

Chapter 7

PERFORMATIVES AND TRUTH

As we know, Austin makes no secret of his aversion to the descriptivist account of knowledge. 'To suppose that "I know" is a descriptive phrase, is only one example of the descriptive fallacy, so common in philosophy'. We have already quoted this remark of Austin's. So his desire to get rid of the descriptivist account of knowledge and for that purpose, to find a suitable alternative to it, which he thinks would be available in his reconstruction of the notion of knowledge in terms of that of performatives, is understandable. But his stance against descriptivism is not a stance against descriptivism as such; it seems to be confined to his theory of knowledge. For, Austin shows special interest in the problem of truth and the theory that results from it tends to present a very different picture. Asking himself, when it is that a statement is said to be true, Austin answers, "A statement is said to be true when the historic state of affairs to which it is correlated by demonstrative conventions (the one to which it refers) is of a type with which the sentence used in making it is correlated by descriptive conventions".¹ And speaking of 'is true' as this particular correlation, he remarks, 'If it is admitted (if) that the

rather bearing yet satisfactory relation between words and world... does genuinely occur why should the phrase "is true" not be our way of describing it?'² Except for its sophistication, Austin's account of truth is substantially a version of the particular brand of descriptivist theory which in the philosophy of truth is called correspondence theory. Thus as far as the problem of understanding truth is concerned, Austin, having shun the anti-path to descriptivism which he originally showed in connection with the interpretation of knowledge becomes, on the contrary, reconciled to it. What is more, his refined version of the correspondence theory may well be supposed to be a new contribution towards enriching the descriptivist tradition in the philosophy of truth. As regards truth, Austin is thus quite happy with a descriptivist hypothesis. So, it has been only natural that the idea of performatives does not figure in his thoughts about truth. That the concept of performatives, a discovery of his own, can be of any use in a theory of truth does not have any occasion to occur to him. The concept comes in for the first time³ for exploitation by Strawson in his characteristic theory of truth. This theory, often called a performatory theory, is an attempt to understand how the phrase 'is true' is used in language, in the light of a characteristic set of

performatory utterances. What is historically more important about this Strawsonian account of truth is that eventually it is made to play an antithetic role in relation to Austin's correspondence theory of truth.⁴

Reacting to this theory Strawson says, "The correspondence requires, not purification, but elimination".⁵

Strawson's performatory account of truth may well be looked upon as constituted of a number of different contentions. One such contention — no doubt a basic contention — is the non-descriptivist position to the effect that the word 'true' in a sentence of the form 'P is true' does not describe or designate a quality or relation or anything of the kind. This, as is known to us, happens to be the central thesis of the particular theory of truth which is associated with the names of F.P.Ramsey and A.J.Ayer and is often called Redundancy or Logical Superfluity theory of truth.

According to Ramsay, the word 'true' in a 'truth-sentence' does not denote anything. So that, we do not have any separate problem about truth; to add the predicate 'true' to a proposition is to add nothing to it. In Ramsey's own language :

... it is true that Caesar was murdered means no more than that Caesar was murdered.⁶

The same position is more explicitly formulated by A.J.Ayer when he says :

... in all sentences of the form 'P is true' the phrase 'is true' is logically superfluous. When, e.g., one says that the proposition ' "Queen Anne is dead" is true', all that one is saying is that Queen Anne is dead..., to say that a proposition is true is just to assert it.⁷

Strawson admits that 'is true' in 'P is true' does not designate anything. So far he is in agreement with Ramsey and Ayer. But he dissociates himself from the latter when they proceed to treat 'is true' as 'logically superfluous' or as a bare mark of assertion. For Strawson, 'is true' is not logically superfluous ' "True" and "not true" ' he says, 'have jobs of their

own to do...'⁸ Let us follow the analysis through which this position is worked out by Strawson.

A sentence-pattern may indeed be used to assert P. But this assertiveness is not the whole truth or the only truth about it. For, according to Strawson, there are circumstances in which it may be used to do many things besides making an assertion. To illustrate the point consider any of the following :

- (a) Nehru is the first Prime Minister of India.
- (b) It is ten O'clock.
- (c) Truth survives in the long run.

A certain sentence-pattern has been used in each of these cases to make an assertion. But the making of the assertion is certainly not the only thing it can be used to do. Depending on its use in appropriate context it can be said to do more things, i.e., perform duties other than merely that of asserting. Thus (a) may figure in a quiz contest to answer the question 'Who is the first Prime Minister of India ?' (b) may be taken in the sense of, say, telling or reminding somebody that he should begin his work. In the

same way, (c) may be used to function as a means of encouraging someone who has lost his faith in truth. There indeed are many more such jobs other than making assertion which a sentence may be used to perform, e.g., warning, inspiring, reassuring, reprimanding and so on. Now, in many such cases, i.e., cases which provide appropriate context for a sentence to do a job over and above that of asserting, one may make the assertion without using the sentence-pattern. Certain 'abbreviatory devices' are there for making the assertion. The matter is stated by Strawson himself thus :

In many of the cases in which we are doing something besides merely stating X is Y, we have available, for use in suitable contexts, certain abbreviatory devices which enable us to state that X is Y without using the sentence - pattern 'X is Y'. Thus, if someone asks us 'Is X Y', we may state (in the way of reply) that X is Y by saying 'yes'.⁹

Now, the word 'true', according to Strawson, is one such 'abbreviatory device'. To be more precise, it is said to work as a substitute for each of a number of such devices. But what exactly are the devices? In answering this question Strawson has recourse to what is identified by Austin as performatory utterances. That is to say, the devices are performatory expressions like 'I corroborate', 'I agree', 'I grant', 'I confirm', 'I accept', and such like. One uses the word 'true', according to Strawson, as a substitute for any of these expressions which, again, is used as a device for making an assertion, say, P, in the context of the same assertion being actually made or envisaged to be made by somebody. From this it follows that 'true', like the expressions it is a substitute for, performs in language a performatory role in addition to that of asserting; and in this, according to Strawson, lies its logical significance; it is not as supposed by Ramsey and Ayer, logically superfluous.

Thus, according to Strawson, the expression 'true' or 'is true' is basically performatory. This performatory feature, while it explains its logical relevance, also explains another important thing, namely why it is that Strawson accepts the Ramsey-Ayer position that 'true'

does not designate anything. The non-designating feature of the word 'true' follows straightway from its performatory feature. For, one of the distinctive features of an expression called performatory is that it is non-descriptive; it does not report or describe anything whatever in the world, a situation, a state of affair or anything of the kind.

But in maintaining that the word 'true' in a sentence of the form 'P is true' performs basically a performatory role and does not describe anything, Strawson faces one difficulty of which he is fully aware. The difficulty arises from the obvious resemblance of the sentence 'P is true' to a sentence of the kind 'The flower is yellow'. The word 'yellow' in the sentence describes the subject 'flower' and is a grammatical predicate in it. If so, why should we not be in a position to say that 'true' in 'P is true' is a grammatical predicate functioning as a description of 'P'? That 'true' in 'P is true' is a predicate is an obvious grammatical fact which Strawson does not deny. But he denies that 'true' can be understood as the name of a property describing 'P' in the way 'yellow' as the name of a property describes flower. The function of 'true' is not to describe 'P'. To suppose that it is so, is to be misled by its grammatical position. According to Strawson, 'true' is

neither a device for making an assertion about 'P' nor is it a device for making an assertion other than 'P'; its entire function is to assert 'P' itself in a certain particular way which is the performatory way. What specifically this performatory way would be would, of course, depend on the nature of the context in which 'P' is asserted. Thus, on occasions, it may assume the 'agreeing' way, on occasions the 'endorsing' way or the 'accepting' way, and so on.

II

To provide an exhaustive account of Strawson's view of truth is not germane to our present interest. However, the outline we have given above ^{of} Strawson's account of the use of the phrase 'is true' seems adequate enough to highlight the points considered salient and relevant by us. The points are as follows :

- (a) In saying 'P is true' one does not make a statement about 'P' or a statement over and above 'P'.
- (b) 'Is true' in sentences of the form 'P is true' does not designate anything in the way 'yellow' in the sentence 'The flower is yellow' does.

- (c) The use of the word 'true' needs a context in which a statement is actually made or is envisaged.
- (d) To say that the statement so made or envisaged is true, is to make the statement itself in a performatory way, that is to say, in agreeing, endorsing, 'confirming, and similar other ways.

The points are not all of them, as far as we can understand, such as are equally and directly related to our interest. Nor do we think that they are all equally fundamental.

Thus take (a). It may, in a way, be said to be subordinate to (d) that is, the performatory point. For, if it is granted that in saying 'P is true', we are asserting 'p' itself in a certain characteristic way, then it inevitably follows that 'P is true' is neither a separate statement about 'P' nor a separate statement over and above 'P'.

In the same way, (b) also is, in a sense subordinate to (d). For, if it be correct to say that the purport of 'is true' in 'P is true' is non-descriptive,

more specifically performative, then the question of its designating anything does not arise at all.

The basic and the most important thing from our point of view is thus the point (d). The point (c) is built in (d) in such a way that one need not treat it separately. Dealing with (d), in a way, will cover (c). Thus for us, consideration of Strawson's view about the use of the phrase 'is true' boils down to the consideration of (d). Which means, our task now is going to be basically an examination of how far, if at all, the function of 'is true' in 'is-true' - sentences can be construed after the model of those performed by such performatives as 'I agree', 'I accept', 'I concede', 'I corroborate', 'I endorse', and such like !

Before we get into this task in right earnest it would however, be worthwhile to clear up certain general points and therewith certain misgiving arising out of them. This, we hope, will offer some protection to Strawson's analysis of 'true' against being unduly exposed to certain misconceptions.

(a) One thing calls for some emphasis. It is this. Strawson is concerned to explain the use of the word 'true' : he has no intention to provide any metaphysical account of truth. This explanation, again, is not intended to answer when we use the word 'true', but to answer how we use the word 'true'.¹⁰ This, it may be noted is made quite explicit by Strawson himself. But in mentioning just this we have not fully delimited the scope of Strawson's[†] interest. The word 'true' is used in a variety of linguistic contexts. Thus it may occur, for instance, in an interrogative sentence like 'Is it true that your friend has lost his job?'; as has been mentioned by Peter Geach,¹¹ ~~it~~ ~~■~~ may also occur in a conditional sentence, e.g., 'If the statement "The earth is flat" is true, astronomy is bunkum'. The word 'true' may figure also in similar other sentences. But Strawson's explanation is not designed to cover the vast and varied [†] range of all possible uses of the word 'true'. What it is confined to is the use of 'true' in the context of one particular variety of sentences, namely, those indicative 'is true' - sentences which contain statements as their grammatical subjects. The statement in the sentence, it should be noted, may be explicitly stated, e.g., 'The statement that sugar is sweet is true'. It may also be [†]

left inexplicit, as for example, in sentences like 'That's true', 'Your statement is true', 'What he said yesterday is true', and so on. Incidentally, it may be pointed out that by taking into consideration 'is true' - sentences of the latter variety, i.e., sentences in which the statement is kept inexplicit, Strawson's analysis enjoys one advantage over that of Ramsey and Ayer. According to the Ramsey and Ayer, as we know, 'is true' - sentences of the form 'P is true' does nothing more than asserting 'P'. On this view, explanation of 'is true' - sentences with inexplicit statements as their grammatical subjects runs into difficulty. For, obviously, a statement which is inexplicit cannot be asserted. But if 'is true' in 'P is true' is conceived, as Strawson does, as a device for endorsing or giving assent to 'P', then there is no such difficulty: there is no absurdity in endorsing or agreeing to an inexplicit statement.

Anyway, let us come back to the point that Strawson's analysis of truth is not comprehensive in the sense of covering all the uses of 'true' or 'is true'. Nor does it make a claim to be so. And this, it may be mentioned, is a ground for some, for instance, Warnock¹², to suppose

that what Strawson says about truth does not amount to a theory of truth. The supposition would, no doubt, hold good, if it is granted that whatever is to count as a theory of truth must be such as to be capable of throwing 'some sort of light on contexts in general in which "true" on "truth" might occur, or in which questions of truth or falsehood might arise'.¹³ But is it mandatory for us to understand a theory of truth in this sense? That is to say, is it necessary for a theory of truth to be comprehensive to the extent of covering all, or even nearly all uses of the word 'true'? In that case, one would wonder whether anybody at any time has constructed a theory of truth. None of the theories of truth known to us would appear to fulfil this requirement. "We are surely over the days" very rightly said by Wheatley, "when we expect one simple theory to solve all the problems over a huge field".¹⁴ The stipulation of being comprehensive not being unduly insisted on, Strawson's view of truth may well count as a theory of truth. For, in trying to throw light on the use of 'true' as a predicate in indicative sentences, Strawson is trying to throw light on a particular use of 'true' which is undeniably fundamental. The fact that his preoccupation with 'true' is purposefully selective does not come in the way of his view being called a theory.

(b) Strawson certainly maintains that in saying 'p is true' one is not making any statement about 'p' or any statement over and above 'p'; this much is fairly clear : there is hardly any ambiguity on this point. The position may be correct or incorrect. We need not commit anything on this point. But one thing seems pretty clear to us. It is that even if it turns out to be incorrect, it would not affect, in any adverse way, the analysis of 'is true' in 'is true' - sentences in terms of such non-dissenting performatives as 'I agree', 'I accept', etc., etc. Yet, it is to be noticed that, while dealing with Strawson's view of truth, Warnock has chosen this position as a special target of his criticism. But what, exactly, may be supposed to follow, if it is granted that Warnock's criticism is justified ? Perhaps only that the position is incorrect, not that Strawson's performatory analysis is untenable. Warnock's criticism, if it has any value, has a value of its own, and not on account of any possible bearing of it on the performatory analysis of 'true'.

Let us take up a connected point which, perhaps, is more important. Even though he denies that 'p is true' is a statement about 'p' or that it is a statement over and

above 'p', Strawson does not deny that 'p is true' is a statement, namely, that 'p', though in a characteristic way, i.e., the way called performatory. Apparently, having this statemental character of 'p is true' in mind, Warnock shows some degree of reservation against calling the Strawsonian account of the expression 'is true' in the sentence 'p is true' by the name performatory. He says, '...Strawson has been taken by some to be propounding what I have heard called "the performative theory of truth" : but I think it is clear that what he says neither deserves, nor surely claims¹⁵ any such title'.¹⁶ And in all this, Warnock, it appears, has been led by the idea that an utterance which is a statement cannot count as a performative. But this, we suppose, is a mistake not too uncommon in philosophy of language. For an utterance to become a statement does not exclude the possibility of its possessing a performatory character. Being a statement and being a performative are not incompatible concepts. They may well go together without any prejudice to the distinction between performatives and constatives. We have already argued this point in some detail¹⁸ and, we shall not repeat our arguments here. As a matter of fact, to suppose that the statemental character of an utterance is incompatible with its performativeness is to commit what is called the 'fallacy of the Single

Function' by Arthur Danto.¹⁹ Austin says, 'To say that you are a cuckold may be to insult you, but it is also, and at the same time to make a statement which is true or false'.²⁰ It makes no difference if this remark is read with some alteration as 'To say that you ^{are} a cuckold may be to make a statement which is true or false, but it may also, and at the same time be to insult you'.²¹

(c) Warnock does not deny that to say 'That's true' may be to express agreement with what someone has said. '...it is quite obvious', he says, 'that that's so, that this is at least one of the ways in which "is true" is used'.²² But explanation of this particular use of 'is true', Warnock tends to feel, does not matter much. What is required of a theory of truth is that it must contain an answer to what the word 'true' means. But Strawson's view is accused by Warnock of having failed on this particular score. It is alleged to leave the question of the meaning of 'true' unanswered, because saying how the word is used is not saying what the word means. To quote Warnock :

If someone were to say, correctly,
that the phrase 'is a fool' is often
used to criticise, belittle, denigrate,

or insult the person of whom it is predicated, it is plain that he would not have offered an answer to the question what the phrase 'is a fool' means; and similarly, it would seem that one who says, correctly, [as Strawson does] that 'is true' is often used to indicate the speaker's agreement has offered no answer to ... what the words 'is true' mean.²³

We are not quite able to understand how all this may be said to have a bearing on Strawson's view of truth. True, Strawson does not say ~~that~~ anything which is characterised by him as the meaning of 'true' or 'is true'. Nor does he appear, from what he has said, to aspire to do so. His avowed objective has been to explicate how the word 'true' is used in 'is true' - sentences. Whether or not such an attempt can be construed as an explication of the meaning of the word 'true' is to depend on how exactly is the relation between the use of a word and the meaning of it is conceived, in other words, whether or not the meaning of a word is to be defined in terms of its use. But Strawson is non-committal on this point. And

that does not in any way undermine the merit of his view of truth, if it really has any : an account of the use of a word - and for that matter, the use of 'true' - does not have to depend for its ^{worthwhileness} ~~worthwhileness~~ on an account of its meaning. Explanation of the use of a word is an autonomous philosophical activity having a value of its own.

III

It is time that we address ourselves to what we have earlier called our basic task. How far, if at all, is an use of 'is true' understandable as a performative of the non-disseminating type, e.g., 'I agree', 'I accept', 'I confirm', 'I endorse', etc. Alternately, to what extent, if at all, can we assimilate the varied uses of the phrase 'is true' to the particular species of performatives ? One obvious and common way to decide the issue is to conduct an explanation to see whether or not in every case the function of the phrase 'is true' can adequately be discharged by one or more performatives in question. And, conversely, also to see whether or not in every case the job done by a performative like 'I agree', 'I endorse' etc. can be made to be done using the phrase

'is true'. In short, we have to examine whether in all cases 'is true' and the performatives are logically interchangeable. There are philosophers who think that it is not so, and to substantiate their position they have produced some arguments.

(a) The argument we take up first is of Warnock's. It consists in citing instances in which it is perfectly sensical to say 'I agree', 'I endorse', and the like though, not 'true' or 'That's true'. Thus, e.g., I can agree with a decision, with a policy, with an appraisal, with a taste or an opinion. '...if I agree with his decision or his assessment', Warnock says, 'I may, of course, say, "Yes, I agree"... but in neither case, surely, could I naturally or could I properly say "That's true".'²⁴

Warnock is certainly right in saying that in the context of decision, policy, resolution, taste, appraisal and such like^k, we are entitled to say 'I agree', 'I endorse', etc., and that in these contexts it is improper to use the locution 'That's true'. No one would dispute this. Decisions, resolutions, etc., do not have any truth-value at all, so that there is indeed no point in talking of interchangeability between truth and agreement in their case.

But in what way may it affect the position that 'is true' in the context of a sentence is replaceable by agreement-expressing locutions which precisely is what is maintained by Strawson? A statement differs basically from decisions, resolutions and appraisals etc., in that unlike the latter it is either true or false : in fact, it has to be so. Which means decisions, resolutions, etc., provide no reliable model for finding what may be said to hold good in the case of statements. Taken in the sense of an objection to Strawson's view, what Warnock says, seems to lose sight of the view itself.

Warnock's objection has been to the effect that in certain instances agreement-expressing locutions cannot be substituted by 'is true' locutions. We shall now consider certain converse instances, i.e., instances, in which, 'is true' locutions, it is alleged, cannot be substituted by agreement-expressing locutions.

(b) It is not denied that there are occasions when in saying 'That's true' what one does is to express his non-dissent in the context of a statement. Yet, it is felt by some that, it would be unfair ~~to~~ to reduce them to such agreeing or endorsing expressions

as 'I agree', 'I accept', 'I endorse', 'Ditto', 'Yes', etc. Thus, take for instance, G.Ezorsky, who in his article, 'Truth in context',²⁴ maintains that the expression 'That's true' has a power or authority which places it above expressions like 'I agree'. This power or authority derives from his idea that saying 'p is true' we take into consideration the evidence or proof in favour of 'p' which we do not do when we say 'I agree that p'. To put the matter in Ezorsky's own words :

To teach someone the use of 'true' is not the same lesson as teaching the use of 'yes', 'Ditto', 'I accept'... etc. One would expect words like 'evidence', 'test', 'proof', 'verified' to be the major figures in the first lesson, but they might not show up at all in the second.²⁵

From this alleged peculiarity of 'is true' - sentences, vis-a-vis sentences in which we express our agreement, arises a difference between the two types of sentences at the linguistic level. For example, there is nothing outrageous in saying 'I agree that p, though

I do not have any evidence or proof for p'; contrarily, we are debarred from saying 'p is true, though there is no evidence or proof for it'. Another connected difference which appears to surface itself when we address 'why' - questions to someone who says 'I agree that p' and to one who says 'p is true'. That is to say, when we ask 'Why do you agree that p?' and 'Why do you say that 'p' is true"? In the former case, the answer may well consist in the stating of such extra-logical factors, as for example, 'Because I wanted to avoid an encounter with X who said that p', 'Because it would please x' and such like. But in the latter case, such answers will not do. What is required is a statement of the logical ground for saying that p is true.

Ezarsky's argument to draw a line between 'That's true' and 'I agree' does not have any finality for us. It is far from conclusive. For, the criterion he uses to mark off the two sentences from each other is not absolute. It may be true that such sentences as 'I agree that p, though I do not have evidence or proof for p' are normally admitted in our discourse. But it is equally true that saying such sentences as 'I agree that p and I have evidence or proof for p' is not quite uncommon.

One may indeed expect words like 'evidence', ~~that~~
'test', 'proof', 'verified' to figure in our process of
learning the use of 'true'. But our learning the use of
the expressions like 'I agree', etc., will not be vitiated
if these words occur in the process, 'That's true' and
'I agree' are not thus completely separated from each
other, even if we admit what Ezorsky has said. There may
indeed be occasions when they meet, in other words, do the
same job.

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