AUSTIN AND THE REAL*

Austin's remarks on truth are a central aspect of a once pervasive methodology. Even though this methodology[1] has fallen from fashion in many quarters there seem to us to be certain very severe difficulties with Austin's theory of truth that are worthy of attention. Austin's most definitive remarks on truth are found in the section, "When is a statement true?", in "Truth".[2] There it is obvious that Austin is railing at what he takes to be an oversimplistic view of truth adopted by correspondence theorists who explained the correspondence of statements to the world in terms of picturing (or some rigid one–one relation) Austin argues that "for a statement to be true one state of affairs must be *like* certain others, which is a natural relation, but also *sufficiently* like to merit the same 'description', which is no longer a purely natural relation.'[3] A criticism often made of picture theories[4] is that due to their lack of recognition that, since truth is a property of linguistic entities rather than states of affairs to which the entity " corresponds ", there can be no completely "natural" relation between sentences and states of affairs (which the criticism asserts the picture theorist requires). Austin therefore proposes a more sophisticated theory designed to assimilate the recognition that since sentences and what they are about are mediated by the language to which the sentence belongs, correspondence must be seen as a conventional relation.

In our paper we wish to reconsider the conventional correspondence theory Austin sets out in "Truth". We see the flaws in the theory as a symptom of a general malaise that permeates many conventionalist criticisms of the picture theory and that is beginning to get some attention[5].

We think that anxieties about the notion of truth very similar to those that brought Austin to develop his conventionalistic correspondence theory of truth are revealed in Karl Popper's "Comments on Tarski's Theory of Truth" :

It was not so much the antinomy of the liar, but the difficulties of explaining the correspondence theory, what could the correspondence of a statement to the facts be[5].

One can see then that if Austin's theory of truth leaves us with no mysterious or unexplained relations then Austin can be said to have gone a long way toward giving an account of the correspondence theory of truth. If we find, that the same old problems about explaining what the correspondence relation is occur also on Austin's account or if we find that Austin's seeming ability to get along without such things depends upon employing unacceptable ontological or epistemological theories then we will have to conclude that Austin has not made any progress toward setting out a correspondence account of truth.

We shall first set out Austin's dictum on truth. (We use the phrase " dictum " because it appears to be plausibly arguable that Austin is neither giving a definition of " truth " or an account people would give of their own speech acts in explaining their own use of " true ", " truth ", etc. We should note that if one thinks Austin is doing either one of these then he clearly has not succeeded.) Austin's dictum on truth is

> a statement is said to be true when the historic state of affairs to which it is correlated by the demonstrative conventions (the one to which it ' refers ') is of a type with which the sentence used in making it is correlated by the descriptive conventions[7].

We think that Austin's theory of truth leads to a vicious regress and that is self-referentially inconsistent. One can get a preliminary view of this by considering the following; imagine three objects, one the state of Ohio, one a drawing of the state by a geography student, and one a drawing by a cartographer[8]. We say that the drawing by the geography student is " good enough for a geography student" but that the better drawing of the cartographer is not " good enough for a cartographer ", just as Austin says we would. It is hard to imagine anyone denying this and it is also not easy to see what this has to do with the problem of truth. Let us assume Austin's remarks on our reaction to the three shapes is true. Then, if Austin's

dictum on truth is itself true it would seem that his claims are themselves such that they stand in a certain close enough relations to a certain set of states of affairs. The clear absurdity of this shows that Austin's analysis is at best partial. (i.e. What could this state or states of affairs be?) It does not go to show, as some defenders of Austin may wish to claim, that it is not correct to call Austin's dictum either true or false.

Take the classic sentence "The cat is on the mat". According to the dictum this is supposed to be true when the situation is as the Austinian definition of truth would have it. We may be able to specify the appropriate demonstrative and descriptive conventions at work here but more is needed if we are to understand Austin's dictum at work. What we need is the additional claim that the match is close enough. In other words we must not only specify the conventions at work in the example but must also specify that the match they enter into is "close enough". The problem arise when we try to see what this matching claim comes to. We seem to have a situation like the following; we specify how the correlations via the demonstrative and the descriptive conventions go and we then *have* to add the rider that it is true that the standard state of affairs are close enough to the historical state of affairs in question.

> *Descriptive* conventions correlating the words
> (= sentences) with the *types* of situation, thing,
> event, &c., to be found in the world.
> *Demonstrative* conventions correlating the words
> (= statements) with the *historic* situations, &c.,
> to be found in the world.[9]

(Standard states of affairs are just then types of situations to be found in the world). We now see that if we are going to be helped by or understand this then there is no need for the analysis of truth in the first place and that if we do in fact need an account of truth then Austin has merely shifted the problem to another place.

Take the first of the vicious regresses involved in Austin's theory of truth. What we need to do here is to examine what must go on to correctly claim or for it to be the case that

the match talked of earlier is close enough. We need then to introduce three elements into the account; the historic state of affairs of the cat sitting on the mat, the standard state of affairs of the cat sitting on the mat, and the match between these two states of affairs. In order to tell whether or not the classic sentence is true we look to see if the match between the two states of affairs is close enough. If such a match is needed in the case of the correlation of the two states of affairs then one is needed in order to match up the match between the two states of affairs with a standard case of close enough matches.[10] In order to perform the second level matching operation we need to match the standard match for standard matches to yet another type of standard matches. We are not here offering the argument that since one can always ask if one's analysis of truth is itself true therefore we are caught in a vicious regress. We have here tried to show that the first step in the matching process set out by Austin can be taken only if it is preceeded by an infinite number of previous matching operations.

There is another vicious regress at work in Austin. Let us turn our attention not to the matching process but to the standard states of affairs We need to know how one is able to know that a standard state of affairs (or paradigm) is in fact a standard state of affairs. Clearly, given the Austinian dictum, one matches the standard state of affairs in question with a standard state of standard states of affairs. One then needs to have a way of saying that our standard state of standard states is itself as it purports to be. Here again we must complete yet another matching procedure. Note that we are not setting out simply what on the Austin's dictum must be done to justify one's claim that the cat is on the mat, but rather what it is on that account for the classic sentence to be true.

If we think carefully about the second regress considered above we will notice something interesting. Namely that exactly the sort of regress concerning the match in the first regress will occur in the match in the second regress. Hence we are launched into a third regress. Once we have set up our third regress we will see that we are in fact launched into an infinity of vicious regresses.

It might be objected that in those cases where the standard state of affairs is itself the historical state of affairs in question no matching operation is needed to perform the correlation and hence there is no regress. However, it is still necessary to perform an infinite number of matching operations to establish that the standard state of affairs is in fact the historical state of affairs in question. It might also be objected that for any historical state of affairs there are large number of different standard states of affairs to which they could be correlated. This objection also misses the point that no matter how many standard states of affairs there are the matching operation must still be done and this leads to the regresses we spoke of above.

It is difficult to diagnose the pathology of Austin's explication of truth via his conventional correspondence theory of truth. Austin, as we stated earlier, saw the notion of truth as treatable in terms of certain relationships between language and the world. Given that certain human creations, the demonstrative and descriptive conventions, are related to the world in certain ways, a statement can be determined as true or flase by looking at the world. (There need for Austin be no necessary or sufficient conditions at work here.) However, as we have tried to argue, on Austin's account it is the case that we can both never know when these conditions obtain and that the conditions can never obtain. Hence the regresses are both ontological and epistemological.

The pathology may be roughly stated as follows. Austin is caught in a kind of equivocation on the nature of the real. Austin rejects the explication of the real and the true as standing in some sort of rigid correspondence. He would hold that the insistence that the world is one way and no other rests on a failure to appreciate the conventionality of the relations between words and the world.[11] Given changeable conventions the world can be any number of ways. Consider then what " the world" can herein signify. If it refers to the historic states of affairs arrayed via convention in one specific way, then it is a contradiction to say these very historic conditions could be different. If " the world " refers to the flexible dynamic stuff to which language can be attached in many different ways, then Austin

is forced to have the world at the same time relative to
conventions and independent of them. If concentions create
the world we cannot without contradiction speak of them
shaping material; hence Austin cannot give an account of what
the world to which language corresponds is to be. The phrase
" the world " in the formula either refers to the product of
conventions and cannot be different or it refers to something
independent of the conventions, a nonsenical notion. If one is
to have conventions about the world, one must not claim that
there is no talk of the world apart from conventions else one
loses the notion of alternative conventions needed to make sense
of convention; and loses the world in the process. Conventions
require the Real and the Real makes sense only if we can get
at simpliciter. We need then an account of " the world " that
allows this.[12]

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NOTES

1. cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (New York, 1968)
   and J. L Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, 2nd. ed. (New York, 1970).

2. J. L. Austin, "Truth", *Philosophical Papers*, pp. 117-33.

3. "Truth", p. 122, see the rest of Austin's footnote there.

4. See opening section of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

5. The picture theory of truth holds that the correspondence of statements
   and reality consists in a mirroring of certain structural features of the
   world in language. Quine in "Ontological Relativity", in *Ontological
   Relativity and Other Essays*, (N. Y., 1969), pp. 26-28 can be seen as arguing
   that a correspondence theory of truth requires simple world-word connec-
   tions of a kind that do not exist and further that we can only compare
   theories with other theories, not theories with the world, as correspon-
   dence theories of truth, including Austin's, require.

6. Karl Popper, "Comments on Tarski's Theory of Truth", in *Objective
   Knowledge*, (Oxford, 1972), p. 320.

7. "Truth", p. 122.

8. See Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, pp. 139-149.

9. "Truth", pp. 121-122.

10. We take it that a vicious regress is one in which taking the first step in the regress cannot be done until one has already completed an infinite series of steps. We do not claim that a regress is vicious merely when the first step allows an infinite hierarchy of steps.

11. See Nelson Goodman's "The Way The World Is", in *Problems and Projects* (N. Y., 1972), pp. 24-32 for some interesting arguments related to this.

12. This difficulty was hinted at in Nayland Smith's *Realism and Truth*, (N. Y. 1956), Chapter III.