inadequacy of descriptivism, finding an alternative analysis of 'I know' is considered necessary by some. This accounts for the importance and relevance of Austin's performatory analysis of 'I know'. The analysis is suggested to Austin by the parallelism he discovers between 'I know' and 'I promise' which is a typical example of a performatory utterance. And it takes the form of elaborating the analogy.

(a) As distinguished from expressions like 'I believe', it is the characteristic of the expression 'I know' that it would not make sense for one to say

'I know that p but I may be wrong'. For, if one is already aware that he may be wrong in respect of what he claims to know, then obviously, there is no point for him to make a claim by saying 'I know...'. This is the first point in which, according to Austin, the functioning of 'I know' resembles that of the performative 'I promise', in the sense that it does not also make sense for one to say 'I promise... but I may fail'. For, if one has any definite reasons to suppose that he may fail then there is no point for him to say 'I promise'.

If you are aware you may be mistaken, you ought not to say you know, just as, if you are aware that you may break your word, you have no business to promise.¹³

Thus 'I know' is shown to be alike 'I promise' in the sense that just as 'I may fail' does not go with the latter, so 'I may be wrong' does not go with the former. But this particular point of similarity exhibited by 'I know' to 'I promise' should be fortified against certain misunderstanding.

(i) The first point of misunderstanding arises from the fact of our inability to 'foresee the future'. It is often argued that since we cannot know what will happen in the future and, therefore, whether or not we shall fail, we do not have any right to make any promise at all. Likewise, it is argued that if it is such that if I know I cannot be wrong then, I am never in a position to say 'I know', because I am always liable to be wrong and there is no perpetual safeguard against being so.

The obsession, as has been observed by Austin, 'fastens on my inability to make predictions as the root of the matter'. But this obsession, according to Austin, is 'doubly mistaken'. '... we may be perfectly justified in saying' says Austin, 'we know or we promise inspite of the fact that things 'may' turn out badly...' ¹⁴ Austin further maintains '... it is overlooked that the conditions which must be satisfied if I am to show that the thing is within my cognisance or within my power are conditions, not about the future but about the present and the past...' ¹⁵

(ii) The second source of misunderstanding is a certain difference between our reaction to someone's saying 'I promise' and someone's saying 'I know' when in both cases

things turn out badly. In the latter case we say 'You have proved wrong, so you did not know', while in the former we say 'You have failed to perform, although you did promise'.

Austin dismisses the misunderstanding because the alleged difference on which it is based is, according to him, more apparent than real. He says :

The sense in which you 'did promise' is that you did say you promise ... But it may well transpire that you never fully intended to do it, or that you had concrete reason to suppose that you wouldn't be able to do it..., and in another 'sense' of promise you can't then have promised to do it, so that you didn't promise.¹⁶

(b) We may now mention another characteristic in respect of which 'I know' is alike 'I promise'. This particular characteristic is specially emphasised by Austin. When someone says 'I promise' he is supposed to express a certain intention. That is true. But, according to Austin, what he does in addition to this is to stake his reputation

in a new way, to make himself as if a part of the promise he makes. And the same happens when someone says 'I know'. 'Saying "I know", is taking a new plunge'.¹⁷ Elaborating the matter Austin says,

[I]t is not saying 'I have performed a specially striking feat of cognition, superior, in the same scale as believing and being sure, even to being merely quite sure' : for there is nothing in that scale superior to being quite sure. Just as promising is not something superior, in the same scale as hoping and intending, even to merely fully intending : for there is nothing in the scale superior to merely fully intending. When I say 'I know', I give others my word : I give others my authority for saying that 'S is P'.¹⁸

By saying 'I know' I involve myself in what I say as much as I do when I say 'I promise'. The truth of this contention becomes, in a way, obvious because it would explain a number

of facts. To mention a few such facts.

(i) Suppose I say 'I promise to do A', although my hearer refuses to take my promise seriously, and contrast it with my saying 'I intend to do A' which also is not taken seriously. In the former case I feel offended in a way in which I do not feel in the latter case. The same is found to happen when I consider my saying 'I know' Vis-a-Vis my saying 'I am sure'. My hearer's refusal to accept the former offends me far more seriously than if he refused to accept the latter. All this becomes accountable only on the supposition that in saying 'I promise' and 'I know', I do not just issue certain utterances but go further to involve myself with the utterances in a very special way, by making myself, as if, a part of the utterances, if we may say so.

(ii) The second fact which becomes intelligible in the light of the supposition is this. Suppose I say 'I am sure that P' but eventually I am found to be wrong; and compare it with my saying 'I know that P' in which case also I turn out to be wrong. In the former case I can evade the responsibility for my failure by saying such things as 'I am sure for my part', and the like; but in the latter

case, there is no such way out. There is no way for me to shed my responsibility, and so, I am liable to be rounded on by others in a very special way. An exactly comparable situation is found when I compare my saying 'I promise to do A' when eventually I fail to do A with my saying 'I intend to do A' though, in fact, I fail to do A. In the former case I am liable to be rounded on by others in a special way, that is, a way in which I am not liable in the latter case.

(c) The final point in which 'I know' and 'I promise' resemble is that both are 'transmissible'. On the basis of someone having said to me 'I know that P', I also am entitled to say that I know that P. The only difference between the two knowledge-claims is that while the former may be first hand, the latter is to be called second hand. The same holds good of 'I promise'. If someone says seriously 'I promise', then on the basis of that I also am entitled to say that I promise.

Expl.

III

In spelling out the analogy between 'I know' and 'I promise', Austin apparently has two objectives in mind : on the one hand, to avoid the descriptivist analysis of

'I know', and, on the other hand, to assimilate the expression 'I know' to the sentential sub-class of performatives of which 'I promise' is a most typical example. But this comparative analysis of these two expressions is confined to his article 'Other Minds'; it may be a matter of some interest to note that he did not subsequently follow it up. In his subsequent works, nowhere does the comparative study of the two expressions happen to recur. Anyway, this move on the part of Austin to interpret 'I know' as a performative has proved quite provocative. It has been subjected to fairly widespread criticism by philosophers, not all of whom tend, otherwise to share the same platform. Thus, e.g., one critic, Arthur Danto who is critical about Austin's performatory analysis of 'I know', appears inclined to accept the latter's non-descriptivist thesis about knowledge in a general way. 'It is a common ground between Austin and myself', he says, 'that there are no cognitive actions...'¹⁹ On the other hand, Jonathan Harrison, another critic, who has little sympathy for the non-descriptivist hypothesis, accuses Austin of over-working the discovery that language, in general, has a non-descriptive function. He says thus :

When the interesting and important
discovery that language has other

uses than to state facts, describe things, or communicate information was first made, it was only natural that philosophers should over-estimate the extent to which language was 'non-propositional'... The view that the function of 'I know' resembles the function of 'I promise' is a case in point.²⁰

Assimilation of 'I know' to performatives is, according to Harrison, a mistake. Pointing to this mistake he remarks :

Our predecessors, so far from committing the 'descriptive fallacy' with regard to 'I know', had the better of us in that they did not make this mistake.²¹

The objections against Austin's performatory analysis of 'I know' are quite multiferous. They consist, almost entirely, in showing certain disanalogies between 'I know' and 'I promise'. However, subject to our judgement being correct, the disanalogies may broadly be divided into those

that are misconceived and those that are too weak and peripheral to be capable of having any adverse effect on the analysis cited by Austin.

IV

Let us first be concerned with some objections which are misconceived. Specimens of this type are to be found in Jonathan Harrison and also in Zeno Vendler.

Harrison says :

...both 'promising to' and 'promising that' are essentially different from saying 'I know...', in that someone who says either 'I promise not to be late' or 'I promise that I will not be late' is correctly described as having promised, but someone saying 'I know...' is not correctly described as having known.²²

Vendler also says something substantially to the same effect. To quote him.

To say (in the appropriate circumstances)
"I promise to X" is to promise to X.

This fails with know : it is
 not the case, in any circumstances,
 that to say 'I know that P' constitutes
 knowing that P.²³

The objection seems to be based, as far as we understand, on a gross misconstrual of the intended purport^p of the expression 'I know'. That is not hard to see. When the expression 'I know' is understood in the intended sense the alleged disanalogy between 'I know' and 'I promise' will disappear. In saying 'I promise', in appropriate circumstances, I do make a promise. That's a fact. But if one is to go by the exact purport of the expression 'I know', then one cannot say that in saying 'I know' I perform an act of knowing. In saying 'I know' one does not perform an act of knowing but the act of claiming to know. It is unlike 'I promise' in saying which one promises but does not make a claim to promise. Now, taken in this claimative sense — which is the correct sense — 'I know' really amounts to saying 'I make a claim to know'. If it be so then why should it not be the case that in saying 'I know', i.e., 'I make a claim to know', in appropriate circumstances, I do make a claim to know just as in saying 'I promise', in appropriate circumstances, I do make a promise? To say, 'I claim to know' is to make a claim to know. Whether or not

my claim is justified in the light of relevant facts and I do really know is a different matter.

The claimative feature of 'I know' having been missed by Harrison, in particular, while formulating his objection against the performatory interpretation of 'I know' might seem a bit incongruous in the sense that he is not exactly unaware of the matter. For, in the preceding section of his paper he writes :

One of the important difference is that someone saying 'I promise...' is thereby promising, whereas someone saying 'I know...' is not thereby knowing, but simply claiming that he knows.²⁴

In Austin's use, the claimative sense of 'I know' is essential so that, in attempting to understand the expression one must take adequate precaution not to lose sight of it. The critics' failure on this score has, on occasions been, in our opinion, the source of another objection. The objection pertains to Austin's position that both in saying 'I know' and in saying 'I promise',

the person so saying gives others his word. Now, the critics' objection consists in showing a number of instances in which saying of 'I know' by somebody does not involve anything like giving word to others on his part. Thus Harrison says :

There are, however, cases when we would certainly not say of someone who said 'I know p' that he gave his word that p. If X says to me 'I know that you are determined to make a fool of yourself', he is surely not correctly described as having given me his word, pledge his authority, that I will make a fool of myself. When the amateur investigator says to the detective-inspector 'I know there is strong circumstantial evidence against him, but...' it would be very odd to describe what he is doing in the way Austin does. In general, when X says to Y 'I know that p', when he believes Y to be already aware of p, he is not doing this so much to assure Y of p, as to communicate to Y the fact that he also knows p. In such

cases, to describe X as giving his word to Y that P is true would be thoroughly implausible.²⁵

Similar examples are also cited by Danto.

It is easy to find examples in usage where a man cannot be giving his word when he says 'I know'. Thus A says 'I no longer love you' to B and B replies 'I know you do not'. B cannot be giving A his authority here ! Here he is acknowledging that the words 'I love you no longer' are not needed. C says to D that A no longer loves B, and D says 'I know she does not'. Here he is not giving C his word. He is saying that C brings stale news.²⁶

But what do all these examples may be supposed to show ? What exactly, is their relevance ? They tend no doubt to confirm that there are some extra-claimative uses of 'I know'. There indeed are such uses. Who would

deny that ? But the fact of the existence of such uses has nothing in it to disprove that when 'I know' occurs in language in the claimative sense, in other words, when it is used by someone to make a claim to the effect that he knows, it is being used to give his word or authority to others.

We have met to our satisfaction the objection that arises from misconception. Yet, it may not be out of place here to take notice of certain observations made by Chisolm. Referring to the question raised in the Thaetetus as to how to differentiate between "saying, of a man, that he has true opinion that P, and saying of him that P falls within his cognizance", Chisolm maintains that Austin's view suggests an important clue to an answer to this problem. He says :

Suppose you consider his statement
 'When I say "I know", I give others
 my word : I give others my authority
 for saying "S is P" and revise it to
 read : 'If a man knows that S is P,
 then he has the right to give others
 his word - to give others his
 authority for believing S is P'. ²⁷

Working within the framework of his view that all performative verbs 'conform to the achievement schema in their tense structure', Zeno Vendler mentions one particular point of disanalogy between 'I know' and 'I promise'. The disanalogy consists in the fact that one can know something for a period of time, but this does not hold good of promising. As a result, there is incongruity in asked^{ing} 'Since when does he promise...?', but there is no such incongruity in asking 'Since when does he know?' To quote Vendler :

Just think of the incongruity of saying things like : "Since when does he...?"... Now with Know, all these questions make sense; know like believe, doubt, etc., are state-verbs; One can know something for a period of time, since a certain date, and so forth.²⁸

But the alleged disanalogy seems to be based on a misapprehension of the way in which the verb 'promise' functions in our language, and the misapprehension has its source presumably in the acknowledged framework of his thinking. I may indeed know something for years or since a particular time; but I

may equally be said to be promising something for a certain period of time. Interestingly, the point figures in the writings of a fellow-critic, Arthur^s Danto, when he says :

I may have known something for years, as indeed I may have been under a promised obligation for years. I report the latter fact by saying that I am under such and such a promise. This means that at the beginning of that period I said the words 'I promise' or performed some equivalent action. That action instituted the period, which will last until the promise is fulfilled : breaking the promise does not remove me from the obligation.²⁹

The particular disanalogy between 'I know' and 'I promise' is followed up by Vendler by another of a somewhat different kind. This disanalogy is supposed to consist in the use of the mark 'hereby' with 'promise' and 'know'. In Vendler's own words the disanalogy is this.

Finally, the hereby mark : the sentence

I hereby promise to X

is issued to make the promise quite

explicit and official

I hereby know that P

on the other hand once more falls short of

the requirements of grammar and good sense.

We are unable to understand why Vendler has taken his particular disanalogy at all seriously. For, as we understand, it does not, in any way, become prejudicial to the analogy between 'I know' and 'I promise' which Austin has spelt out with the idea of assigning 'I know' to performatives. The disanalogy takes for granted the position to the effect that 'I know' and 'I promise', more generally, performatives, can be unified in a class on the basis of a common identifying mark derived from the vocabulary. But the position is wrong, which has been shown by Austin through extensive examination. Vocabulary can provide nothing in respect of which performatives may be said to be analogous to one another. So, the failure of the 'hereby'-mark to ensure an analogy between 'I know' and 'I promise' need not be confined to these two expressions; it may well be true of any two typical performatives. That will not impair their performativeness.

V

There indeed are more objections to Austin's know-promise parallelism having been made by critics on the basis of misconceived or genuine disanalogy between the two expressions. We are not unaware of that. But we consider it, in a sense, redundant to mention or discuss them separately. For, those objections, as we can see, share certain common defects, at a general level, on account of which they cannot be said to possess the force they may appear to have. These objections, if we may say so, are based mainly on two mistakes.

One : the mistake consisting in the presupposition that there is some identifying feature which is common to all performatives and bind them together in a sentential class. But such a feature, as we have already seen is elusive, though fortunately, the identity of performatives as a distinct class of utterances is not prejudiced on account of that.

Two : the mistake consisting in the inability to see that some degree of disanalogy may characterise any two performatives, however paradigmatic they may happen to be. The reason for our so saying is this. The functioning

of performatives is governed by a number of felicity conditions. There is nothing mandatory that two performatives will violate the same conditions or the same set of conditions. P_1 may violate C_1 while P_2, C_2 . That will exhibit a disanalogy between P_1 and P_2 . But despite this disanalogy their performativeness is not adversely affected.

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