

The Purification of Correspondence: Re-examining the Austin-Strawson Debate

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The redundancy view of truth states generally that the truth-predicate “is true” does not express an analyzable semantic property; and therefore it is semantically superfluous. To say, then, that a sentence or proposition is true is, in a certain sense, to assert nothing other than the sentence itself. According to Austin (1950) this is incorrect. The predicate “is true” is not redundant, if for no other reason than that it is analyzable – *not* as expressing a property of sentences, but as expressing a property of their use, i.e., insofar as indicative sentences are used to refer to a “historical situation.” We “approach the term,” in Austin’s phrase, “cap and categories in hand.”

In what follows I argue that Austin’s view is deficient in a way that Strawson’s “performative-redundancy” view is not; that the semantic categories with which we approach the truth-predicate are inadequate for an analysis of the *concept* of truth. I argue further that the defects in Austin’s view are a consequence of failing to distinguish between *two* concepts of truth. This distinction becomes clear once another, closely related distinction is made, namely, that which lies specifically between the logical (and syntactic) character of assertion and the semantic character of declarative sentences, or sentence-uses.

In predicating “is true” of a sentence or speech-episode, we do not quite assert what is already asserted in the way Austin envisages. Austin does, in fact, claim that we “refer” to a given state of affairs in predicating “is true” of a given sentence, conceding that this referring itself produces *another* sentence, which then, *as asserted*, involves producing a truth-value on grounds distinct from those on which the initial assertion itself is judged true. While Austin is correct in saying that we make another, numerically distinct, statement (taken as a speech-episode) in this way, and in doing so assert another *truth*, he does not explain that the process by which this happens is a consequence of the application of the two (aforementioned) concepts of truth. A clarification of this distinction, and what it amounts to, is attempted later.

Austin’s semantic theory of truth is intended to vindicate the correspondence theory of truth. An outline of the semantic aspect of his definition appears before the definition when he states that there are primarily two kinds of semantic convention in any form of referential discourse:

- (i) *Demonstrative* conventions under which certain linguistic expressions are related to “historic situations.”
- (ii) *Descriptive* conventions under which certain linguistic expressions are related to *types* of situations.

The definition is as follows:

A statement is said to be true when the historic state of affairs to which it is correlated by the demonstrative conventions (the one to which it ‘refers’) is of a type with which the sentence used in making it is correlated by the descriptive conventions.¹

There is, I think, considerable merit to Austin’s view, a fact that is not always explicitly recognized by his opponents.² There is, for example, something obviously correct about Austin’s notion that “a statement is made and its making is an historical event,” and that, construed as such, a statement is something like a primary truth-bearer.³ Less obvious is the contention that the idea of a primary truth-bearer implies a primary/secondary distinction. Something *like* this distinction, which often takes sentence-tokens and assertive utterances to be “secondary” truth-bearers, is a commonplace in the philosophy of language. Given this, it is commonly taken for granted that the *concept* of truth appertaining to the distinction of truth-bearers is the *same* concept. It is seldom held that to this primary/secondary distinction there is a corresponding distinction between *concepts* of truth. In the second half of the paper I indicate why I think such a further distinction is needed. In light of this distinction, which is explained more fully in the second half of the discussion, we shall see that the connection between assertion and the concept of truth applicable to assertive utterances goes unappreciated by Austin and his critics. However, the programmatic aim of his analysis – of providing a “purified” correspondence relation – may readily accommodate this explanatory amendment.

There is a special context in which sentences may make use of the truth-predicate.⁴ Austin gives the following examples as perfectly legitimate uses:

- (a) “The third sentence on p.5 of his speech is quite false.”
- (b) “His closing words were very true.”

In (a), “sentence,” and in (b), “words,” *refer* not to a proposition, fact, or truth-value, but to “the sentence *as used by a certain person on a certain occasion.*”⁵

Austin's definition of the correspondence relation naturally requires a truth-maker, as any correspondence view must. He is somewhat wary of the implications of this demand, the effect of which is the erecting of a realm of facts (*qua* truth-makers) – “populating the world with linguistic Doppelganger.” However, while conceding the need to designate an historic state of affairs as the truth-maker for a statement, Austin is cautious not to lose sight of the important, if not truistic, point that “we can only *describe* that state of affairs in *words*.”⁶ It becomes evident soon that Austin did not exercise sufficient caution in this respect, for he goes on to say:

It takes two to make a truth. Hence (obviously) there can be no criterion of truth in the sense of some feature detectable in the statement itself which will reveal whether it is true or false. Hence, too, a statement cannot without absurdity *refer* to itself.⁷

As an elementary criticism of traditional coherentist theories of truth, this has sometimes been, and perhaps ought to be, taken in philosophical seriousness. However, it would seem that Austin, and several other correspondence theorists, have taken the criticism so seriously as to let it obscure the significance of the observation that we can only describe a state of affairs in words. The kind of view recommended by this observation on the one hand, and the kind of view implied by the quoted passage, on the other, are each traditionally taken by truth-theorists to be antithetical. Unlike Strawson, Austin sometimes fluctuates between them. Thus, once he articulates an insight which we may rightly consider to be the touchstone of any deflationary theory of truth he then moves back toward a correspondence view. How, then, Austin asks, is “the statement that S is true” (read: TstST) different from “the statement that S” (read: tstS)? Suppose that,

If Mr. Q writes on a notice board ‘Mr. W is a burglar’, then a trial is held to decide whether Mr. Q’s published statement that Mr. W is a burglar is a libel: finding Mr. Q’s published statement was true (in substance and in fact). Thereupon a second trial is held, to decide whether Mr. W is a burglar, in which Mr. Q’s statement is no longer under consideration.⁸

Austin goes on to claim that a second trial is necessary to decide the separate issue of Mr. W’s guilt or non-guilt. A redundancy theorist such as Strawson would believe that such a trial is in fact unnecessary, for the evidence leading to the verdict of the one trial is the *same* evidence as that in the other. Strawson, presumably, would then wish to argue that the point of the example generalizes so as to apply to the descriptive predicate “is true”: thus the grounds for the semantic verdict for *TstST* are the same as that for *tstS*. More precisely, the truth or falsehood of the one implies, and is implied by, that of the other. This piece of reasoning, Austin believes, is the consequence of confusing

identity conditions of propositions (as synonymous with sentence meanings) with those sentences themselves.

The alleged confusion over sentential and propositional identity attends a related misconception concerning assertion. This misconception is merely hinted at in Austin's paper, in which he claims that the meaning of the sentence "that *Fa* is false" is often confused with that of the negation of "*Fa*." Both negation and assertion refer "directly to the world" not to "statements about the world"; they are, he avers, "on a level." This remark is at once odd and instructive, for the assertion and negation (denial) are seen *not* to be "on a level" the moment we consider how the truth or falsity of a statement arises in the first place. In illustrating his point, Austin asks: how are the assertions "He is not at home" and "It is false that he is home" the *same* in a context in which "no one has said he is at home?"⁹ Interestingly, it is *this* consideration that leads Strawson to depart from the earlier proto-redundancy view of Ramsey (1927) and to assign a performatory function to the various predicative uses of "is true" – e.g., "it is true that" (preceding a statement), "that is true" (referring to what is said), and so on. Thus, the semantically superfluous predicate "is true" is not *completely* superfluous, as it *does something* over and above its semantic role. It may confirm (in certain substantival phrases), assent, grant, or concede (in proleptic uses).

Austin's principal objection to all of this is that the performative interpretation of the truth predicate stresses a significant *aspect* of linguistic meaning to such an extent as to almost ignore the significance of the semantic content of the predicate. This, Austin claims, amounts to ignoring the fact that the performative aspect is merely *one* aspect among others. "To say that you are a cuckold may be to insult you," Austin remarks, "but it is also and at the same time to make a statement which is true or false."¹⁰

There is, however, one aspect of statement making whose importance must have been ignored altogether by Austin and to some extent Strawson, namely, the assertoric function of statements. It is in respect of this aspect of linguistic meaning that the significance of the *logical* concept of truth alluded to earlier is brought to light. I suggested that the logical concept is distinct from the semantic concept; but if Austin has somehow given a vague impression that this is so, it can only be by failing to observe that distinction in the first place. Witness Austin: "There can be no criterion of truth in the sense of some feature detectable in the statement itself which will reveal whether it is true or false. Hence, too, a statement cannot without absurdity *refer to itself*."¹¹ Here, one cannot be blamed for suspecting that it is Austin's undue fixation on a statement's referring capacity and the associated demonstrative conventions of the act of referring that prevents him from recognizing that a sentence *may* say of itself that it is true. I go on later to argue that it *must*. As it stands, the notion that a statement may be "saying of itself" awaits further clarification.¹² It is worth noting that one would be mistaken to claim that Austin never entertained the suggestion that a

statement can say of itself that it is true. In fact, we see some groping for an explanation of a similar point when Austin asks of sentence-uses “whether there is not some use of ‘is true’ that is *primary*, or some generic name for that which at bottom we are always saying ‘is true’” [my emphasis]. Which, if any, of these expressions is to be taken “*au pied de la lettre*?”¹³ Austin then quips, “[In] philosophy the foot of the letter is the foot of the ladder.” His question leads to some more fruitful speculation about the concept of truth, but it is not pursued in the manner in which Strawson – I believe, rightly – pursues it. The result of Austin’s efforts is thus a study of the demonstrative conventions by which statements refer, betraying a somewhat fruitless preoccupation with the strictly semantic import of the truth predicate.

It is in Strawson’s discussion of the nature of facts where the redundancy theory prevails. The suggestion is that the words “‘fact’, ‘situation’, and ‘state of affairs’ have, like the words ‘statement’ and ‘true’ themselves, a certain type of word-world-relating discourse (the informative) *built in* to them.”¹⁴ Thus “it would be futile” to elucidate any segment of referential discourse in which these several terms naturally occur by analyzing the terms themselves, or in terms of one another, for they “contain the problem, not its solution.”¹⁵

Implicit in these remarks may be the key to understanding precisely why Austin’s view must be found to be untenable.¹⁶ The point is reflected in Austin’s telling remark that “it may further be questioned whether every ‘statement’ does aim to be true at all.”¹⁷ Though it may make no sense to say that statements really *aim* to be true, statements may be said, in a sense, to be true solely in virtue of their normal assertoric function (what Frege refers to as *force*).¹⁸ The linguistic conventions governing assertion are not wholly semantic; there is also a logical and syntactical dimension to which we have paid little attention in this discussion up to now.¹⁹

We may now wish to understand precisely what Strawson means by the claim “that facts and statements have a type of “word-world-relating discourse (the informative) *built in* to them.”²⁰ Why do Austin and Strawson both make the point that “*p*” and “*p* is true” do not mean the same, and that this difference emerges once one considers the conditions under which the question of truth and falsity arise? What if no one asserted “that *p*”? Are we to believe that “*p* is true” *means* “that *p*” in a context in which the assertion that *p* was never made, or is unlikely to ever be made? Both are in agreement that such questions reveal *something* defective in the redundancy conception, for which they offer their respective remedies. We may attempt to elucidate the nature of the problem by appealing to Strawson’s insights. The terms “statement” and “fact” *contain* the problem. It is worth noting that Ramsey (1927) came near to making the same point earlier with his suggestion that “truth” is not a problem that could not be dissolved through a proper analysis of the internal structure of judgment. We may understand Ramsey’s remark by attending to the logico-syntactical point concerning standard cases of assertion discussed below.

To assert that *a* is *F* is, of course, to make a claim. It is to say *this is thus so*. A statement of the form *a is F* is true in the sense that it contains *in its making* the truth-value “True.” A truth-value is, in a special sense, *thereby* conferred upon any judgment or statement that states *this is so*. This is a consequence of the declarative statement’s logical form. The grammatical rendering of such a judgment typically links subject and predicate terms by means of introducing a finite verb – in this case, “is.” Thus, the function of “is” in “*a is F*” reflects an *act* of judgment, viz., of judging something to be the case. By “subtracting” from the sentence “*a is F*” the finite verb “is,” we suspend what W. E. Johnson²¹ calls the “assertive-tie” of judgment, and so we are left with an expression syntactically unlike the statement “*a is F*” and unlike the corresponding judgment. The result of this suspension is a form of words that may be expressed grammatically in participial form, *<a’s being F>*. Note, then, that when a truth-value is conferred upon this form (the declarative form of a sentence represents the formed judgment) the result – a *statement* – does not name or refer to a “state of affairs” or “fact” in the way the resulting sentence is alleged to name or refer.²² In recognition of this distinction, we may say that such a statement is an instantiation of a concept of truth (has (primary) value of “True”) in virtue of its *form* – in virtue of what I have called, after Kwasi Wiredu, an occurrence of truth in its *primary* sense. We might say, to be more precise, that such a statement contains an occurrence of a *primary concept* of truth.

None of this is to deny the obvious truth that situations in the world often give rise to judgments, as they obviously do. The mistake, rather, is to think that the truth of a resulting judgment obtains in virtue of a relation that obtains *ex post facto* between it and a given fact, or state of affairs. Frege, nearly sixty years earlier, suggested that there are problems with the idea of taking facts to be truth-makers of judgments. It is worth noting that the mistake is supported by the widespread belief that (1) there is no primary sense of truth-value for statements to have, and (2) when we inquire as to the truth of a statement we thereby inquire *not* into *<a’s being F>* but into the truth expressed by the declarative sentence “*a is F*.” If, however, we hold an Austin-style correspondence theory, we commit a category mistake in supposing that a sentence *corresponds* to a state of affairs.²³ We have already seen that there are good reasons on intuitive grounds not to suppose that *sentences*, as logically and syntactically *complete* expressions, name, refer, or correspond, to anything whatsoever. *In the primary sense*, a statement asserted just *is* true insofar as it possesses a truth value (of True or False)

I wish now to consider a potential objection to the idea that assertions contain a claim to truth, or possess what I have called a primary truth-value. The objection might go as follows: “On your view even a sentence like “ $2 + 2 = 5$ ” is *true* in virtue of its merely being asserted. Surely, you do not wish to say *that*.”²⁴ That is, if a statement is true in the primary sense, in virtue of its syntactical form as you have explained it, then you must admit that *any falsehood* is also true in virtue

of its being asserted, which is absurd. The force of the objection seems to rest on the mistake of confusing *mention* with *use* in the following way. When one presents the falsehood “ $2 + 2 = 5$,” as a clear counter-example to the present view, it is not clear *what* exactly it is that one is presenting as false. Is one presenting for our consideration “ $2 + 2 = 5$ ” as a sentence, i.e., *as a claim*, or is one presenting the judgeable content of that sentence? In any case, it is plain that “ $2 + 2 = 5$,” however construed, is being proposed as an *obvious* falsehood; but presumably the one who proposes it as such knows this in advance. If this is the case, however, then one is in an important sense mentioning the *statement* that “ $2 + 2 = 5$ is true” as a falsehood – as a statement (in Austin’s sense, a speech-episode) which one has already determined to be false after having evaluated its content from a previous point of view. There is now under consideration a point of view which has already been determined to be false. This fact is obscured in part because the intended counter-example takes the grammatical form of a question – viz. “Is the statement ‘ $2 + 2 = 5$ ’ true on the present view?” The covert judgment may be more easily detected in the question, “Are you prepared to admit that ‘ $2 + 2 = 5$ ’ is true?” But the claim has been, somewhat covertly, evaluated from some previous point of view.

Let us suppose that our opponent does *not* know in advance that “ $2 + 2 = 5$ ” is false, but rather is asking the question in all sincerity. It would sound odd were she to say, “Could you really mean to say that ‘ $2 + 2 = 5$ ’ is in some sense *true*?”, as if to ask, “Are you sure that you wish to commit yourself to claiming something so absurd?” If one did not know in advance that “ $2 + 2 = 5$ ” is a falsehood (and did not mean to suggest that in being offered as a kind of counter-example to the present view we would then have to countenance the absurdity that “‘ $2 + 2 = 5$ ’ is true”), then, of course, one would not have raised the question in the first place. The question arises with something *non-declarative* in form. It is incorrect to think that when one asks the question “Is $2 + 2 = 5$ *true* (or *false*)?”, one would *first* present the idea that $2 + 2 = 5$ is true *as if* it were false – let alone as a claim – then proceed to ask whether it is true. Rather, what one actually does first is to consider *whether* $2 + 2 = 5$, and in doing so one considers not “ $2 + 2 = 5$ ” as a *statement* but as a question. What is truth-evaluable *in the primary sense* is a content that has yet to receive a truth-value and therefore non-declarative in form. But the question thus arises: if this accurately reflects linguistic practice, why would the grammatical form of the expression not correspond to the appropriate mood of entertainment – i.e., of its being a question? Such an act of consideration does, in fact, involve a *content* for whose expression a specific syntactical construction is to be used. For this consideration the proper formulation of the initial question, then, is “Does $2 + 2 = 5$?” – or, equivalently, “*two and two’s being five.*” In the context of inquiry *this* is what is in question. Accordingly, it is determined to be the case that two and two is *not* five, in which case the resulting (primary) truth-value is “False.” Note that this would be expressed by the declarative sentence “ $2 + 2 \neq 5$,”

whereas the sentence “ $2 + 2 = 5$ is false” contains two truth-values, one of which is primary the other which is secondary.

These reflections may put several of Austin’s earlier remarks into perspective. It was mentioned earlier that Austin believes that we “refer” to a given state of affairs in predicating “is true” to a given sentence. It is by now perhaps more clear why this cannot be the case. The difference that “is true” makes to a plain assertion is, in part, what Strawson takes it to be – a performative one; but it is not *merely* performative, a fact to which Austin is sensitive in a way Strawson is not. Austin’s observation is that the act of “referring” to another speech-episode itself entails *another* statement which, as asserted, receives a truth-value on grounds distinct from those by which we judge true the initial assertion. What is wrong with this is not only the idea that we somehow refer to other statements (though it is true that we *may* be said to concur, or agree, with them), but the idea that a bare assertion obtains a *secondary* truth-value in the construction of a judgment. We do not, in fact, form judgments in the way that Austin suggests. If we did, we should expect that we normally go about fitting judgments onto the world. It is then a small step to the doctrine that the truth of a judgment is an epistemically inscrutable relation that obtains between it and a given state of affairs. But what Austin seems to be right about given all this – and what Strawson is perhaps mistaken about – is that we do, in fact, arrive at another judgment in the act of *predicating* “is true” to a statement.²⁵ That judgment, itself a result of applying the truth predicate, is a comment upon a prior judgment wherein occurs the primary concept of truth. We do not arrive at another judgment, however, by fitting it onto the historical situation which is supposed to make it true. Rather, in cases of empirical belief, we “fit” a concept onto the world, where this concept in part *constitutes* our judgment.

It may be noted that a judgment, in terms of the concept of truth, because it is the product of a concept discharging its referring function, is never strictly *identical* with another judgment. This applies also to statements, speech-episodes, and propositions. Thus, if statements do not refer to states of affairs and cannot refer to themselves (given restrictions on identity), then a statement *p* as assented to by someone must be accounted for in a way that makes reference to the conditions under which *p* was initially made.²⁶ The details of such an operation cannot be discussed here. The point I wish to make bears on the debate between Austin and Strawson somewhat obliquely, but it is worth stating. When Austin says that the act of “referring” to another speech-episode itself entails *another* statement, which, as asserted, receives a truth-value on grounds separate from those by which we judge true the initial assertion, he is only partially correct. Were his view amended in such a way as to incorporate the distinction between primary and secondary concepts of truth, it would have perhaps forestalled objections from deflationary quarters while still respecting our correspondence intuitions.²⁶

Notes

¹ J. L. Austin, "Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. XXIV (1950): 116. Reprinted in George Pitcher, ed., *Truth* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), to which subsequent citations refer.

² I include, in addition to P. F. Strawson (1950), two notable truth-theorists, J. L. Mackie (1973) and Kwasi Wiredu (1973).

³ Austin, "Truth."

⁴ This a context to which Frege was sensitive early on despite exhibiting a strongly deflationary bias. See Frege (1879)

⁵ Austin, "Truth," 20. Strawson, more frequently than Austin himself, uses the synonymous term, "speech-episode."

⁶ Austin, "Truth," 23.

⁷ Austin, "Truth," 23. My emphasis.

⁸ Austin, "Truth," 26.

⁹ Austin, "Truth," 27.

¹⁰ Austin, "Truth," 31.

¹¹ Austin, "Truth," 31.

¹² It is worth noting that Moore seems to have detected the sense of a sentence "saying of itself that it is true"; that I wish to explain. On this score, however, it is evident that Austin did not follow Moore's lead.

¹³ Austin, "Truth," 19

¹⁴ P. F. Strawson, "Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. XXIV (1950). Subsequent citations refer to this essay in Pitcher, *Truth*, 32-53.

¹⁵ Strawson, "Truth," 42.

¹⁶ This may apply also to Russell's correspondence view of 1912. See his *Problems of Philosophy*.

¹⁷ Austin, "Truth," 29.

¹⁸ Caution must be taken here to distinguish Frege's early concept of *force* of his *Begriffsschrift* (1879) from the later concept as it appears, e.g., in *Grundgesetze* (1891), as the differences between them, though subtle, lead to radically different interpretations. I refer here to the former. The critical literature on Frege from Russell to D. M. Armstrong would suggest that these differences in interpretations lead, in turn, to different ontologies.

¹⁹ It is not possible to discuss this aspect of assertion satisfactorily here; it is an aspect which, as I mentioned earlier, makes essential reference to "point of view," a significant although technical term of art. The logic of point of view, insofar as it bears on the logical syntax of assertion, is discussed

fully in Wiredu's "Truth as a Logical Constant with an Application to the Principle of Excluded Middle" (1975). Many of the views contained in the present discussion are either based substantially on several theses advanced in that paper, or are applications of them.

²⁰ Strawson, "Truth," 41.

²¹ W. E. Johnson, *Logic* (Cambridge: UP, 1921).

²² I was first made aware of the primary and secondary distinction in reading K. Wiredu's "Truth as a Logical Constant, with an Application to the Principle of Excluded Middle," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (October 1975): 305-17; see also his "Deducibility and Inferability" *Mind* 82 (January 1973): 31-55.

²³ This is what Strawson means, as I understand him, when he remarks that it is a "logically fundamental *type-mistake*" to suppose that there is something in the world to which a statement can be related (or be "about") other than that to which the referring part of the statement refers and that to which the describing part "fits or fails to fit." To understand how these functions are discharged in normal cases of assertion is to see precisely what it is a statement is *about*. Cf. Strawson, §2 of "Truth."

²⁴ Or we might say "in virtue of using a declarative sentence ' $2 + 2 = 5$ '." I have deviated from orthodoxy in maintaining that a declarative sentence cannot be *used* non-assertively (e.g., as a complex name).

²⁵ I should point out here not just the difference between primary and secondary concepts but that the secondary concept is derivative of the primary. This point is developed clearly in both Wiredu, "Truth as a Logical Constant," and Wiredu's "Truth: The Correspondence Theory of Judgment," *African Philosophical Inquiry* (1987).

²⁵ The idea presented here, which I do not develop, may be found in Kwasi Wiredu, "Deducibility and Inferability," and *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980).

²⁶ Thanks to Emil Badici and to an anonymous reviewer for some helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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