A Plea for Perlocutions

DAVID KAUFMANN

After staging the shipwreck of the constative-performative distinction halfway through *How To Do Things With Words*, J.L. Austin goes on famously to "make a fresh start on the problem."[1] He relinquishes the original opposition between making statements and doing things and then introduces a ternary account of speech acts. He distinguishes between locutionary acts (in which we produce sounds with "a certain sense and a certain reference"[95]), illocutionary acts (in which we perform acts such as "asking or answering a question, giving some information... announcing a verdict...and the numerous like" [98-99]), and perlocutionary acts (in which we "produce consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of an audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons"[101]). For all the philosophical ink that has been spilled on Austin, not much has been devoted to perlocutions. Locutions and illocutions get almost all the action.

Stanley Cavell has been one of the few philosophers to emphasize the importance of the perlocutionary for speech act theory. In his forward to the second edition of Shoshana Felman's *The Scandal of the Speaking* Body and in his essay "Performative and Passionate Utterances," Cavell assumes, as Stephen Mulhall puts it, that Austin believes that "the perlocutionary effect of any utterance [is] extrinsic to its sense and force" and thus that the perlocutionary can be opposed to the illocutionary act.[2] Because Austin maintains that the illocutionary is conventional and the perlocutionary is not (121), Cavell argues that illocutions come down on the side of the Law, while perlocutions give voice to Desire. Where the illocutionary is scripted and prescribed, the perlocutionary opens up space for improvisations.[3] According to Mulhall,

---

1. J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972) 91. All further references, unless noted, will be included parentetically in the text.

2. Stephen Mulhall, "Convention in the Theory of Speech Acts," in *Reading Cavell*, ed. Alice Crary and Sandford Shieh (New York: Routledge, 2006), 31.

3. See Cavell, "Forward" to Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xi-xxi and "Performative and Passionate Utterances," *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 155-91.

Cavell proposes a radical innovation to Austin's theory by suggesting that the perlocution is "as internal to any genuine speech-act as are its locutionary and illocutionary dimensions."[4] I am going to argue in this essay that Cavell does not really revise Austin's theory. He gives voice to what Austin actually says.

Austin's insistence in the penultimate lecture of *How To Do Things With Words* on "the total speech act in the total speech situation" reminds us that the speech act encompasses more than its illocutionary and locutionary dimensions. Our utterances have not just sense and force, but purpose as well. Part of the problem that Austin presents to his interpreters lies with the fact that the perlocutionary involves not just effect but intention, so while actual perlocutonary effect might sometimes seem extrinsic to the total speech act, perlocutionary aim should not. An example: if I warn you that the bull might charge, then I really am trying to affect your beliefs or your subsequent behavior, though you might not take my warning to heart. My aim is clear, but my success is not assured.

We should also note that my warning and my attempt to influence your thoughts or your actions do not actually constitute separate *acts*, although Austin does indeed talk about them as if they did. This has to do with a trick of description, a question of stress, not an actual difference. When we describe a speech act in terms of its perlocutionary aim rather than illocutionary force, we are emphasizing one dimension of the utterance at the expense of another. If we say that in an address on a given date the President persuaded Congress to authorize military force instead of saying that he maintained correctly or incorrectly that a Middle-Eastern dictator had weapons of mass destruction, we are not indicating that the President performed two separate acts. We are just looking at different aspects of a single one.

So, I am claiming that the complexity of utterances—and the fact that we draw distinctions when we emphasize their different dimensions—leads Austin to talk about the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary as if these were discrete *acts*, rather than moments in the "total speech act in the total speech situation" (148). I stress this, because Austin calls on us to keep that total speech act in mind when we think about an utterance's meaning, force and effect. Austin makes it clear that to perform a locutionary act is "*eo ipso* to perform an *illocutionary* act" (98). When he

_____

4. Mulhall, "Convention in the Theory of Speech Acts," 31.

maintains that the illocutionary and the locutionary are abstractions (147), he is re-minding us that they are handy reifications, but that they are reifications nonetheless. That is why in the end, Austin tells us that "what we have to study is *not* the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation." In that speech situation, stating is both "performing an [illocutionary] act" and "performing perlocutionary acts of all kinds" (139). We therefore mistake him if we imagine that we can easily oppose illo-cutions to perlocutions and thus pull asunder what Austin has surely joined. A full account of a speech act will have to comprehend the whole kit. It will have to look at its locutionary "meaning" (its sense and reference), its illocutionary force and both its perlocutionary aims and effects as well.

A problem quickly arises: when Austin tells us that the locutionary and illocu-tionary are merely abstractions, he does not mention the perlocutionary at all. Why, then, does he let the perlocutionary drop when it comes time to make his pitch for the total speech act? There are two pertinent but ultimately local reasons for this. The first and most obvious one is that Austin has other fish to fly. Austin claims that phi-losophers have stiffed the illocutionary in favor of the locutionary and, to a lesser ex-tent, the perlocutionary (103). Accordingly, the purpose of his lectures is to restore balance by emphasizing the illocutionary. Because he also wants to play old Harry with the worn-out philosophical distinctions between truth and falsehood and betwe-en fact and value, Austin does not have time to worry about persuasion, intimidation, consolation and all the other flavors of perlocutionary effect.

The other reason that Austin leaves the perlocutionary out of his conclusions has to do with the undeniable fact that not *all* speech acts have a perlocutionary aim. As Austin reminds us, promises frequently lack perlocutionary intent (126). The same goes for other ritual performatives. If I swear to tell the whole truth in a court of law, I am not trying to persuade you of anything, and if I, as a baseball umpire, call you out, I am not particularly interested in your feelings. I just want you to scurry back to the dugout as quickly as possible.

This objection is well taken, but limited. It should not make us forget that con-ventional procedures leave plenty of scope for our perlocutionary aims. You might wa-ger a huge sum in order to scare me into folding (I am susceptible to bluffs) or you might make a solemn promise in order to impress me with your probity (I am easily

impressed). So, while Austin is certainly right to deny that *every* speech act has a perlocutionary moment, it is a safe bet that *most* do. It might be harder to come up with a taxonomy of these moments, but that does not mean that we are free to ignore them.

Bearing all this in mind, I want to ask what happens if we factor the perlocutionary back into our account of Austin's work. What must we do to give it the importance that Austin, in spite of his theory, is not quite willing to lend it? What are the consequences for us if we take seriously Austin's contention that the terms "true" and "false" only stand "for a general dimension of being a right or proper thing to say…in these circumstances, to this audience, *for these purposes and with these intentions*" (145; emphasis added)?

The quickest way into my argument is to look at the claims that Alice Crary has spelled out in her articles "Happy Truth" and "Austin and the Ethics of Discourse" as well as in her book *Beyond Moral Judgment*.[5] Crary's discussions of Austin are really local skirmishes in a much broader assault on the tradition of modern moral theory. She maintains that philosophers' habit of banning personal sensibility from rationality and the concomitant restriction of moral reasoning to agreements or disagreements about judgments impoverishes our understanding of the reach of moral thought. Crary looks to Austin to show that the abstractions considered necessary to ascertain the literal sentence-meaning of an utterance are of a piece with the prejudicial demand that we leave our individual sensitivities at the door when we come to use moral concepts. She argues that we give up too much when we reduce our assessments of utterances to consideration of literal sentence-meaning, just as we give up too much when we imagine that moral thought has to be shorn of affect. In the end, we can return utterances to their native habitat in lived experience without giving up philosophy's demand for objectivity and rationality.

I will not follow Crary quite that far. By offering an account of the place of convention and the perlocutionary in *How To Do Things With Words*, I hope to induce

---

5. Alice Crary, "The Happy Truth: J.L. Austin's *How To Do Things With Words*," *Inquiry* 45.1 (2002), 59-80; "Austin and the Ethics of Discourse," in *Reading Cavell*, 42-65; *Beyond Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) 49-95. My arguments are also indebted to James Conant, "Three ways of Inheriting Austin," *La philosophie du langage ordinaire: Histoire et actualité de la philosophie d'Oxford / Ordinary Language Philosophy: The History and Contemporary Relevance of Oxford Philosophy*, ed. Christoph Al-Saleh and Sandra Laugier (Hildesheim: Olms Verlag, 2011) 395-415 and Avner Baz, "Knowing Knowing (that Such and Such)," *The Philosophy of J.L. Austin*, ed. Martin Gustafsson and Richard Sørli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 146-175.

people to adopt what I take to be Austin's most expansive understanding of what meaning means. By emphasizing the importance of both perlocutionary aims and effects, I also hope to clear some space for the ethical and the aesthetic, though I am well aware that the both the "ethical" and the "aesthetic" serve here as indications that will require further discussion.

As I have just rehearsed Crary's broader argument, I will put her claims about Austin as briefly as I can. Crary shows that Austin organizes *How To Do Things With Words* in such a way as to make it impossible for his audience to do what 20th-century Anglophone philosophers like to do, that is, talk about literal sentence-meanings that are somehow distinguishable from the situation of an utterance's occurrence. He wants to cure them of their habit of treating sentences as if they were susceptible to being either true or false, independent of their context. Austin rejects this. He is not interested in statements (or in sentences for that matter.) Rather, he is interested in entire utterances and the speech situations in which they occur.

Austin's demonstration that constantive statements are as liable to infelicity as performatives are to falsehood drives home his conclusion that we cannot differentiate the "meaning" of a "statement" from the force and the occasion of its saying. (The scare quotes are Austin's and Crary's.) As *How To Do Things With Words* gains steam, Austin argues that we cannot speak, as philosophers have been tempted to do, of unsituated meaning. There is no such thing as a pure locutionary act to which an illocutionary force is then somehow added. Rather, he shows that the locutionary, the illocutionary and the perlocutionary constitute related dimensions of a single act. At his most radical—and it is Crary's point that commentators have avoided the full implications of his argument—Austin indicates that we don't begin with "meanings" at all. We don't start off with an utterance's detachable "sense and reference" which we then recast as questions or assertions or demands. Rather, force and effect are as integral to the total speech act as its sense and reference. Thus to reduce an utterance to its locutionary "meaning" gives us an inaccurate and impoverished notion of how it is that utterances mean. As I have already had occasion to mention, in the second-to-last lecture of *How To Do Things With Words,* Austin shows that we can only properly speak of meaning in the same way that we talk of truth, that is, in light of all the

dimensions of an utterance's occurrence. We have to consider its sense and reference, its force, its context and its intended (and actual) effects.[6]

Austin's rejection of the idea that a statement's meaning is independent of that statement's linguistic conventions and effects does not mean that he foregoes the possibility of objective truth. According to Crary, the idea that objective truth will go by the board as soon as we do away with literal sentence-meaning (a notion that Derrida and Searle seem to share) is based on a sneaking metaphysical assumption that Austin's conclusions do not allow. According to Crary, it is a fundamental feature of Austin's position that there is no such thing as a "*non-conventional* alternative to our current conception of the world" (emphasis added). There is thus "no such thing as a comparison between our current conception and such an alternative." If we are rigorous in our refusal of literal sentence-meanings, we have to forego "the sort of metaphysical vantage point from which to discern that our efforts thus to separate ourselves [from literal sentence-meanings] cut us off from objective truth."[7] In other words, to get rid of literal sentence-meaning is also to get rid of the idea that we could stand somewhere outside of language or convention.

Crary thus reminds of two important points. The first is that *How To Do Things With Words* is constructed as a pedagogical text, an exemplary demonstration of how to think a problem through. At one moment, Austin imagines that his audience is impatient and wants him "to cut the cackle" and cut to the chase (123). But it takes him a long time to do that. The categorical distinction between the performative and the constative, which looked so promising at the start, has to founder midway so that can see that we are not talking about separate kinds of sentences, but rather about features that are common to all sentences. It takes Austin a number of pages to show that the formulae that might distinguish the illocutionary from the perlocutionary are not conclusive. In other words, Austin works them through in order to work them—and his audience—over, or, to use one of his own jokes, he is flogging us until we are converted. This means some of his moves are tactical feints.

---

6. For a dissenting view, see Hansen's sympathetic critique of Crary's reading of Austin. I suspect that Hansen accepts too readily some of Austin's tactical feints. Nat Hansen, "J. L. Austin and Literal Meaning," *European Journal of Philosophy* 22.4 (2013), 617-632.

7. Crary, "Austin and the Ethics of Discourse," 53.

Crary also reminds us of the centrality of convention to Austin's argument. As the illocutionary is *eo ipso* conventional—a point that Austin makes on several occasions—and as there is no *non-conventional* conception of the world to which we can appeal, a lot is riding on what he means by "convention." Even so, we have to come to terms with the fact that Austin never provides us with a full-blooded account of what "convention" means. It might well be that some of the misunderstandings that Austin's work is heir to turn on a misapprehension of what Austin thinks conventionality actually entails.

How To Do Things With Words begins with clear and clearly delimited forms of convention, with the ceremonies and rituals of marrying, playing cricket, pronouncing verdicts and christening ships. Austin also dwells on less institutionalized, but nevertheless equally ritualized performative acts such as betting and choosing up sides for games. And of course, central to his preoccupations lies the act of promising, which though not in itself either a ceremony or a ritual, serves as the basis of any number of rituals as well as performances of the law.[8] But as Strawson noted early on, Austin's account of ritual convention does not apply to most of the performatives or illocutions that concern him. While there are set gestures for begging and entreating, there is no ritual, per se, for either. Nor is there a ritual script for demanding or requesting or asserting or warning, let alone recommending, claiming, favoring, postulating or deducing. You cannot draw a straight line from christening a baby to recommending a wine or wondering if it will rain.[9]

By the same token, we cannot say that Austin is arguing that, as illocutionary acts rely on language and as language is merely a "conventional, convention-employing means for getting things done," then all illocutionary acts are conventional by virtue of their use of words. In this view, what makes the illocutionary conventional is merely an the fact that it is part of an "act of speaking" or a "making use of language." [10] This will not do, as Warnock notes, because such a definition is at best trivial and at worst incorrect. Trivial, because it states the obvious: all speech acts are, by virtue of

---

8. A good deal of the confusion around Austin's account of promises would disappear if he distinguished more clearly between the act of *making* a promise and the related, but different, act of *keeping* one.

9. P.F. Srawson, "Intention and Convention in Speech Acts," *Symposium on J.L. Austin*, ed. K.T. Fann (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), 38-400.

10. This is Warnock's description of a position that he finds untenable. G.J. Warnock, *J.L. Austin* (London: Routledge, 1989), 127.

being speech, based on language. Incorrect, because some illocutionary acts do not actually require words at all. You can make gestures of entreaty or deny an allegation with a mere shake of your head. So illocutionary acts are not necessarily linguistic. You cannot say the same of locutionary acts. You cannot perform a locutionary act without language. If any dimension of the speech act situation is solely and thus "conventionally" linguistic (in this broad sense), it is the locutionary.

Strawson suggests that what is at stake in Austin's insistence on the conventionality of illocutions is not conventionality in itself, but intention. A speaker's intention in a ceremonial speech act is not ambiguous. What Austin calls uptake—"bringing about the understanding of the meaning and the force of the locution" (117)—is not an issue in ceremonies and games, because the verbal formulas of ritual performatives leave no doubt about the meaning and the force of the formulas. This is not the case with other illocutions, hence the importance of the explicit performative ("I claim" or "I assert" or "I suggest"). Warnock, who agrees with Strawson, puts it this way: the explicit performative "conventionalizes" non-conventional illocutions. It makes their intended force clear.[11]

This account finds the warrant for the explicit performative in the relative under-determination of many illocutionary acts. Unless I make it plain, you might not realize that my warning is a warning, rather than a terse description of a bull or a sniper or an impending storm. Strawson and Warnock maintain that unless I *do* make it plain, you might not know which illocutionary act I intend. Their explanation makes sense, but it begs the issue of why Austin might want to call an estimate, a recommendation or assurance *conventional.* Strawson and Warnock show that the explicit performative behaves *like* a convention, not that it *is* a convention. While the explicit performative might serve the same function as a ritual formula, that does not make it one.

I would like to take a crack at this problem by splitting the difference between Austin's initial strong identification of convention with ritual and the trivial definition of illocutionary convention as a mere "making use of language." Austin suggests that illocutions produce a certain range of consequences. These are different from the consequences that attend the perlocutionary, because they are narrower. Perlocutionary effects sometimes—even often—depend on the idiosyncrasies of the people who

---

11. Warnock, *J.L. Austin*, 132-133.

are addressed. In spite of my best efforts, you might refuse to be intimidated, fail to be convinced, or remain unwilling to be moved by what I say. Illocutions, on the other hand, "invite *by convention* a response or a sequel" (117; emphasis added). The range of this response and sequel is delimited by the illocutionary verb itself. If you ask me a question, the question by its very nature invites me to answer. (My silence might in itself be an answer.) If you order me to do something, the command by its very nature invites me to obey, just as your request invites me accede. Austin says that "the response or sequel might be 'one-way' or 'two-way'" (117) because there is a difference between committing myself by making a promise (or claiming that I know something) and asking you to wipe your feet. The rules that govern these acts and their sequels might be governed by social rituals or by the informal sanctions we call manners, but they all form part of our ability to speak the language. If I know how to offer you a drink, I know that you can decline the offer. Part of the point of uptake, then, is recognizing not just what act is being performed, but also understanding what sequel or response is being solicited. Illocutions are vulnerable to misfire precisely because their force and thus their sequels can so easily be mistaken.

While in some cases my ability to tell the difference between a demand, a request and an entreaty might require both tact and insight, the ability to tell this difference ultimately lies not with my psychological acumen or my good manners, but with my basic linguistic competence. The important distinctions between these acts are inscribed in, or prescribed by, our language. They are intrinsic to our description of the acts we perform and our understanding of the sequels that those acts invite. Illocutionary conventions, then, lie below the level of ritual and etiquette (although it might be rude not to answer a question). They rest on the distinctions that we enact when we perform, describe or respond to illocutionary acts. If I misunderstand your request as a demand—if there is a catch in the uptake—my response will not be the conventional one. The result could turn out well or badly, as either comedy or tragedy, depending.

The linguistic rules and expectations at play in illocutionary acts make their sequels and responses more predictable than is possible with perlocutionary acts. This is because illocutions are conventional in ways that a perlocution cannot be. Because I cannot say "I persuade you," I cannot put you in a position where the possible range of sequels to my attempt is set. I can come close to an explicit perlocutionary

act by admitting that I am *trying* to persuade you, but such a statement of intent is usually taken to be a sign of failure. As it is, the perlocutionary always requires other means to achieve its ends—it makes use of locutionary-illocutionary acts—and it cannot speak its name except in retrospect or in disappointment. These are indications of its constitutional vulnerability.

In the end, perlocutionary effect depends on a wide array of context-specific variables, and can never simply rely on our linguistic competence the way the illocutionary can. This is why Cavell sees it as a form of improvisation. The perlocutionary is often the scene of surprise or disappointment. I can accept your argument, but I might find it trivial—you have not impressed me. (If you meant to impress me, you have failed.) I might not agree with your assertion that "all flesh is grass," but I might take heart from your having said it. (You have succeeded in consoling me, but not as you had planned.) When you warn me that jumping from the second story into the snow is dangerous, I, being foolhardy, might find myself moved to fling myself from the window for fun. (You have persuaded me to do it, in spite of your intention. This can either be counted as a failure or as an ironic success.) In short, with the perlocutionary, there is no telling how things will go.

So, we can say that speech acts are conventional to the extent that they derive their locutionary sense and their illocutionary force from the established conventions of our language. Their sense comes from our shared definitions and their force from the set range of responses and sequels that illocutionary verbs invite. But there is no reason to take this pervasive conventionality as a call for skepticism. Post-Saussurean appropriations of Austin go against the grain because Austin was trained as a philologist and had an essentially historical view of language. He did not assume that words get their meaning from their place in an arbitrary differential system nor did he see that convention was conclusively arbitrary. Austin refuses to be drawn into a latter-day Idealism much in the same way that he refuses the pragmatist doctrine "that the true is what works, &c." (145). This is because he sees a cognitive value in linguistic convention and it is this belief that underwrites his commitment to ordinary language.

At base, Austin's "linguistic phenomenology" consists of using "a sharpened awareness of our words to sharpen our perception... of the phenomena."[12] Even

---

12. J.L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 181. All further references to this essay will be included parenthetically in the text.

though our expressions still incorporate "superstition and error and fantasy of all kinds" ("A Plea for Excuses," 184), the history of our language provides us with a rich inheritance of useful distinctions. Austin maintains, famously, that "our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations" ("A Plea for Excuses," 181). One could hear in this claim a rather Burkean conservatism—language here taking the place of a settled system of manners—were it not for the fact that Austin works from the premise that the history of language forms part of a larger history of social rationalization.

Austin offers an account of this rationalization in a little bit of counter-intuitive conjectural history about halfway through *How To Do Things With Words*. He suggests that the "constative statement," the act of naming or describing is *not*—as many philosophers have assumed—the most primitive form of language. In fact, the constative marks a late and rather sophisticated linguistic development:

> [I]t seems… likely that the "pure" statement is a goal, an ideal, towards which the gradual development of science has given the impetus, as it has likewise also towards the goal of precision. (73)

As he says in an extended passage, we do not know what primitive language actually sounded like. It probably consisted of imprecations rather than of flat-out assertions. Austin suggests that as society has progressed, it has become increasingly complex. This complexity requires greater specialization. As a result, language becomes more precise, more fitted to the specific tasks that it is required to undertake. In this particularly way, our usage becomes more accurate and more rational. The explicit performative is an index of this rationalization in that responds to our need for increasingly fine linguistic instruments. The same is apparently true of the constative. In Austin's eyes, society has to come a long way before it produces utterances that are *not* warnings, prayers or commands, utterances that are only concerned with establishing facts. The intellectual abstractions that make up "statemental or constative" sentences are therefore not primitive in the slightest, but an achievement of scientific progress. In this way, "statemental" utterances represent a latter-day accomplish-

ment in both language and knowledge, not the zero degree from which all language or knowledge begin.

It follows, then, that for Austin the conventions of natural language serve as valuable cognitive tools because they provide relatively up-to-date and readily serviceable distinctions and connections. He assumes that a good deal of solid knowledge inheres in our linguistic conventions, provided that we have the wit and the training to use those conventions with discretion. They are, in the jargon of another tradition, world-disclosive.

Convention is thus central to Austin's account of speech acts and to his linguistic phenomenology. The illocutionary is conventional to the extent that illocutionary verbs entail set or predictable responses and sequels. Their intention can be made explicit and that very explicitness (in a felicitous utterance at least) then prescribes or limits the kinds of sequel or response that can follow. As we have seen, the same is not true of the perlocutionary. The relative absence of conventions that could insure perlocutionary effect makes that dimension of the speech act harder to schematize. That is not to say that perlocutionary acts are completely unconventional. They are propped, after all, on the conventionality of the both the locutionary and the illocutionary. Nor is it to say that we cannot predict the perlocutionary effects of our utterances. We can reasonably expect a certain range of reactions to our utterances, though we might not always achieve our intended—or rather, our desired—goal.

As Cavell argues, if we could shore up the perlocutionary consequences of our utterances by making our intentions explicit, our speech would quickly shade over into magic. To persuade you by merely uttering the formula "I persuade you" would be tantamount to casting a spell.[13] (Part of the anthropological thrust of Austin's speech-act theory is to make speech a form of action without turning it into efficacious magic.) But if we were unable to predict any perlocutionary effects at all, then our conversation would shade over into solipsism or madness. Cavell puts it nicely: if the performative and the illocutionary bring the "I" primarily into the picture, the perlocutionary cedes that place to the "you."[14] That "you" might be skittish, but its responses are not comple-

---

13. "If apparently perlocutionary acts (uttering "I deter, punish, alarm, amaze, disgust, seduce, delight, etc. you") were *eo ipso* (as Austin likes to say) to deter, punish, alarm, disgust, seduce, delight you, speech would essentially, over an unsurveyable field, be a form of magic…" Cavell, "Forward," xix.

14. Cavell, "Forward," xx; "Performative and Passionate Utterances," 179.

tely unforeseen. After all, we have developed canons of persuasion to help speakers reach their desired perlocutionary ends. If the achievement of perlocutionary effects were entirely a matter of luck, there would be no study of rhetoric at all.

The speech act necessarily summons forth both that "I" and that "you;" a speech situation will encompass both poles. All this is merely to say that the perlocutionary and the illocutionary are not really opposing speech acts, but distinct and complementary dimensions of a single complex action that Austin calls the utterance. They only seem to be separate acts because in our descriptions of the speech situation we choose to emphasize one aspect of the utterance at the expense of the other. The illocutionary dimension of the utterance tells us *how* we say things. The perlocutionary dimensions tells us *why*.

It makes sense to see *How To Do Things With Words* not as a philosophy of language, nor as a contribution to linguistics, but as a part of Austin's attempt to come up with "a cautious, latter-day version of conduct" ("A Plea for Excuses," 177). In other words, it is about human action and everyday ethics. *How To Do Things With Words* asks us to look at our conduct in language. It analyzes in some detail what Austin calls in the essay on excuses "the machinery of the action." He induces us to break down the speech act into (logical) stages, which, for our convenience and perhaps to our confusion, he sees as separate "acts."

Austin insists on taxonomies because he considers the problem of "how we decide what is the correct name for 'the' action that somebody did" ("A Plea for Excuses," 179) to be one of the more vexing issues in the philosophy of action. Part of the problem of describing a speech act obviously lies with determining its force and thus its intention. But that is not the entire problem. If we are to decide what kind of speech act is being performed, we also have to decide how far we should follow its consequences. In this, the difficulty that faces our judgment of speech acts is no different than the difficulty that faces us with all other actions:
If we are asked what a person did,

> we may reply either "He shot the donkey" or "He fired a gun" or "He pulled the trigger" or "He moved his trigger finger," and all may be correct. So, to shorten the nursery story of the endeavours of the old woman to drive her pig home in

time to get her old man's supper, we may in the last resort say that the cat dro-
ve or got the pig, or made the pig get, over the stile. (107-8)

There are many different ways of describing what happens in that nursery tale.
Perhaps, as Austin suggests, the cat drove the pig over the stile. But the story is about
the old lady's intentions and not the cat's success with the pig. So we might do better
to say that the woman got the cat to drive the pig over the stile, or, if we want to take
the longest view, we can reduce the story to its nub and can say that old lady (finally!)
got the pig over the stile and got her old man's supper. This description, though accu-
rate, would beggar the story. It would elide the cat and the dog, and the rat and the
cow and everything else that makes it so much fun. All description comes at a cost. It
depends on what you think is important.

How we might describe an action depends on how expansive we want to be in
our views and what it is that we want to assess. If we emphasize the illocutionary for-
ce of a given speech act, then we will concentrate on the relatively short time that
spans the utterance's articulation and its sequel. We will end our account when the
utterance achieves uptake, takes effect and is greeted with a conventional response. If
we emphasize an utterance's perlocutionary aim or its effect, then we will have to take
a longer view of the total speech act. We will have to canvas the ways in which the
speech act encompasses both its perlocutionary intention and its "consequential ef-
fects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience" (101). Because our inte-
rest in the perlocutionary dimension of an utterance necessarily means that we can-
not appeal to the explicit performative to name the act and locate its intention, we
will need to engage in reconstruction—or depend on others' reconstructions—to tell
us what kind of effect was aimed at. And we will need to depend on testimony—even
our own reports—to gauge the extent to which that effect was achieved. More often
than not, intention is secured retrospectively.[15]

It would seem then that our descriptions of speech acts will shift with our
emphases, and that our assessments will hew to those emphases as well. Our judg-

---

15. Felman reminds that psychoanalysis teaches us that the utterance is vulnerable to disruption
so that "the act cannot know what it is doing." I wonder if it *cannot* know it, or usually *does* not know it,
at least beforehand. The intention that marks the illocutionary force of an utterance is often as opaque as
the perlocutionary aim of an utterance, especially to the speaker. But that just means that the intentions
we ascribe to any dimension of the speech act are always liable to reconstruction. Were they not, the
course of psychoanalysis would truly be impossible, rather than merely unlikely. See Felman, 96.

ments derive from the scope of our descriptions. This is not unimportant. What we look at and how we describe a speech act will determine how we assess it. To fact-check a political speech is not to judge what happens when that speech moves an audience, and Austin's account reminds us that the politician is responsible for more than just the nimbleness of her arguments or the accuracy of her facts. To put it pointedly: to assess the President's success in convincing the country to go to war is not the same as judging the acuteness of his reasons. The two are related, to be sure, but the President in this case is responsible for more than just being correct. He bears a responsibility—it is an open question just how far this responsibility should extend—for his perlocutionary aims. As Austin reminds us, appropriateness counts. The perlocutionary dimension reminds us to take this long view. It makes us ask about the reach of consequences.[16]

Given all this, we can again see why Austin's followers expend so little effort on the perlocutionary. The perlocutionary is messier and less visibly conventional. It requires more tact. It also smacks of the "merely subjective." The illocutionary looks—on the surface, at least—a lot more solid. It can be studied by paying attention to the distinctions that already inhere in language, distinctions that seem more objective and thus can be more readily schematized. The perlocutionary, which is harder to abstract and seems more or less inextricable from context, will inevitably turn on special circumstances. It extends farther in time and brings into play considerations that might at first seem extraneous to the illocutionary. In short: an emphasis on the perlocutionary makes the boundaries of the act all that much harder to determine.

There is also the matter of Austin's audience's interests. The insight of the early lectures in *How To Do Things With Words*—the relation of "meaning" to force—speaks to many of the preoccupations of modern philosophy in a way that the Austin's claim that our task is to analyze the utterance "in these circumstance, to this audience, for these purposes and with these intentions" does not. But as my handling of these issues undoubtedly shows, I am not by profession a philosopher. I was trained to read and write about literature and I come to Austin to help me think about the particular issues that concern someone who teaches novels and poems for a living.

---

16. See Cavell, "Performative and Passionate Utterances," 164, 174.

While I have wanted to remain true to what I see as the unacknowledged radicalism of Austin's thought, I have purposefully resorted on a number of occasions to a more traditional language of discrimination and judgment to describe what I understand as the task that Austin sets for us. It strikes me that a due consideration of the perlocutionary dimension of speech acts returns us to both ethics and aesthetics. If that is the case, then my interests here differ from the usual literary-critical appropriation of Austin's work in the English-speaking world since the deconstructive turn of the late 1970s. That interpretation has tended to emphasize the inaugural and the dramaturgical possibilities of the performative—what it sees as the scandal of reference—and thus has ignored the perlocutionary dimension almost completely.[17] There are any number of reasons for this particular bias, not the least of which is the (relative) distrust that much—though certainly not all—contemporary literary criticism has shown towards effects, affects and aesthetics as a whole.[18] I am wagering that an interest in the perlocutionary would prompt us to take longer and broader views than we now entertain.

A reassessment of the perlocutionary should also lead us to reassess the place that Austin assigns to literature in *How To Do Things With Words.* Early on, Austin notoriously dismisses the literary uses of performatives as "not serious" and "parasitic" (22). He makes a similar claim in "Performative Utterances" where he maintains that what is said in poetry isn't "seriously meant."[19]

Much has been made of this claim over the years. I wonder if in fact *too* much has not been made of these comments and not enough—except perhaps by sympathetic

---

17. See Jonathan Culler, "Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative," *Poetics Today* 21.3 (2000), 503-519 and his discussion of Austin in *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) 109-31. Literary theorists like the drama of the performative and thus tend to ignore the second half of *How To Do Things With Words,* which puts the performative in its place. This is true even in J. Hillis Miller's oddly uncharitable account of Austin in *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). As Glen Odom has noted, Miller treats perlocutionary effects as if they were performative acts. See Glen Odom, "Finding the Zumbah: An Analysis of Infelicity in *Speech Acts in Literature,*" in *Provocations to Reading: J. Hillis Miller and the Democracy to Come* ed. Barbara Cohen and Dragan Kujundzic (New ork: Fordham University Press, 2005), 269. In a different sphere, Judith Butler has been remarkably creative in her use of speech act theory. For a critique of her reading of Austin, see Geoff Boucher, "The Politics of Performativity: A Critique of Judith Butler," *Parrhesia* 1 (2006), 112-41. I expressed similar misgivings, though in a Habermasian vein, in "Going Public: Habermas, Butler and Discursive Action," *Anglistik* 5.2 (1995), 115-130.

18. My own interest in Austin and the perlocutionary owes everything to Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

19. "And I might mention that, quite differently again, we could be issuing any of these utterances, as we can issue an utterance of any kind whatsoever, in the course, for example, of acting a play or making a joke or writing a poem—in which case of course it would not be seriously meant and we shall not be able to say that we seriously performed the act concerned." J. L. Austin, "Performative Utterances," *Philosophical Papers,* 241.

readers such as Maximilian de Gaynesford[20]—has been made of Austin's telling observation that a performative utterance will "be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem" (22; emphasis added). De Gaynesford argues, correctly I think, that Austin is not saying all that much about poetry here. He is merely observing—and this is hardly a revolutionary insight on Austin's part—that performative utterances in poems do not take effect in the way that performative utterances might take effect in everyday life. Poetry exempts the poet from her commitments to some degree. The promise that the poet makes in a poem is not one that she is expected to keep. In literature, our performatives act "in a peculiar way."[21]

Given my emphasis on conventions above, I would like to recast de Gaynesfort's point in slightly different terms. Literature is highly conventional in almost every sense, from the complications of literary form to the specialized modes of readerly attention that those complications require. Competence in literary reading requires training beyond mere linguistic mastery, and competence in literary writing requires training beyond the shibboleths of grammar and usage. Our education in literature and its conventions teaches us to accept forms of thought and expression that we would consider suspect in other parts of our lives. In other words, literature is different because it works differently and its difference is why we call it "literature" in the first place. We distinguish it from other kinds of utterance for a reason.

In literature, the performative utterance becomes "peculiarly" hollow or void because the conventions of literature supervene and trump those of everyday use. On stage, the conventions of the performative that would, in ordinary, non-literary contexts govern the force of an utterance, do not obtain or else they obtain differently. We know from our competence in literature that we are not obliged to rush out to obey an order even though Donne has delivered it. (And because we are competent readers of literature, we know that his command that we catch a falling star is impos-

---

20. See Maximilian de Gaynesford, "How Not To Do Things With Words: J. L. Austin on Poetry," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 51.1 (2011), 30-49. See also Christopher Ricks, "Austen's Swink," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 61.3 (1992), 297-315.

21. This is a different claim than Searle's assertion that fiction is made possible by "a set of conventions which suspend the normal operation of the rules relating illocutionary acts to the world." Searle is perhaps too imprecise here. He is talking about the rules of reference and therefore locutionary 'meaning' (sense and reference) rather than illocutionary force. In the discussion that follows, I am claiming that one of the conventions of literature is that it suspends in 'a peculiar way' the conventions that govern locutionary reference and illocutionary force. See John Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," *Expression and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 67.

sible to begin with.) Something happens to the illocutionary force in literature and this "something" affects the sequel and the response that it solicits as well.

So far so good: none of this is particularly novel. Just as we know that "it is only a story," we know that it is "only a poem." This means that the "hollow" or "void" performatives that appear in a literary work more often than not do not serve their usual illocutionary ends. Orders are not meant to be taken as orders; promises do not take effect as promises. Instead, they are serving perlocutionary aims. Literature thus can be said to follow the loose perlocutionary formula ("By saying *x*, I was doing *y*").[22] By ordering us to "Go and catch a falling star," Donne is trying to convince us that women are naturally (and therefore inevitably) inconstant. Put most crudely, illocutionary force, which undergoes in literature what Austin calls the "sea-change of special circumstances" (22), is directed towards perlocutionary goals, such as boring, exciting, enervating, amusing, entertaining, perplexing, scaring, consoling, convincing, reassuring, horrifying, annoying or just plain moving an audience. If I am correct that literary conventions supervene (or suspend) conventional illocutionary force, then the literary, by Austin's lights, becomes precisely the realm of the perlocutionary. Let me stake my claim as clearly as possible: against the deconstructive reading of Austin, I am suggesting that the literary is not "performative" in any scandalous way. I am suggesting that the performative in literature serves largely perlocutionary aims. I am thus dragging the literary back to pragmatics, aesthetics and everyday ethics.

If I had more space, I would try all this out on an actual literary text, but there is only time for a peroration here, and a short one at that. So here goes: in this essay, I have asked if we want to rise to Austin's provocations. As I have really only concentrated on one of those provocations—the unacknowledged importance of the perlocutionary in his work—I will limit my final question to this. How seriously do we want to take the perlocutionary dimension of our utterances? If we do want to take it, and therefore Austin, seriously, then we must learn to measure meaning—all meaning—on our pulses.[23]

---

22. For this "slippery" perlocutionary formula," see *How To Do Things With Words,* 122-132.

23. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to two colleagues. Charles Jones, a linguist and keen reader of Austin ruffled up my all-too-placid interpretation of Austin and kindly pointed out my errors. Ted Kinnaman, a philosopher, also saved me from some silly mistakes. The mistakes that remain are my responsibility, not theirs.