

## MENTIONING THE UNMENTIONABLE\*

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THERE are two theses in recent philosophical literature which I am going to call Austin's Thesis and Searle's Thesis. In fact neither thesis is peculiar to or originated with the philosopher named. Ryle, Wittgenstein and others have held a version of Austin's Thesis about certain concepts, while Malcolm, Grice, Ryle and others have held Searle's Thesis about other concepts. In a recent article ('Assertion and Aberration' in *British Analytical Philosophy*, edited by Williams and Montefiore (1966) pp. 41-54) Mr. J. R. Searle suggested in regard to a battery of concepts that Austin's Thesis is either a confused species of Searle's Thesis or an incorrect thesis which ought to be replaced by Searle's Thesis. I shall try to show that Searle has completely misunderstood what Austin and other analysts were doing and that Austin's Thesis is neither incorrect nor at all similar to Searle's Thesis. It is in fact a thesis with a long and honourable history. 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. Whereas Austin's motto might be 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent', Searle's could be 'If you have nothing worth saying, then keep it to yourself'. I shall not discuss the merits of Searle's Thesis, nor the moral he wrongly draws from his discussion.

Austin said ('A Plea for Excuses', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 57 (1957) p. 16): 'Only if we do the action named (*sc.* eat, kick, sit, yawn, *etc.*) in some *special* way or circumstances, different from those in which such an act is naturally done . . . is a modifying expression (*sc.* voluntarily, unintentionally, automatically, *etc.*) CALLED FOR, or EVEN IN ORDER.'

Ryle said (*The Concept of Mind* (1949) pp. 69-74): 'In the ordinary use, to say that a sneeze was involuntary is to say that the agent could not help doing it, and to say that a laugh was voluntary is to say that the agent could have helped doing it.' 'In this ordinary use, then, it is ABSURD to discuss whether satisfactory, correct or admirable performances are voluntary or involuntary.'

Wittgenstein said (*Philosophical Investigations*, Sections 246, 408): 'IT CAN'T be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I am in pain'; 'I CANNOT be said to learn of my sensations. I *have* them'; 'it MAKES SENSE to say about other people that they doubt whether I am in

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pain; but not to say it about myself.' '“I don't know whether I am in pain or not” is NOT a SIGNIFICANT proposition.' (The capital letters are mine.)

It is important to emphasize that Austin, Ryle and Wittgenstein all hold that to use an expression in a certain way in certain circumstances is *without significance*, that is, the concept expressed by the expression is not applicable in these circumstances. This is quite explicit in the quotations from Ryle and Wittgenstein. Austin, indeed, uses various phrases to make his point, *e.g.*, 'not called for', 'not in order', 'not required', 'not permissible', 'it will not do to say', 'not naturally be said', 'not be in place'. But he does explicitly say that 'it will not be found that it makes good sense', and, again, that in certain circumstances it is not true to say either 'I did A Mly' or 'I did A not Mly'. For instance, he says, I often yawn without yawning either involuntarily or not involuntarily; I often sit without sitting either automatically or not automatically.

In Searle's account it is not altogether clear whether he wishes to argue (i) that Austin and the others did indeed hold Austin's Thesis, but that, since it is a mistaken thesis, they *ought* to have held Searle's Thesis, or (ii) that the thesis which Austin and the others held is *really* not what they thought it was but is, indeed, the one held by Searle.

Searle's Thesis is that there are certain conditions for the utterance of a sentence, that is, for the making of an assertion; that these conditions are that there should be some reason for supposing that what is asserted is in some way remarkable, and, more particularly, that there should be some reason for supposing that what is asserted 'might have been false or might have been supposed by someone to be false'. If these conditions are not present, then the assertion is 'pointless' or 'out of order'. As Searle himself says, Austin tried to explain the impermissibility of saying something 'in terms of the applicability of certain concepts', while Searle tries to explain what he thinks to be the same impermissibility 'in terms of what, in general, is involved in making an assertion'.

The evidence for supposing that Searle thought Austin's Thesis was a somewhat confused species of his own Thesis is as follows:

(i) in describing Austin's Thesis Searle speaks of what is 'linguistically improper', what one would 'naturally utter', what would be 'in order' or 'appropriate', 'the presuppositions of an utterance'; and in describing his own Thesis he speaks of what is 'odd' or 'impermissible', of what it 'doesn't make sense to assert', of whether an utterance 'has a point', is 'appropriate' or 'is out of order'.

(ii) in describing the relations of Austin's Thesis to his own he says that Austin's Thesis will appear 'in an entirely different light from what I think Austin originally intended', that it 'seems really to

mean' what Searle's own Thesis means, that Austin's point is 'properly speaking' Searle's point and that Austin has 'seen the matter in the wrong light'.

(iii) Searle thinks Austin's Thesis can be 'generalised' to all language, so that, *e.g.*, the 'inappropriateness or impropriety' of uttering 'The President is *sober* today' in certain conditions (*e.g.* when said of a normally sober president) is 'quite similar' to the impropriety alleged by Austin's Thesis.

(iv) Searle thinks that he and Austin would agree on the data of the problem, namely that 'it would be odd or impermissible to say such and such except under certain conditions'.

On the other hand, the evidence for supposing that Searle thought that Austin's Thesis is mistaken and should be replaced by his own quite different Thesis is as follows:

(i) Searle sometimes describes Austin's Thesis in ways which could not be used of his own, *e.g.* that according to Austin's Thesis the concepts in question 'do not apply' in certain circumstances, that in these circumstances an alleged statement containing them would be 'neither true nor false', that an action might be done neither Mly nor non-Mly.

(ii) Searle (*e.g.* page 46) claims to find various objectionable consequences of Austin's Thesis, but not of his own.

(iii) He thinks that Austin's Thesis, which purports to be about the significance of a word, 'ought to be rewritten' so that it is about the 'conditions of utterance' of a sentence. Searle's Thesis purports to be a different and correct explanation of the same data which Austin's Thesis fails to explain. Searle produces examples which he thinks enable him 'to refute the view in a more knock-down fashion'.

Whatever Searle thinks are the exact relations between Austin's Thesis and his own, I shall now try to show that (a) Austin's Thesis is quite different from Searle's and (b) that Austin's Thesis is correct.

(a) Austin's Thesis is that it would *not make sense* to use certain words when certain circumstances do not obtain and, therefore, that 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 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.

(b) The correctness of Austin's Thesis follows from the nature of a concept. A particular concept is what it is because it has certain 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. On the other hand, in *certain* circumstances, but not in all, it would not make sense to say that someone had sobered up or recovered his breath or stopped beating his wife; namely, if he had not previously been drunk or out of breath or beating his wife. Whatever the circumstances, a man is either drunk or sober, beating or not beating his wife, breathing or not breathing. But it need be neither true nor false that he has sobered up, recovered his breath or stopped beating his wife. It depends on certain prior circumstances. It is part of the notion of having sobered up, as contrasted with being sober, of having recovered one's breath, as contrasted with breathing, of having stopped beating, as contrasted with beating, that certain prior circumstances should obtain in order to make them applicable. It would not be true to say of a man who had not been drunk and was not now drunk that he had not sobered up, but it would equally not be true to say that he had sobered up. This is not, however, to say that the *sentence* 'He has now sobered up' is meaningless, although the sentence 'He has now sobered up, though he was not drunk before' may be meaningless. Similarly, there are circumstances in which concepts like *care*, *tact*, *consideration*, *inadvertence*, *intention*, are not applicable to actions to which they are sometimes applicable. For instance, if my action cannot affect anyone's feelings, it makes no sense to say that after lighting my cigarette I inconsiderately (or considerately) blew out the match; whereas this would make sense if I could see that my wife was waiting for a light. When I remark to my secretary that I am going to a committee meeting it ordinarily makes no sense to say that my remark was either tactful or tactless. But if I made this remark just after reprimanding her for forgetting to notify me of committee meetings, my remark might reasonably be called 'tactless'; whereas if I make this remark in the knowledge that she had told a visitor I would be engaged, it might reasonably be called 'tactful'. To ask whether somebody did something automatically or not is to enquire about the relation of his action to some stimulus. If there was no previous stimulus, that is, if the action was not a reaction, the question of

whether the action was automatic or not would not make sense. If I look up from my book when there is a noise at the door, it is logically pertinent to ask whether I looked up automatically or not. But if I look up when nothing has happened, there can be no question of whether I looked up automatically or non-automatically.

Similarly, Ryle's thesis that it is absurd to ask whether satisfactory, correct or admirable performances are voluntary or involuntary rests on his view—which I do not wish to defend—that 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' mean 'could have helped' and 'could not have helped'. Granted this, his thesis is that the notion of being unable to help doing something is logically connected to those of having the skill to avoid it, of trying and making efforts to prevent oneself doing it, and of succeeding or failing in these efforts. One can have the skill and try to be successful, but not have the skill and try to fail, except where 'try to fail' means try to be successful in doing what others count as a failure. 'You couldn't fail if you tried' and 'No-one could help getting it right' are deliberate paradoxes. Hence, no question can arise of being able or unable to help oneself doing what one is skilled in and trying to do or what one succeeds in doing. The reasons that Ryle gives for his thesis are of the same kind as those he gives elsewhere for supposing, *e.g.*, that many of the qualifications of tasks, *e.g.*, carefully, assiduously, methodically, intermittently, cannot apply to achievements, or that what is true of dispositions is not necessarily true of processes.

Wittgenstein's thesis about self-knowledge arises from his contention that the concept of *knowledge* is related logically to the notions of *learning*, *doubting*, *being mistaken*, *having evidence*, *etc.* Where these notions do not apply—as he thought to be the case with one's own sensations—then the notion of *knowledge* also does not apply. Whether Wittgenstein was right or wrong—and I think that what he says is correct about the notion of *discovery*, though not about *knowledge*—his thesis is about the conditions which make a concept applicable, not about the conditions in which it would be appropriate to assert something true. The reasons that Austin, Ryle and Wittgenstein have for their views are essentially of the same kind as those which Aristotle had for asserting that we can wish, but cannot choose, to be happy (*Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 2).

Searle has confused the reasons for not mentioning that which is not worth mentioning and the reasons for not mentioning that which cannot be mentioned. Several reasons may be suggested for his misunderstanding of Austin's Thesis and his mistaken assimilation of that Thesis to his own:

- (i) Searle's use of phrases like 'inappropriate', 'to the point', *etc.*, which are applicable to both theses, though for quite different reasons, makes him lose sight of the differences.

(ii) Searle has overlooked the difference (*e.g.* p. 46) between saying (a) an applicability condition for a remark is just a reason for supposing the remark *might* (empirically) have been false and saying (b) an applicability condition for a remark is just a reason for supposing the remark *could* (logically) have been false. (a) is Searle's Thesis, while Austin's Thesis is (b).

(iii) Searle's attempted 'generalisation' of Austin's Thesis leads him to introduce examples of his own to which, as he later sees, Austin's Thesis does not apply. But instead of asking why Austin's Thesis does not apply to them and wondering therefore whether he has misunderstood Austin, he uses the examples to try to refute Austin's Thesis. Searle has in fact not seen the difference between, *e.g.*, 'The President is sober today' (his example) and 'The President has sobered up today', between 'Jones is breathing' (his example) and 'Jones has recovered his breath'. His Thesis, namely that it would be odd to assert any of these, however true, unless there was some reason to suppose that they were false or that someone doubted them, covers all the examples; but Austin's Thesis was designed to distinguish the examples and to refer only to the second member of each pair. The oddness of saying 'He has stopped beating his wife', if he has never beaten her, is due to the nature of the concept of 'stopped'; the oddness of saying 'He has stopped beating his wife', if there is no reason to suppose that this is false or that anyone doubts it, is not due to the nature of this concept. It may, as Searle asserts, have been *inappropriate* for Senator McCarthy to announce that Dr. Pusey *was not* a communist, since there was no reason to suppose he was or that anyone had suggested that he was. But it would have been downright *illogical* of the Senator to say that Dr. Pusey *was no longer* (had ceased to be) a communist, if he had never been a communist. 'Dr. Pusey is not a communist' may have been perfectly true, whatever the circumstances; but 'Dr. Pusey is no longer (has ceased to be) a communist' could not have been either true or false, unless Dr. Pusey had once been a communist.

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