Austin and Derrida: Problems with the Literary Use of Performatives

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This thesis returns to Jacques Derrida's engagement with John Austin's theory of performatives to examine the validity and effectiveness of Derrida's "Signature Event Context." Derrida's supporters read "SEC" as a definitive critique of Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, while Austin's followers read the paper as an example of bad philosophy. My position lies between these extremes. I will concentrate on Austin's works to argue that Derrida's arguments did not fully hit their mark but did not completely miss the mark either. Like Richard Rorty, I think that Derrida's most valuable contribution to Austin's work is his different perspective. Outrageous as they sometimes are, Derrida's criticisms draw attention to Austin's work and force Austin's followers to look at the issue from a different perspective. My conclusion is that the correctness of Derrida's critique is not as important as the interest that the engagement generated.

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Austin and Derrida: The Trouble with Performatives

There are three general positions on Jacques Derrida's relationship to John Austin's philosophy. Typically, the first position supports Derrida, holding him to be a deep, complicated, and highly engaging reader of Austin. This perspective is shared by Derrida's supporters (such as Christopher Norris and Jonathan Culler), who hold the view that Austin is indeed working with a theory of language that is grounded in continual self-presence. As such, Derrida's criticisms are devastating and final, deconstructing the so-called theory of performatives, and leaving Austin's followers dogmatically and blindly clinging to their defeated position. The second, and antithetical, perspective is held by Derrida's detractors (most loudly represented by John Searle and more hesitantly expressed by Stanley Cavell), who feel that Derrida has bungled Austin's work. To those who hold this second view, Derrida has misread and misstated Austin's work, and his arguments against Austin are shallow and misdirected.

There is also the third position (held by Richard Rorty) that tries to take a kind of pragmatic middle ground. This third perspective gives credit to Derrida for approaching Austin's work from a different and unusual perspective that enhances and perhaps even furthers the work. However, there is something not quite correct in the way that Derrida reads Austin, some detail that deflates some or much of his criticism of Austin. On the positive side, Derrida rightly points out that Austin is mainly concerned with speech and not writing, so an eye should be kept on the application of the theory of performatives to writing as well as speech. Also, Derrida is partially right to draw attention to Austin's differentiation between serious and parasitic or non-serious utterances. On the negative

side, while Austin makes the serious-parastic differentiation, Derrida does not present an accurate picture of this differentiation. Austin relies on commonsensical contexts to make the differentiation, while Derrida denies the idea that contexts can stabilize the meaning of words. Derrida also reads Austin out of context to further his own project of deconstruction instead of Austin's project of ordinary language philosophy. Rorty attacks both the supporters and detractors of Derrida for being too serious and literal-minded. To Rorty, Derrida does not make any real arguments at all, but plays his own private game of poetic philosophy. There is no confrontation between Derrida and Austin because Derrida does not want to argue according to Austin's framework or by Austin's rules. With this evasion of direct argument, Derrida privatizes Austin's more public theory of performatives, keeping clear of the need to argue by the rules of the institution of philosophy.

A few more preliminary comments are necessary. It is somewhat misleading to call Derrida's criticism of Austin and the subsequent replies and replies to replies a debate, dispute, or even controversy. Austin died in 1960, but Derrida's "Signature Event Context" was first delivered at a conference in Montreal in 1971, so there was never any possibility of a two-way debate or discussion. Engagement, I think, is a better word, but it still implies a mutual reciprocation that is absent in this case. Derrida's own characterization of "event" is the best description for his contact with Austin. The other terms that imply or necessitate reciprocation can be left to his contact with Searle.

A further related (and rather large) complication that can be found in the works of many commentators is the replacement of Austin with Searle. In the absence of any possible reply from Austin, many commentators have used Searle's reply to Derrida as a

rhetorical and transitional strategy to slide into Searle's view of the theory of speech-acts rather than deal with Austin's work with performatives. Thus, Searle is sometimes seen as "the living representative" of Austin's theory of speech-acts, something of an inheritor who inherits because no one else is around to change the minds of the judges (Norris, *Deconstruction* 109). Austin's philosophical work covers areas of epistemology, metaphysics, (or philosophy of language and philosophy of mind if you prefer) and ethics. Searle (much to the chagrin of Cavell who was actually Austin's student) becomes *the* successor not only to Austin's theory of performatives but his whole philosophy. However, Austin's whole philosophy is absorbed by its contact with Derrida, and the whole philosophy is reduced to a picture of his theory of performatives, leaving the rest of his writings (and Cavell's relation to them) on dusty shelves, forgotten or ignored.

First and most importantly, then, the purpose of this thesis is to return to Austin's work to examine whether or not Derrida's criticism of *How to Do Things with Words* is valid. My position on this issue comes closest to Rorty's, but I do not share his pragmatic outlook. I am not prepared to seal Derrida in the arena of the ironist as long as he attempts to make public arguments. It seems to me that those who adamantly attack Derrida as well as those who adamantly defend him do so along certain lines of thinking or perspectives on philosophy and language. For those who attack Derrida, there is almost always a preconception that he is not *really* doing philosophy, and only plays the role of a "troublesome obscurantist" (Glendinning 17). Yet, so vehement is the reply from Searle that it must be assumed that Derrida is doing something more than just playing around, otherwise Searle would just ignore him. On the other hand, those who

implicitly defend Derrida follow his trail away from the arguments that Searle lays out, dodging the same questions that Searle raises. They argue along Derrida's line of thinking and, consequently, do not really address the objections that are raised by the other side, mirroring their opponents' strategy. While the first two positions have weaknesses, the third position is also not without flaw. Once Rorty denies that Derrida is making any real arguments against Austin, then part of the argument has been conceded. The redemptive move of placing Derrida into the sphere of private philosophy does not do much to repel the attacks of the detractors (who are working to arrive at a public theory). This unsatisfying stalemate, though, is where the situation stands, an uneasy balance between several camps that do not have much time for each another. Each group claims victory and moves on as though the issue has been definitely concluded. Unfortunately, with Derrida's death in 2004, the situation will not improve.

My position is that Derrida and Austin operate with different philosophical backgrounds, assumptions, and intellectual apparatuses that do not allow for a direct, conventional debate. In a superficial or superfluous sense, Derrida and Austin can meet intellectually and their ideas can be compared and contrasted with various results. However, to proceed in that direction would be a mistake. If the totality of Austin's philosophy is considered, Derrida's questions and criticism may not even arise to trouble the theory of performatives. Iterability, failure, meaning, and intention have very different roles in Austin's philosophy than in Derrida's, and it would be greatly erroneous to assume that both philosophers use those words in the same ways. Ordinary language philosophy deals not only with the everyday uses of words but also non-serious uses. There is no exclusion or extraordinary cases. From the perspective of Derrida's line of

thinking, Austin is an example of a philosopher who tries and fails to overcome the deeply embedded prejudices of western metaphysics. Like Rorty, I think that Derrida provides a strong reading of Austin that, by itself, poses some interesting questions for followers of Austin. However, I would also add that Derrida's reading is not always accurate. Consequently, Derrideans who read Derrida too literally often misrepresent Austin's philosophy. It is not a matter of disagreement but rather a matter of never meeting to disagree. In this sense, I believe that Searle and Derrida are right to claim that a confrontation (philosophical and physical) between Austin and Derrida never "quite" takes place (Searle 198, Derrida 35).¹

The first part of this thesis will outline *How to Do Things with Words*, a text that collects the notes and lectures that Austin gave as the William James Lectures in 1955 at Harvard University, and Derrida's "Signature Event Context." Although it will not be heavily rigorous, the outline will be detailed enough to provide a firm understanding of both Austin's text and Derrida's criticism. This preliminary outline of the two texts is necessary so that any subsequent analysis will not be weighed down by too much detail but will still be substantial enough to be of value. I believe that this survey is especially important in Austin's case, since so many commentators quickly summarize his position to move on to Derrida's seemingly more complicated criticism. A major reason for this maneuver is that Austin writes about very obvious features of language (as he admits many times) and his style of writing is conversational rather than technical. Thus, it

¹ Derrida and Searle actually mean different things when they say that a confrontation never quite takes place. For Searle, it means that a confrontation may have occurred if Derrida did not misunderstand Austin. Consequently, though, no confrontation takes place because Derrida has missed Austin's point. On the other hand, Derrida plays with the word "quite." To Derrida, the insertion of "quite" means that a confrontation does not take place in its full sense of head-on collision, but there is a moment when the two philosophies touch or graze each other. Secondly, "quite" can also be an admission that a confrontation does take place. By replying to "SEC", Searle actually creates a confrontation between Austin's philosophy and Derrida's philosophy where no such thing existed before.

seems that his work can be quickly grasped and understood. On the other hand, most people are willing to give Derrida's writing plenty of time and serious (and non-serious) thought. I hope to show that Austin's position is not as simple as it is sometimes made out to be, and that some care should be taken to understand the details of his position before judgment is passed.²

From there, I will move into Austin's ordinary language philosophy to show that Derrida's charges against Austin are misplaced. Like Searle and Cavell, I hold that the charge that Austin excludes the possibility of failure in his theory of performatives is easily dismissed by examining his other writings. In particular, Austin's *Philosophical Papers* expands and clarifies many of the ideas that he quickly passes over in *How to Do Things with Words*. Derrida accuses Austin of excluding unsuccessful performatives from his whole theory of language, but the papers in *Philosophical Papers* are specifically directed at some of these supposed exclusions. For example, "Pretending" is aimed directly at cases of non-serious uses of words and performatives. Furthermore, it is not clear that Austin even has a concrete model of performatives as his lectures move through different phases of thought and observation. It is possible that Austin only works negatively by countering other claims rather than presenting many of his own.

Iterability also functions differently in Austin's theory than it does in Derrida's. For Austin, iterability is a basic feature of language and convention that allows communication to take place.³ Austin does not deny that taking words out of their initial

² One reason for the difference between the two styles of writing is that Austin analyzes the everyday meanings of words, so the style and diction that he uses tends to be taken from everyday language (hence, he is often described as an ordinary language philosopher). By contrast, Derrida likes to force his readers to read carefully, so his style is denser. There is also, at times, a pseudo-metaphysical streak that runs in Derrida's language that connects him back to the later Heidegger.

³ Derrida, however, questions the very possibility of communication at the opening of "SEC".

context can change their meanings but, unlike Derrida, he is trying to find a way or a set of rules to distinguish between serious and non-serious uses of words. Intention also plays a key role in Derrida's critique but, for Austin, intention is a very tricky concept. In Austin's philosophy, to say that someone does something intentionally or with intention means something almost completely different from what Derrida means when he says that Austin's performative requires continual self-present intention. For Austin, intention means something like one's awareness of one's present actions (Austin, *Papers* 284). This awareness does not extend so far that it becomes a plan, it is not always clear, and it does not clarify any other actions. Circumstances and necessity form the background of intention, and intentional acts involve a number of acts below the level of intention (Austin, *Papers* 285). In fact, Austin is very indecisive about the effects of intensity and duration on intention because each use of the word "intention" attributes a different range of intentional effect. His only rule for the use of intention is the criterion that some performatives must be executed with certain intentions. Lastly, there are the intertwined concepts of meaning and context that both philosophers use. Derrida wants to dismantle and disprove the idea that context can limit the possible meanings of words, while Austin believes that words are meaningless without context. For Derrida, meaning is forever nebulous and unstable, always breaking away from immediate contexts, and always resisting the constraints of new contexts. For Austin, meaning does not exist without context, since words have no meaning outside of sentences. Even if words always break away from one context, they do so to plunge right into another context. When the two philosophers use the same words to mean different things, misconceptions easily arise.

There is also the argument, as Rorty and Norris note, that Derrida may not be trying directly to engage Austin's text in an argument that must have a winner and a loser (Rorty, *Contingency* 133, Norris 108-109). He may be (and, I think, most likely is) playing his own game rather than that of others like Searle. In that case, Derrida already knows that the so-called debate is a game instead of an argument, that the engagement of both sides is the goal rather than the victory of one side over the other. Searle, under this scenario, falls exactly and predictably into place as the opponent that Derrida wants (someone to start and keep the game going rather than someone who does not play along). This is not to say that Derrida is only playing a game with his critique. Rather, this aspect of gamesmanship should be seen as a part of the whole event of Derrida's engagement with Austin and those who come to Austin's defence. As Rorty puts it, under Derrida's reading, philosophers like Plato, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Austin are "transfigured, beaten into fascinating new shapes" (Rorty, "Is Derrida?" 236).

The last section of this thesis will examine the consequences of the three general positions regarding the effectiveness of Derrida's criticism of Austin. For those who support or follow Derrida, the idea of the performative is transformed from the speech-acts of Austin's theory to something different in literary studies. "Performative" goes from Austin's sense of "doing something" to a different sense of theatrical "enactment" or "performance." To perform, in this interpretation, means to act as something or act as though one is doing something, rather than Austin's idea of doing something. The simultaneous acts of speaking and performing an act are seen as reflecting the creativity of language. That is, it is possible to create a state of affairs merely by uttering certain words in certain circumstances. Ironically, this is exactly the kind of serious/non-serious

blending of the use of “performative” that Austin wanted to distinguish in *How to Do Things with Words*. I will argue that this interpretation of Austin is incomplete and ignores the aspects of his philosophy that are not contained in *How to Do Things with Words*. Those who believe that Derrida has dismantled Austin’s philosophy based on “Signature Event Context” have merely missed the details of that philosophy.

For those who oppose Derrida’s position, the issue is the equivalent of a tempest in a teapot. From this perspective, Derrida merely points out the obvious iterable features of language, and he does not address Austin’s other writings in his criticism of the so-called exclusion of the possibility of failure. Although Austin’s theory of speech-acts is not fully developed, there is no crippling gap in its presuppositions that would cause the whole project to collapse in on itself. Derrida is only playing games.

The middle position sees the whole exchange as something of a fortuitous and unlikely spectacle. Derrida is indeed playing games with people like Searle who want to force a direct debate that either validates or invalidates a whole doctrine, theory, or critique. From this perspective, Derrida is trying to cut down some of Austin’s proposals, but he is also not trying very hard. The game is to criticize just enough to engage the other side in a dialogue about certain aspects of language, to augment Austin’s theory with a different perspective rather than to dismiss it or keep it in the domain of only a few interested philosophers. In terms of creating dialogue, Derrida’s game is well played. There has been much discussion from both sides, and Austin, brought out from beneath the veil of analytic or Anglo-American philosophy, is now a more familiar figure to those who study literature. However, I agree with Cavell in his assessment that the exchange between Derrida and Searle has actually detracted from Austin’s work by shifting

attention to Searle. Those who are engaged in literary studies are now familiar with Austin, but this familiarity is also a kind of concealment of Austin's work as a whole. At best, Austin is only known for the bits of his theory of performatives and the smattering of references to *How to Do Things with Words* and, in a few of the worst cases, Austin is equated with Searle.

1. Austin: The Theory of Performatives

In *How to Do Things with Words*, John Austin systematically discusses his theory of performatives. The book can be divided into two parts: the first half or two-thirds of the book is concerned with distinguishing and categorizing the different uses of words and sentences, and the distinctions between different forms of the "meanings" of such words and sentences. In particular, Austin deals with sentences that perform actions and contrasts them with statements of facts or states of affairs. In the second part of the book, however, Austin purposefully breaks down the distinctions that he had established earlier. He emphasizes the idea that meaning involves a whole speech-situation rather than a specific speech-act, that context and convention gives sense (or "illocutionary force" as Austin calls it) to the meanings of words. In this latter part, Austin theorizes that the constative-performative distinction between the different types of utterances is actually fallacious. Instead of such a neat distinction, much of what is said in regular life involves action or performance, and should properly be classified as performative rather than constative. Because many utterances are issued as a reply to or result of other utterances,

such performative utterances fall into both categories of speech and action. The last chapter of *How to Do Things with Words* lists several categories of these performatives.

At the opening of *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin draws a distinction between constative and performative utterances. Constative utterances are those utterances that are traditionally called “statements.” This type of utterance states facts or describes or refers to states of affairs and can be true or false depending on the actual configuration of the world. To Austin, traditional philosophy (and especially the logical positivists during Austin’s time) mistakenly takes all utterances to be constative, and problems arise when an utterance is taken to be a statement of fact when it is actually something else. Unlike constative utterances, performative utterances, or speech-acts, cannot be true or false because they do not describe facts or states of affairs. Instead, performatives are actions or parts of actions that actually do something rather than “just saying something” (Austin, *Words* 6). The name “speech-act” is designed to carry this meaning of performative speech. For example, the sentence “I name this ship the *Pequod*” actually performs the act of naming the ship when it is spoken in an appropriate circumstance, while the sentence “This ship is called the *Pequod*” reports or describes a state of affairs.⁴ The first sentence cannot be true or false because it is not a statement of fact but an act or part of an act, while the second can be true or false depending on the name of the ship that is being referred to.

Obviously, there are conditions and limits on the use of performatives that separate them from plain nonsense.⁵ There are certain criteria that must be met in order for a performative to be successful. Austin lists six of these necessary conditions that

⁴ All examples are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁵ For logical positivists, sentences that are not verifiable are without value and nonsensical. These sentences still have some meaning, but those meanings are of a lesser status than statements of fact.

make performative utterances successful, and failure to meet the different conditions cause different types of failure in the action. The six conditions are as follows⁶:

(A1) A conventional and accepted procedure must exist by which the utterance would perform some sort of action (Austin, *Words* 14). This procedure must include the utterance of specific words by specific people to achieve specific and accepted results. For example, the ceremony of naming a ship is an accepted conventional procedure during which a specified person speaks certain words to name a ship.

(A2) The people who are taking part in the procedure and the circumstances around which the procedure occurs must be appropriate to that procedure (Austin, *Words* 15). For example, only someone who is chosen to name a ship can name that ship at the naming ceremony.

(B1) All the participants must execute the procedure correctly (Austin, *Words* 15).

(B2) All the participants must execute the procedure completely (Austin, *Words* 15).

(C1) If the procedure is designed for use by people with certain thoughts or feelings, or for the commencement of subsequent behaviour, then those people who invoke the procedure must have those thoughts and feelings or intend to behave accordingly (Austin, *Words* 15). Austin gives the example that someone who wants to become a member of the clergy must have certain thoughts and feelings when taking the required vows, and that person must intend to behave accordingly afterwards. If that person behaves differently after the ceremony, then the ceremony is still said to have an effect, but it does not have the effect that it is conventionally expected to have.

⁶ Austin gives each condition a reference letter and number to make it easy to refer back to specific conditions, and I will do the same.

(C2) Those who invoke a procedure must behave accordingly after the procedure (Austin, *Words* 15). For example, a person must behave like a member of the clergy after the initiation ceremony for the ceremony to have been a success.

The failure to meet conditions A or B result in “misfires”, and the speech-act is said to be “botched”, “void”, “without effect”, or “disallowed” (Austin, *Words* 16). This is not to say that nothing has been achieved, but rather that the results are not the procedurally prescribed results that would be conventionally expected. In particular, the failure to meet the A conditions means that there is no accepted conventional procedure, so the invocation of such a procedure is a “misinvocation” (Austin, *Words* 17). For example, someone may say, “I name this ship the *Pequod*” in a country where ships are not named and no such ceremony exists. In such a situation, the invocation of the ship-naming ceremony or procedure is a misinvocation. Similarly, if someone says, “I name this ship the *Pequod*” when the ship already has a name, then the procedure is also said to be misinvoked. The failure to meet the B conditions results in “misexecutions” and the result is cancelled or voided. Specifically, Austin calls the failure of B1 “flaws” and the failure of B2 “hitches.” If someone says “I name this ship the *Pequod*” but is referring to a car or only says “I name this ship” without actually giving the ship a name, then the procedure is flawed or there is a hitch.

The failure to meet the conditions under the heading of “C” results in “hollow”, “professed”, and “abused” acts (Austin, *Words* 16). In these cases, the ceremony is successful, but there is something wrong with the follow-through or subsequent behaviour that makes the whole situation unsuccessful (Austin calls them “unhappy” results)(Austin, *Words* 39). Austin uses the term “insincerity” to cover the lack of the

appropriate feelings, thoughts, and intentions that are required by the procedure (Austin, *Words* 40). Austin's examples are that a false condolence lacks the necessary sympathy or other feelings that would make the performative successful, and a false promise is the absence of the intention to behave according to the promise. However, the case of intentions is very tricky since intentions are vague and ambiguous when it comes to defining the range of present and future intentions. For example, a person (X) may promise to become more environmentally friendly. Later that day, X walks to work instead of driving, reducing his or her output of greenhouse gases. However, X drives to work the next day. It may be argued that X has fulfilled his or her promise by walking for one day, and it may also be argued that the promise extends farther into the future so X did really not keep the promise. There is no concrete period of time that would satisfy such a vague promise, and Austin does not have a way to clarify this ambiguity, since it is an ambiguity of language and not a specific problem with performatives.

Like false intentions, false advice is somewhat slippery. False advice is the lack of the necessary thought for the best interest of another person. However, there is a distinction in the correctness of what is thought. Austin gives the example that X may advise Y to do *a*. While X thinks that *a* is in Y's best interest, it may be the case that it is not. If it is not, then X has given Y bad advice, but X has not been insincere, since X really believed that *a* was in Y's best interest. Austin categorizes bad advice under the heading of "excusable" infractions rather than insincerity (Austin, *Words* 42). Similar to the excusable bad advice is the "verdictive." Verdictives are judgments in processes that are meant to produce correct results (obviously derived from the word "verdict"). For example, a baseball umpire may call a player "Out." If the call is actually wrong, then it

is a bad call, but it is not insincere since the umpire actually thinks that the player is out. Obviously, these three subcategories (insincere thoughts, feelings, and intentions) overlap on to one another.

Austin's speech-acts or performative utterances are something between regular spoken words and physical actions, so they are vulnerable to the failures of both speech and action. As spoken words, they are vulnerable to parasitic meanings and uses. For example, a character in a play might say "I name this ship the *Pequod*" in situation that would be accepted in real life as an acceptable circumstance but the speech-act does not have the same effect because its meaning applies only in the play. In order for the performative to have an effect in the play, the same situation must be conventionally accepted in real life. Thus, this secondary meaning (that which only takes effect in the play) is parasitic on the real meaning in real life. Without the conventional, real-life meaning, the performative in the play would be meaningless. For Austin, it is almost always clear when utterances have parasitic meanings because of the contexts in which they are used.

As physical actions, performatives are vulnerable to extenuating circumstances, mistakes, complications, and misunderstandings. These mishaps are generally caused by human errors or alterations rather than linguistic rules. As such, speech-acts are liable to fail as all conventional acts are liable to fail when conventionally accepted rules are broken or bypassed. For example, due to extenuating circumstances (blackmail or some other form of threat, for example), a person may be forced to name someone as the heir to a kingdom or an inheritance without actually wanting to do it. Even if a conventional

procedure is invoked to name the heir or inheritor, the process is considered to fail because the rules for that procedure have been broken.

In general, Austin calls those performatives that succeed “felicitous”, while those that fail are called “infelicitous” (Austin, *Words* 14). This distinction is purposefully different from the true/false distinction that applies to constative statements, since performatives cannot be true or false. For example, the sentence “I promise to take out the garbage” cannot be true or false. Rather, it is infelicitous if I do not take out the garbage as I had promised to do, or it is felicitous if I do as I promised. In a sense, the idea of the correspondence between what is said and what occurs or is the case still applies, but the correspondence is not as direct as that of constative sentences.

Austin points out that most of his examples in the preliminary distinction between constatives and performatives involve explicit uses of speech-acts (Austin, *Words* 32). Under the general category of performatives, there are explicit and implicit performatives. Explicit performatives include the direct expression of the performative in the sentence and the listener or reader can easily identify it as a performative. Implicit performatives require interpretation and can be misunderstood as something other than a performative. “I name this ship the *Pequod*” is an example of an explicit performative, since it includes the word “name” in the actual sentence that names the ship. “Dog” is an implicit performative, since it may warn someone about the presence of an aggressive dog or it may just inform that person that there is a dog nearby (which would make it a constative sentence). It is up to the receiver of the message to interpret the implicit performative using past experiences and his or her own mastery of language.

For Austin, the successful performance of a speech-act also implies that certain statements must be true. If the necessary conditions for successful speech-acts are met, then: 1) something has been done, 2) certain conditions have been met, and 3) there has been a commitment to subsequent or further actions. Austin's example is that if A apologizes, then something has been done (an apology has been made), the accepted conditions for the procedure of apologizing have been met (A has performed the necessary actions that are conventionally accepted as apologizing), and A has committed to future or subsequent actions.

With the basic characteristics of performatives laid out, Austin next returns to the question of the distinction between performative and constative utterances. This return, however, emphasizes the grammatical aspects of the two types of sentences. He states that the first-person present indicative is not essential to performatives (although his simple examples use this form), since second and third person passive voices also work (Austin, *Words* 57). Austin also notes that, in written form, performatives sometimes use the word "hereby" to show that a certain sentence (as it is stated in writing or read out loud) actually performs an act or commences an act. For example, "You are hereby authorized to pay..." uses "hereby" and is not in the first-person present indicative (Austin, *Words* 57). Furthermore, Austin notes that mood and tense are also not essential to the functioning of performatives since they may change with the changing of sentences (Austin, *Words* 58). Thus, Austin concludes that there is no grammatical difference between constative and performative sentences, so performatives cannot be defined solely with grammar.

With grammar not playing the central role in the differentiation of constative and performative sentences, Austin moves on to the possibility that vocabulary might distinguish them. Certain words seem to be used more as performatives than others. However, this possibility is also quickly rejected, since vocabulary can be vague and interpreted differently. Austin's example is that the word-sentence "Out" can be a performative when it is spoken by a baseball umpire (a verdictive), a failed performative when it is spoken by someone in the stands (only the umpire is authorized to call someone safe or out), and can be a constative when it is spoken as a reply to a question as to whether or not the player is out. Thus, performatives cannot be defined solely with vocabulary.

With the first two options (grammar and vocabulary) gone, Austin proposes that a combination of the two might provide a means of distinguishing constatives from performatives (Austin, *Words* 59). Performatives, Austin reasons, are performed by the person who speaks the words of the sentence, and this person is the "utterance-origin" (Austin, *Words* 60). In the case of written performatives, a signature refers to the origin and makes the speech-situation (the circumstances under which the performative occurs) explicit (Austin, *Words* 61). Therefore, it should be possible to reduce or convert every performative to a form with the main verb in the first person single present indicative active tense. This conversion would distinguish the performative use from the use of the same sentence in different voices and tenses. For example, "I name this ship the *Pequod*" is a performative, while "I named this ship the *Pequod*" and "He names this ship the *Pequod*" are not performatives.

While it seems that this may be a working distinction, Austin pokes holes in his own over-inflated balloon. First, the first-person single present indicative active can be used to describe behaviour. For example, “I promise only when I talk to someone I like” reports a fact and is not a performative. Second, the first-person single present indicative active has a use that is similar to the use of the historical present tense in constatives. For example, I might say “On the first page of this paper I introduce the basic ideas of Austin’s book.” Third, some verbs may be used in different ways that are sometimes performative and sometimes not. Austin gives the example of “I call inflation too much money chasing too few goods” (Austin, *Words* 65). This sentence is both a performative and a constative, since the definition of inflation is both a statement of a fact (this is what inflation means) and the act of definition (“I call”). Fourth, there would be the threat of including undesirable formulas that do not translate into the first-person single present indicative active. For example, “I bet” and “He bets” can both be converted to “I bet” but the second sentence is not a performative in the first place. Fifth, there is the danger of fitting actions to words. Austin gives the example of someone saying “I quote” followed by the actual quote. This contrivance manipulates the actions to fit into the definition of the words that have been given instead of using the words to describe what is actually occurring. Sixth, it is sometimes impossible to make the implicit explicit. For example, “You’re a pig” is an implicit insult that translates into something like “I insult you by calling you a pig.” Obviously, the effect is completely different once the sentence has been translated. Last of all, the first-person single present indicative active is not necessarily the true form of some performatives. For example, “I apologize” is not the true form of “I am sorry.” Something is lost in the conversion.

With the failure of his hybrid definition, Austin tries a different approach to the problem and turns to the precision of words to differentiate constatives from performatives. He states that “precision in language makes it clearer what is being said - its *meaning*: explicitness, in our sense, makes clearer the *force* of the utterances, or ‘how...it is to be taken’”(Austin, *Words* 73). The explicit performative formula that does not completely distinguish between the two types of sentences is one of a number of linguistic features that make meanings clearer. Mood, pronunciation, vocabulary, gestures, behavioural accompaniments, and the circumstances around the utterances all contribute to the force of the utterance. For example, “duck!” has a meaning that is different from “duck.” In order to understand what the word means the interpreter must know the entire situation in which it is being used. The exclamation may be accompanied by a pulling motion that obviously means “duck down” or it may be accompanied by pointing which means “there is a duck over there.” The tone of the voice with which the exclamation is made can also impart information as to whether it is a warning or an observation. If “duck” is accompanied by giggles or laughter, it may be that the call for attention is a joke of some sort. Each of these considerations is susceptible to failure if it is analyzed apart from the others, but the whole clarifies more than the individual component parts.

Here, the distinction between the constatives and performatives begins to break down as Austin blurs the dichotomy. He notes that there are some performatives that are also constatives depending on the circumstances of their usage. For example, “behavatives” are performatives of feelings or wishes (it is conventionally accepted that one should feel x when y occurs). Austin gives the example that, by convention,

someone might say, “It is a pleasure for me to introduce X” to express a pleasure in introducing X, but this does not mean that the pleasure *only* results from the performative act of introducing X. This sentence introduces X, but it also describes the pleasure that the speaker has in introducing X. Depending on how it is construed, the same sentence can be a performative or a constative. Similar expressions of the same type of sentence (“I apologize” and “I repent”) also fall into the blurred area between descriptive (constative) and performative.

To solve the problem of determining whether or not a performative is explicit, Austin proposes a series of questions that can be asked of the sentence. First, one can try to determine whether or not it makes sense to ask if the performative was really performed. For example, one might ask if A *really* named a ship the *Pequod*. Second, it may be asked whether or not the action could have been performed without the use of the performative. Again, could a ship be named without the procedure involving the phrase “I name this ship...”? Third, it may be asked if the action still makes sense when the terms “willfully” and “deliberately” are added on to the performative sentence. For example, one can ask, “Did A *deliberately* name the ship the *Pequod*?” Lastly, it may be asked whether or not it is literally possible (or intended) for the performative to be enacted. For example, someone might say, “I wish that I was in a hole where no one can see me” but not mean it literally (making the performative an implicit one). For Austin, an affirmative answer to any of these questions marks the performative sentence as an explicit one.

Along with the list of questions to determine whether or not a performative is explicit, Austin adds two more subcategories of performatives to his many lists. The first

category is that of the verdictive and has been touched upon, but Austin adds a further observation that verdictives may be descriptive for some people and performative for others. This dual use can easily be seen in the case of the umpire who calls a player out and someone in the stands calling the player out. Since the umpire is the only person who is authorized to make the decision, the other person's sentence is descriptive rather than performative.

The second subcategory that Austin adds is that of expositional performatives. The explicit performatives that occur at the beginning of these sentences is integrated in such a way as to show the contextual use of the performative. For example, someone might say, "I conclude that X is not really a dog." The performative "conclude" is strategically positioned at the beginning of the sentence and situates the sentence in a larger speech-situation ("concluding" meaning that it comes at the end of a process of reasoning, debating, or depicting).

With the failure of mechanisms that would allow for the distinguishing of descriptives from performatives, Austin returns to the original distinction between regular speech and physical action. He reasons that speech can be spoken of in a passive sense such as in the expressions "X only talks but never does anything." On the other hand, speaking is clearly an act that involves different parts of the physical body and the processes that are necessary to generate sound and speech. For Austin, then, the distinction between the two senses of speech is contextual and not essential. Depending on the point that is being made, speaking may or may not be considered to be an action. Therefore, the idea of "issuing an utterance" should be revised to take both uses into consideration (Austin, *Words* 92). While speech can be considered to be a form of bodily

function, Austin wants to distinguish it from other forms of physical action. He argues that words that are conventionally used to refer to speech (such as “say”, “warn”, and “yell”) have conventional uses while words that refer to actions (such as “wave”, “walk”, and “wiggle”) have variable meanings depending on the circumstance of their use (*Words* 112). Also, bodily actions involve more than one act and result from other acts, covering a whole range of physical activities with one word, while speech is relatively controlled and does not necessarily result from prior speeches.⁷

Under Austin’s revision of the distinction between speech and action, speech is a kind of action, so to say something is to do something, and the act of speaking can be broken down into component parts. First, to make a noise with one’s mouth is to produce what Austin calls “phones”, and the act itself is called a “phonetic” act (*Words* 92). Secondly, to speak is to utter certain words or vocables that belong to a vocabulary and a system of words and word-use (grammar, pronunciation, etc.). These utterances are “phatic” acts and that which is uttered is a “pheme” (the pheme is distinct from the linguist’s phememe) (Austin, *Words* 92). Lastly, speaking is the using of the phemes with sense and reference (the combination of which Austin equates with meaning). This is a “rhetic” act and that which is uttered is a “rheme” (Austin, *Words* 92). The distinctions between the three are that phones are merely noises, while phemes are units of language. However, phemes are nonsensical or meaningless because they lack reference and sense, but rhemes are actually units of speech which have some meaning

⁷ At this point, Austin is trying to find a way to drag performatives away from the general classification of verbal speech and slip them under the heading of actions. Thus far, with Austin’s analysis of performatives, he is justified in doing so, but it is not clear yet where performatives would fit. While Austin has shown that performatives are very different from constatives (what is normally thought of as regular speech), he has also shown that performatives do not work like normal actions.

(although they are generally vague or obscure unless they are integrated with other rhemes).

The next step in Austin's reassessment is the analysis of locutionary acts. To perform a locutionary act (the act *of* saying something) is to speak (Austin, *Words* 99). This kind of act is contrasted with the illocutionary act, which is the performance of an act *in* saying something. A locutionary act is the use of speech, but an illocutionary act determines *how* that speech is actually used (Austin, *Words* 99). Therefore, an illocutionary act is necessarily a kind of locutionary act (meaningful speech being a kind of speech). There is also a third kind of act that Austin calls the "perlocutionary" act. This third act produces effects on the feelings, thoughts, and actions of a receiver. Austin gives the following examples: the sentence "He said to me, 'You can't do that'" is a locutionary act since it reports an occurrence (Austin, *Words* 102). By itself, this locutionary act does not tell the receiver how to understand the sentence (it may be a joke, a warning, or any number of other possible uses of that string of words). If the sentence is changed to "He protested against my doing it", the act becomes an illocutionary act because "You can't do that" is the protest (the receiver is told how the words are being used). In looking for illocutionary acts, it is best to look for the sentence that accomplishes the act. In this case, "You can't do that" is a protest that is accomplished by uttering those words (one can ask "how did he protest?", and the answer is "through the phrase 'You can't do that'"). If the sentence is changed to "He pulled me back, checked me", it becomes a perlocutionary act because the speech describes how the subsequent actions of the speaker have been affected. Obviously, the distinctions are not clear and absolute. Someone might say, for example, "It rains a lot in Vancouver" which

would normally be considered a constative sentence (a locutionary act) that describes the weather in Vancouver, but if the remark actually dissuades me from going to Vancouver then it turns into a perlocutionary remark.

Only the achievement of an effect defines an act as an illocutionary act. One of the other purposes that illocutionary acts serve is that of giving sense and meaning to locutionary acts. In this way, illocutionary acts are related to the giving of force to locutionary ones. That is, illocutionary acts tell the receiver how the sentence should be understood, given general speech-situations or circumstances. Because of the relation between the illocutionary act and its effects, Austin notes that another trait of the illocutionary act is its invitation of responses (Austin, *Words* 117). In contrast, perlocutionary acts work only when the object of the perlocution is achieved or a response to it is produced. For example, X may warn Y about an aggressive dog in the yard. If Y takes precautions because he or she believes that X is telling the truth, then the object of the warning has been achieved (that of alerting Y to the possible danger). However, if Y takes precautions but does not really believe that there is an aggressive dog, then a response to the warning has been achieved but it is not a response to the content of the warning so much as a response to the warning itself. Both are cases of perlocutionary acts. Perlocutionary acts have the added characteristic that they may be achieved without speech, but that the non-locutionary (unspoken) act must be conventionally understood. Austin gives the example that a stick may be waved to threaten someone without the exchange of any words, but it must be waved in such a way that the other person understands that the waving is a threatening gesture. This is

completely different from the illocutionary act, which is only achieved through an utterance or utterances.

Finally, Austin sets down (yet another) list of five illocutionary categories that are distinguished by the effects of their forces. The first category (verdictives) has already been discussed. The second category is that of “exercitives” or the advocacy of certain positions or actions. They are kinds of judgments that do not have the authority of verdictives (they are weaker in compulsive force) and are meant to persuade almost to the point (but not coming to the point) of force. Words such as “allow”, “compel”, “beg”, “press”, and “entreat” are examples of exercitives. Depending on the way that they are used, exercitives can border on and blend into verdictives. For example, “compelling” someone to do something can be just as forceful as “forcing” him or her to do it. The third category is that of commissives which commit the speaker to certain actions or a certain course of actions (Austin, *Words* 157). Promises, deals, and declarations are examples of such acts. The fourth category is that of behabitives (which have also been mentioned). These acts are reactions to the thoughts or feelings of others. For example, a person might congratulate another for his or her marriage or say that he or she is sorry that the other person’s dog died. These acts are especially vulnerable to insincerity. The final category is that of expositives. These illocutionary utterances relay or announce views, arguments, and general information that are to be used for similar purposes. Quoting, deducing, and referring are examples of expositive acts.

One of the key results from Austin’s work with performatives is the elimination of the idea that all sentences and propositions must state a fact or refer to or describe a state of affairs. With his attempt to reclassify utterances as actions, Austin also takes a

step in the elimination of what W.V. Quine would call the “idea idea” (the idea that all words refer to Platonic ideas or forms). The move of turning speech into behaviour opens up all sorts of possibilities for behaviourists, as well as giving ordinary language philosophy another credible practitioner (there were not many at the time). It is the strand of anti-Platonic thought in Austin’s work that Derrida picks up and pulls into the direction of his own project of deconstruction in “Signature Event Context.”

1.1 Derrida: “Signature Event Context”

About a decade after Austin’s death, Jacques Derrida delivered “Signature Event Context” as a conference paper, picking up and developing some of the ideas from *How to Do Things with Words*. The printed version of the paper opens with a quotation of Austin’s book that acts as a reference to Austin’s concern with spoken utterances as well as Derrida’s recurring message that traditional philosophy privileges speech over writing. Also, the quotation acts as an example of iterability (a pivotal idea in the paper), and points to the irony of the supposed “simplicity” of words.

Derrida’s paper is divided into two main sections. The first section deals with the idea of communication and the meaning of words in general, while the second section applies Derrida’s criticisms to Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*. Derrida begins by questioning whether the word or signifier “communication” has a “unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, transmittable” meaning (Derrida 1). He points out that, ironically, in talking about the meaning of the word “communication”, the meaning of the word has already been anticipated or predetermined to mean a vehicle, means of transport, or transitional medium of a unified meaning (Derrida 1). Even in questioning

the meaning of the word, the use of “communication” is already determined. Apart from this semiotic or linguistic meaning, Derrida argues, “communication” can also signify a physical connection between two locations or a displacement of force such as a tremor or wave (Derrida 2). These general observations are a prelude to Derrida’s charge against Austin in the second part of the paper. Derrida thinks that Austin’s distinction between serious and parasitic utterances is too clear-cut. For Derrida, the distinction between the two types of utterances can be swept away by shifting the contexts in which they are used, so serious utterances can become parasitic ones and parasitic utterances can be serious. At the same time, though, if serious utterances are to be studied, then parasitic cases must also be analyzed, since serious cases are defined by their difference from parasitic cases. That is, words are inherently repeatable, and repetition is inherently prone to failures and parasitic meanings.

According to Derrida, ordinary (everyday) language and the dominant philosophical tradition of the West starting with Plato relegate the non-linguistic meaning of “communication” to that of a secondary meaning because it relies on a metaphor that relates to the linguistic meaning of the word. One of Derrida’s key arguments in the paper is that the so-called derivative meaning is not actually derivative and should not be treated as a secondary meaning. Conventionally, everyday and philosophical uses place so-called metaphorical meanings below primary meanings on a value-scale because of deeply embedded metaphysical presuppositions. It is only a contingent fact that most people use the word “communication” to mean the transmission of meaning instead of a connection between two locations. There is nothing in the word itself that differentiates between a primary and a secondary meaning.

The second key argument in the essay is that a word's meaning cannot be determined by a context because contexts cannot be absolutely determined, certain, or saturated (Derrida 3). For Derrida, this lack of certainty points to the inadequacy of the "current concept of context" and necessitates a change in the concept of writing (Derrida 3). He argues that "writing" is usually understood to mean a "particular, secondary, inscribed, and supplementary" form of communication (Derrida 3). In other words, writing is seen to be an extension or modification of oral and gestural communication. Underlying this acceptance of extension is the idea that communication takes place in a homogeneous space that can be extended via writing. While oral and gestural communication is limited by space and time (presence), writing (in this view) can expand that limitation by leaving a trace of presence. Writing, under this understanding, perfectly captures the oral or gestural meaning of the writer so that nothing in the wholeness and unity of the meaning is altered (any alterations are accidental) (Derrida 3). The signifier is immediately present to or continuous with that which is signified.

To clarify Derrida's ideas, it may make the most sense to begin with his attack on the Platonic model of ideas or forms. According to Derrida, philosophers have thought and still think that the purpose of communication is to transmit thoughts, ideas, or representations (Derrida 4). Under the Platonic model, words are representations of thoughts or ideas, so communication is necessarily preceded by representation (there must be representations to transmit before transmission can occur). When people form ideas or thoughts, these ideas are perfectly understood to the people who are thinking them because they are immediately present to their minds. However, if people want to transmit thoughts to each other, then they must use signifiers of some sort to exchange

thoughts. These signifiers represent the thoughts perfectly, so the successful transmission of a signifier means that one person can have a perfect understanding of another person's thoughts.

Writing is seen to be a secondary and less effective form of communication because it represents spoken words.⁸ In the hierarchy of metaphysical entities and representations, writing becomes a tertiary kind of representation (thoughts represent the ideal forms, spoken words represent thoughts, and writing represents words). Although its metaphysical status is dubious, writing is necessary when the receiver or addressee is absent at the time that the message is inscribed (when spoken communication fails or cannot function effectively). Thus, writing acts as a "continuous modification" and "progressive extenuation of presence" in such a way as to allow the message to move from one person to the other without a loss of meaning (Derrida 5). There is a slight shift in this way of thinking that converts the absence of the sender or receiver into a kind of delayed or modified presence.⁹ The absence is replaced by a trace of presence, (actual presence is replaced by a kind of deferred presence), and writing renders an absent person present. Even when the writing ends, it does not disappear like normal presence but lingers, creating a prolonged presence that resists time more effectively than the actual presence of the person, since one can always go back and read the writing again but one cannot necessarily meet the person again. Communication, then, becomes "that which circulates a representation as an ideal content", and writing is a type of communication (Derrida 6).

⁸ Note that this kind of theory takes for granted the fact that spoken communication occurs before written communication.

⁹ Readers of Derrida's work will recognize the familiar hierarchical opposition of presence and absence.

Derrida delves further into this idea of absence. Since every inscription or sign requires some sort of absence, he reasons, then writing (being a kind of inscription) requires its own kind of absence. Furthermore, this absence must be unique to writing or else writing would not be required to modify it. However, if the predicate that characterizes the absence is not unique to writing (if it applies to other forms of communication or all forms of communication), then the traditional concept of writing is wrong. That is, there must be a unique kind of absence that only writing can modify into delayed presence. If the absence is not unique, then writing itself is not as traditional philosophy has characterized it. The absence that is required at the time of inscription is an absence from the field of perception of the sender or the receiver. Yet, this is an idealized absence since it is expected that the other person will receive the letter and come into presence again. Thus, the absence is a kind of delayed presence rather than an absolute absence. One of writing's essential structural characteristics is that it must be able to function in the absolute absence of the sender, the receiver, or any "empirically determinable collectivity" of senders and receivers (Derrida 7). The signs must be repeatable and readable beyond the immediate context of their production or else there would be no point to writing, since the receiver (who is absent at the moment of inscription) would not be able to make any sense out of the message. That is, there is no way for the receiver to duplicate the exact context in which the message is written.

This iterability, however, is the same characteristic that Derrida points to as the force that ruptures the supposed transmission of unified meaning. Because signs must be iterable to function as signs, they also have an inherent possibility of conveying the wrong meaning. Separated from both the context and origin of production, nothing keeps

the meaning of the message unified and absolutely whole. Once inscribed or uttered, the message moves beyond the control of the sender, and moves into the interpretative field of anyone who receives the message. Thus, with every instance of the transference of signs (every act of communication), there is the possibility that something in the message is lost or altered. For Derrida, this potential loss of meaning is not accidental or anomalous but structural and essential to language. Iterability, according to Derrida, even trumps context in that context cannot theoretically limit the interpretation of signs. The rupturing force that removes signs from their original context can also nullify any context that may be imposed on them. For example, the intention of the sender may act as a kind of context for the message but, once sent, the message does not theoretically have to function under the rule of intention. There is nothing in the message itself that carries the intention of the moment of origin. Removed from the original context, the message may be transposed into a different context to mean something completely different without violating any linguistic rules. In fact, it is a linguistic rule that words cannot be bound to a single context or intentional point of origin.

With his general and very basic (in the sense that he develops them much more in his longer works)¹⁰ arguments laid out, Derrida moves to the case of Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* to show that Austin's speech acts, although very different from the traditional concepts of writing and communication, fall to the same prejudices. Of all the philosophies from the Anglo-American tradition, Austin's theory presents specific and potentially crippling problems for Derrida. First, performatives are not statements of

¹⁰ More elaborate and detailed versions of Derrida's arguments can be found in works such as *Of Grammatology*, *Positions*, and *The Margins of Philosophy*. Derrida has a few themes that show up in almost all of his works, so familiarity with a few of his books should provide the reader with a reasonable understanding of his arguments.

ideas or thoughts but words that produce changes in states of affairs. They are words that act upon the configuration of the world and not words that only refer to or describe the world (hence the name “speech acts”). To say that a performative communicates in the traditional sense of “communicate” is to say that a force is communicated through a sign rather than the transmission of meaning (Derrida 13). That is, Austin differentiates between the force or sense in which a sentence is to be understood and the actual meaning of that sentence. Thus, performatives communicate both the sense (the conventional way in which it should be understood) and the meaning (the actual meaning of the words) of the utterance.

Derrida seemingly runs into some trouble when he accuses Austin of taking a traditional Platonic position on language. Austin’s anti-Platonic model of performatives seemingly presents a hitch in Derrida’s criticism of philosophy’s traditional view of the nature of language. Austin even goes so far as to completely absorb the Platonic model into the theory of speech acts by turning constatives into performatives. While he takes the time to differentiate between constatives and performatives at the beginning of the book, almost all sentences end up being categorized as performatives at the end of *How to Do Things with Words*. Performative utterances react to other sentences instead of merely describing the world, so Austin sees them as being closely akin to normal actions.¹¹ The shift in different theories of performatives occurs because Austin’s book is actually a collection of his lecture notes, so the teaching of theory begins from a basic

¹¹ Sentences that describe the configuration of the world or that express ideas or thoughts are called “constatives” in Austin’s theory. By the end of *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin sweeps away constatives altogether. Derrida’s attacks on the Platonic model, therefore, would have no effect on Austin’s theory.

position and becomes more complicated as observations are made and hypotheses are tested.

Austin's theory of speech acts presents a second problem for Derrida in that performatives seem to resist the linguistic division of sign and referent. Unlike the Platonic model (or constatives as Austin calls them), performative words resist the distinction between the word and that which the word refers to. Performatives do not refer to something outside or before themselves, but refer only to themselves as acts that occur simultaneously with their use. More accurately, performatives do not refer at all. They trigger or alter behaviour. The word *is* the action. The last issue of concern for Derrida is that Austin substitutes the idea of value or fact with that of illocutionary and perlocutionary force. These illocutionary and perlocutionary forces are the forces of the total speech situation that determine the way in which the meaning of the performative should be understood. Instead of being confined to a word or a few words, the meaning of performatives is derived from the complete context of their employment. This means that the emphasis is moved from the single sign to the total situation (including non-linguistic behaviour).

In order to show that Austin's analysis still falls victim to the arguments that were made in the first section of "Signature Event Context," Derrida shifts the ground of attack from that of illocutionary and perlocutionary sentences to locutionary ones since all utterances are locutionary utterances. While performatives may be determined by the total speech situation, the more general category of locutionary sentences relies on a more general concept of context. At first, it seems that intentionality forms a certain and absolute context for the use of performatives, a guarantee that no meaning can escape the

intended use of a certain string of words (the horizon of meaning as Derrida likes to call it). However, like many philosophers from the continental tradition, Derrida notes, Austin makes two seemingly contradictory claims almost simultaneously. Almost at the same time that he claims the absolute certainty and effectiveness of intentionality, Austin notes that performatives are exactly like any other conventional acts in that they carry the inherent possibility of failure. Yet, while this possibility of failure is admitted to be a structural characteristic of performatives, it is pushed outside of the theory. Austin passes over this possibility of failure as though it cannot yield any information about performatives and ignores the “arbitrary nature of the sign” (Derrida 15). The possibility of failure is swept away into the neglected territory of contingencies, accidents, and anomalies.

Although the structural possibility of failure inherent in illocutionary and perlocutionary acts weakens Austin’s theory, it is not a pivotal flaw. Derrida thinks that an elaboration and development of the details of this inherent possibility of failure would add to the general theory of performatives. Embracing failure and moving it into a position equal to successful, felicitous performatives would also produce a more accurate model of performative utterances because failure plays as key a role as success in the overall theory. As Austin’s work with excuses shows, studying cases of failure can add to the general understanding of cases of success.

For Derrida, the possibility of failure (the possibility that words can be understood in a different sense than that intended by the speaker) is of secondary importance to the question of iterability. Austin’s theory of speech acts relies on the idea that there are conventional procedures that must be performed in order for performatives to be

successful. For example, there must be a conventionally accepted procedure of marriage in order for a marriage to occur. These procedures must be invoked and repeated each time a performative is attempted and, while there is variation with each repetition of any procedure, the repetition must be accurate enough that the procedure is recognized.

Austin draws a line between the repetition of these conventional procedures in serious circumstances and those that are not serious. For example, if a marriage ceremony is invoked in a play, the actors may speak the performatives without actually marrying each other. For Derrida, this distinction between the so-called parasitic and real meaning of utterances is highly dubious. There is something paradoxical in the way that Austin excludes “parasitic” and “non-serious” from the general theory of performatives, while he simultaneously recognizes them “as the possibility available to every act of utterance” (Derrida 16-17).

Derrida’s reference to the two meanings of “communication” in the first part of the paper plays with this distinction between parasitic and real meanings. To Derrida, the metaphorical secondary meaning (a physical connection between two locations or a displacement of force) is seen to be dependent on the primary meaning of “communication” and would be excluded from Austin’s theory. Yet, primary meanings derive their position of value from a comparison to parasitic meanings. The gravity of a “serious” utterance depends on its difference from the parasitic non-serious utterance. Thus, for example, a promise that is made in real life can only be interpreted as such because it is not a fictional or parasitic promise. Because it is understood that the promise is not parasitic, the force of the promise is understood to be a real promise. In a similar manner, “communication” is understood to mean a medium through which

thoughts and ideas are transported because it is also understood that “communication” does not mean a displacement of force.

Derrida gives the example of the signature as a specific kind of conventional procedure that seemingly contradicts or undermines its own purpose. In signing documents, writers establish that they were present at the time of the inscription of the mark. Furthermore, the signature commits them to future behaviour, extending their presences from the time of the inscription into the future with indefinite limits. In order for a signature to have meaning, though, it must be inscribed in a unique situation that is different from every other instance of inscribing a signature. At a certain place and at a certain time, a person inscribes a signature that is different from other repetitions of that inscription. The force of the contradiction or undermining effect of the signature is amplified by the fact that it is a kind of inscription of a name that is both the same as and different from every other instance of that person inscribing his or her name. For example, practice signatures, writing a name, and signatures on different documents are all considered to be out of context but also unique in their own circumstances. Thus, while there is a conventionally accepted procedure for inscribing signatures, each inscription is a unique occurrence.

Derrida sees a tension in the way that Austin, on one hand, relies on iterability to make performatives work by convention but, on the other hand, excludes a kind of iterability that occurs in non-serious situations. The so-called purity of speech-acts is marred by the opposition to specific kinds of iterability. While Austin adheres to the belief that intention creates a context in which serious and non-serious uses of performatives can be separated, Derrida argues against that idea of context. For Derrida,

the inherent possibility of failure in the structure of locutionary acts means that intention cannot be transferred without failure or some loss of content. The intention of the sender cannot be absolutely maintained and, as a result, the context of meaning is never absolutely clear. Since there is an inherent possibility of failure in any action (verbal or physical), there must also be an inherent possibility that the intention of the sender is lost or altered in the process of communication. Intention is a factor in the determination of the context and meaning, but it is not the central and solitary meaning-determining factor. In the case of signatures, there is tension between the iterable nature of signatures and the uniqueness of their inscription. The fact that there are conventional procedures means that the procedures are not unique, and that the signatures that are inscribed are not unique. A signature that was inscribed at a different place and time may be extracted from its context and moved into a different one without any change to that signature. The transferred signature is the same as the one that would have been inscribed, and the context cannot fix a meaning to the signature.

As I commented at the beginning of this thesis, Austin's understanding of the word "intention" is that it is used in different ways to mean different things. If Derrida reads him as using intention to mean a general awareness of one's actions, then there seems to be an element of self-presence in this use. If people are aware of their own actions, then there is a split between the observer and the performer of the act, so people are literally present to themselves. However, Austin pushes a kind of soft-behaviourist understanding of "intention", so self-awareness does not necessarily require a split in people. Austin rejects the example of Hippolytus's excuse that his mouth made a promise that his mind did not intend to keep, and does not allow for the split between

intention and action (Austin, *Words* 9-10). Obviously there are acts that are below the level of intention (the beating of the heart, for example) and some acts are unintentional. Intention comes into play when people do things intentionally. This statement may seem to be circular, but it serves to rule out unintended acts (although people can still be held to be responsible for their unintended acts). This is not to say that intention is a concept that is defined by its antithesis. In “Three Ways of Spilling Ink,” Austin notes that “intentionally” is only added to a sentence to rule out the possibility of an unintended act (Austin, *Papers* 284). Unless “unintended” is added to qualify an act, it is always assumed that the act is intentional.

2. Pros and Cons: The Points of Contention

With the basic arguments or points of contention between Austin and Derrida laid out, I will now move on to the various commentaries that have given different interpretations of the relation between the two texts and philosophers. It is interesting to note that both Derrida’s supporters and detractors can be very dogmatic in their interpretations, and both camps are willing to dig in their heels to refute the other’s arguments without much serious consideration of the opposing lines of thinking. For example, Searle will not budge from his position and will not change his framework of argumentation. Similarly, Jonathan Culler maintains his position against Searle’s and will only debate by Derrida’s rules.

As expected, Derrida's supporters re-iterate his arguments in different ways. First, Christopher Norris gives an explanation of the general thrust of Derrida's argument, or the upshot of "Signature Event Context". Norris writes that Derrida calls into question philosophy's right to "erect a wholesale theory of mind and language on the basis of commonsense notions" that work in practical situations and for practical uses, but which "take on a different, more doctrinaire aspect when applied as a matter of philosophic principle" (Norris, *Derrida* 179). By critiquing Austin's theory of performatives, Derrida is "most emphatically denying the idea that philosophy can lay down the rules of this procedure by explaining how language *should or must* work if its workings are to make good sense" (Norris, *Derrida* 179). Obviously, this perspective sees *How to Do Things with Words* as a text that puts forward a theory of language and sets down a number of rules by which language functions. As Jonathan Culler puts it, Austin's theory is regarded as a "model for all language use" (Culler 2). It is evident that Norris and Culler believe (although they attribute it to Derrida) that Austin's theory not only describes how language works but states, dogmatically and doctrinally, how it *must* work.

According to Norris, Derrida takes a rhetorical approach to deflating Austin's heavily rule-governed theory of language. Norris explains that "there is much in 'Limited Inc.' that can hardly be interpreted as anything but a species of elaborate textual play", but this game has a serious purpose (Norris, *Derrida* 178). By writing about Austin in the way that he does, Derrida is trying to avoid rather than enter into a confrontation. The objective of Derrida's game of rhetoric is to expose the presumption of philosophers that they can get to the "conceptual heart of a text without wasting time over matters of resistant or (to them) unrewarding detail" (Norris, *Derrida* 183). When

Searle responds, Derrida writes a reply that is even more rhetorical and evasive, making it clear that his intent is to “baffle and provoke, rather than to reach any common ground of discussion” (Norris, *Deconstruction* 108). In fact, Derrida knows exactly what he is doing. As Norris observes, “Derrida is under no illusion that he has ‘taken Searle seriously’ or met his arguments with reasoned opposition at any point” (Norris, *Deconstruction* 114). Rather, the game is to avoid a direct run-in with Searle or any other opponent, leaving them without a direct target in order to achieve “a kind of tactical triumph” over the “literal-minded innocent dupe” (Norris, *Deconstruction* 114, *Derrida* 178).

Apart from the explanation of Derrida’s choice of writing style or rhetorical strategy, Norris also comments on the content of his criticism of Austin. Norris explains that one of Austin’s requirements for a felicitous performative is that the speaker must “‘mean what he says’ in the sense of being presently involved with his utterance and faithfully *intending* its import” (Norris, *Deconstruction* 109-110). This is all well and good but, according to Norris, Derrida argues that performatives must also “hold good for various occasions and contexts where the supposed original force of intention is no longer present” (Norris, *Deconstruction* 110). While it works with the original intention of the speaker, a performative must also work without that intention. Therefore, Austin’s criteria for performative felicity are actually inconsistent with the functioning of his performatives. Thus, in showing this internal inconsistency, Derrida has successfully undermined or deconstructed Austin’s theory of performatives.

In a slightly different way, Kevin Halton explains that Derrida argues against a serious/non-serious distinction because: 1) intentions are not present to or in utterances or texts, and 2) performatives, being inherently iterable, can be made into parasites if their

contexts are changed (Halion 161). Ian MacLean writes that extralinguistic details are needed to distinguish the meaning of a string of words because the iterable nature of language and the rules and conventions of utterances mean that the same sentence can be insincere or sincere (MacLean 4). He then cites an early portion of *How to Do Things with Words* to argue that Austin banishes “the possibility of a non-serious performative from his inquiry” (MacLean 5).

On the opposite side of the debate, Searle insists that Derrida has not read Austin appropriately and has “a distressing penchant for saying things that are obviously false” (Searle 205). As Searle’s position is well-known to anyone with a passing interest in the debate, I will only go over its basic arguments.¹² According to Searle, Derrida’s portrayal of Austin is an attack against a straw man that does not carry much weight in real philosophical argumentation. First, Derrida has actually confused iterability with the permanence of a text. A text may be repeated in so far as tokens of it can be reproduced, but the general text (the type) cannot be reproduced. Through repetition, the type gains a kind of extended existence or permanency, while the actual tokens of that type are much less durable. Furthermore, for Searle, iterability actually argues for the necessity of intention in fixing a contextual meaning to a string of words, because the words would be meaningless if the intentional context of their production is not understood each time that they are reproduced (Searle 201). For example, “King me” has a different application (is a different token of a general sentence type) each time that it is used (in a game of checkers or while making a joke, for example).

¹² More detailed and elaborate analyses of Searle’s counter-criticism of Derrida can be found in Jonathan Culler’s *On Deconstruction*, and Christopher Norris’s *Derrida*. Searle’s more controversial and hostile attacks against Derrida and deconstruction in general can be found in *Working Through Derrida*.

Searle finds Derrida's notion that there is no distinction between real and parasitic meaning baffling. Like Austin, Searle holds that parasitic meanings are secondary to primary ones because of logical dependency and not because of arbitrary choice or value (Searle 205). Without a primary meaning, there can be no secondary meanings. For example, without real promises, promises that are made in poems would not have any meaning. While recognizing the necessity of a concept of parasitic meaning, Searle also maintains that Austin does not exclude them metaphysically from his general theory of language. He maintains that Austin makes a practical choice of excluding any discussion of parasitic performatives to concentrate on the regular performatives (the subject at hand). This exclusion is merely an exclusion from the book, and Austin has other writings that deal with unsuccessful performatives and non-serious uses of language (Searle 204-205). Thus, Derrida is barking up the wrong tree, being too hasty in declaring that Austin excludes parasitic uses of words from his philosophy.

While the two extremes of support and detraction become more heated, some commentators have gingerly stepped in between them to point out that things are not so clear as either side makes them out to be. Mark Alfino has questioned whether Derrida's move of eliminating the distinction between serious and non-serious uses of words is actually basic to language (as he claims it to be), or if it is something that is imposed on language by Derrida's game (Alfino 147). Furthermore, Alfino observes that it is not absolutely clear that *How to Do Things with Words* is actually presenting a full-fledged general theory of language instead of just listing all of the things that may be done with performative words. However, Alfino concedes that "it is very hard to read through the book without feeling that a global, if pragmatic, theory of language has emerged" (Alfino

147). Unfortunately for the debaters, Alfino observes, “on many of the issues Derrida raises, Austin is either silent or his position has to be inferred from the rhetoric of the text” (Alfino 147).

Like Alfino, Stanley Cavell takes a less antagonistic approach to Derrida’s criticism of Austin but still disagrees with Derrida’s conclusions. In a chapter of *Philosophical Passages* called “What Did Derrida Want of Austin?”, Cavell expresses the view that Derrida’s criticism of Austin is, at different times, misinformed and uninformed. Cavell states that the philosophical traditions from which Austin and Derrida state their theories and make their arguments are incompatible and cannot be forced together by one side to criticize the other. According to Cavell, continental philosophies (or a few major strands of continental philosophy) “grant an autonomy – institutional and intellectual – to metaphysics as a persistent structure of Western thought, or an inner menace of it” (Cavell, *Passages* 46). Analytic philosophy denies metaphysics “in favor of the tests of science and logic” and what is called the “ordinary” with the result that both traditions seem “hopelessly naïve, even quite senseless, to one another” (Cavell, *Passages* 47). Cavell gives the example that Derrida seems to think that ordinary language is “an effect of a general writing which is its possibility”, while Wittgenstein (and Austin as a result) thinks that metaphysics is “an effect of ordinary language (needing its words but denying their shared criteria)” (Cavell, *Passages* 47).

In his invocation of the traditions of continental and analytic philosophy, Cavell is not saying that the traditions cannot enter into conversation but that care should be taken not to attribute different, mistaken meanings to the words of the other. From this perspective of a philosophical conversation, Cavell sees “Signature Event Context” a

valuable example of both the positive and negative meeting of the two traditions. On the one hand, Derrida picks up on some of Austin's thoughts and analyzes them from a different perspective to bring up questions and answers. Derrida reads Austin's distinction between normal and parasitic uses of words to come to a different conclusion than Austin did, and he notes Austin's emphasis on utterances while leaving writing as a secondary medium of communication. On the other hand, though, Derrida misses the philosophical background against which Austin writes and, as a result, confuses some of the arguments. Consequently, Derrida's paper does not merely criticize Austin but develops some of his ideas by questioning and pushing them in a different direction. Furthermore, Derrida's performance is "hilarious and devastating, high intellectual slapstick" only to those who "unquestionably admire Derrida" (Cavell, *Passages* 67). Otherwise, the "theatrical" response is not quite amusing (especially to someone who thinks as highly of Austin as Cavell does), and the reactions of both Searle and Derrida have done more harm than good in trying to create discussion between those who work in literary and philosophical studies (Cavell, *Passages* 67). Justifiably, Cavell sees the mock debate between Searle and Derrida as narrowing the interest in Austin and creating the false view that all of his philosophy can be summed up in the few lines that are quoted by either side when talking about performative utterances (Cavell, *Passages* 73).

Cavell's main criticism of "SEC" is that it does not understand the intellectual background that Austin is writing with and against. As Cavell sees it, Derrida does not appreciate or does not care to appreciate the anti-positivist position that Austin takes in declaring that some utterances do not describe or state states of affairs (Cavell, *Passages* 50). To the positivists of the time, empirically and logically verifiable statements have a

greater value than statements of aesthetics, ethics, religion, and other seemingly subjective types of statements. As a result, metaphysics was attacked as being unverifiable and lacking in adequation to reality. Cavell sees Austin's performatives as direct counter-examples of utterances that do not describe or state states of affairs but, nevertheless, have concrete empirical meanings and reflect reality (Cavell, *Passages* 50). Thus, Derrida's interpretation that Austin replaces truth with force is simply wrong.

According to Cavell, Austin is very much interested in truth, for his counter-example shows that there are true and verifiable utterances that are not descriptives (Cavell, *Passages* 50). For Austin, force is the full possibility of the interpreted meaning of a string of words, the different potential uses of that string. When a meaning is attached to a string of words, it limits the force of the words. As Strawson puts it, "to know the force of an utterance is the same thing as to know what illocutionary act, if any, was actually performed in issuing it" (Strawson 24). Rather than force, Cavell proposes that Austin replaces "truth" with "felicity", and descriptives and performatives are felicitous if they are adequate to reality (accurately reflect or describe reality) (Cavell, *Passages* 51). According to the old Platonic/positivist model, a sentence can be judged to be true or false depending on the actual state of affairs in reality.¹³ With Austin's performatives, the rules of the old model do not apply. "I name this ship the *Pequod*" cannot be true or false because it does not describe a state of affairs. The sentence can only be felicitous or infelicitous depending on the success of the performative.

Apart from the mistaken interpretation of Austin's idea of force and the background against which it is used, Cavell also charges Derrida with misinterpreting

¹³ This is the correspondence theory of truth. Under this model, a sentence is true if it corresponds with reality.

Austin's exclusion of failures in his explanation of performatives. To Cavell, the exclusion that Derrida sees as being a structural denial of failure or a disregarding of so-called parasitic performatives is rather nothing but an exclusion of a subject that does not belong in the book (Cavell, *Passages* 52). In fact, Cavell notes, Austin actually has two theories to deal with the failure of performatives. First, there is the theory of excuses that deals with the failure of performatives in their roles as actions. Second, there is the theory of pretence and imitation to deal with the failure of performatives in their roles as utterances. For Cavell, Austin mentions these exclusions to refer to them apart from the context of *How to Do Things with Words*, and not, as Derrida thinks, to ignore them.

With Derrida's mention of Nietzsche, Cavell points out that Austin does indeed make a Nietzschean move but that the move involves the idea of tragedy and not force. When Austin refers to Hippolytus's claim that his mouth made a promise that his soul or mind did not intend, it is a multi-layered reference. First, the reference points to the idea that excuses can be made for such promises, so the dualist acceptance of such a theory of a separated mind and body leaves a loop-hole for liars and dishonest people to abuse. If such a system is accepted, then no one can be held to the contract that his or her words create. A second layer of the reference (and Austin's own theory of excuses) shows that different excuses are made to back-peddle on different parts of a performative. The myriad excuses available to every user of language shows that there are many ways for a performative to fail. Lastly, Austin's reference to tragedy points to the Nietzschean idea of tragedy as being beyond excuses, explanations, or justifications (Cavell, *Passages* 54). Excuses have limitations and only so much ambiguity exists to wriggle around one's words. Beyond that limit, explanations are no longer excuses.

Unlike Cavell, Simon Glendinning does not think that the philosophies of Austin and Derrida are held within the boundaries of their contrasting philosophical traditions (although Cavell actually thinks that Austin and Derrida stand at the margins of their own traditions). According to Glendinning, at the actual level where philosophical work is done (reading, interpreting, and forming theories), the distinction between the two traditions is “virtually insignificant” (Glendinning 10). Agreeing with Derrida, Glendinning sees Austin as falling to the same charges that he lays against those methods of philosophy that see all utterances as constative statements (Glendinning 11). Even as he criticizes that kind of philosophy (what Derrida refers to as traditional philosophy) for holding the view that all words are names, Austin works out a theory of language that imbues performatives with continual self-present intention. Austin inadvertently walks the same, well-trodden path of his philosophical predecessors and, as such, his theory of ordinary language is not really grounded in ordinary language but metaphysics. Therefore, Glendinning concludes, “Austin’s conception of the ordinary functioning of language remains in the (insensible) grip of inherited presuppositions” (Glendinning 16).

Yet, along with his position that philosophical tradition has little to do with the ways in which Derrida and Austin differ, Glendinning also notes that Austin uses a Fregean notion of force (Glendinning 24). For Gottlob Frege, Glendinning explains, force is the intention of the speaker of an utterance that his or her utterance be taken seriously and that it claims to be true (Glendinning 24). According to Glendinning, Austin, like Frege, thinks that an utterance that does not claim to be true or serious (such as a parasitic utterance) is not really meaningful. The reason that Austin can dismiss parasitic uses of words is because he lists intention as one of the appropriate

circumstances that is required for the successful execution of a performative. Therefore, Austin's theory of performatives has, as Derrida claims, a heavy element of intentional content.

In their criticisms of "Signature Event Context", Searle and Cavell refer to two areas of Austin's philosophy that Derrida, or so Searle and Cavell claim, seemingly misses. In Austin's *Philosophical Papers*, three papers discuss these two areas of philosophy. "A Plea for Excuses" was published in 1956, and "Pretending" was published in 1958. The third paper ("Three Ways of Spilling Ink") is taken from Austin's notes and was never published (Austin, *Papers* 272). Cavell reads these three papers as evidence that Austin did not deny that performatives could fail and actually had done work to explore what happens when words and actions fail. Whether or not Austin's work would answer Derrida's criticism is altogether a different question. Searle and Cavell read Derrida's criticism to mean that Derrida is accusing Austin of neglecting the possibility of failure from his general theory of language. Austin's work with excuses and pretence would answer this charge of exclusion.

"A Plea for Excuses" deals with an area of philosophy that is normally lumped in with ethics. As is reflected in the title, this paper is both a quick examination of excuses and a justification of the study of excuses. Austin writes that his work on excuses brings him "what philosophy is so often thought, and made, barren of – the fun of discovery, the pleasures of co-operation, and the satisfaction of reaching agreement" (Austin, *Papers* 175). The pleasure that Austin expresses implies that this area of his work is not something to be swept aside as frivolous or mundane. Rather, "A Plea for Excuses" is thought to be "one of Austin's best, most fertile, and most characteristic contributions" to

an area of philosophy that is usually passed over or left to ethics (Warnock 65). This study of excuses pinpoints the parts in various processes where there are breakdowns that cause actions to fail.

Austin opens the paper by noting that there are differences between justifications and excuses. Both responses are given whenever someone is accused of doing something undesirable, wrong, and, generally, that should not have been done. A justification is an admission that the accused did the deed but with the further argument that the deed should have been done or that it is not wrong or undesirable. An excuse, on the other hand, is an admission that the deed is wrong or should not have been done but with the further argument that it is not fair or correct to say only that the accused did the deed. Whereas successful justifications can pardon or even praise those who have been accused, Austin notes that, “few excuses get us out of it completely” (Austin, *Papers* 177).

To analyze the component parts of the process of accusation and the offering of excuses, Austin points out that the idea of performing an action is usually vague (Austin, *Papers* 179). Acts can vary from a single movement of a particular part of the body to complicated processes of systems. The study of excuses sheds light on these differences between the kinds of acts that we talk about by pointing to situations in which there are failures in the process of acting (Austin, *Papers* 178). Furthermore, the different types of excuses that are offered and accepted show the different possible breakdowns. Austin lists a number of factors that will influence whether or not an excuse is accepted.¹⁴

¹⁴ The full list runs from page 189-204 of this edition of the *Philosophical Papers*. Those who want to read Austin's specific examples should refer to those pages.

Mapping these specific and potential breakdowns yields a more complete model of action that includes successes and failures.

While “A Plea for Excuses” deals with the aftermath of action, “Pretending” deals with the things that can be said about certain types of actions as they occur. Austin’s main question in the paper is “How do I tell if someone is pretending or not?” (Austin, *Papers* 254). Austin rejects the claim that pretending and not pretending are only separated by a certain something that is present in the real action (this certain quality is usually called “intent”). First, he notes, it is usually obvious that someone is pretending (Austin, *Papers* 253-254). Second, there is usually a certain expected limit to pretending, a separation or insulation from reality (Austin, *Papers* 254). This limit may sometimes be vague, but it exists nevertheless. Third, pretending is a public act, a kind of performance (Austin, *Papers* 258). For example, if A is pretending to be angry, then the one thing that A cannot be is angry. If A acts in a way that crosses the line between what the audience considers real and pretended anger, then A is no longer pretending to be angry but is actually angry. Even if A tries to argue that it was only pretended anger, the argument would not be accepted since there is reasonable proof that it was real anger.¹⁵ This double deception, of course, may or may not be the point of A’s behaviour.

There are circumstances in which pretending to do something is to do it, so the limit of pretending does not apply. Austin gives the example of putting a golf ball into a hole: one might pretend to put the ball, but that would not be pretending to putt it into the hole. On the other hand, if one putts the ball into the hole, then one has performed the act rather than pretended to do it. Yet, there seems to be no other way of going about pretending to do such a thing without actually doing it. This problem moves Austin to

¹⁵ At the end of the paper, Austin notes that he has not dealt with pretending to oneself.

touch on the etymology of “pretend”. He notes that the Latin word from which “pretend” is derived (“Prae-tendre”) literally means “holding or stretching one thing in front of another in order to protect or conceal or disguise it” (Austin, *Papers* 260). Thus, there is a potential explanation for actions that seem to cross the line between pretending and actually performing the action. Austin gives another example of pretending that is not so easy to systematize: a man washes a window and surveys the valuables behind the window to eventually steal them. It makes no sense to say that the man is not actually washing the windows because he is washing them, nor is it accurate to say that he is really washing the window without any other intentions. Here, Austin applies the Latin etymology to point out that the man is using the window washing as a screen to deflect attention away from his surveying of the valuables. Thus, he is pretending to wash the windows with the intention of surveying the valuables. The fact that he actually washes the windows does not matter in this case because it is only being used to deflect attention (Austin, *Papers* 264).

Although its purpose is to deflect attention away from one’s actual intentions or actual actions, the act of pretending is not the same as that of trying to make someone believe something. Austin gives the following example to prove his point: A hides in a bush and quacks when B walks by. A is not pretending to be a duck because there is no other behaviour that would mark the act of quacking as pretence, but A has the intention of making B believe that there is a duck in the bush (Austin, *Papers* 266). Note also that A is not using the quacking to divert B’s attention from something else that A is doing.

The example of the duck reveals a different aspect of pretending, and Austin moves to note that pretending must simulate distinctive characteristics and not incidental ones. He gives the example of a person at a party who, being told to pretend to be a hyena, lays down on the ground and pretends to sleep (Austin, *Papers* 266). Pretending must draw attention away from the person's obvious immediate characteristics or actions and divert that attention to some performance. While it is true that hyenas sleep, that simulated behaviour does not draw attention away from the obvious fact that the person is not a hyena, and the pretence is a failure. Here, it should be noted that Austin also draws a difference between pretending to do something and pretending to be something (Austin, *Papers* 257). Being and doing require different kinds of pretence, and the separation between actually doing and pretending to do something is different from that of actually being something and pretending to be that thing. For example, pretending to putt the ball into the hole is very similar to actually doing it, but pretending to be a hyena and actually being a hyena are completely different.

With the general distinction between pretending and trying to make someone believe something, Austin also argues that more complicated forms of simulation are not the same as pretending. Make-up, costumes, sets, different accents, and other more elaborate simulations are distinct from pretending due to the more involved nature of those activities. Acting on a stage, for example, requires much more than just simulation an action or behaviour. These more complicated simulations (acting, extended trickery, imitation, etc.) have their own requirements.

“Three Ways to Spill Ink” slightly develops themes that run under the theories of excuses and pretending. The paper's main purpose is to show that the word “intention” is

used in a very sloppy manner, and the connected idea of “freedom” is extremely slippery.

Austin notes that there are differences between “intentionally”, “purposefully”, and “deliberately” even though no distinction is usually made when people use those words (Austin, *Papers* 274). To mix these three terms together is to commit a large mistake. Austin gives the example that if A spills ink intentionally, then there must be some sort of plan or forethought involved. To Austin, intention acts like the light on a miner’s helmet, illuminating a certain distance but also leaving most things dark and unseen (Austin, *Papers* 283). Austin gives another example: a sign warns “do not feed the penguins”. I feed them peanuts anyway, and the peanuts turn out to be fatal to these penguins. I did not feed them deliberately because I did not think about the possible effect of peanuts on penguins, did not take the time to consider the diet of Antarctic birds (perhaps I did not read the sign either). I did not feed them purposefully because I did not want the result that the act produced (dead penguins). That leaves me with the accusation that I fed the penguins intentionally. It must be admitted, then that I fed the penguins intentionally (as Austin puts it, I am no idle bird-feeder), but my intention only went as far as feeding the birds and did not extend to killing them or to any of the consequences that result from feeding them (Austin, *Papers* 275). Of course, I did not kill the penguins on purpose, intentionally, or deliberately (the possibility of doing harm to the penguins never even arose in my decision-making process). Similarly, the question of intention arises in questioning a person about his or her intentions for someone else.

If A is said to spill the ink on purpose, then A did it to achieve an effect or result but not necessarily with a plan in mind. To do something on purpose is to decide to do it in order to achieve an expected result but not plan to do it in advance. Austin gives the

example that there is an emergency and the driver of a fire truck runs over a child's bicycle on the way to the site of the emergency. The driver obviously did not intend to run over the bicycle (there was no prior plan to run over as many bicycles as possible on the way to the site). However, the driver did run over the bicycle on purpose because there was a need for the consequence of the act (that the truck did not have to slow down and could arrive at the site in time).

Lastly, if A spills the ink deliberately, then A has thought about whether or not the act should be performed. For Austin, the question "shall I or shan't I" precedes every deliberate act. Deliberation requires time and forethought, as well as a weighing of positive and negative reasons to perform the act in question. Deliberation shows that the intent is not merely a general awareness of one's own actions but a more thoughtful understanding and planning of those actions.

These three papers would seem to answer the objection that Austin does not deal with the possibility of failure in his theory of illocutionary acts, but this reply misses Derrida's argument. Derrida's charge is that Austin distinguishes too sharply between regular and parasitic meanings, and the exclusion of parasitic meanings is the real denial of the inherent possibility of failure (the failure of context to restrict the meaning of words to serious or parasitic meanings). Even with Austin's work on excuses and pretence, this second charge is more difficult to answer. To Derrida, puns and sentences that have different levels of meaning resist Austin's idea of illocutionary force and, consequently, can cause the more basic locutionary act to fail. This is the possibility of failure that Austin ignores, not the failure of illocutionary acts that the three essays discuss.

It is at this point that Derrida's reading of Austin takes a turn towards generating dispute rather than accurately portraying Austin's philosophy. Austin does not say that locutionary acts only have one meaning, but rather makes the parallel point that locutionary acts can have any number of meanings. To Austin, locutionary acts are just strings of words that can be construed in different ways (Austin, *Words* 99). It is the role of the illocutionary force to determine *how* the locutionary act can be understood. Even when the illocutionary force of a sentence is understood, it can still leave a number of possibilities for interpretation. For example, someone may order a bowl of pea soup, but the string of words "bowl of pea soup" can carry any number of puns or different levels of meaning. To Austin, if a speech-situation is known, then the receiver of the sentence would understand the different illocutionary acts that are occurring. For example, the sentence can be a request for a certain type of soup if a waiter hears it, but it can also be a joke for children who like the words "pea soup." Austin does not differentiate between a primary and a secondary meaning between the different ways in which the sentence can be understood, since they are all illocutionary acts. To Austin, the biggest problem is being able to determine what illocutionary act (or acts) is being performed.

3. What Do We Do Now? Some Ramifications

All the arguments that go back and forth between the Derrida and his supporters and Austin's followers boil down to a single question of what can be done with Austin's work, what it can be used for. If, following Derrida, *How to Do Things with Words* and

Austin's theory of performatives is deconstructed and left to literary theorists, the theory opens up to a certain kind of use that is actually counter to Austin's theory. Jonathan Culler explores some of the ramifications of a Derridean victory in a paper called "Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative." What, according to Culler, "began as a model for all language use," turns into something very different in the hands of these theorists (Culler 2). Austin's theory of performatives is viewed as "an active, world-making use of language, which resembles literary language," so this world-making aspect is emphasized and developed without much regard to or concern over Austin's intention (Culler 2). The intention of the author, of course, has little to do with contemporary literary theory.

With *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin wanted to find a theory of performatives that would eventually fit into a larger theory of language (to which he would be making a contribution but not formulating the whole general theory). As much as possible, Austin wanted to return to everyday language to extract the metaphysical assumptions that are taken for granted. These assumptions, for Austin, lead to misunderstandings in the way that words are used and the meanings that are generated. Derrida's project is similar to Austin's in its goal of eliminating metaphysical assumptions in language but, unlike Austin, Derrida wants to blur the line between ordinary uses of words and metaphorical uses. This blurring would allow the secondary meanings of words to gain a more prominent position and dissolve the distinction between philosophy and literature, serious utterances and fictional utterances. For Austin, metaphorical uses of words are not necessarily the same as non-serious uses.

Serious utterances are not necessarily literal, so metaphorical uses of words can also be serious. The actual *use* of words should always be considered on a case-by-case basis.

While it is philosophically dubious, the literary use of the theory of performatives (which is distinct from Derrida's view) fits right into the overall event of Derrida's encounter with Austin. The creative aspect of performatives (words that create or alter states of affairs) is exactly what drew Derrida to Austin in the first place. Ironically, then, deconstruction (as it is supposed to) has turned Austin's alleged exclusion of literary or non-serious utterances from his theory into an embrace of such utterances and uses. Culler captures this irony by observing that "for Austin, literature had to be excluded in order to get at the fundamental nature of the performative; for literary theorists, literature is a primary example of the performative functioning of language" (Culler 3).

The theoretical move to morph Austin's performatives into that of the literary theorists is a quick, deft gesture of rhetoric. Culler attributes to Paul de Man the idea that since every utterance is a kind of performative-constative hybrid (as Austin seems to say at the end of *How to Do Things with Words*), what this hybrid says (its meaning) and what it does (its illocutionary force) are not necessarily harmonious or co-operative (Culler 5). Culler states that, "for Austin...the performative breaks the link between meaning and the intention of the speaker, for what act I perform with my words is not determined by my intention but by social and linguistic conventions" (Culler 3). There is a gap or space, then, between the meaning of a performative and its illocutionary force, and this is fortuitous and delightful to anyone who wants to absorb performatives into

deconstructive theories.¹⁶ The Austinian performative turns into the literary performative, the illocutionary act that is part utterance and part behaviour becomes “performative behaviour” (Culler 5).

Culler refers to Judith Butler as an example of a literary theorist who makes use of Austin’s performatives. According to Culler, Butler’s theory is that gender is a kind of performative behaviour, a mixture of convention or social practice and individual performance (Culler 5). This is not to say that a person can just pick and choose between genders, since there is no “person” (conscious subject) before gender. Gender is part of the self-identity of a person, and it is developed through the “ ‘compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms’ ” (Culler 6). This compulsory repetition constrains and compels, but it does not absolutely force a person into any gendered behaviour. The problem with this constraint, according to Culler’s reading of Butler, is that no one can actually meet the social or conventional ideal or expectation of gender (Culler 6). Therefore, there is always a space or gap between a particular person’s gendered behaviour and the ideal expectations of society. There is nothing that can be done about gendering, but resistance can be put up in this gap between behaviour and expectation to change conventional expectations.

With Butler’s literary absorption of the Austinian theory of performatives, Culler ends up with a two-sided idea of the performative. He poses the obvious question of whether the performative is a “socially embedded act or self-reflexive act”, and answers that, “the same concept sustains two rather different notions of the basic nature of language” (Culler 3). This, however, is not quite an accurate picture of Austin’s theory

¹⁶ Those who are familiar with the strategies of deconstruction will appreciate the discovery of this space that, in the hands of capable deconstructionists such as Culler, will widen into a chasm that undermines Austin’s original position.

of performatives. Austin's performative utterance is taken to be a kind of theatrical performance and, as a result, this kind of literary absorption of Austin's theory is heavily flawed and philosophically untenable. This is not to say that only literary-minded people could accept the absorption but rather that those who have read Austin (mostly philosophers and some literary theorists) can spot the flaws more easily. It is an issue of familiarity.

There are several glaring misinterpretations or misrepresentations (to borrow Searle's characterization) of Austin, and Culler recognizes some of them but contributes to others. First, Culler knows that there is an obvious difference between Butler's view and Austin's view of performatives. Culler states that Austin's main concern was language and the methods that can be used to study it, while Butler is concerned with social processes (Culler 7). This difference between Butler and Austin, Culler warns, should not be seen as a difference between philosophy and literature but rather a difference of interpretation (Culler notes that Butler is a philosopher who happens to be doing work in literature). Secondly, there is the fact that the success of Butler's performatives cannot be measured by a standard of felicity as Austin's criteria had set out. It is probably the case that Butler wants to have as infelicitous a performance as possible, reflecting the most resistance to conventional expectations as possible. Thirdly, Austin's performatives occur in a single event or ceremony while literary works achieve effects through repetition even if some effects are achieved through a single reading of a text.

Some of Culler's observations are correct, but he seems to wear blinders when it comes to Austin's philosophy. On the first point, Culler is partially right. Austin is very

much concerned with language, but the issue is not so simple as to contrast that concern with Butler's interest in social processes. As I have already noted, Austin saw "language" as a word with many meanings. In a way, Austin is interested in what happens when a person issues utterances, so this is an interest in language. However, Austin is also very interested in the behavioural consequences of utterances and language, so it is not fair to say that his interest only lies with a certain understanding of language. After all, Austin did study and write about excuses and the ethical implications of utterances, and these subjects are as related to social processes as Butler's work with gender theory. For example, the breaking of laws or rules and the subsequent punishments for such transgression require a system of evaluation and justifications or excuses that may or may not be valid once they are analyzed. Social justice and responsibility (the language of laws and ethics) are just as much a part of social processes as gender theory. To Austin, illocutionary acts are as linguistic as they are behavioural, so it is incorrect and misleading to characterize them as merely being verbal utterances.

Culler's second observation is correct in its questioning of Butler's use of the term "performative". Butler's use of the word seems to imply the theatrical performance that she denies, and it seems to have nothing to do with Austin (Culler 6). "Performative behaviour" is not an utterance but a life-long series of behaviours that may or may not conform with social expectations. It is unclear how "performative behaviour" actually relates to Austin's illocutionary acts. One of the important requirements of Austin's performatives is that the person must perform the act willingly, but there is no choice in Butler's "performative behaviour." If one accepts Butler's idea that "it's a girl" is a performative utterance, then one must also accept the idea that the baby was something

else before it became a girl with that utterance. For example, the Queen of England may knight someone and that act changes the knighted person's social status so, similarly, Butler's theory seems to say that a girl is not a girl until she is declared to be girl (just as a person is only a knight when he or she has been knighted). However, it is more likely that declarations (Butler's) of this kind are unnecessary, since the child will be socialized even if no such utterance is ever made.¹⁷ This possibility of silent socialization (the possibility that a child could be brought into the world of conventional expectations without "it's a girl" ever being uttered) actually nullifies the performative status of "it's a girl." For Austin, a sentence is only being used as a performative if the act that the sentence triggers cannot be done without it. For example, a promise cannot be made without a sentence that performs the act of promising.

The element of active choice only comes into play, in Butler's theory, much later on when the child has reached a sufficient level of understanding to recognize social conventions and expectations as such. Only then does the person willingly choose to try to meet or reject those expectations. Presumably, also, the resistance to the conventional expectations would take the form of some sort of counter-conventional behaviour, but this merely reverses the expectations to create different sets of norms of gender. It seems that there is always some sort of new convention that must be overcome because the resistance to the old convention only sets up different expectations.

Culler's third observation is half right. Austin's examples of illocutionary acts does tend to involve only a single utterance or an instance of performativity, but this does

¹⁷ Of course, there is a distinction between gender and sex in many gender theories, so saying that someone is a girl does not mean the same thing as saying that she is female. Yet, the declaration "it's a girl" can also be used to state the fact that the child is a female when the parents do not know in advance what the sex of the child is. In that case, the declaration is a constative statement rather than a performative one, since the declaration only reports that the child is female and does not make her so.

not mean he thinks all illocutionary acts take place in such a short span of time. One criterion of felicitous performatives is that the person performing the act commits himself or herself to certain kinds of behaviours in the future. For example, once a ship is officially named, there is a commitment on the part of those involved to call the ship by its official name (nick-names are also only given with a performative, though unofficial, naming ceremony or process). Similarly, if someone gets married, then that person commits himself or herself to a certain set of rules of behaviour (those of a married person within a certain society at a certain period in time). While a text achieves its effects with each different reading, each individual reading still refers back to a single text. By contrast, a married person may act in certain ways that obey the rules of the promise or agreement of marriage without always referring back to that promise or agreement.

Culler makes some interesting observations about literary performatives, but his characterization of Austin is suspect. Culler seems to think that Austin was trying to develop some sort of theory or model of “all language use”, a Theory of Language, but this is not the case (Culler 2). Austin used his analysis of language as a way to contribute to the broader inquiries of philosophy. Language only covers a portion of this larger field of inquiries (the size of the portion depends on the importance that is placed on language). Also, it should not be forgotten that *How to Do Things with Words* (and *Philosophical Papers* for that matter) is not a treatise on performatives or a grand declaration of a philosophical position but rather a collected set of lectures. Thus, it is not surprising that Austin should move from one position to another, beginning with a simple theory and developing it further throughout the lectures. Also, throughout the

lectures, Austin constantly reassesses his conclusions, so there is no reason to think that the final lecture presents a final and decisive picture or model of performatives and that he would not reassess that conclusion.

A second mistake that Culler makes with Austin's philosophy is to claim that there is a break between the meaning and intention of a speaker and the act that is performed by the utterance. This is another version of Derrida's critique of the role of intention in Austin's theory, and it also does not work very well. Where Derrida and Derrideans like Culler claim that Austin's performatives require a moment of complete self-present intention, Austin's idea of the role of intention is different from their portrayal. As Austin's work in his papers show, the idea of "intention" is not so easy to nail down.¹⁸ One of the six criteria that Austin lists for the felicitous performance of an illocutionary act is that the person who is performing the act must have the necessary thoughts and feelings or intend to follow through and commit to future behaviours (Austin, *Words* 15). Therefore, someone cannot make a promise and later claim that she or he did not intend to keep that promise. The promise would not count as a successful (felicitous) illocutionary act, so there would be no space or gap between the performative utterance and the result. Of course, there is no way to be certain how anyone will act in the future, so evidence of felicity can only work retrospectively. Also, there are degrees of intentionality ("fully intending" to throttle someone is not the same as only "half intending" to throttle him or her). For Austin, Derrida's claim of self-present intention is too simplistic.

Culler (and possibly de Man) is technically right to say that Austin creates a constative-performative hybrid in the form of the illocutionary act, but this is a

¹⁸ Recall the example of feeding peanuts to penguins.

misleading claim. Austin's revision of the differences between performatives and constatives does not result in a hybrid but a different kind of distinction between different kinds of speech-acts. Austin's initial purpose in creating a theory about performatives was to distinguish performatives from constatives, to show the logical positivists of his time that some utterances are meaningful but also do not have truth values. With his constantly revised positions, however, Austin does not keep this distinction. The hybrid that Culler talks about is the illocutionary act, but there is no sense of the constative and performative left in the theory of illocutionary acts. Where constative and performative sentences both had meaning, locutionary acts do not have meaning (or have too many meanings) until the illocutionary force is understood. Illocutionary acts are hybrids in the sense that they convey the ways in which sentences should be understood (as being reports, jokes, warnings, requests, etc.), but they also work in a completely different kind of framework than constatives and performatives.

3.1 Rorty's Meliorism

William James dubbed his brand of pragmatism "meliorism" because, according to James, it could bring together opposing philosophical positions to glean useful information and methods from each position. Similarly, Richard Rorty's version of pragmatism aims to level out some of the large cracks that separate the different readings of Austin to take advantage of the strengths of each reading. To Rorty, philosophers can be divided into two groups: ironists (private philosophers) and problem-solvers (public philosophers). The first group seeks to create itself or make itself autonomous through

different philosophies, while the second group seeks to change societies by changing social institutions. To Rorty, Derrida falls into the first group of philosophers while Austin falls into the second, and it is a mistake to try to bring one into the other's sphere because their projects and ultimate goals are completely different. In fact, many philosophical problems are created when philosophers of one type try to criticize or argue with those of the other type.

According to Rorty, "the sort of autonomy which self-creating ironists like Nietzsche, Derrida, or Foucault seek is not the sort of thing that *could* ever be embodied in social institutions", so "as *public* philosophers they are at best useless and at worst dangerous" but they are very useful in helping to form or alter private senses of identity or self-images (Rorty, *Contingency* 65, 68).¹⁹ For Rorty, this separation of the public and the private means that the things that different philosophers write can be used for different purposes and one group does not need to justify itself to the other (since the justification will always fail). Being "oracular world-disclosers" who are "good at leaping in the dark", private philosophers do not write for the general public as much as they do for smaller groups of people who know and understand what they are trying to do (Rorty, "Is Derrida?" 140). To Rorty, Derrida invents new words, plays around with language and word games, and writes "for the delight of us who share his background, who find the same rather esoteric things as funny or beautiful or moving as he does" (Rorty, "Is Derrida?" 138). As long as Derrida stays with his strength (this kind of

¹⁹ The potential danger that private philosophers pose is that their work can be mistaken to be public philosophy. When Nietzsche writes about Zarathustra and the super-man or over-man, he is not espousing a public view of the world (an ideology) but expressing a personal desire and ideal. However, the deliberate misreading and subsequent portrayal of this Nietzschean ideal in propaganda by the Nazi party proved to be extremely dangerous.

private philosophy), he will actually have more influence than if he tries to be a public philosopher.

For Rorty, people who think that Derrida is putting forward a new theory of language or making arguments for a different theory of language (like Culler and Norris) are missing the point. Rorty thinks that “it is a mistake to think that Derrida, or anybody else, ‘recognized’ problems about the nature of textuality or writing which had been ignored by the tradition”, because philosophical problems are not scattered around the universe waiting to be found by people with different kinds of magnifying glasses (Rorty, “Deconstruction” 22). People like Culler and Norris miss the point that “the fact that language is a play of differences, as well as an instrument useful in acquiring knowledge, gives us no reason to think that words like *différance* and *trace* can do to, or for, philosophy what Heidegger failed to accomplish with his own magic words- *Sein*, *Ereignis*, and so forth” (Rorty, “Deconstruction” 3).²⁰ That is, just because Derrida replaces older buzzwords with new buzzwords, it does not mean that he is any closer to Truth or Reality than the philosophers who came and went before him. The very ideas of Truth and Reality are the same ideas that Derrida attacks at every turn, so it would be embarrassing if it turns out that Derrida has deconstructed those previous philosophies only to place his own in their place. To Rorty, Derrida is at his worst and weakest when he writes this way and, fortunately, Derrida does not indulge very often in public philosophy.

²⁰ Rorty thinks that, early on, Derrida was susceptible to writing this way. Comments such as “there is no outside the text” have a metaphysical ring that Rorty dislikes and sees as a great weakness in an ironist like Derrida. Derrida’s later writings, however, no longer suffer from this metaphysical delusion. To Rorty, the mature Derrida is fully an ironist.

Instead of argumentation (and following the later Wittgenstein's therapeutic approach to philosophy), Rorty thinks that philosophical problems arise when language games reach their limits or when contrasting, incompatible language games collide.²¹ Therefore, the value of a private philosopher like Derrida lies in the fact that he can "think up ways of speaking which made old ways of speaking optional, and thus more or less dubious" (Rorty, "Deconstruction" 22). That is, private philosophers can expand existing vocabularies or invent new ones that will eventually expand the public's general understanding and consciousness (it usually takes a while for intellectual models to trickle from academic circles to the general public). With the expanded or altered vocabulary or language game, the old problems will not arise, since the old limits are moved farther back and new language games can replace the incompatible old ones. With each subsequent expansion or alteration, old problems are not solved but simply cease to arise and, eventually, are forgotten and disappear.²²

With this view of Derrida as a private philosopher, it is not surprising that, while he admires Derrida, Rorty has no delusions about the deconstructive readings of Austin.

²¹ A language game is, *very roughly*, the equivalent of a vocabulary. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein lists the many different meanings of the word "game" to show that there is no one meaning that always applies to the word. "Language game" refers to the same undecided number of uses that any language can have. Furthermore, "language" does not refer to a whole language but only a certain basic portion of the whole. For example, asking questions is a language game, since there are myriad ways of asking questions. Thus, when someone talks about asking questions, one should not think that there is only one way to do so, or go searching for a single theory of question-asking. Those who fall for this trap of meta-theories succumb to what Wittgenstein calls the bewitchment of language (the feeling or thought that things *must* be a certain way).

²² Therapeutic philosophy is called by that name because it does not seek to solve problems by finding answers to them but, instead, eliminates their causes. For example, one does not find the solution to the problem of skepticism by looking for bedrock propositions or certain facts about the universe. One solves the problem by looking at the confused way in which philosophers like Descartes have used terms such as "know" and "to be certain of". Changing the way that these terms are used, dragging them back from their metaphysical heights to their ordinary meanings, eliminates the cause of the problem of skepticism. For example, the regular use of "know" does not include Descartes's idea of "absolutely knowing" that anything exists. The Cartesian use of the word is merely a misapplication of linguistic rules that creates conceptual problems.

Rorty agrees that Searle's criticism of Derrida's reading of Austin is "largely correct" and that Derrida's reply in *Limited Inc.* does not actually deal with the criticisms leveled against him (Rorty, "Deconstruction" 21). The reason for this strategic evasion (as Norris calls it) is that if Derrida follows the rules and intentions that Austin had developed, then the deconstructive arguments against Austin lose most of their potency (Rorty, *Contingency* 133). Also, original thinkers (private philosophers) forge new vocabularies instead of making "surprising philosophical discoveries about old ones" and, consequently, "they are not likely to be good at argumentation" (Rorty, "Deconstruction 9). According to Rorty, Derrida's reading of Austin is inaccurate because Derrida "blithely attributes to him all sorts of traditional motives and attitudes which Austin prided himself on having avoided" (Rorty, "Deconstruction" 21). This misrepresentation of Austin is most clearly evident when Derrida tries to portray Austin as a kind of Platonist by pushing Austin's use of intention in a different direction than Austin had intended.

For Rorty, it is too great of a burden for deconstruction to be "*both* 'rigorous argument within philosophy and displacement of philosophical categories and philosophical attempts at masters'", so he suggests that "the 'rigorous argument' part" be jettisoned (Rorty, "Is Derrida?" 137-138). Rorty's half-joking suggestion means that deconstruction cannot claim to be both a private and a public philosophy. If it claims to be a public philosophy, then it must play by the rules that other public philosophies have established, and it must truly argue rigorously instead of strategically evading confrontations that question its public status. If, on the other hand, deconstruction claims to be a private philosophy, then it does not need to and should not engage in arguments

with public philosophies. However, this also means that deconstructionists should stop claiming that they are working on new and more progressive theories of language because that is a task for public philosophies (unless those deconstructionists are working on theories of private languages).

Still keeping in mind that Rorty sees Derrida as a private philosopher, Rorty argues that there is no reason for Derrida to engage in the argumentative rules by which Searle debates. It is only necessary to follow the rules of argumentation “if one wants to argue with other people, but there are other things to do with philosophers than argue with them” (Rorty, *Contingency* 135). In fact, because Derrida is not trying to argue with Searle, to establish consensus, or to prove himself to be right and Searle to be wrong, there is no reason for him to respond to Searle’s criticism with counter-arguments. Since Derrida and Searle do not share a common philosophical vocabulary and “arguments only work if a vocabulary in which to state premises is shared by speaker and audience”, Rorty believes that it is useless for Derrida to argue with Searle. Conversely, it is equally useless for Searle to keep up the engagement with Derrida, since Derrida will never give him a satisfying reply.

The reason that Derrida cannot argue is that if he does, he risks placing himself into and becoming a part of the philosophical tradition that he criticizes, “turning himself into a metaphysician, one more claimant to the title of discoverer of the primal, deepest vocabulary” (Rorty, “Deconstruction” 16). As such, Rorty argues that “Derrida does not want to make a single move within the language game which distinguishes between fantasy and argument, philosophy and literature, serious writing and playful writing”, “he is not going to play by the rules of somebody else’s final vocabulary” (Rorty,

Contingency 133). This also explains his constant evasion of Searle, whose final vocabulary is so constricting and hostile to Derrida and his vocabulary. For Rorty, the Derridean resistance to all types of argumentation and direct debate is as much a survival strategy as it is a rhetorical strategy. Derrida simply will not and *cannot* play by those rules.

According to Rorty, Derrida also does not want to create a new theory of language (hence his avoidance of defining “deconstruction” and concretely setting down its methods or techniques), because Derrida knows that “the only thing that can displace an intellectual world is another intellectual world - a new alternative rather than an argument against an old alternative” (Rorty, “Is Derrida?” 139). For Rorty, the claim that deconstruction can somehow displace an old philosophical position without putting anything in its place shows poor reasoning. He thinks that “the idea that there is some neutral ground on which to mount an argument against something as big as ‘logocentrism’” is just “one more logocentric hallucination” (Rorty, “Is Derrida?” 139). Old ideas and institutions are never destroyed and just left as rubble but they are always replaced by new, more appealing ones. The vacuum of a displaced intellectual world cannot remain empty, and it will only draw in another world. Therefore, deconstruction works better as a critique of the old system rather than as a model for a new system.

Although he likes the way that Derrida can create a new vocabulary with which to analyze language, Rorty does not like the way that Derrida sometimes exaggerates his relation to the philosophical tradition. Sometimes, he observes, “Derrida talks as if this neat textbook dilemma were a real one, as if there were a terrible, oppressive force called ‘the metaphysics of philosophy’ or the ‘history of metaphysics’ which is making life

impossible not only for playful punsters like himself but for society as a whole” (Rorty, “Deconstruction 14). It is simply not the case that there is some oppressive philosophical force that severely constrains private philosophers like Derrida (except in some countries that are under the control of authoritarian regimes). To claim such a thing is more than a bit theatrical (much like Heidegger’s previous claims of the end of history and philosophy). Derrida’s incorporation of Austin into this “history of metaphysics” is one of his more outrageous moves, but Rorty is willing to give him the benefit of the doubt since, without precedents and established conventions, it is uncertain as to what the works of some ironists are good for. Rorty’s position is that we must simply wait and look for possible uses for these works instead of predetermining their value (positively or negatively).

The great advantage of Rorty’s position is that it can accept both the positions of the supporters of Derrida and his detractors without rejecting either. It means that “argumentative problem-solvers” and “people good at rendering public accounts” should be expected to play “sentences using old words off against each other”, while the “world-disclosers” invent new words and vocabularies (Rorty, “Is Derrida?” 140). Austin is “a writer with a public mission, someone who gives us weapons with which to subvert ‘institutionalized knowledge’ and thus social institutions” in that he works against positivism to further our understanding of language, but Derrida is not trying to achieve the same purpose (Rorty, “Is Derrida?” 138). Conversely, Austin does not deal much with personal identity and self-image, while Derrida is very interested in these private issues. Taking the pragmatic position means that “one will be content to use lots of different vocabularies for one’s own purposes, without worrying much about their

relation to one another” (Rorty, “Is Derrida?” 145). This pragmatic outlook means that one will become especially “willing to accept a public-private split: using one set of words in one’s dealings with others, and another when engaged in self-creation” (Rorty, “Is Derrida?” 145). Once the public-private split is accepted, the question of whether or not Derrida misreads Austin becomes less important and may fade away.

I agree mostly with Rorty’s position, but this pragmatic perspective still leaves some unanswered questions and problems. First, it grants a certain autonomy to misrepresentations of Austin’s philosophy in the name of private philosophy. It is one thing to say that private philosophers can make up their own words and vocabularies, but it is something else to say that they can deliberately misinterpret someone else’s philosophy to prop up their own views. Rorty admits that Derrida is only using Austin to further his own agenda, but he accepts this as a kind of highly original and useful interpretation of Austin. What this use actually is, Rorty leaves unstated.

I see no use for Derrida’s misreading of Austin. If the claim is made that Derrida is actually only looking to provoke a response rather than engage in an argument or debate, then the question must be asked as to why he wants such a response. The problems with Austin’s theory that he raises have been raised before in the philosophy of language, so it seems that Derrida was trying to start a conversation with other philosophers rather than actually criticizing Austin. Again though, Derrida baffles. If his intention was to initiate a conversation with Anglo-American philosophers, then why does he evade their criticisms, questions, and responses? When Rorty says that there are no standards by which to judge ironists, he leaves very little room to criticize them. Whenever a problem is found with an ironist, he or she can just point to the lack of

conventional standards to wriggle out of trouble. Public conventions cannot be used to evaluate private philosophies, so what should be used to do the evaluating? This, of course, is a question that is raised from the perspective of someone who is trying to evaluate Derrida's paper, and the objection can be raised that I am working from within the framework that Derrida questions. The problem is that if Derrida's response to Austin is accepted as a strong reading that does not pretend to be accurate (as I understand it to be), then what do we mean by a "strong reading"? Conventionally, a strong reading suggests that the commentator has understood the subject and has given new insight into the area of study, and Derrida does this in his own way by drawing attention to Austin's writings, by leading readers to the fact that Austin's project shared many similarities with Derrida's own project, and by rejecting some of the more dogmatic interpretations of Austin. Yet, Derrida accomplishes all of this by misstating some of Austin's positions (something that would be attributed to a weak reading). With his tendency to reject standards of evaluation, Derrida would be very happy to leave us with this problem.

Although his approach to Derrida is very useful, there is an inherent flaw in Rorty's proposal that we leave ironists alone. If we sit and wait to see if the works of ironists can be of any use, then we already have a standard of judgment. We are simply waiting to see if the work is of any pragmatic use, and this means that there are actually many standards of judgment (there being as many potential pragmatic standards as there are readers). It is not the case then that we can always just sit back and watch Derrida perform his linguistic tricks to find uses for them. We already have some potential uses in mind while we watch, we are watching *for* something.

A second problem with Rorty's view is that it requires an indefinite amount of time. In picking and choosing the useful bits of various philosophies, Rorty recommends that we sit back and watch what philosophers like Derrida are doing. Once we catch on, we can gnaw on the fleshy, useful elements of their thoughts and discard the bones. The only problem with this position is that the use for some philosophies might never be discovered or there may be no use for some philosophies. Not everything that comes out of a philosopher's thoughts is useful or even comprehensible. So, how long should we wait until we decide that a philosophy is useless? Certainly, there is no exact time that can be given (and none is expected), but there must be some kind of criteria by which we can judge such philosophies. Unfortunately, Rorty maintains (and rightfully so) that there are no standards by which original thinkers can be judged. Like C.S. Peirce, Rorty seems to believe in some sort of ideal process of discovery that will eventually sort everything out (although it is a different kind of discovery from Peirce's scientific ideal). The only problem is that no one knows who will do the sorting, since every potential critic can be swept aside by the lack of conventional standards of judgment (any potential use must be agreed upon by the general public or a portion of the mass). This internal dilemma of Rorty's pragmatism has no easy and immediate answer.

Perhaps the real problem with Rorty's view is the sharp division between the ironist and the public philosopher. A softening of the distinction can easily dissolve some of the objections that have been raised. Public philosophers are never purely public writers and ironists are never purely private philosophers, so there is always a certain amount of intermingling. Thus, one can always judge with conventional standards even if the subject of the judgment is an ironist. However, as Rorty argues, a certain amount

of autonomy should be granted to private philosophers such as Derrida, because there really are no fair rules by which to judge them. However, when Derrida encroaches on the public philosophy of Austin, then he should be judged according to conventional standards. This judgment should be tempered, though, with careful attention to what it is that the ironist is trying to accomplish (a metaphor for the locutionary and illocutionary acts being performed, as it were). If the private philosopher steps out of her or his domain and seeks to start a debate within the public sphere, then conventional rules apply.

Some of Derrida's supporters do not agree with the pragmatic response to Derrida's engagement with Austin's philosophy because it seemingly reduces his influence to a few like-minded ironists or deconstructionists. Following Rorty would mean that Derrida writes only ironically and, consequently, those writings will lose a large amount authority and influence. Although he might appreciate Rorty's sympathy with his general project of creating a new kind of writing, Derrida is not a pragmatist and would not agree with Rorty's classification. However, it should be remembered that the sphere of the individual is never completely cut off from that of the community. If the ironist is given autonomy in the private sphere, then he or she is free to influence others on that individual level. There is nothing stopping individual people from reading the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger to gain self-understanding or to alter their self-image. Consequently, there is nothing that stops these people from slowly moving that private understanding and identity into a community. The restriction applies only when a public philosopher tries to force his or her view on to individuals, or when ironists try to force their views on the general public.

3.2 Back to the Beginning

One of the purposes of this paper is to bring attention back to Austin's philosophy, so I will end by returning to Austin. While moving through the philosophical positions of people such as Derrida, Searle, Norris, Culler, and Rorty, it should not be forgotten that Austin also deserves to be patiently and carefully read. I hope that I have shown that Austin's positions are, at the very least, extremely nuanced and open to change and interpretation. Overly simplistic characterizations and criticisms of this philosophy should not be accepted without a careful reading of his work. Austin characterized his brand of philosophy as "linguistic phenomenology" and, where it touches on language and phenomenological methods, it stands near the philosophies that Derrida has studied very carefully and criticized more fairly (Cavell, "Austin" 251). My division of commentators into three groups is obviously only a matter of practical classification. In so far as Derrida is sometimes a very good reader of Austin (such as when he observes that Austin is heavily interested in utterances and not always so interested in writing) and, at other times, a very bad reader of Austin (such as when he implies that Austin is a kind of platonist), all three groups might have opinions that slide into the perspectives of the other two groups.

Although I have presented Rorty's reading of Derrida as a middle position between Derrideans and Derrida's detractors, "SEC" does not fit Rorty's description of a work of irony. Rather, "SEC" lacks the elaborate games that characterize many of Derrida's other works and seems to try to make arguments to question Austin's use of intention as a tool that is used to stabilize context and meaning. Derrida's position is that

iterability makes context inherently unstable, since the repeatability of words makes them break away from any context that is used to try to stabilize them. To Derrida, Austin's appeal to intention as a stabilizing factor to fix meaning is flawed because it would require continual self-present intention. According to Derrida, Austin's model would require people to know their intentions (they must know that they intend something, intend the meaning of certain word) and continually keep this intention so that the meaning of their words is fixed to the original context of use. Yet, it is inherent in the nature of words that they are repeatable and that their meanings are understood in the absence of the producer or origin. Thus, it is the nature of marks and language that they can be understood away from the original context of production. In assigning intention a controlling role in his theory of performatives, Austin makes a mistake that his philosophical predecessors have also made.

Austin, however, is not working with the same model of language. At the opening of "The Meaning of a Word," Austin states that his paper deals with "the phrase 'the meaning of a word'" (Austin, *Papers* 56). For Austin, "what alone has meaning is a *sentence*" because the meaning of the word is derivative of the meaning of the sentence (Austin, *Papers* 56). Therefore, saying that one understands the meaning of a word means that one understands the sentence in which that word is used (Austin, *Papers* 56). According to Austin, when someone looks up a word in the dictionary, the dictionary can only help that person understand the role that the word plays in the sentence (Austin, *Papers* 56). In defining a word, then, people can give syntactical explanations of what kind of sentences in which a word can be used and what kind of sentences that it cannot be used in. Alternatively, people can define words by trying to make the questioner feel,

imagine, or experience a word by describing situations that would fit the word. Thirdly, there are ostensive definitions that can be pointed to.

When Derrida talks about meaning, he is using the term slightly differently from Austin. Using the linguistic model of language, Derrida would point to the fact that a word only has meaning within a system of signs, and that words derive their meanings from their differences from other words in the system. This point is similar to Austin's idea of knowing the meaning of a word since, for Austin, knowing what a word means (how it should be used) is also another way of saying that one knows what the word does not mean (how it should not be used). Both Derrida and Austin attack the idea that words represent ideas or concepts (the idea that words are names or labels). The main distinguishing factor between the two models, then, is the idea of the use of words rather than the meaning of words. For Derrida, words are signifiers that point to signifieds (although there is always a gap between the signifier and what it signifies) while, for Austin, words are tools to be used in certain ways to achieve certain effects.

Derrida sees Austin's theory of performatives as being organized around a classical view of intention (Derrida 15). When Austin talks about infelicities and the success or failure of speech-acts, he is not taking the inherent instability of meaning into consideration (the possibility that locutionary acts can convey different meanings). Speech-acts can fail, and they are inherently susceptible to failure because of the iterable nature of words. Austin would probably think that Derrida has stepped beyond the boundaries of everyday language use into an ideal realm. For Austin, sentences derive their meaning from the conventional rules (which are not always understood or explicitly known) of language. Using words means that one has a command of language that

allows for the organization of strings of words to achieve effects. Success and failure are measured by the conventions of language, so speech-acts fail if they do not achieve the desired purposes.

Derrida accepts that everyday language functions according to the rules of language and that it works and fails according to the conventional rules of that language, but he adds that there is a deeper level at which such conventional explanations fail. The distinction between parasitic and serious meanings shows this possibility of failure, since it is sometimes impossible to tell the difference between parasitic and serious uses of words. The same string of words can be moved into different contexts to have different meanings. Austin, though, keeps to his idea of context. For Austin, words can have different meanings when they are moved out of context, but words are always in context. If a sentence is moved, it is moved into a different paragraph. If a paragraph is moved, it is moved to a different chapter. Every movement brings the words into a different context, and that new context gives the words meaning within a new framework. Those who have a command of language will know that the different frameworks will produce different meanings. Intentions are desired ends, and words are used as tools to reach those ends. Intending a serious meaning means that a string of words is being used in a certain way, and intending a parasitic meaning means that words are being used in a different way. Parasitic meanings are only dependent on serious meanings in the sense that serious meanings are understood to be aiming for a certain kind of effect while non-serious meanings are aiming for a different effect. Both types of meaning are parts of illocutionary acts. Austin pushes the use of words within conventional contexts, while Derrida insists on a non-conventional context beyond conventional use.

As Cavell writes, “Austin’s fundamental philosophical interest lay in drawing distinctions”, and the “fineness of ordinary language” provided him with a huge supply of examples, observations, and counter-observations (Cavell, “Austin” 251). Even if one is only interested in Austin’s theory of performatives, it is only fair to get to the whole theory instead of the bits of *How to Do Things with Words* that are discussed in various books and articles. A quick survey of the related papers will show that the theory of performatives is closely tied up with theories of ethics, behaviour, and responsibility. Language is not Austin’s only concern. I do not think that any of the writers that I have mentioned in this paper have completely misrepresented Austin. In their own ways, even those who misread him have picked up some crucial aspect of his philosophy. There are only degrees of misrepresentation.

I stated earlier that one of the main goals of this thesis is to draw attention back to Austin’s philosophy, and I have suggested that his work is not only concerned with language. Austin’s works complement each other and blend into one another. When he talks about everyday language and explores the fine distinctions that can be made in language, there is always another purpose that is illuminated. Language, for Austin, is an extension of behaviour and, consequently, studying language furthers the study of behaviour. Ethics, aesthetics, and many social sciences such as psychology and sociology are bound to language and behaviour, and analyzing language can also contribute to the study of these other fields of inquiry. In general, Austin is a public philosopher, contributing to the study of conventions, public language use, and social responsibility. Sometimes, though, Austin’s subjects do not seem to belong to any

specialized field of study (excuses, for example), and it is in these works that he becomes a more private philosopher.

I position myself with Rorty in the sense that I believe Derrida's reading of Austin has been very useful for both philosophical and literary studies. Derrida poses questions that Austinians would not consider (because they are not really challenges to Austin's theory), but the failure of these questions illuminates the many similarities between Austin's philosophy and some of Derrida's writings. On the other hand, Derrida's work has also given rise to many misunderstandings of Austin. Literary theorists who read Derrida too literally have incorporated Austin into literary studies without much understanding of Austin. This negative effect is slightly balance by the positive fact that it has exposed literary theorists to a tradition of philosophy that is usually not touched upon by literary studies.

As Alfino has commented, a portion of the debate between Derrida and his supporters and Austin's supporters has been based on inferences more than actual fact. It is a problem that Austin's books are mainly gatherings of his papers and lectures, since this leaves us with only *Sense and Sensibilia* as the one book that was published before he died. By contrast, Searle, Derrida, and Rorty (the three main representatives of my divisions) have each produced a huge amount of writing, so it is not easy to stay with Austin when discussing the relationship between the philosophers. It is almost as though most commentators have preferred to use Austin as a Wittgensteinian ladder to get to the other three philosophies. Once they arrive, the ladder is kicked away. Again, though, Austin's small output puts them in an uncomfortable situation of having only so many texts to work with (one book, a collection of papers, and a collection of lectures), and this

leads back to inferences. As a result, many of the issues that are discussed remain undecided, but there is nothing to say that this open conclusion is unacceptable. Only, there should be an awareness that open conclusions do not mean that anything goes or that misrepresentations are acceptable.

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