

Chapter 3

THE VANISHING DISTINCTION

Austin develops the distinction between performatives and constatives, as we have noticed, with considerable patience and assiduity. Initially, there is hardly any doubt in his mind about the validity of the distinction : he is pretty sure about it. However, as a result of continued preoccupation with the distinction, this initial sense of sureness disappears, yielding place to a sense of skepticism; and this skepticism, interestingly enough, snowballs progressively to such a magnitude that eventually he thinks it obligatory to abandon the distinction saying, "Perhaps, indeed, there is no great distinction between statements and performatory utterances".¹

There is nothing too unusual in a philosopher discarding a view at one time upheld by him. Sometimes it really so happens. But in the case of Austin giving up his favoured performative-constative antithesis, there is, as has been aptly pointed out by L.W. Forguson,² some *uniqueness*; ~~the~~ uniqueness consists in that the development of the antithesis and its rejection are parts of a continuous process and done 'within the compass of the same work.'

In this chapter, our business is going to be to explore the grounds for Austin's rejection of the performative - constative distinction; while in the next chapter we shall undertake an examination of how far the grounds are genuine and the rejection justified.

I

Austin's reexamination of his performative-constative distinction begins with a comparison between (a) the relation of performatives, say, 'I apologise', 'I promise', etc. to the facts that I am apologizing or promising and (b) the relation of constatives, say, e.g., 'I am running', 'I am singing', etc. to the facts that I am running or singing. Interestingly enough, the outcome of this comparison proves encouraging in the sense that it tends, in a way, to confirm the performative-constative distinction. Consider, 'I apologise' or 'I promise'. The facts corresponding to them, i.e., the facts of my apologising or my promising are to count as facts on proviso that 'I apologise' or 'I promise' turn out to be happy. That is to say, the facthood of the facts in the case of performatives depends on the happiness of the performatives. The picture in the case of the relation of constatives like

'I am running', 'I am singing', etc. to the facts corresponding to them, is, on the other hand, just the opposite. Here, the facts do not assume facthood on account of the truth of the constatives. On the contrary, it is the facts which make the constatives true, in other words, truth of the constatives depends on the facts corresponding to them.

II

A true constative stands in relation to a fact on account of which it is true. The fact in relation to which a performative stands becomes so on account of the happiness of it.

Relation to facts apart, a constative also stands in relation to other constatives; and likewise, a performative, even though it is not itself a constative, stands in relation to certain constatives. Now, a comparison of performatives and constatives in respect of these relations, unlike the comparison above, does not appear on Austin's analysis to confirm the performative-constative distinction, but tends, on the contrary, rather to weaken it. The comparison reveals a parallelism between the two types of

utterances in at least three very important ways which are illustrated as follows.

(a) Take, for example, my statement, 'The cat is on the mat', which implies, 'I believe that the cat is on the mat'. Seen in this light, the statement 'The cat is on the mat but I don't believe it' would obviously be outrageous : we are debarred from saying so. But the question is : what is it that is wrong with it ? It is not self-contradictory, firstly, because the statements 'The cat is on the mat' and 'I do not believe it' are perfectly compatible, and, secondly, because '... it is not the case that my not believing that the cat is on the mat implies that the cat is not on the mat'.⁴

Neither can we say that it is meaningless in the way a class of sentences like 'Love is rectangular' is so. What vitiates it is that it is a case of insincerity comparable^{ap} to that which vitiates the performative 'I promise... but I do not intent' or 'I bet... but I have no intention to pay'. Thus, shared insincerity of the same nature tends to remove the cleavage between performatives and constatives in some cases as these.⁵

(b) Let us take, for example, the constative 'John's children are bold'. It presupposes that John has children. Now, imagine someone saying 'John's children are bold, when, in actuality, John has no children. The statement is not in order, which is plain. But what makes it so? Certainly, it cannot count as a false statement; for, as has been said by Austin, '... it is devoid of reference; reference is necessary for truth or falsehood'.⁶ Nor, again, it is '... like a "meaningless sentence", ungrammatical, incomplete, mumbo-jumbo & c.'⁷

We dismiss the statement by saying that the question does not arise, or that the utterance is void. Thus, we get the concept of a statement being void, which in turn gives the statement a second meeting-point with the performative. For, as we have seen before, a performative also becomes void in the same sense. E.g., the performative 'I do' when the maker of the utterance is not the appointed bridegroom, or 'I declare the convocation open' when the utterer is not the person authorised for making the declaration.

(c) Finally, take 'I promise' and the utterance 'I ought'. The former implies the latter, so that to say that I promise but I ought not, will not be in order. But

what makes it so ? The answer lies in its resemblance to the statement 'The flower is red and it is not red'. The statement is self-contradictory and so is the performative.

III

A comparative exploration of the various relations in which performatives stand to constatives and those in which constatives stand among themselves tend to show that there is resemblance between performatives and constatives in at least three respects. The resemblance need not be considered as so serious as to provide a conclusive ground for straightway giving up the performative-constative distinction. But neither it is, on the other hand, such that it can be lightly brushed aside as inconsequential. All that the resemblance can justly be supposed to do is to provide a good ground for a doubt to such effect as to whether there really is a basic difference between performatives and constatives. The doubt, in turn, makes Austin to look for a source of reassurance. And the search for reassurance, as we can see, assumes for Austin the form of a search for a universal and absolute criterion, i.e. a criterion such that it would enable him to distinguish every performative from any constative whatever.

Where may one hope to find such a criterion ? The plausible places to look for it would be the grammar, logic and vocabulary by which performatives, in their capacity as sentences are governed.

IV

Consider the standard examples of performatives mentioned above. They would appear to possess in common a number of grammatical features, e.g., each being a sentence in the indicative mood and in the active voice, each containing as its subject the pronoun in the first person singular and the verb in the present indefinite tense. Can any one or each of these grammatical features be said to provide the criterion Austin is in need of, in other words, can it be said that any or each of them is exclusive to performatives and does not ever mark constatives ? To his dismay, Austin comes across numerous counter-examples which tend to falsify the possibility. Let us illustrate these.

(a) To start with mood, can we say that performatives are confined to sentences in the indicative mood ? It is not hard to find that we cannot. Firstly,

on occasions it may well take the form of a sentence in the interrogative mood. E.g., 'How do you do?' which, though a sentence in the interrogative mood, does not express any query to be answered, but functions in language, we may well say, as a substitute for such performative utterances, as for example, 'I greet you', 'I welcome you' - and the like. In the same way, at times, a sentence in the imperative mood also may function indistinguishably from a performative. Take, for example, the performative, 'I order you to leave the room', which may well be replaced by the utterance, 'Leave the room', without any change in its import. Austin is fully aware of this when he says, '... we have to recognize that mood... break $\overline{[S]}$ down as absolute criterion'.⁸ Continuing he further says, 'Mood will not do, for I may order you to turn right by saying, not "I order you to turn right", but simply "Turn right"; I may give you permission to go by saying simply "You may go"; and instead of "I advise" $\overline{[}$ or 'recommend' $\overline{]}$ you to turn right" I may say "I should turn to the right if I were you".⁹

What perhaps is more interesting is that in certain contexts, performatives may not explicitly assume the form of sentences at all, let alone sentences in the indicative mood, e.g., expressions like 'Thanks',

'congratulations', etc. which may be expanded respectively to 'I thank you', 'I congratulate you', which are typical examples of performatives.

(b) Exceptions to the grammatical criterion of the subject being in the first person singular are not also hard to find. Certain obvious examples are there. E.g., utterances like 'We promise...', 'We agree...' and so on. Such utterances apart, there also are examples of utterances which, although they are performative in their import, do not involve the first person singular at all as the subject. Examples of such utterances as mentioned by Austin¹⁰ are as follows :

1. 'You are hereby authorised to pay...'
2. 'Passengers are warned to cross the track by the bridge only'.
3. 'Notice is hereby given that trespassers will be prosecuted'.

(c) These utterances, being all in the ^{Passive}~~active~~ voice, it may be noted, serve an additional purpose, namely, to function as counter-examples for the criterion of the utterance being in the active voice.

Thus the criterion of verbs in the 'present indicative active' and that of subject in the 'first person singular' fail to do the job they are supposed to do. The odds against the two criteria are quite a few and also pretty obvious. What, then, might be said to explain Austin's initial favouratism for them? The answer in Austin's own words is this :

.... the idea of a performative utterance was that it was to be.... the performance of an action. Actions can only be performed by persons, and obviously in our cases the utterer must be the performer : hence our justifiable feeling... in favour of 'first person'...; moreover, if in uttering one is acting, he must be doing something — hence our perhaps ill-expressed favouring of the grammatical present and grammatical active of the verb.¹¹

The 'I' who is doing the action... come $\overline{[s]}$ essentially into the picture. An advantage of the first person singular present indicative form...

is that this implicit feature
of the speech-situation is
made explicit.¹²

V

Thus none of the grammatical features which were initially supposed by Austin to delimit the range of performatives is ultimately found on closer examination to prove equal to its job, i.e., to provide any universal and absolute criterion of the performatives. Austin, therefore, falls back on vocabulary with the hope of finding such a criterion. That is to say, he undertakes an inquiry into whether there are some characteristic expressions by which performatives can be marked off from constatives. The expressions he takes into account are such as 'off-side', 'liable', 'authorised', 'dangerous', 'promise', 'guilty', etc. The reason for the selection of these particular expressions is, according to Austin, that they are 'linked in origin' with certain verbs which he calls 'explicit performative verbs',¹³ e.g., 'pronounce', 'declare', 'undertake', etc.

But this move to get at the required criterion in

the range of the selected words and their like also turns out to be elusive. For, in the first place, as has been pointed out by Austin, we may get the performative without the selective words. In place of 'dangerous corner' we may well say 'corner', and in place of 'dangerous bull' we may say 'bull'. Likewise, in place of 'You are ordered to shut the door' we may simply say 'you will shut the door', and in place of 'I promise to be present on your birthday' one may just say, 'I shall be present on your birthday'. Contrarily, there are examples of utterances which are not performatives, even though the selected words occur in them. A few examples. In cricket someone from the spectators' gallery shouting 'It was over' or someone other than the judge saying 'you were guilty' or 'you are guilty', and the like. Again, in such utterances as 'you promised to come on my birthday', 'you authorised me to receive the money, we do not have instances of performative utterances despite the occurrence of words like 'promise', 'authorise', etc. Because, obviously, in making those utterances I do not make any promise or perform any act of authorisation, but only give a report on the incident of your saying 'I promise' or 'I authorise'.

Let us have a word on the claim of the word 'hereby' in our vocabulary to provide a criterion for

distinguishing performatives from constatives. Austin formulates the possibility in such words as, 'If we ask ourselves, as sometimes we may, whether the given utterance... is performative or constative, we may settle the question by asking whether it would be possible to insert in it the word 'hereby' or some equivalent'.¹⁴

Austin rejects the possibility on two grounds. One : The 'hereby' - formula is too formal for ordinary purposes. Two : Its occurrence cannot be the distinctive mark of a performative, because on occasions, we may also say 'I hereby state such and such' or 'I hereby question such and such'.

VI

The search, at the level of grammar and vocabulary for a universal and absolute criterion, which might provide a basis for isolating performatives from constatives does not yield any encouraging results for Austin. He, therefore, switches over to what may be called the logical features of performatives and constatives in his pursuit of such a criterion.

One such criterion is readily available. As we remember, it is initially supposed by Austin that truth and falsity which characterise constatives are not possessed by performatives; on the other hand, while performatives are logically characterisable as happy or unhappy, constatives are not so characterised. The criterion tends to have limited applicability. But the problem for Austin is to see whether it can be generalised into a universal criterion. Are we in a position to say that truth or falsity is exclusive to constatives, so that performatives can never admit of appraisals in terms of them? In the same way, can we say that happiness or unhappiness is exclusive to performatives, so that no constative can be called happy or unhappy?

On a survey of our linguistic practices Austin comes across, disappointingly enough, numerous counter-examples on both these scores. That is to say, he identifies instances of performatives which tend to collect truth-value; and in the same way, he finds examples of constatives which tend to share the infelicities of performatives.

(a) Let us first, following Austin, mention some of those performatives which appear in his eyes, to be

characterisable as true or false, more or less in the same sense as a constative.

(i) To start with the particular example of Austin's, 'I warn you that the bull is about to charge'. This is a typical performative. But how to criticise it when it turns out to be the case that there is no bull around, or that the bull is not about ^{to}the charge? We should not call it void on account of any of the infelicities that infect a performative, nor is it correct to call it insincere '... we should feel much more inclined', according to Austin, 'to say the warning was false... as with a statement'.¹⁶

(ii) Secondly, to take the class of performatives called Verdictives by Austin. Examples: 'I declare him guilty', 'I estimate the value of the diamond', 'I pronounce that the batsman is out', etc. We characterise them by using such adverbs as 'rightly', 'wrongly', 'correctly', 'incorrectly', etc., but these adverbs are applied also to characterise statements.

(iii) The same holds good with another class of performatives called exercitives by Austin. Exercitives are

exemplified by those utterance by which we give 'decision in favour of or against a certain course of action ...'¹⁷

A few instances 'I appoint your...', 'I name...', 'I dismiss...' etc.

But there arises a rather important question. Do the adverbs 'correctly', 'rightly', 'justly', etc. mean the same thing as 'true', 'truly', etc., which characterise constatives? Austin is unwilling to admit any very sharp distinction between them. He says :

It is essential to realise that 'true' and 'false'... do not stand for anything simple at all; but only for a general dimension of being a right or proper thing to say as opposed to a wrong thing, in these circumstances, to this audience, for these purposes and with these intentions;¹⁸

and elsewhere :

under the heading 'truth' what we in fact have is, not a simple quality nor a relation, nor indeed one anything, but rather a whole dimension of criticism...

There is a whole lot of things to be considered and weighed up in this dimension alone — the facts, yes but also the situation of the speaker, his purpose in speaking, his hearer, questions of precision, etc.¹⁹

(b) Contrary to his initial view that true-value is purely distinctive of constatives, Austin now finds, on a second thought, that it may characterise also performatives, so that performatives and constatives cannot be universally distinguished by reference to truth-value. In the same way, according to Austin, we cannot justify any absolute separation between constatives and performatives on the basis of the original supposition that performatives alone are subject to being happy or unhappy, while constatives are not. For, he comes across instances which make him conclude '... that statements are liable to every kind of infelicity that performatives are liable'.²⁰

(i) Let us first mention instances of constatives which, like performatives, become void rather than true or

false. We have a very good example on this point when someone says 'The king of France is bald'. Since the statement does not have any reference it cannot be called true or false. As a matter of fact, the question of its being true or false does not arise at all. The best way to characterise it is to call it void, in the sense in which a performative having violated the conditions A-1 or A-2 is so. Some more examples of more or less of the same kind are : 'You cannot order me', said in a situation when the person giving the order is not in an appropriate position to do so; 'This is diamond' said by a person who does not have the expertise for telling diamond from other stones, and the like.

Austin proceeds further to detect among constatives instances such as are not true or false but should better count as instances of flaws and hitches. We have cases of such constatives particularly on those occasions in which what is said is not what is meant. Austin's own example is 'The bat is on the mat' when the speaker wants to mean that the cat is on the mat.

(ii) Constatives are also liable to be vitiated by insincerity in the same fashion as a performative, e.g.,

'I promise to be present on your birthday' (when, in fact, I have no intention to do so), is vitiated. Representative example of such insincere constative is my saying 'The cat is on the mat' when I do not actually believe that the cat is on the mat'.

VII

We come now to give an account of Austin's second thought on the particular criterion which is that the performative is doing something over and above merely saying something as opposed to the constative which is just saying something.

In a sense, this is most important among Austin's initial criteria, because in it precisely lies his ground for calling performatives by that name. What becomes of this criterion when it is subjected to reconsideration by Austin? Does it appear to possess the required universality? As in the cases of other criteria, here also, the outcome turns out to be discouraging. For, on a closer scrutiny, constatives also appear to Austin to be capable of being construed in the sense of doing something or performing an action. Take for example the constative 'Grapes are sour'. One can well

recast it in the form of such utterances, as for example, 'I say that the grapes are sour', 'I state that the grapes are sour', 'I assert that the grapes are sour', and so on; and 'saying', 'stating', 'asserting' and the like are performing actions, to be precise, illocutionary acts, no less than 'promising', 'warning' and the like. 'Surely', says Austin, 'to state is every bit as much to perform an illocutionary act as, say, to warn or to pronounce.... "Stating" seems to meet all the criteria we have for distinguishing the illocutionary act'.²¹ Stating, asserting, etc. and 'warning', 'promising', 'arguing', etc. reveal a parallelism because of which they may be assigned to the same linguistic category. Austin appeals to certain linguistic facts to confirm this hypothesis.

(i) 'In saying that it was raining, I was not betting, arguing or warning : I was simply stating it as a fact'.²²

(ii) Similarly, 'In saying that it was leading to unemployment, I was not warning or protesting : I was simply stating the facts'.²³

In these two cases, stating is put in the same level with arguing, betting and warning. And the same happens

when we note that 'I state that he did not do it' is exactly on a level with "I argue that he did not do it", "I suggest that he did not do it", "I bet that he did not do it", & C.'²⁴

VIII

Thus Austin discovers action-potential, more precisely, illocutionary-act-potential in constatives. And this gives a new turn to his line of thinking. All utterances become, in the eyes of Austin, varieties of acts called speech-acts by him. Consequently, performatives and constatives which were initially contrasted meet each other as species of speech-acts. The position is summed up by him say :

What we need, perhaps, is a more general theory of these speech-acts, and in this theory our Constative-
-Performative antithesis will scarcely survive.²⁵

Also :

...the dichotomy of performatives and constatives... has to be abandoned in favour of more general families of related and overlapping speech-acts.²⁶

The new concept i.e., the concept of speech-act is no doubt important and has, in fact, proved, if we may say so, even revolutionary. Philosophical literature and those in linguistics in recent years will, perhaps, amply testify to this. The notion is useful no doubt in understanding language and therewith performatives and constatives. But it is open to doubt whether it is incompatible with the performative-constative antithesis, in the sense that to accommodate it in our range of concepts would make it mandatory for us to give up the identity of the performatives, as distinguished from the constatives. The matter will come up for consideration, along with other things in the following chapter.

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