

How to do things with things other than just words*

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I will confine myself to promising. Let's say, 'I promise to review this book favorably'.

Here's the problem with Alston in a nutshell. He writes: 'It would be grossly dishonest of me to promise to get you the number-two job in the Defense Department. But I can make the promise' (p. 87). What we have to ask is whether the use of the word 'promise' in the second of Alston's sentences is grammatical. That is, if I am in no position to promise — in the social, intersubjective sense, and there is no other sense I know of — can I be said to have promised as such? Surely 'uttering a false promise' is part of a distinct language-game from 'promising'. However, Alston appears able to *call* such an utterance 'a promise' by virtue of the fact that, like some, but not all, speech-act theorists, he is committed to finding the illocutionary force of an utterance in terms (inter alia, though most importantly) of its 'speaker meanings'. But, as Wittgenstein pointed out, people can *say* whatever they want; yet that does not mean they can *mean* whatever they want. I can say 'glub, glub glub' and want to mean 'Seven bottles of beer and a packet of chips, please' — but it won't get me anywhere. Ditto: 'I promise you the number-two job in the Defense Department' can be said — that's for sure. But it can't 'mean' that a promise has been issued and taken. That is, *intersubjectively*, a socially warrantable object called 'a promise' cannot be said to have occurred.

Unlike, for example, Austin and Searle, Alston wants to be able to get beyond questions of felicity, honesty, sincerity, and (it would seem) sheer possibility, by wanting 'an account that will cover all clear cases of promising — sincere or insincere, well-advised or misguided, explicit, or elliptical' (p. 54). Again, we have to ask whether the use of the word 'clear' in this sentence is grammatical. Is promising 'clear' if it is, for

*William P. Alston, *Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000.

example, insincere, misguided, or elliptical? I think there are good grounds for assuming not. And I think this can be shown in terms of Alston's own conditions for promising. Take his initial approximation for such conditions:¹

[I]f in uttering a sentence, S, I promise to leave H alone, then in doing so I R [that is, take Responsibility for the facts] that:

1. It is possible for me to leave H alone.
2. H would prefer my leaving H alone to my not doing so.
3. I intend to leave H alone (p. 79).

Translating this back into Alston's Defense job 'promise', we get: If in uttering the sentence, 'I promise to get you the number-two job in the Defense Department', then in doing so *I take responsibility for* the facts that:

1. It is possible for me to get you the number-two job in the Defense Department.
2. You would prefer my getting you the job to my not doing so.
3. I intend to get you the job.

We can see from this direct translation that at least condition 1 is false. I cannot R (take responsibility for the fact) that it is possible for me to get you the number-two job in the Defense Department. Such a responsibility is simply not mine to take. Condition 2 may be okay: I may indeed take responsibility for the fact that you would prefer my getting you the job to my not doing so. But if so, I would be indulging your actual preference falsely. That is, I may be drawing you into the idea that I can satisfy your preference while having no entitlement to produce such satisfaction. As for condition 3: what I intend or do not intend is of no consequence — for how can we, after Wittgenstein, assume that a ghostly process of intentional meaning lurks behind the social-material fact of, for example, promising? Therefore 'taking responsibility for what I intend when I promise' is of at least equal consequence: that is, none. Indeed, such a construction may be meaningless. And even were we to admit the ghost of intentional meaning, I cannot intend to get you the job (or, a fortiori, take responsibility for the fact that I intend to get you the job), if there is no way in the world that I can get you the job.

What this shows is that putting speech-act theory's traditional 'factual' conditions under Alston's new R-umbrella (turning them into *the speaker's taking responsibility* for their factuality) does not solve any problems. On a standard ('fact' rather than 'responsibility for the fact')

speech-act theory account, we would have something like the following (using Alston's own reduction of Searle's conditions):

If in uttering a sentence, S, I promise to leave H alone, then in doing so, *it is the case* that:

1. It is possible for me to leave H alone.
2. H would prefer my leaving H alone to my not doing so.
3. I intend to leave H alone.

Again, translating this into the case of Alston promising me (for example) a job in the Defense Department, it is clear that: 1 is false (Alston cannot give me such a job); 2 is possible though not certain (I may be a peacenik); 3 is spurious: Alston cannot intend to bring about a state of affairs that he knows is impossible; he, Alston the American philosopher, can't, under any circumstances, get me, McHoul the Australian ethnomethodologist, the job. So, as noted, the R-umbrella (using 'the speaker takes responsibility for *p* being true' in place of '*p* is true') makes very little difference to the general problematics of speech-act theory.

In this and many more respects, Alston (though he very carefully marks the differences) is well within the problematic previously marked out by, for example, Austin, Grice, Searle, and Schiffer. And it seems to me that this whole problematic needs to be questioned rather than the epicycles on it (instanced in their tedium above). Teasing out the subtle differences, that is, while important within the field, will not help us see the broader geographical location of the field itself. That's what I propose to do from this point: move on to the question of why we might question some of the very assumptions on which speech-act theory routinely operates and illustrate this, where appropriate, with examples from Alston; especially from the earlier parts of the book where he lays down his basic — Alston says, 'pretheoretical' (p. 33) — presuppositions.

A problem that speech-act theory shares with a number of other approaches to language and meaning (whether logical, philosophical, linguistic, or sociological) is that concerning decisions about appropriate linguistic units. One of Alston's important contributions in this new book is to locate the sentence as the foundational semantic unit: hence illocutionary acts *and* sentence meaning. But, as is well known, the concept of the sentence is notoriously slippery. Since Alston's main interest is in illocutionary types (exercitives, commissives, directives, and so on), the notion of sentence cannot be conflated (as in some forms of analysis) with the formal proposition; for this would confine the analysis to declaratives (or, in the terminology, assertives). Without such an extension, utterances like 'I promise to review this book favorably' could not be a sentence. Still, as Alston himself points out, ordinary

language users rarely speak in formally grammatical full sentences. Hence:

There are cases ... in which one utters some substantial unit as elliptical for a sentence, leaving it to the context to fill out the rest of the content. Upon being asked whether the museum is to the right or the left, I may say 'Left', thereby performing the illocutionary act of informing my interlocutor that the museum is to the left. (p. 27)

Or, returning to promising:

I may promise to leave you alone by saying 'Yes' in answer to the question 'Do you promise to leave me alone?' And 'Yes' is not [?] permissibly uttered only if the above conditions ['It is possible for me to leave H alone' etc.] are satisfied. (pp. 79–80; [I take it that the 'not' in the original is a typo — AMcH])

So, we may ask, where is the 'sentence'? Is it 'A: Do you promise to leave me alone? B: Yes.'; or is it just the simple 'B: Yes'? Alston prefers the latter and refers to it not as a 'sentence' but as a 'sentence surrogate'. Is it not preferable, rather, to consider such things as 'promises' as conjointly produced socio-cultural objects rather than as individual speakers' illocutionary acts? If so, we would have to attend to the full ('conversational') course of the conjoint act and note that, for example, such acts routinely come in pairs such as question-answer, insult-insult, request-acceptance, and so forth. Accordingly, it seems to me that the idea of a 'sentence surrogate' is no more than an attempt to unreasonably modify and downgrade the artfulness of everyday intersubjective actions in a bid to lever them into formally analyzable (logical-linguistic) categories.

The peculiarity of the 'sentence surrogate' idea is compounded if we turn to Alston's second example:

... [I]t is possible to perform illocutionary acts with nonlinguistic devices. I can tell my wife that it is time to leave the party by making a prearranged signal, for example, scratching my head. ... (p. 27)

What 'surrogacy' in both cases requires is a hierarchical classification of social acts, such that the lower classes (the ellipses and the signals, for example) are said to be 'parasitic' on the higher classes. Hence, 'The elliptical case is parasitic on the full-blown case' and, for signals, 'the non-illocutionary vehicle is parasitic on the use of sentences to do the same illocutionary job' (p. 27). That there is a hierarchy becomes more obvious when, in the latter case, a signal is held to be dependent on actors' sentence-uttering capacities: 'My wife and I wouldn't have been able to

arrange our signal for “saying” that it is time to leave the party unless we had the capacity to say that explicitly with a sentence’ (p. 27).

Now this is a very peculiar description of everyday intersubjective action, and for several reasons. Firstly, on what ontological basis (that is, on what argument about what social beings are) could we decide that sentence-uttering capacities precede and predicate nonsentential social actions? Only a commitment to one or another version of ‘nativism’ or ‘innatism’ would do here. And such postures are, today, at the least, dubious. (I will have more to say on the incipient ‘Cartesianism’ of speech-act theory later.) Secondly, we can adduce perfectly good instances of nonsentential actions that are independent of any form of translation into sentences, let alone dependent on putative sententialisations of them. One example would be Australian Aboriginal hunting signals, conducted as they are in complete silence (for obvious reasons), learned by novices in the field of practice rather than by linguistic explanations and not easily mapping on to vocalizations of any sort. Thirdly, we have to wonder how far the concept of ‘sentence surrogate’ can extend before it becomes nonsensical.

For example, I may express derision at the peculiarity of someone’s ‘philosophical’ ideas by blowing a raspberry, or even by breaking wind (assuming I have the talent to do so on cue). Can a fart be a ‘sentence surrogate’? And if so, how would it translate? Is my breaking wind dependent on my ‘capacity to say [something] explicitly with a sentence’? (p. 27). If such objections are seriously entertained, then the idea of a ‘sentence surrogate’ (and, less obviously, the very concept of a sentence itself, perhaps) becomes either tautological or meaningless. Then we have to wonder about the whole project of connecting speakers’ ‘sentence meaning’ to ‘illocutionary act potentials’. In place of this, we might think of social actions more broadly and holistically in terms of their ‘grammar’, in the later Wittgenstein’s sense, a sense which takes us, from the first and without prestipulated analytic units, well beyond an *obsession* with mere words. As Gordon Bearn (1997: 115) puts it:

Grammatical investigations are investigations of the uses of words in various situations. Hence these investigations are not concerned with language in the narrow sense; they include or touch upon every aspect of our life with words. For instance, Wittgenstein says, “It is part of the grammar of the word ‘chair’ that *this* is what we call ‘to sit on a chair’” (1969: 24). The force of the italicised demonstrative is to invoke the way we move our body when we sit. So too the grammar of ‘explanation’ will include how and where we turn up our noses at dubious explanations. It is simply a mistake to think that Wittgenstein’s philosophical method is hypnotized by words, needing further elaboration in terms of the patterns of activity manifest in different parts of our lives.

Wittgenstein's grammatical investigations were already investigations of the forms of our lives.²

On such a view — an 'existential' view as much as a grammatical one — we need not translate social actions into bits of language, let alone into sentences or sentence surrogates, in order to understand their place in our forms of life. Ellipticals (like 'Chair!' used to command or request a seat) and ordinary bodily actions (like sitting, turning up our noses, or farting) are already built into the grammar; not the grammar of a language in the formal sense, but the grammar of our forms of existence. There is nothing special about philosophical words such as 'language', 'intention', and the rest. As Wittgenstein notes: 'of course, if the words "language", "experience", "world", have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table", "lamp", "door"' (Wittgenstein 1968: §97; cf. Coulter 1999: 171, 179). Accordingly, in the case of speech-act theory, as in the case of so many 'analytic' stabs at language and discourse, the requirement that life be first broken down into units is far from unproblematic. At worst, we might say that this constitutes a violence — without apology.

There is a word that aptly describes such violence without apology: it is 'logocentrism'. The official Derridean registration of the term need not concern us here since all we need indicate by it is (from Bearn) any mistaken hypnotization by words, the transformation of whatever may occur in a form of life into *λογος*; an assumption that 'in the beginning was *λογος*' and that, still, the 'units' of *λογος* are the ultimate predicates of (at the final center of) utterly familiar matters like promising, sitting, explaining, meaning, climbing.... If this holds for speech-act theory, and I think it does, then we should expect such a position to hold, in addition, to the idea that, for example, 'signals' can be turned into sentences, or that *speech-acts* ('utterances') can be extended to incorporate non-vocal forms (such as writing) without loss or gain (or, as some would say, without 'supplement'). And this is precisely what is proposed on the first page of the first chapter of the Alston book, albeit in a footnote:

I follow current practice in using terms for speech in a broadened sense to cover any employment of language. Thus 'utterance' *is to be taken* to range over the production of any linguistic token, whether by speech, writing, or other means. And 'speaker of a language' *is to be understood* as 'user of a language'. (pp. 11–12; emphasis added)

Would it be going too far to compare this move with colonization? I'm less than confident of such a metaphor — it may connote too strong

a force — but I think we can arrive at something of the kind by an attention to Alston's 'grammar' in this note. Let's take the case of writing. What is there to lead us to believe that a piece of writing is a *linguistic* token? Hasn't all the work been done by simply assuming that such is the case? When I write, as I am now, it may be possible to vocalize the marks I put on paper with a pen or on a screen via a keyboard. But does this make them 'utterances'? Have I just *uttered* 'But does this make them "utterances" '? Perhaps in some restricted form of life (such as in statutory law) I can be said to 'utter' when I do something nonvocal — for example when I proffer a false document or note. But in the ordinary grammar of 'utter', it is very peculiar to think of making marks on a surface as 'uttering'. Indeed, many of the communicative marks I can make are not perfectly translatable into vocal sounds. For example, only recently has '@' come to be pronounced 'at', under the influence of the 'grammar' of the UNIX computer 'language' (note the metaphors here). And while '!' may affect how we read, or even pronounce, a string of marks, it, itself, cannot be pronounced — and the same goes for other punctuation marks, diacritical marks, asterisks, brackets, quotation marks, and so on. Thus, while writing is hardly a single social activity in its own right, there are social activities that are uniquely performed by making written marks. I cannot simply *say* my name, for example, when cashing a travellers' check. I have to write it; and in a very specific way. Signing and counter-signing, then, are social practices whose just-possible vocalizations are in no sense part of their grammar, at least in Wittgenstein's sense. How do I 'pronounce' my signature, as opposed to merely saying my name? Writing may be done in various scripts; but not all of these are like the 'script' of a play — put down expressly in order to be vocalized later (if the dramatist is lucky enough). Cantonese and Mandarin speakers cannot comprehend one another when speaking; but they can communicate via a shared set of symbols; and who is to say which of the 'vocalizations' of the symbols (Cantonese or Mandarin) is *the* (proper) vocalization?

We need to be careful to make such distinctions. And, in the absence of them, we can only wonder at the 'illocutionary force' (if such it is) of Alston's *written* words: '*is to be taken*' and '*is to be understood*'. Are these predictions, explanations, announcements, disclosures, proposals, reminders, invitations, claims, opinions ... requests? Or are they, more likely, commands? Whatever — whether Alston is 'explaining', 'proposing', 'claiming', or 'commanding' that writing be taken as a 'linguistic token' and, hence, as 'utterance' — he is asking us to distort our natural grammar for the use of the word 'writing' for the sake of 'following' his theory of illocutionary acts. And, at the same time, he is, by asking us to

do so, unduly restricting for us what Coulter (1999: 173) calls ‘the widely ramifying domains of *praxis and circumstance*’ relevant to the richness and artfulness of everyday practices, including, but *by no means* limited to, linguistic practices. It is then far from trivial that I should want to preserve the critical differences between ‘writing’ and ‘uttering’. Once this gross commonsensical distinction between kinds of ‘praxis and circumstance’ has been let go (and on the first page!), who knows what further ordinary grammatical boundaries could fall to the forces of logocentric theorizing?

Colonization, as we know, brings ‘conversion’. But is it quite ‘ethical’ — in the sense of threatening violence to what we routinely and grammatically (again, in Wittgenstein’s sense) do in everyday practice with and without words? Let me expand on these rather elliptical remarks.

Once the sentence unit has been decided upon (‘decided’, that is, in its literal etymological sense of ‘excised’ or ‘cut out’), the next move is to break that unit up (at least initially) into two constituent parts. These parts are the sentence’s ‘illocutionary force’ and its propositional content. Hence:

Following Searle ... I analyze an illocutionary act into a ‘propositional content’ and an ‘illocutionary force’. A full-blown *oratio obliqua* [indirect speech] report contains a main verb and an attached ‘content-specifying’ phrase. We may take the former to indicate the *illocutionary force* and the latter to indicate the *propositional content*. Thus in ‘A predicted that the strike would soon be over’, the illocutionary force is that of predicting and the propositional content is *that the strike will soon be over*. In ‘A asked B to give him a match’, the illocutionary force is that of requesting and the propositional content is *that B gives A a match*. (p. 15)

Clearly this involves a translation, if not yet a ‘conversion’ — we will come to that shortly. For now, let’s look at the translations in question:

1. A predicted that the strike would soon be over → PREDICTING + *the strike will soon be over*
2. A asked B to give him a match → REQUESTING + *B gives A a match*

But (no pun intended) is there not a serious mis-match between the original report and its supposed ‘propositional content’. That is, how does the ‘would’ in 1. become ‘will’? And how does the ‘to give’ in 2. become ‘gives’? The first case is not so problematic as the second, for it involves a fairly routine change of mood. If I say ‘The strike *will* soon be over’, it’s a fairly normal grammatical move to report of me that I said that the strike *would* soon be over — though I’m far from in the habit of saying such things if they can be avoided. But in the second case, the

transformation does not come off so smoothly. Surely we would say, in the case of requests, that B might/could/should etc., give A a match? This is not as trivial as it seems at first blush: because what I think Alston wants (in common with Searle and others of their ilk) is, where possible, to find formal logic-like propositions, as it were, inside illocutionary acts. But is there a 'B gives A a match' inside 'A asked B to give him a match'?³ Was it not among the main points of Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) to show that formal logic went wrong when it tried to reduce the totality of language to the particular speech-act called 'proposing' (more recently 'asserting')? More 'things' could be done with words, he announced, than just uttering propositions. So why try to track back requests, promises, and commands (for example) to, inter alia, their *propositional* content when what it is they are designed for in the first place is to do something quite different from propositions? In requesting someone to open the door, isn't it the very fact of requesting that nullifies the utterance's propositionality — doesn't the fact that it is requesting that's being done make the utterance, precisely, nonpropositional? Again, why delimit the 'domains of praxis and circumstance' to, ultimately, stating propositions within the 'shells', as it were, of requesting, promising, commanding, and so forth?

What I suspect is that such grammatical infelicities facilitate a 'conversion'. And 'convert' is the term that Alston himself uses. Having made the divide into illocutionary force and propositional content, Alston then talks of how sentences can be converted in illocutionary acts:

Now for the question of what sorts of conditions will convert a sentential act into an illocutionary act of a certain type. What features must a condition have in order to do the job? (p. 34)

Such 'conditions' (e.g., the ones we saw above, re. promising — 'It is possible for me to leave H alone' and the rest) are precisely what guarantee proper relations between a sentence's illocutionary force and its 'propositional content'. Without the latter — and we have already adduced some reasons for worrying about whether requests and others things like them actually *have* propositional content in the strict sense — the whole question of an illocutionary act (in at least Alston's and Searle's senses) becomes at best problematic and, at worst, something of an analytic fiction. For what is this reference to 'conversion'? Where and how does some actual conversion take place? Are we routinely in the habit of inspecting, say, sentences (though there are few enough of them in the main medium of exchange, conversation), having a good

chew through them (as it were, ‘in our heads’) and then ‘converting’ them into illocutionary acts? I sincerely hope I will never, in daily life, be caught doing any such thing — except perhaps in order to play jokes on speech-act theorists.

To be sure, there are routine conversational techniques that are sometimes called ‘formulations’ (Heritage and Watson 1979) — things like ‘Is that a threat or a promise’ and other sorts of return comments on previous utterances. Here, earlier items of talk become explicit topics for later items of talk. Ordinary folk, then, can and do attend to what speech-act theorists call the ‘illocutionary force’ of their utterances. But this is a very particular technique: a very particular thing that can be done with words. By contrast, Alston’s talk of ‘conversion’ supposes that something of this kind could well be going on (where? in the background? in the interlocutors’ minds?) every time there’s promising, requesting (and the rest) going on. Manifestly, this is a speech-act theorist’s convention and not a description of any routine social practice. Moreover, it makes less credible Alston’s claims, throughout the book, that he is engaging a realist semantics based on ‘use’.

Wittgenstein is famous for his (albeit rough) equation of meaning with use. But this is not to say that just any (especially any theoretical) construction of use will do. As we have seen, Alston’s version of ‘use’ is couched in terms of ‘sentence meaning’ and:

I will hold that what it is for a sentence to have meaning is that it is governed by a certain I-rule and thereby has a certain *IA potential*. In a word, sentence meaning = IA potential = I-rule governance. (p. 79)

We have already alluded to the problems with the notion of ‘sentence’ as a unit of meaning. Now we can turn to the question of ‘rule’.

Alston claims that, for meaning to occur, ‘*socially* entrenched rules are required’ (p. 58). So far, so Wittgensteinian. And, of course, given that we are dealing with speech-act theory, we might expect the next move to be a totalization of such ‘social’ rules by speaker-intentions. However, Alston’s position is somewhat different from some previous workers in the field, particularly Schiffer (1972) and Grice (1957). That is, he comes closer to Searle (1969), noting that, by contrast, ‘In Schiffer’s theory Gricean intentions (or Schiffer’s version thereof) bear the whole burden of making the illocutionary act the kind of act that it is’ (p. 66). So has the ghost left the machine, exorcised by material and public rules? Well, not quite.

As we have already seen, at least in cases of promising and other commissives (such as betting and inviting), the ‘U intends to do D’

condition is still part of the ‘rules’. Moreover, while such ‘rules’ are routinely expressed in terms of formal-logical conditions binding the ‘propositional content’ of illocutionary acts, the ‘axioms of meaning’ underpinning these conditions make routine reference to speakers’ and hearers’ ‘knowing’ such and such — for example ‘the meanings of many expressions in [the] language’ (p. 313). We also find the further axiom:

Knowledge of the meaning of the sentence uttered is the linguistic knowledge a hearer needs in order to understand what is being said (p. 313).

Again we have to ask about the grammar of such things. Is it okay to say that ‘I know the meaning’ in this rather specialized sense? In everyday talk, ‘Knowing the meaning’ routinely occurs in criticisms and defenses of various sorts. We say, for example, when accusing someone of financial profligacy, ‘You don’t know the meaning of money’. As in so many cases of the everyday use of ‘mean’, it has a strong tendency to crop up in circumstances of making one’s claim emphatic; for example, in cases of making strong commitments in the face of, for example, criticism and doubt. As Coulter (1999: 169–170) points out:

although we may ‘take in’ an utterance such as: ‘I said it and I meant it’ superficially to articulate a description of two activities, one physical (‘I said it’) and the other mental (‘I meant it’), an inspection of further examples of use, crucially including their contexts and purposes, reveals that ‘meaning something’ is *not* an activity, and in the prior example of its use (‘I meant it’) it therefore cannot signify something that I did, but, rather, must be understood as proclaiming my commitment to what I just said (i.e., it was not something I am likely to retract or to alter).

By contrast, the specialized, speech-act-theoretic use of ‘knowing the meaning’ implies a ghostly activity going on in speakers’ and hearers’ heads. And related ghosts crop up, almost casually, without so much as a blink of criticism, in various parts of Alston’s account. Hence: ‘*Expressives* [like thanking and apologizing] express some psychological state of the speaker’ (p. 34). Or, in his exposition of Schiffer’s and Grice’s more ‘intentionalist’ position, Alston makes concessions such as the following:

I will admit for the sake of argument that for every illocutionary act type there is some type of belief or action such that the intention to elicit a belief or action of that type in A normally accompanies illocutionary acts of that type. (p. 44)

So, for all the reference to ‘*socially* entrenched rules’ (p. 58), we soon discover that these are ‘social’ rules for governing, among other things, knowing, intending, meaning, and believing as speaker-hearers’ mental states. That Alston requires reference to mental states, if not ‘conscious’ ones, is shown in a rider to his view that ‘taking responsibility’ (in promising) is to ‘*knowingly* [take] on a liability to ... blame’, to ‘*recognize* [oneself] to be rightfully subject to blame, etc’ (p. 55; emphasis added):

These formulations do not require U to be consciously or explicitly thinking of the liability. All this may be implicit, below the level of explicit notice or conscious awareness, just as the intentions involved in habitual action typically are. (p. 55)

Rather than a fully public-social (for example, Wittgensteinian) account of rules, then, this is a clearly pro-cognitivist and Cartesian account of what goes on in, for example, ‘talk’ — or, at least, it allows for such elements in its conception of ‘social’ rules. That is, whenever ‘talk’ is discussed here, we appear to be in the presence of Cartesian dyadic subjects: separated individual speakers and hearers, each with a corporeal-actional component (the part that does the saying) and a mental-intentional component (the part that does the meaning, knowing, believing, etc.). Accordingly, what Coulter (1999: 177) has to say of *all* ‘permissive’ theorizing may apply at least to Alston and, I suspect, to speech-act theory generally:

our ordinary language and practical, commonsense reasoning, never having been subject to serious empirical-analytical inquiry, comprises methods and resources so dense and so rich for producing social orders of all stripes that ‘theorising’ [is] redundant. It [can] only and ever idealise, abstract from, restrict the appeal to, select from, distort and, thereby, *stipulatively circumvent*, the real issues that actually, in their rich integrity, arise within our ordinary affairs.

The ordinary (for example, ordinary ‘speech’ and how it ordinarily ‘acts’) is — in the methods and resources it draws upon (its ‘rules’, perhaps), no doubt about it — ‘rich’; its resources are, as Harvey Sacks used to put it, extensively and finely powerful. But, it seems to me, even the most finely tuned analyses (and Alston’s analyses *are* so), if predicated on ‘sentences’, ‘propositional contents’, and ‘social’ rules for internal states, will miss this dense texture. In doing so they *must* play fast and loose with the manifold and rich subtleties of everyday talk (preferably sampled *in situ* rather than invented by philosophers).

In a motto: promising is one thing we can do with words, promiscuity another.

Notes

1. This early approximation will have to suffice for present purposes. It could easily be extended to cover Alston's more fully developed version for all commissives which runs:

U C'd in uttering S (where "C" is a term for a commissive illocutionary act type [such as promising], a purporting to produce an obligation on U to do D) if in uttering S, U R'd that:

1. Conceptually necessary conditions for U's being obliged to do D are satisfied.
2. H has some interest in U's doing D.
3. U intends to do D.
4. By uttering S, U places herself under an obligation to do D. (p. 97)

In the original the first 'S' is mistakenly written as 'T' — one of several typographical slips in the book.

2. Bearn's reference is to *The Blue and Brown Books* (Wittgenstein 1969: 24). Here, and in several other places in this review, I am working with and indebted to Jeff Coulter's (1999) reading of Wittgenstein (via, inter alia, Bearn and ethnomethodology). Coulter's target is 'discursive psychological' accounts of mind and talk — a target that is different from but interestingly related to (especially in terms of its Cartesian assumptions) speech-act theory.
3. Lest I be thought to be exaggerating on this point, note that Alston actually writes that, in promising, one is *expressing* a proposition. 'If U takes responsibility for the satisfaction of [Searle's conditions] 4–6. in uttering S, he has thereby expressed the proposition that U does A at some future time' (p. 68).

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