

17. Three Ways of Inheriting Austin

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In this paper I will sketch three different ways of reading Austin. In order to have some bit of Austin before us to show that it can be and has been read in each of these three different ways, let us begin with a characteristic passage from Austin. In *A Plea for Excuses*, Austin writes:

Modification without aberration. When it is stated that X did A, there is a temptation to suppose that given some, indeed perhaps *any*, expression modifying the verb we shall be entitled to insert either it or its opposite or negation in our statement: that is, we shall be entitled to ask, typically, “Did X do Mly or not Mly?” (“Did X murder Y voluntarily or involuntarily”), and to answer one or the other. Or as a minimum it is supposed that if X did A there must be at least *one* modifying expression that we could, justifiably and informatively, insert with the verb. In the great majority of the cases of the use of the great majority of verbs (“murder” perhaps is not one of the majority) such suppositions are quite unjustified. The natural economy of language dictates that for the *standard* case covered by any normal verb—not, perhaps, a verb of omen such as “murder”, but a verb like “eat” or “kick” or “croquet” – no modifying expression is required or even permissible. Only if we do the action named in some *special* way or circumstances, different from those in which such an act is naturally done (and of course both the normal and the abnormal differ according to what verb is in question) is a modifying expression *called for* or even *in order*. I sit in my chair, in the usual way – I am not in a daze or influenced by threats or the like: here, *it will not do to say* either that I sat in it intentionally or that I did not sit in it intentionally, nor yet that I sat in it automatically or from habit or what you will. It is bedtime, I am alone, I yawn, but I do not yawn involuntarily (or voluntarily!), nor yet deliberately. To yawn in any such peculiar way is just not to just yawn. [The last three sets of emphases are mine; the rest are his.] (Austin 1961.190f)

My aim here will not be to defend what I take Austin to be saying here (or anywhere else in his work), but rather to *understand* it. I and others have sought to defend the philosophical view here in question, often without reference to Austin. It cannot be defended as a reading of Austin, until there is some shared understanding of what Austin is saying in passages such as the one above, and of what it is that is thus to be defended. And merely understanding Austin is already a formidable task. What I want to do is to try to bring into focus how I think Austin should be read by contrasting the reading I favor with the two most common and philosophical tempting misreadings of his work. By contrasting the favored reading with those two misreadings, I shall seek to highlight what I take to be most philosophically original and radical in Austin’s thought.

Austin says in the above passage: “Only if we do the action named in some *special* way or circumstances [...] is a modifying expression *called for* or even *in order*.” And: “I sit in my chair, in the usual way – [...] : here, *it will*

not do to say either that I sat in it intentionally or that I did not sit in it intentionally...” The italicized bits are typical of a sort of locution one finds throughout Austin’s work. Here is a brief list of examples of the sort of characteristically Austinian locution I have in mind:

- (1) we would not say X
- (2) we can say Y, but not X
- (3) X cannot naturally be said
- (4) it would not be found to make good sense to say X
- (5) X is not called for
- (6) X is not in order (or: X is out of order)
- (7) X is not permissible
- (8) it will not do to say X
- (9) it would not be in place to say X
- (10) X will not do
- (11) X would not be in place

What I am after in this paper is the following question: How are we to understand these locutions as they occur in Austin’s work? I think it is not an exaggeration to say that the significant differences in the ways in which Austin has been read have largely been a function of how these locutions end up, implicitly or explicitly, being construed by his interpreters. So what sort of thing *is* Austin trying to say when he says things like (1)-(11) above? What sort of claims are these? Are they claims about language? Or concepts? Or the world? If claims about language, what sort of claims about language? Or are these statements about the syntax of sentences with verbs and modifiers in them? Or are they claims about the semantics of such sentences? Or their pragmatics? If they are about concepts, then what is being claimed about such concepts? If they are about the world, then what sort of claims about the world are they? Are they ontological claims about which sorts of actions, or events, or things, or states of affairs there really are in the world?

I think all of the preceding questions are in various ways misguided, if our task is one of seeking to understand what Austin takes himself to be doing in passages such as the above. To pursue these questions would involve imposing our questions on Austin, taking him to be trying to answer the sort of question that philosophers usually want to ask. To take him to be doing this here is to miss what is most original and radical in his thought.

What I will do is to consider three rather different readings of Austin, each of the first two of which has a hold of a piece of what Austin is doing and the third of which is able to hold these two pieces together in a single coherent account in a way that neither of the first two is able to.

The first way of reading Austin is by far the most common. It was arguably first put forward by John Searle and it has been devastatingly influential – devastating in the sense that some philosophers today are no longer able to read the pages of Austin’s work in any way other than Searle’s. When they read a remark by Austin that contains one of the eleven locutions listed above (or some similar locution) they hear the remark as making a Searlian point. There are any number of articles or chapters of books by Searle that one might focus on to bring out some of the characteristic features of the reading of Austin at issue here, but, for purposes of convenience, simplicity of exposition and focus, let us look at his early article “Assertions and Aberrations”, where he takes up the interpretation of the passage from Austin with which we began.

Searle takes that passage to defend a general thesis – the thesis “no modification without aberration” – which he calls Austin’s Thesis. And, as we shall see, he takes it to be a limiting case of a yet more general thesis that he takes Austin to be implicitly committed to. He doesn’t think Austin is very clear that he is committed to the more general thesis. (And, indeed, if Austin *is* concerned to defend the thesis that Searle says he is, then it is true that Austin doesn’t seem to be very clear that that is what he is doing.) Searle’s article actually waffles a bit as to whether he takes himself to be offering a reading of what Austin *meant* to be doing (only less clearly than he might have) or whether he takes himself to be introducing modifications and improvements into Austin’s original view, thereby telling a story about what Austin *should* have been doing, if only he had been clearer. Though he mostly purports to be offering an exposition of Austin’s Thesis, Searle does say at one point in the article: “What I now propose to do is to make ... points about the thesis which will enable us to see it in an entirely different light from what I think Austin originally intended” (Searle 1969b.207). Are we being brought to see the same thesis in a different light? Or are we supposed to come to see it in such an entirely different light that it no longer makes sense to think of it as the same thesis? For our purposes here, this particular question in the exegesis of Searle’s exegesis of Austin need not be decided. It suffices, for our purposes, that many philosophers today take Austin to have been doing just what Searle either thought he was doing or thought he should have been doing.

Searle, in “Assertions and Aberrations” begins by restating Austin’s thesis:

Let me try to state the thesis again. There is a class of expressions ... used to describe or qualify descriptions of actions. It is incorrect to use any of these expressions or their negations to describe or qualify a description of an action unless the action satisfies certain conditions, which conditions Austin denotes by the notion of an aberration... (Searle 1969b. 206)

Some observations: Searle evidently takes Austin's thesis to be sufficiently unclear so as to benefit from restatement. His own restatement suggests that the place to begin, in seeking to understand Austin's thesis, is first to pick out *the relevant class of expressions* to which the thesis pertains; once we have done this, then we can go on to *specify the conditions* under which these expressions "are in order". This already involves a significant assumption: namely that the relevant class of expressions and the relevant class of conditions of possible use are fully independently specifiable. This puts in place a general form of answer to our question about the characteristically Austinian locutions that figure on the list above. When Austin speaks of certain things being "in order" or "called for", he is offering a theory about the permissible sorts of combinations that obtain between the sorts of elements that figure in each of these two independently specifiable classes of sorts of element. The first class consists of linguistic entities – words, phrases or sentences – that can be picked out independently of their circumstances of use. The second class consists of possible sorts of circumstances of use, where the relevant class of circumstances can be specified independently of any reference to the elements that belong to the first class. But this still leaves us with the following question: once we have picked out a class of expressions and a class of possible circumstances of use, what governs the conditions of their permissible combination? What sort of conditions are at issue here?

Having stated Austin's thesis, Searle goes on to ask if it is true:

Now we have our thesis. Is it true? Well, if one considers the actual use of words there seems to be a good deal in it. Consider the following sentence: "He went to the Philosophical Society meeting of his own free will." When would one naturally utter such a sentence? In describing a normal man under ordinary conditions attending such a society meeting? I think not. To imagine a case where we would actually utter the sentence would involve imagining rather special or aberrant conditions. (Searle 1969b.206)

Searle himself here uses one of our characteristically Austinian locutions, when he asks: "When would one naturally utter such a sentence?" But our question is: what kind of question is this? As Searle continues, it becomes increasingly clear what sort of question he thinks this must be and thus what sort of answer it requires:

Or again consider the sentence: "He tied his shoes on purpose." It is not easy to imagine a situation where this would be in order. But try: "He stepped on the dog on purpose." Here it is easy to imagine a situation where this would be appropriate, and the reason seems to be that stepping on dogs is aberrant in some way that tying shoes is not. (Searle 1969b.206f)

We have a hint of what Searle thinks the answer to our question is when he says: “Here it is easy to imagine a situation where this would be *appropriate*.” This suggests a line of answer to our question “What sorts of conditions (governing the possible combinations of expressions and circumstances) are at issue here?” What are at issue are appropriateness conditions. Of course, to say that an expression is appropriate does not, in itself, sound all that different from – or any more informative than – saying that it is called for or in order. But, in Searle’s hands, the notion of appropriateness is given a particular sort of sense here – one that then laterally confers a parallel sort of sense on all of our other characteristically Austinian locutions. This sense becomes explicit when Searle spells out what he takes Austin’s thesis to be:

There are standard or normal situations. (People normally, e.g., buy their cars voluntarily, go to meetings of the Philosophical Society of their own free will, know when they are confronting a tree, remember their own names,...) It does not in general make sense simply to assert of a standard or normal situation that it is standard or normal unless there is some reason for supposing that it might have been non-standard or abnormal, or that our audience might have so supposed, or might have been supposed to so suppose. For to remark that it is standard is to imply or suggest that there is some reason for supposing that it might not have been standard. If a speaker describing a situation knows of no reason why anyone might suppose the situation non-standard or aberrant, or of any other reason why its standard character is worth remarking on, then his assertion that it is standard is out of order. (Searle 1969b.212)

It becomes clear here how Searle’s conceives of the issue of what is or is not in order: there are two classes of items and conditions governing their permissible co-occurrence. The first class consists of propositions that people might utter. These propositions carry with them a set of conditions under which they would be true or false. To understand the propositions in question is to know what these (truth-) conditions are. The second class of elements consists of situations. The latter can be divided into two sorts: standard or normal situations or aberrant or abnormal situations. The appropriateness conditions in question here govern speech-acts of assertion – where assertion here concerns a relation between a proposition with a determinate set of truth-conditions and a situation with a determinately standard or aberrant character. Roughly speaking therefore: Searle takes the sorts of appropriateness-conditions that are at issue in Austin to concern the pragmatics of uttering certain sorts of propositions in certain sorts of circumstances, not the semantics of what is thereby uttered. Searle’s analysis presupposes the possibility of drawing a sharp distinction here between (what philosopher’s have called) sentence meaning and speaker’s meaning – or alternatively between what philosophers have called narrow context and

wide context. Searle takes the meaning of the sentence uttered in each of these cases (where Austin speaks of an utterance as being out of order, not called for, etc.) to be fixed by “the rules of the language” (plus the semantic values of any indexicals occurring therein, and so on) and he takes that dimension of the meaning of a proposition to be secured prior to a particular speaker’s calling upon it on a particular occasion of utterance. He takes Austin’s complaint to be directed at a lack of appropriateness in the fit between such a determinately meaningful proposition and the wider context in which it occurs. If such appropriateness conditions are violated, we can, Searle thinks, through a determined effort, still come to fully understand *what* is thereby said; but it is much more difficult to do so in the case of an inappropriate utterance than would otherwise be the case (i.e., than in a case in which there is no violation of appropriateness conditions) because the inappropriateness of the act of utterance obstructs our view of what is said. Notice: This means that we are actually concerned here with two different sorts of circumstances of possible use of a proposition: there are the circumstances under which the proposition in question, if uttered therein, would be true as opposed to false, and there are the circumstances under which the proposition in question, if uttered therein, would be appropriate as opposed to inappropriate.

Here is a list of standard situations described by certain general propositions: People normally buy their cars voluntarily, go to meetings of the Philosophical Society of their own free will, know when they are confronting a tree, remember their own names. Here is a list of particular propositions: “I bought my car voluntarily.”, “I came to this conference in Amiens on Austin of my own free will”, “I know that that is a tree” (accompanied by a pointing gesture), “My name is James Conant” (said with great conviction for no apparent reason). On Searle’s reading of Austin, not only the truth-conditions of the general propositions mentioned here, but also those of the particular propositions can be determined (once the reference of indexical expressions, such as the first-person pronoun, are fixed) independently of any further consideration of the situations in which each of them happens to be uttered, and, in particular, independently of considering whether the situations in question are standard or aberrant ones; and the classification of situations into standard and aberrant itself can be accomplished without any reference to the circumstances of utterance of any of the particular propositions. On our list of situations, all of the situations listed are (what Searle calls) normal ones. Now let us pair the situations and propositions, imagining the first proposition to be uttered in the first situation, etc. Each of the envisioned pairings between a proposition and

situation envisioned here would, according to Searle, be of the following sort: the proposition would be uttered in a context in which it would be true but inappropriate to utter it.

Searle's generalization of Austin's thesis then goes roughly as follows: each of the particular propositions listed above uttered in the corresponding aforementioned standard situation is true, but, in each case, it is flamingly obvious that what is said is true; and there is a problem about going around saying things that are flamingly obviously true (or flamingly obviously false). There is no point in saying any of these things in a standard situation. – Not because what is said would be false, but because it will confuse your audience. Since we only say things of this sort under aberrant conditions, in asserting such a proposition you imply your circumstances of utterance are of an aberrant nature when they are not. Thus it is inappropriate to say any of these things under standard situations -- situations in which there is no reason for such a thing to be said.

This puts in place a general framework for understanding what Austin means when he says something is “not called for” or “out of order”. Here is how Searle summarizes his reading of Austin:

Austin's point then, is not, properly speaking, about words or even sentences. It is a point about what it is to make an assertion. To make an assertion is to commit oneself to something's being the case as opposed to that thing's not being the case. But if the possibility of its not being the case is not even under consideration, or if its being the case is one of the assumptions of the discourse, then the remark that it is the case is just pointless.

Austin's slogan “no modification without aberration” ought to be rewritten “no remark without remarkableness”, or ... “no assertion without assertibility”. (Searle 1969b.212)

This modification of Austin's slogan sums up Searle's generalization of (what he takes to be) Austin's thesis. Let us call it Searle's thesis. Searle's thesis, as formulated here, can apply only in cases in which the sentences uttered are fully truth-evaluable independently of the situations in which they are used. Austin's point, properly speaking, according to Searle, is not really about words or sentences at all. It is a point about what it is to make an assertion, where to make an assertion is to commit oneself to something's being the case as opposed to that thing's not being the case. Austin's point therefore, on this interpretation of Austin, would attach not to thoughts, say, to my entertaining the thought that I came to this conference of my own free will, but just to acts of asserting the propositions that express these sorts of thoughts. If I were just to entertain the thought in question (e.g., “I came to this conference of my own free will.”), but keep it to myself, and not utter it out aloud, I would never run afoul of the sorts of appropriateness conditions

that Austin is concerned to lay down. There is therefore no bar to my, in the privacy of my own thoughts, entertaining such a thought and evaluating whether it is the case or not, and determining that it is, indeed, the case (e.g., that I did, indeed, come to this conference of my own free will). But, if I attempt to assert this proposition out loud, I create a problem for you – a problem of a sort that I did not encounter when I was merely entertaining the thought. The problem is entirely a consequence of the overt action of producing the sentence in the enviroing circumstances in question, and not at all with the semantic integrity of the thought thus expressed and thereby inserted into those circumstances. The problem just is, given that I have uttered this thought in a non-aberrant circumstance, you have no reason to suppose that what the sentence says is something which could so much as be under consideration (since, supposedly for you, the truth of what it says just is one of the assumptions of our discourse); so my remark will seem utterly pointless, and thus you will inevitably be misled into looking for something for my words to mean other than what they do mean.

Searle concludes:

In general to remark that *p*, is to suggest that *p* is in some way remarkable or noteworthy. One of the characteristic ways in which *p* will be remarkable or noteworthy is for there to be at least the possibility of *not p* in the offing. All of the sentences we were inclined to call A-sentences [i.e., aberrant sentences], were sentences which in standard situations could not be uttered to record something remarkable or noteworthy, because their not being remarkable is what makes those sentences standard. They could not, therefore, be appropriately uttered in “aberrant” situations, and the aberration was in general some reason for supposing that the negation of the proposed remark might have been true. (Searle 1969b.212f)

The truth-value of *p* here, on Searle’s reading of Austin, must be fixed prior to and independently of *p*’s being determined to be in some way remarkable or noteworthy. The possibility of its being thus unremarkable or unworthy of notice introduces additional conditions – over and above its truth-conditions – that constrain when it is appropriate to assert *p*. One of the characteristic ways in which *p* can be remarkable or noteworthy, Searle says, is for there to be at least the possibility of *not p* in the offing. But, on Searle’s picture of this, there are two independent, temporally successive layers of linguistic processing here required: the process of determining the pragmatics of the felicity of such an utterance must first pass through a prior stage of determining what is the case. First, I must establish whether *p* looks to me to be true. It does. Good. Now, and only now, can I go on and ask myself further (taking *p* to be true): how do things stand with regard to the question of the possibility of *p* being the sort of thing that someone might take to be not in the offing? If I conclude: yes, someone might equally take *not p* to be in the offing (or: yes, there are inadequate but tempting grounds for falsely

supposing *not p* to be the case), then I can convert my original semantically sound thought into a fully felicitous speech act: I can go on and assert what I know to be true. Or, if I conclude: no, there is no such possibility in the offing (or there are no such reasons), then I must conclude: damn, it is presently inappropriate to assert what I know to be true; I guess have to keep it to myself.

So, going back over our list of characteristically Austinian locutions, for Searle, when Austin says “we would not say X”, what he means is just that, under normal circumstances, we *wouldn't* say that, not that we *can't* say it – i.e., that we cannot mean something in saying it. We can, of course, say it; it is just that it would be inappropriate to do so. But, of course, Austin often puts (what he seems to think is) the same point by saying: “we can say Y, but we cannot say X”. Searle would reply here: Yes, sure, Austin does say this sort of thing, but then what he really means is that, we can say it, but we cannot assert it – i.e., we cannot say it and expect to be understood. How about when Austin says things like this: “it would not be found to make good sense to say X?” That seems to involve a stronger claim. Searle would here reply: Well, if said about one of the cases under consideration here, then that is simply inaccurate. Strictly speaking, what is said in such an inappropriate condition of utterance does make sense; it has to make sense, in as much as it is true, and the truth of a proposition presupposes its meaning. But the act of asserting such a perfectly meaningful proposition in this situation would not be a humanly intelligible act. This is what Austin means by it doesn't make sense here – it does not make sense qua speech-act to do it: it is not a humanly intelligible action. Therefore, on Searle's account of our Austinian locutions, it is not the proposition which each such locution is directed at, considered in itself, which is under indictment. What doesn't make sense is not the content of the utterance, but the act of asserting the content in question in the envisioned circumstance considered qua intelligible human action. Hence what Austin is offering us is properly understood to be a contribution not to the theory of meaning, but to that dimension of the philosophy of action now known as the theory of speech-acts.

Now let us look at a second sort of reading of Austin. In order to bring this alternative reading of Austin sharply into focus, it will help to take a case where what is originally under discussion is the same alleged thesis of Austin's that we began with. Here is Alan White (White 1969) disagreeing with John Searle about (what he, too calls) Austin's thesis. White is eager to distinguish Austin's Thesis from Searle's Thesis:

Austin's thesis and Searle's thesis are two quite distinct interpretations of "mentioning the unmentionable". Searle's is a pragmatic objection to mentioning what is *not worth* mentioning; Austin's is a logical objection to mentioning what *cannot be* mentioned. [emphases in original] (White 1969.219)

White is here challenging a basic assumption of Searle's reading of Austin: namely, that Austin is concerned to put forward a thesis about relations of permissibility that obtain between semantically structured expressions and the situations in which they might be used. Thus he challenges Searle's claim that it is at all relevant to what is at issue here whether it is easy or difficult to imagine a situation (i.e., an item of the second sort: a situation) where it would be appropriate to utter such-and-such (i.e., an item of the first sort: a sentence).

What then does White think Austin is saying when he says a certain expression is not in order? White continues:

Austin's Thesis is that it would *not make sense* to use words when certain circumstances obtain and, therefore, by using them we would not then say anything which was *either true or false*. For instance, if I remark to my secretary in the normal course of the day's work that I have a committee [meeting] this afternoon, then it does not make sense to say, and it is neither true nor false, that I made this remark tactfully or tactlessly, carefully or carelessly. If I blow out a match after lighting my cigarette, I need not have done this either considerately or inconsiderately. Searle's Thesis, on the other hand, is that it would not be appropriate to make an assertion, however true, if there was no reason to suppose that it was false or that someone might have thought that it was false. (White 1969.222)

According to White, when Austin says that something does not make sense, he is saying that *it* (i.e., that which is said, and not just the awkwardly circumstanced act of saying it) *does not make sense*. O.K. That certainly fits the text well. Austin, after all, is constantly saying things like "it would not make sense to say X here". For White, the Austinian charge that a failure of sense has occurred never attaches merely to the action of saying something, but always to what is said. Here is how he explains what he takes Austin's thesis to be:

The correctness of Austin's Thesis follows from the nature of a concept. A particular concept is what it is because it has relations to other concepts and it has these relations because it is what it is. Thus, in *no* circumstances would it make sense to say, nor would it be true or false, that someone *knew* the date of the Battle of Waterloo, *found* a half-crown, or *became ill*, carefully or carelessly, inadvertently or intentionally. The concepts of care, intention, etc., can *never* go with the concepts of knowledge, discovery, and becoming ill. Consequently, the very *sentence* 'He knew carefully the date of the Battle of Waterloo' is meaningless. (White 1969.222)

According to White, Austin's Thesis does not pertain to a relationship of fit between a proposition and a context; rather it pertains to a relationship of fit between two or more concepts. The above passage contains examples of sentences about which Searle would claim that it is difficult to imagine a situation in which it would be in order to say such a thing. White suggests an entirely different line of answer to the question: what sorts of conditions of something's being "in order" are at issue here? What is or is not in order are relations of fit that obtain between concepts. White therefore denies that Austin is concerned merely with the pragmatics of uttering certain sorts of propositions in certain sorts of circumstances and not at all with the semantics of what is thereby uttered. White thinks that the sorts of conditions that are violated here are such that we cannot do what Searle thinks we can do. Searle thinks that we can, despite the violation of propriety involved in coming out with such sentences, through a determined effort of the will, come fully to understand *what* is thereby said in each of these cases. According to White, we cannot understand what is said in such cases because what is said does not make sense.

But the reason such things cannot be said, according to White, is because such things make no sense *regardless* of the situation in which they are uttered. "A particular concept is what it is because it has relations to other concepts and it has these relations because it is what it is." The relations that a concept stands in to other concepts is determined entirely by the prior structure of the concepts in question, and in no way by the manner in which these particular concepts are jointly shaped by the particular situation in which they co-occur. The problem with these sentences, according to White, is just that they involve an impermissible combination of concepts. Hence White concludes "Thus, *in no circumstances* would it make sense to say, nor would it be true or false, that someone knew the date of the Battle of Waterloo, found a half-crown, or became ill, carefully or carelessly, inadvertently or intentionally." White wants to say it is the sentence itself that is meaningless. The problem, at least in the case of these particular examples, lies in each case with the sentence itself and the thought it expresses, before you ever get around to trying to insert it into a situation.

The very great differences in their respective readings of Austin notwithstanding, White's picture and Searle's picture have something in common here: namely, each presupposes a certain sort of independence obtains between the conditions that determine semantic features of the proposition and those that determine the felicity or lack thereof of uttering the proposition in a particular situation. Moreover, both Searle and White take the failures of sense which here result to be due to a certain

impermissibility of combination. Searle takes the cases that are not in order for Austin to be ones in which the semantics of the proposition is independently determined and perfectly in order and then traces the lack of order to a lack of fit between the proposition and the situation. For Searle, it is impermissible to combine *this* sort of sentence with *that* sort of situation. White takes the cases that are not in order also to be ones in which the semantic shape of the proposition is what it is independently of the situation in which it is uttered and then traces the lack of order to a lack of conceptual coherence in the semantics of the proposition itself, prior to its importation into a particular context of use. For White, it is impermissible to combine a concept of *this* sort in this way with a concept of *that* sort. For both, the shapes of the *this* sorts and *that* sorts in question must admit of prior identification; for the impermissibility in each case is to be traced to the incompatibility of these sorts given their prior structure.

White has Austin saying that in *no* circumstances would it make sense to say, nor would it be true or false, that someone *knew* the date of the Battle of Waterloo, *found* a half-crown, or *became ill*, carefully or carelessly, inadvertently or intentionally because the concept *knowing the date of the Battle of Waterloo* and the concept *carefully* cannot be meaningfully combined; the concept *becoming ill*, and the concepts *inadvertently* or *intentionally* cannot be combined; and so on. These concepts can never go together. The concepts of care, intention, etc., can never meaningfully combine with the concepts of knowledge, discovery, becoming ill, etc. White takes Austin to be offering not a theory of the pragmatics of speech acts, but an analysis of the structure of certain concepts – showing us what the shape of our concepts are and thus which concepts can meaningfully figure in combinations with each others and each sorts of combinations yield inherently nonsensical thoughts. According to White, Austin's point about a sentence such as 'He knew carefully the date of the Battle of Waterloo' is that the very sentence itself is meaningless and nothing can save it from being meaningless.

White's analysis therefore strikes at the heart of the assumption that Searle makes that we highlighted earlier – namely, the assumption that there is no problem in the sorts of cases that concern Austin with what the words or sentences uttered mean considered apart from their context of use. Austin's point, properly speaking, according to White is just the opposite of what it is according to Searle. Searle says Austin's Thesis is not about words or sentences at all. White says that is exactly what it is about. Searle's says the point of the Thesis is about what it is to make an assertion. White says that there is nothing here to assert. Unlike for Searle therefore, for White,

Austin's point attaches equally to an attempt merely to entertain the thought asserted by an out-of-order proposition and the attempt to assert it. Keeping the thought to myself, not uttering it out aloud, does not protect the proposition in question from Austin's charge. Whether I merely think p or assert it, the value of p in each of these two cases is equally problematic.

So, going back over our list of characteristically Austinian locutions, for White, when Austin says "we would not say X ", what he means is we cannot say X . He does not just mean that, under normal circumstances, we wouldn't say that. What he means is not that we can say it, but we cannot assert it; but rather we cannot assert it *because* we cannot say it. When Austin says things like "it would not be found to make good sense to say X "; he means just that – the failure of sense attaches directly to what is said. He is talking about the conditions of sense and not just the conditions of felicitously asserting something that independently of its assertion makes perfectly good sense.

Yet, for all their differences, Searle and White agree thus far: for Austin, it is through our considering, in each case, what it is that the proposition in question independently says or is trying to say, when considered in itself, that we can already put ourselves in a position to see that a proposition of this sort is destined to run afoul of a certain kind of stricture. What they disagree about is what sort of stricture is here at issue: White takes the stricture to be directed at what the proposition already means due to the lack of fit among its internal parts; Searle takes it to be directed at a lack of fit with the situation in which it comes subsequently to be uttered. The strength of White's reading is that he can do justice to Austin's claim that he is concerned to draw our attention to cases in which what we say fails to make sense. The weakness of White's reading is that, in locating the failure of sense in the internal conceptual structure of the proposition apart from its circumstances of use, he is unable to give sufficient weight to Austin's concern with the context of utterance and its constitutive role in the conferral of sense. Searle's reading is weak where White's is strong, and strong where White's is weak. Searle is unable to make sense of the strength of the indictment directed at forms of words by each of our Austinian locutions. Searle's account, however, does at least try to find an ineliminable role for context to play in the conferral of sense – however, only at a second level, at the level of the intelligibility of the speech-act, only after the intelligibility of the thought thus spoken out in such an act of speech has already been secured.

Let us now turn to our third reading of Austin. This is the reading that can be found, above all, in the writings of Stanley Cavell and Charles Travis. The following is a characteristic passage from Cavell:

When are we “knowing something”? Do I know (now) (am I, as it were *knowing*) that there is a green jar of pencils on the desk (though I am not now looking at it)? If I do know now, did I not know before I asked the question? I had not, before then, said that or thought about it; but that is perhaps not relevant. If someone had asked me whether the jar was on the desk I could have said Yes without looking. So I did know. But what does it mean to say “I did know.” Of course no one will say that I *did not* know (that I wasn’t knowing). On the other hand, no one would have said of me, seeing me sitting at my desk with the green jar out of my range of vision, “He knows there is a green jar of pencils on the desk”, nor would anyone say of me now, “He (you) knew there was a green jar...”, *apart from some special reason which makes that description of my “knowledge” relevant* to something I did or said or am doing or saying (e.g., I told someone that I never keep pencils on my desk; I knew that Mrs. Greenjar was coming to tea and that she takes it as a personal affront if there is a green jar visible in the room...)

Perhaps one feels: “What difference does it make that no one would have *said*, without a special reason for saying it, that you knew the green jar was on the desk? You *did* know it; it’s *true* to say that you knew it. Are you suggesting that one sometimes cannot say what is true?” What I am suggesting is that “Because it is true” is not a *reason* or basis for saying anything, it does not constitute the point of your saying something; and I am suggesting that there must, in grammar, be reasons for what you say, or be point in your saying of something, if what you say is to be comprehensible. (Cavell 1979.205-206)

If faced with Cavell’s question (Do I know that there is a green jar of pencils on the desk?), in the envisioned circumstance of asking, Searle would reply: Yes, I do know. But Searle would agree with Cavell that no one would have said of me, without further reason, when seeing me sitting at my desk with the green jar out of my range of vision: “He knows there is a green jar of pencils on the desk.” Similarly, Searle would agree that no one would say of me in this situation, “He (you) knew there was a green jar...”, *apart from some special reason which makes that description of my “knowledge” relevant* to something I did or said or am doing or saying. But Searle would take the impropriety at issue here to be one that attaches merely to the assertion of the proposition in question in the circumstances in question. Thus Searle would not agree with the first half of the interlocutor’s complaint above: “What difference does it make that no one would have *said*, without a special reason for saying it, that you knew the green jar was on the desk?” It does matter for Searle’s Austin, as for Cavell’s Austin, whether there be intelligible reasons for saying what you say. But Searle would have no problem with some of the rest of what the interlocutor says here: “You *did* know it; it’s *true* to say that you knew it.” Searle would agree to all of this, thus in answer to the interlocutor’s final question (“Are you suggesting that one sometimes cannot say what is true?”), Searle would simply answer: Yes, that’s right. White, on the other hand, could agree with Cavell on the very point that Searle cannot: namely, that our Austinian

locutions are directed not just at the asserting of otherwise perfectly true propositions, but are intended rather to penetrate all the way through to what is said, and not merely to when and where it is said. It is hard to see, however, if faced with the above example, how White could avoid the conclusion that what we have to do with here is a case which no longer lies within the target range of criticism intended by our Austinian locutions. For White, there should be nothing wrong with what is said here, since there is no tension between the concepts that are combined in an utterance such as “I know there is a green jar on the table.” Thus Searle’s account is able to focus on the sort of case which interests Cavell here, while White’s is not. White is able to make sense of the level at which, according to Cavell, the Austinian criticism is directed, while Searle is not.

Travis elaborates the point Cavell is beginning to get at (in the above and related passages) by exploring the consequences of what he calls the *occasion-sensitivity* of what words with given meanings say on particular occasions of utterance – a phenomenon that he, like Cavell, takes to have been discovered by Austin and Wittgenstein. Cavell and Travis both take Austin to challenge a picture of meaning that “is attractive enough to have been shared by nearly everyone [since Frege], up to and including the present day” (Travis 1989.2). The picture in question is one that we have already seen in play in both Searle’s and White’s readings of Austin. What they each presuppose, that Travis denies on Austin’s behalf, is that the context-independent meaning of a sentence has a determinate set of truth-conditions establishing what the sentence is able to say or not say on particular occasions of utterance independently of its use on those occasions. Travis summarizes what he takes Austin’s view to be as follows:

[I]t is intrinsically part of what expressions of (say) English mean that any English (or whatever) sentence may, on one speaking of it or another, have any of indefinitely many different truth conditions [...]. (Travis 1989.1)

To help illustrate his point, let us look at one of his examples:

Suppose that the refrigerator is devoid of milk except for a puddle of milk at the bottom of it. Now consider two possible speakings, by Odile, of the words, ‘There’s milk in the refrigerator.’ For the first, Hugo is seated at the breakfast table, reading the paper, and from time to time looking dejectedly (but meaningfully) at his cup of black coffee, which he is idly stirring with a spoon. Odile volunteers, ‘There is milk in the refrigerator.’ For the second, Hugo has been given the task of cleaning the refrigerator. He has just changed out of his house-cleaning garb, and is settling with satisfaction into his armchair, book and beverage in hand. Odile opens the refrigerator, looks in, closes it and sternly utters the above words. (Travis 1989.18f)

Odile’s words are the same in both situations (what she says in both cases is *that there is milk in the refrigerator*) and the state of the refrigerator is the

same. But there is a difference in truth-value of that which is said on each of these occasions of utterance – the passage continues: “in the first case, the words said what is false of a refrigerator with but a milk puddle; in the second case they said what is true of such a refrigerator” (Travis 1989.19). On Searle’s conception of what it is to individuate what it is that words say, Odile’s words here say the same thing in each case, thus there truth-conditions should be the same in both cases. What Travis’s example seeks to bring out is that Searle is wrong about this: words can say different things – and have different truth-conditions – on occasions of utterance that differ only in the minimal way envisioned here. It is this interdependence of speech situation and truth-evaluable content that interests Austin, according to Travis.

Searle is partially right when he says, about the passage with which we began, that Austin is not really interested here in just words or sentences. Austin’s remark is indeed concerned with words and sentences as deployed within total speech situations. And White is partially right when he says that, in the cases that are said by Austin not to be in order, Austin’s thesis is that nothing has been asserted in such cases. But neither sees a way to combine what he has right with what the other has right.

The problem with White’s account is that it winds up attributing to Austin (what I have called in other publications) a substantial conception of nonsense – one according to which the impermissibility of what is said turns on the intelligibility of the parts independently of the intelligibility of the whole. For White, the independently intelligible parts here at issue are the concepts of which the proposition is composed. In a different way, however, Searle’s account also turns on the idea that the sort of failure of sense which interests Austin is to be traced to the independently intelligible parts of which a certain sort of whole is composed – only in Searle’s case, the independent whole in question is one which is composed of an independently intelligible proposition and an independently identifiable general situation.

Travis’s analysis strikes at a deeper assumption of Searle’s than the one that is under attack in White’s criticism of him: namely, that the parts of the sort of whole here in question are merely externally related. It questions Searle’s idea that we can first pick out *the relevant class of expressions* to which a thesis of Austin’s such as the above pertains, and can then subsequently go on to *specify the sorts of conditions* under which these expressions “are in order” or not. It denies that truth-evaluable propositions and the conditions of their possible use are fully independently specifiable in the way Searle’s analysis requires. It therefore involves a very different understanding of

Austin's point from the one Searle arrives at, and thus a very different understanding of a remark of Austin's such as the following: "[T]he total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating" (Austin 1962b). For Cavell and Travis, when Austin speaks of certain things being "in order" or "called for" or "not making sense", *pace* Searle, he is not laying down principles that govern the permissible sorts of combinations obtaining between two independently specifiable classes of sorts of element – words, phrases or sentences (whose truth-evaluable content can be picked out independently of their circumstances of use) and possible environing circumstances of use (specifiable independently of any consideration of what might be meant by those words in the circumstances in question). Rather what Austin seeks to bring out is the profound interpenetration of the elements that Searle's account takes to be independently specifiable: the words are to be seen as having the truth-evaluable content they do, only when viewed through the lens of their context of utterance; while the circumstances of use are relevantly specifiable only if viewed through the lens of the particular sort of sense that the words in question can be seen to make in them. To understand what the context in question is requires understanding what is said and vice versa. Austin's recurring interest in questions such as "When would one naturally utter such a sentence?" is not to invite us "to imagine a situation where it would be *appropriate* [in Searle's sense of "appropriate"]" to enter a proposition that makes an already fully independently intelligible claim. Rather his aim is to try to get us to see how the total speech situation (taken not as a container into which an utterance is inserted, but understood rather as a unitary whole of which both utterance and context form internally related parts) serves to constitute the content of what is claimed.

Let us return to our list of standard situations described by general propositions: People normally buy their cars voluntarily, go to meetings of the Philosophical Society of their own free will, know when they are confronting a tree, remember their own names ; and to our corresponding list of particular propositions: "I bought my car voluntarily", "I came to this conference in Amiens on Austin of my their own free will", "I know that that is a tree" (accompanied by a pointing gesture), "My name is James Conant" (said with great conviction for no apparent reason). On the recommended reading of Austin (towards which Cavell and Travis point) the right thing to say here, according to Austin, is not that, given the flamingly obvious truth of the propositions uttered in these situations, there is something infelicitous about asserting the first proposition in the first situation, etc. Rather the thing to say is: if someone utters one of these propositions in one of these

situations, it is not clear what he is saying. Given the apparent failure of his words to engage the situation in any way that has an apparent point, it is not clear which, if any, of the indeterminately many possible things he might be claiming is the one which is at issue here. The fault lies not in a clash between the prior fully determinate content of what he says and the prior fully determinate structure of the speech situation in which he tries to say "it". The failure lies rather, on the one hand, in the *indeterminacy* of what is said – which is understood now to be consequence of a lack of any apparently intelligible relation that the sentence and the situation bear to one another. Hence, on the other hand, we can with equal justice also say: the failure lies in the indeterminate bearing of the situation on the form of words uttered; thus in a failure to determine, in the relevant sense, a genuine context of use. Each of these ways of putting the matter are to be contrasted with Searle's understanding of the matter, according to which the problem lies in a failure of fit between the meaning of what is said and the context of use. Searle's thesis is about how fully determinate truth-evaluable contents resist certain fully relevantly specifiable occasions of utterance. *Pace* Searle, Austin's thesis, as White rightly sees, is about how no fully determinate truth-evaluable content comes into view in the cases in question. *Pace* White, this is because, as Cavell and Travis rightly see, for Austin it is only when an utterance forms an internal working part of a total speech situation that a truth-evaluable content can arise in the first place. For Austin, a sentence is a linguistic instrument that can be used to say any one of many different things on different occasions of utterance. Thus what goes wrong in our envisioned pairings of propositions and situations above is that we have yet to be told enough to be able to see, in each such case, *what* the sentence in question is being used to say *here*. The failure lies in an underdetermination in the content of what is said, which in turn may be due to an underspecification of the context. If we specify any of these examples more fully in an appropriate way, we can transform the situation into one in which something is claimed. Searle would say that we thereby transform a normal situation into an aberrant one. But Searle's idea of "a normal situation" is really just a case in which we have yet to specify a situation in sufficient detail for a reason for saying something to be able to come into view. It is not the specification of a fully determinate situation whose very structure expels the possible assertion of certain independently fully truth-evaluable propositional contents.

This sort of underdetermination in the content of what is said here is equally an underdetermination in what thought it is that the sentence in question, in each case, seeks to express. My entertaining a putative thought of the form "I

came to this conference of my own free will” quietly to myself for no particular reason is no better or worse off than my saying that same thing out loud. If there is something determinate I mean here, then, Alan White is certainly right, it must be the sort of thing that can be mentioned. White is therefore also right that what our characteristically Austinian locutions are concerned with is whether what is said on a particular occasion of utterance makes fully determinate sense and not just with whether the saying of something (supposedly already fully determinate in sense) is permissible or not when said out loud.

But White goes seriously wrong himself, by recoiling in the wrong direction from what is wrong in Searles’s formulation. White ends up concluding that, in our opening passage, Austin is not concerned with ways in which something can be untoward in the coming together of a form of words and a context of utterance. Admittedly, Austin is not interested in a relation between a “proposition” and a context, if a proposition is taken to be something that already brings a truth-evaluable content into view prior to its commerce with the total speech situation. But it doesn’t follow, as White supposes, that therefore what Austin must be interested in is how the sentence in question is irremediably flawed as a vehicle for the expression of thought, prior to its occurrence in any particular situation. Hence, while White is right to deny that Austin is concerned merely with the pragmatics of uttering certain sorts of propositions in certain sorts of circumstances (and thus not at all concerned with the semantics of what is thereby uttered), he is wrong to suggest that, in the envisioned cases, the reason the saying of such things is not in order for Austin is just because the sentences at issue here, taken by themselves, make no sense *regardless* of the situation in which they are uttered.

What is true is that it is hard to imagine a genuine set of circumstances in which it would be at all clear what someone would be trying to say if he said some of things that White maintains cannot be said. On the other hand, for some of White’s cases, it is not all that hard to construct occasions of possible use for the forms of words in question. For example, White claims that the concept *becoming ill*, and the concepts *inadvertently* or *intentionally* cannot be combined. Consider the following story:

I suddenly realize that I don’t want to get married. My wedding is tomorrow. I consult you about what I should do. You advise me to fall ill. I tell you that I am not very good at feigning illness. You point out that, given that the father of the bride-to-be is a doctor and will immediately take charge of the case, feigning illness will not be good enough here anyway. I am going to have to do better than that. I am going to have to actually fall ill. You make

various suggestions about how I might bring this about. They all sound quite ghastly. Moreover, I decide that I don't have the stomach for such deception. The thing to do is just to tell everyone the truth: I have had second thoughts about getting married and that is the reason I am calling off the wedding. I decide to make an announcement to that effect first thing in the morning. I go to bed. I wake up the next morning deathly ill. I am unable to get out of bed. I call for you and you greet me by saying: "So you did decide to become ill after all." I reply: "No, not at all, it was completely inadvertent." My friend, who has read a great deal of Freud, might argue that I am wrong about this and claim that it is no accident that my previously formed intention to become ill has now been fulfilled. The resulting argument between us presupposes what White denies, namely that we are each speaking sense.

The point of this example generalizes. If Travis's reading of Austin is right then Austin should not be in a hurry to claim about any sentence that it is the sort of thing that just can never in *any* circumstances be used to say something perfectly meaningful. Thus Austin, on this reading of him, will not be friendly to White's way of construing the idea that certain concepts can just never go together. White claims that the concepts of care, intention, etc., can never meaningfully combine with the concepts of knowledge, discovery, becoming ill, etc. *Pace* White, the full semantic content of what each of these concept-expressions can express itself depends, for Austin, upon the various unforeseeable and surprising ways in which given occurrences of the expressions can interact with various unusual circumstances of use. White's picture of these concepts – as having an independent structure which is such as to preclude their combination in any possible context of use, presupposes a picture according to which we can fully determine which possible semantic contributions these expressions can make to what is said in any possible context of use independently of any consideration of those contexts of use themselves. To suppose this is to miss the import of Austin's Thesis no less fully than Searle does, albeit in a very different way.

Austin's point, in our opening passage, is neither one merely about a flaw in the pragmatics of certain utterances nor merely one about a flaw in the semantics of what thus gets uttered. Austin's point about a sentence such as 'He is sitting voluntarily in his chair' is neither that we already know just what it is being claimed here but it is very difficult to arrange for a situation that allows you to claim "it", nor is his point that the very sentence itself is meaningless and nothing can save it from being meaningless. His point is rather to bring out how a certain sort of accord between a sentence and a

situation of utterance are a condition of the possibility of our being able to see someone as saying something with his words. Austin's thesis "no modification without aberration" is an attempt to get into view one of the many dimensions of accord that are at issue here. (He goes on, in that article, to mention others.) It is therefore essential to the point that Austin is making in our opening passage that he qualify it in ways that look to be irrelevant on both Searle's and White's reading of it. Thus Austin says: "In the great majority of the cases of the use of the great majority of verbs [...] such suppositions are quite unjustified." Thus he does not take his so-called "thesis" to hold of all verbs, nor does he take there, *pace* White, necessarily to be any verb that it holds of all of the time. Austin's Thesis here is neither Searle's Thesis nor White's Thesis. It is not a thesis at all. It is a rule of thumb – one of many he offers – to help us appreciate how philosophers go astray when they believe that they can get a hold of a truth-evaluable proposition just by supplying themselves with a string of words in propositional form, without seriously going on to consider on what occasion we would ever really say such a thing and whom we would thereby be informing of what on such an occasion of use. Austin's writings abound with such rules of thumb, whose purpose is to cause us to reflect on the ways in which we can mean our words emptily – not because there is nothing those words *can* mean, but because *we* mean nothing by them when we call upon them, under the pressure of philosophical reflection, in the situations to which he characteristically seeks to draw our attention.