

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The idea of performatives as distinguished from statements or constatives, we are told by Warnock,¹ was conceived by Austin in 1939, though it was first made use of by him seven years later, that is, when he wrote his famous article 'Other Minds'. However, it could come in the philosophical limelight and trigger off widespread interest only about a decade later, in 1955 when he delivered his William James Lectures.² These lectures were followed up by two articles, namely, 'Performative Utterances' (1956)³ and 'Performative-Constative' (1958).⁴

I

The discovery of performatives as a class of utterances distinct from constatives is an important event by itself. What, however, is more important is that it has come to influence in various ways our philosophical thinking in recent times. Writing in

1956 about Austin's preoccupation with performative utterances Warnock observes :

This territory has proved remarkably fruitful, and its exploitation powerfully disruptive of prejudices about the working of language... it provides a model, almost a pilot project for a kind of inquiry into the realities of speech and language which seems likely to be long pursued and extensively developed : Nor is there any doubt that a number of wholly traditional problems in philosophy have been illuminated in the course of, or as an effect of this kind of inquiry.⁵

Judging by some of the important philosophical developments that have taken place during the last three decades, we are surely in a position to say now that there was no overstatement in Warnock's observation. The concept of performatives has indeed enabled philosophers to see many of the matters that concern them in a new way.

II

(a) The first thing that deserves to be mentioned is language, particularly, the sector of it, which is comprised of what grammarians call sentences in the indicative mood. Since Austin's identification of performatives, in the range of indicative sentences, philosophers (and linguists) have been led to give a second thought on their traditional concept of language. The picture of language, in their eyes today, is no longer just the same as it was before. The remark can be corroborated by reference to the works of quite a number of philosophers and linguists with philosophical orientation. In saying so we have specially in mind the recent work of Jarold Katz, his book entitled Propositional Structure and Illocutionary Force⁶ in which he has taken considerable interest in refining the concept of performatives in the light of a number of notions derived from the generative grammar of Chomsky, specially, the notion of competence.

(b) Indicative sentences apart, there is a further sector of language in which one would find the concept of performatives being used of late as a tool for analysis and interpretation. This sector of language contains what is called questions by us. Questions have semantic properties apparently not quite similar to those of other

linguistic entities. These properties call for explanation and, for that purpose, what has been sought for is a suitable analysis of questions. The analysis suggested has assumed a number of forms. We shall, however, mention three. The first one which comes primarily from Katz and Postal⁷ consists in analysing questions in terms of what is called 'Q-morphem' by them, i.e., a phrase such as 'I request that you answer'. The second analysis is proposed mainly by Hintikka⁸ and Aqvist⁹. It consists in looking upon questions as epistemic requests, and then, in analysing them in terms of some such suitable epistemic operators as, e.g., 'Bring about that I know', 'I want to know', 'Let it be so that I know', and the like. But the particular analysis of questions which invokes the model of performatives is the one which is suggested by Jarold Saddock.¹⁰ It is an attempt at showing that questions are dominated by sentences containing such verbs as are similar to the performative verb 'ask'.

(c) However, to realise the most significant impact of performatives on language one is to go beyond the bounds of language in any particular grammatical mood or even

language as such and turn to language as it is used by us in talking about the world, that is to say, to what is called speech. In the philosophy of language, as it stands today, theory of speech occupies a position comparable in respect of importance, perhaps only to the theory of meaning; and a crucial linguistic use of performatives lies, if one may say so, in the fact that it has been the source of a most effective tool for our understanding speech. The tool we are referring to is Austin's idea of speech as an act. The concept of speech-act since Austin has, in fact, been so extensively used by philosophers and linguists in their reflection that the importance of its role in understanding language can hardly be overstated. And it is not hard to see that the concept of speech-act in Austin emerges out of his concept of performatives, it may well be said to be only an extension of the latter.

Thus performatives, in fact, have served to pave the way to speech-acts. Viewed this way, it may not sound as an overstatement if one says that the doctrine of performatives has not proved far less revolutionary than the theory of meaning¹¹ proffered by the logical positivists in the early thirties of this century.

III

We have mentioned above some of the implications of performatives on language. In a sense, there is not too much in them which might appear too extraordinary. We may pass on to the implications of performatives on certain matters which happen to fall outside the precincts of language. That would, in a way, be more interesting.

(a) The first such matter is the concept of evidence in jurisprudence. According to the usual law, a report of what someone has said is not admissible as an evidence, since it might only be hearsay. But in the light of the characteristic of a performative as an alleged mode of action,¹² this traditional concept of evidence may well call for a revision. That is to say, in the light of the notion of performative, a report of what someone else has said would deserve to count as an evidence if what has been said is a performative utterance. As mentioned by Austin, 'In the American law of evidence, a report of what someone else said is admitted as evidence if what is said is an utterance of our performative kind : because this is regarded as a report not so much of something he said as which would be hearsay and not

admissible as evidence, but rather as something he did, an action of his'.¹³

Anyway, this particular implication of the performative, that is, its implication on the notion of evidence in jurisprudence though not uninteresting, is, we think, a relatively minor matter and would not for that reason be persued by us. What is uppermost in our mind is its implications on two most fundamental epistemic concepts, namely, knowledge and truth which as already indicated, will be taken up for consideration by us. Performatives, it is claimed, tend to provide an extremely useful model for explicating these two concepts. We are not in a position at the moment to commit anything about the justifiability or otherwise of this claim. But one thing is clear. It would certainly not be a matter of any mean importance, if the claim turns out eventually to be justified, even partially.

(b) The basic questions about knowledge and truth, as one knows, are respectively : 'What is knowledge?' and 'What is truth?' Traditional inquiry into these two questions has been conducted along two lines. The first proceeds having taken the words 'knowledge'

and 'truth' in their extension, that is to say, having understood them in the sense of the range of true propositions. This line of inquiry, as is easily understandable, reduces the investigation of knowledge and truth into that of true propositions. It is not a conceptual inquiry into knowledge and truth in the true sense of the term; rather it becomes a different inquiry, namely, an inquiry into the nature of true propositions.

The second line of inquiry, on the other hand, apparently having taken the words 'knowledge' and 'truth' as names of things in some sense, presumes that there exists certain entities corresponding to them; and then proceeds to ascertain a priori whether these entities are to be categorized as substance, or as relation, or in some other way. To state the matter in the words of Austin :

We approach [them] cap and categories
in hand : we ask ourselves whether
Truth [or Knowledge] is a substance, ...
or a quality, or a relation....¹⁴

though philosophers, as Austin says, '... should take something more nearly their own size to strain at'.¹⁵ 'what

needs discussing rather is the use, or certain uses of the word [S] 'true' [and 'to know'].¹⁶

Now, for those philosophers today who are inclined to share the above line of thinking, inquiry into knowledge and truth has naturally come to assume, among other things, the form of explaining certain crucial uses of the verb 'to know' and those of the word 'true'.

As far as the verb 'to know' is concerned, the particular use which is considered crucial and is, on that ground, widely discussed is the use of it in the location 'I know'. In the same way, the particular use of the word 'true' which appears crucial to some - we have P.F. Strawson,¹⁷ among others, in mind — is the use of it in the context of a conversation, for example, someone saying 'True', 'That's true' and the like on someone else's saying, say, 'Might is right'.

Thus, according to a certain philosophical culture today, inquiry into knowledge and truth reduces itself to an inquiry into how best to interpret the utterances 'I know' and 'That's true'. As regards the former, what is usually done is to model its interpretation

after that of such descriptive sentences as, for example, 'I sing', 'I dance', 'I believe', and so on. Each such sentence being a report on a certain state of affairs, it is supposed that the utterance 'I know' also must purport to describe certain state of affairs. Likewise, the latter, that is, 'True' or 'That's true', is cast after the model of such descriptive sentences as 'The rose is red', 'The earth is round', and so on. Which means just as 'red' in the sentence, 'The rose is red' and 'round' in the sentence 'The earth is round' designate some characteristics respectively of the rose and the earth, so the word 'true' in the sentence 'That's true', it is thought, is to function as a characteristic of the statement for which the word 'That' stands for.

In this way, we have in recent philosophy, various versions of a descriptivist account of knowledge¹⁸ and truth. But there are a good many philosophers who do not react favourably to the descriptivist account; they find in it serious short-comings. We need not commit anything at this juncture as to whether these philosophers have been right or wrong. We shall have occasion to discuss the matter elaborately at a later stage. Anyway, one thing is plain. It is that for these anti-descriptivist

philosophers, it has become naturally mandatory to find a suitable alternative to descriptivism, a way out of it. Now, performatives assume considerable value in the eyes of such philosophers in the sense that they tend to provide a way to overcome descriptivism and its alleged inadequacies. That is to say, some philosophers have found it possible to assimilate the expressions 'I know' and 'That's true' to the class of utterances called performatives. As for instance, as is well known, the function of 'I know' in language has been likened by Austin to that of 'I promise', an utterance which is paradigmatically performative.¹⁹ And this approach has not been without sympathisers among post-Austinean philosophers.²⁰

Similarly, as is well known, the function which expressions like 'That's true' is supposed to perform in language is modelled by P.F. Strawson²¹ after those locutions like 'I agree', another example of utterance which is paradigmatically performative.

We shall desist from making any hasty and ad hoc assessment of the merits and demerits of these

performatory analyses of 'I know' and 'That's true' at this stage. To do so would be undesirable. And not also necessary, for, we have reserved at a later stage two chapters²² specifically meant for this purpose.