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ON THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN COGNITIVE
JUDGMENTS AND VALUE JUDGMENTS:
SPEECH ACTS AND COMMITMENTS*

I

INTRODUCTION

It is well known that for much of our tradition of thought the dichotomy between factual assertions and value judgments has constituted an important point of intersection between theory of knowledge and moral philosophy. It is understood that, while our assertoric utterances involve claims whose truth or falsehood can be objectively decided, value judgments make claims which are not objectively decidable, since they are rather a matter of personal decision or of opinion.

In this sense, the dichotomy has been prefigured as the pathway both for the affirmation of the priority of the ideal of scientificity centering on the idea of objectivity and certainty and wholly extraneous to every value position, and for the consequent denial of any statute of rationality and scientificity for the practical-moral sphere.

And still today, though the presuppositions on which it was based no longer hold (and principally the idea of the objective decidability of the truthfulness of assertoric utterances), this dichotomy, far from having been weakened, has become – as Putnam has pertinently observed – a true cultural institution¹. It continues to express above all the conviction, intrinsic to all moral relativism, that our value judgments from whose genesis all participation of reason is assumed to be excluded², unlike our cognitive judgments, are wholly subjective, devoid of any universality and objectivity.

This is the reason why we set out to challenge it, endeavoring, in line with the most recent claims for the peculiarity of the logic of every specific “argumentative field”³ and on the basis of the “constitutive”

* I wish to thank A. G. Conte for his helpful comments on this paper.

¹ Cf. Putnam 1981.

² As a radical and emblematic expression of this position cf. Ayer 1949, pp. 171-84.

³ See in particular Toulmin 1958, and Strawson 1952.

rules underlying our linguistic-communicative action, correctly identified by John Searle, to reconstruct specific validity criteria for our judgments, both moral and cognitive. This would allow us, first of all, against the presupposition of the total subjectivity of the former, to hypothesize for them a specific field of arguability, and to arrive at the admission of the discursive resolvability of their specific claims to validity. Secondly, since the analysis of the “constitutive” rules underlying our assertoric utterances permits for them too a precise reconstruction of a complex validity standard, in addition to the truth standard, it would also allow us to take up a position in favour of a possible parallel between cognitive judgments and value judgments.

In this way there could begin to be delineated along this pathway too a model of morality as a “logic of action” parallel to a logic as “morality of thought”, which is the model of morality which to us, more than any other, appears able to oppose effectively the skeptical and relativistic positions now dominant⁴. With it, it seems to us that there begins to emerge, in the contemporary philosophical debate, the possibility of going beyond every Platonizing conception in the field of morality parallel to that of a similar conception in the field of logic. Like the latter, no longer a «realm of pure and crystalline forms» after Wittgenstein’s affirmation of an a priori logic denying the possibility of «illogical thinking»⁵, morality too, no longer the realm of pure ideas of good and evil, right and duty, would appear to us as part of the more general phenomenon of human interaction, which inevitably takes place within a determined «form of life».

It seems to us that we are talking about the model of morality to which Piaget referred⁶ and that Husserl had already envisioned when, in his *Vorlesungen über Ethik und Wertlehre* (1914), he proposed an enquiry into our moral judgments which was similar to the analysis that he carried out in the sphere of logical judgments, *i.e.* into the «legality» which, like the latter, they obey, in the conviction that it is possible to identify a «logic of the practical-moral sphere»⁷.

⁴ On the connotations most recently taken on by the dispute between ‘relativists’ and ‘convergentists’ see Rorty 1995, pp. 53-71.

⁵ Cf. Wittgenstein 1922, 5.47, 5.4731, and 6.13.

⁶ Piaget 1969, p. 328. On the topicality of this ‘cognitivist’ proposal in the contemporary ethical debate, cf. Dreyfus-Dreyfus 1990, pp. 237-64. See too Varela 1992.

⁷ Cf. Husserl 1988, pp. 3-69. On the most general hypothesis relating to the convergence between phenomenological tradition and Piagetian approach, presupposed here, see Mandelbaum 1955.

There is full development of the idea that Brentano had previously expressed where, claiming the impossibility of considering moral rules as «commands of an external will» and thinking them as naturally valid rules of action, he had explicitly referred to the model of the «commands of logic» in that they too have no connection with a «will of logic» or of logicians. In the work of Brentano, conformity with the rules of morality would already naturally make our action superior, just as conformity with logical principles makes our judgment sure, while «anyone moving away from it is subject to error»⁸.

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SEARLE'S REFUTATION OF THE THESIS OF THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF DERIVING "OUGHT" FROM "IS"

It seems to me that it is very important for the foundation of a possible parallel between moral norms and logical norms is the recognition of rules underlying both our acting and our thinking, characteristic of the line of thought going from Aristotle to Kant⁹, down to Brentano and Husserl. This acquisition finds full development in Searle's theory of speech acts as acts that have underlying specific constitutive rules, mastery of which would allow every competent speaker to perform and understand speech acts¹⁰.

In Searle's perspective such an acquisition reveals its importance as an adequate conceptual instrument in refuting the relativistic and skeptical positions that are still dominant. He refutes such positions first of all because to this perspective there is closely connected the idea of a "deep structure" common to all languages, over and above its different conventional realizations. Searle himself directly makes it explicit. For him, the fact that in French people make a promise by saying "Je promets" while in English they say "I promise" has a conventional character, to which he opposes a rule character: «[the fact that] an utterance of a promising device (under appropriate conditions) counts as the undertaking of an obligation is a matter of rules and not a matter of the conventions of French or English»¹¹. He develops this theory along the

⁸ Brentano 1934.

⁹ Cf. Di Lorenzo Ajello 2000, pp. 116-19.

¹⁰ Cf. Searle 1969, pp. 33-42. On the concept of constitutivity of rules see Conte 1995, pp. 518-50.

¹¹ Cf. Searle 1969, p. 40.

lines of Chomsky's generative grammar, the extension of which to the semantics of speech acts leads him to theorize constitutive rules underlying them¹², fully aware that the linguist's stance on the universality of a deep structure of our language is «a major step toward restoring the traditional conception of the dignity and uniqueness of man»¹³. Working along these lines, he has illustrated the connection between this conception of the various human languages as «different conventional realizations of the same underlying rules» and the possibility of translating from one human language to another¹⁴.

Searle also shows how his perspective can refute both the thesis of the “subjectivity” of every member of the class of evaluative utterances and the connected one that «no factual or objective statement can entail any member of this class»¹⁵. He gives direct proof of this by arguing, against the well-known Humean and Moorean thesis of the impossibility of deriving *ought* from *is*¹⁶, the thesis through which – as he fully realizes – Moore's continuers transferred into language the distinction between fact and value, thus also sanctioning the dichotomy between factual judgments and value judgments in the domain of the logic of language. He is able to conduct this refutation by appealing to the most general aspects of his conception of language, according to which «when we do use a word literally and unreservedly we are indeed committing ourselves to the logical properties of that word»¹⁷, including obligations. Generalizing this conception, which he derives from Wittgenstein and Hare, among the logical properties to which the use of the word commits us he also includes the obligations that are part of their meaning, and furthermore he extends it to speech acts. In this connection, he stresses that, just as the use of the utterance “X is a triangle” «commits [us] ... to the proposition that X has three sides», likewise a promise, for example, commits us to doing what has been promised and the assertion that p renders it inappropriate to maintain not p or refuse to provide evidence in favor of p¹⁸.

¹² Cf. Searle 1974, p. 31.

¹³ Ivi.

¹⁴ Cf. Searle 1969, p. 39. See also, for the way Searle directly opposes this theoretical position to Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, Searle 1987 and 1992, p. 194.

¹⁵ Searle 1969, p. 196.

¹⁶ Cf. Searle 1964 and Searle 1969, pp. 175-98.

¹⁷ Searle 1969, p. 194.

¹⁸ Cf. the already mentioned last chapter of Searle 1969, *passim*.

Searle thus delineates a conception of speech acts as acts that involve imposing obligations upon oneself and which are therefore inseparable «from the commitments which form essential parts of them»¹⁹. He develops this conception in close connection with the complex analysis that he proposes of the structure of the various types of speech acts, which, as is well known, is articulated into an original reconstruction of the specific “constitutive” rules underlying them, which he distinguishes into “preparatory” rules, ones with “propositional content”, “sincerity” rules and “essential” ones. On the basis of the identification of the essential rule underlying every type of speech act (assertoric, commissive, imperative, etc.), which is the rule fixing the specific commitments that each speaker takes upon himself in his performance, he is able to theorize that every assertion necessarily «counts as an undertaking to the effect that p represents an actual state of affairs», just as a promise «counts as the undertaking of an obligation to do A», and an order «counts as an attempt to get H to do A»²⁰. And this means that every performance of speech acts first of all involves the speaker’s acceptance of an obligation to provide reasons or evidence for his or her claims²¹, whether they are evidence for the truthfulness of what has been stated, or, in the case of verdictives, guarantees that they can justify one’s expectation both to be able to impose one’s will on the listener and to find that the latter is able to perform the order given to him. Likewise, the promise is held to oblige the speaker not only to fulfill it but also to provide evidence and reasons for his implied conviction that the thing promised is in the listener’s best interests²².

By contrast, the identification of specific sincerity conditions for each type of speech act – requiring the speaker to believe in what he states, intends to do what he promises and wants what he orders to be done – implies that it is not possible to distinguish affirmations, as acts through which one obliges oneself to tell the truth, seen as merely descriptive, from evaluative acts like the one that tells us, for example, that we should not lie. In such a perspective, the latter would, rather, take on the role of a “constitutive rule” of every type of speech act,

¹⁹ Searle 1969, p. 198.

²⁰ Ivi, pp. 57-71.

²¹ Cf. Searle 1991, p. 93.

²² Such general aspects of Searle’s thought, whose consequences interest us here, have been investigated in Di Lorenzo Ajello 2000.

including affirmation itself²³, if the rule of sincerity is effectively “constitutive” of each of them (as Searle’s analysis shows).

From all this Searle can legitimately draw the immediate conclusion – valid against the Humean and Moorean thesis, of the impossibility of deriving *ought* from *is* – that words and phrases like *promise*, *affirm* and *give orders* are evaluative terms (*axionyms*) «logically connected to the evaluative notion of obligation».

3

VALIDITY CRITERIA FOR EVALUATIVE SPEECH ACTS

It seems to us that Searle’s conception of speech acts has other implications, requiring to be further discussed in different respects. The fact is that the model of speech act that it prefigures, as “intentional acting” governed by specific “constitutive” rules (“preparatory”, “of propositional content”, “essential” and “of sincerity”), prefigures a complex validity standard for our speech acts comprising, for assertions as for other types of speech act, both a criterion of satisfaction of the propositional content, so that the descriptive dimension is also extended to evaluative acts, and criteria of sincerity and legitimacy that delineate its conditions of rational acceptability.

In one respect such a model, insofar as it does not see truth as *adaequatio intellectus atque rei*, but as adaptation, reciprocal convenience between world and mind, goes beyond the mere truth criterion, broadening it into a more general criterion of satisfaction of the propositional content valid for every type of speech act, not only assertoric but also imperative, interrogative, commissive, etc.

Hence such a validity standard would first of all also extend the validity dimension based on propositional truth to speech acts which are not assertoric, involving the admission, for these too, of objectively decidable validity claims. Indeed, if – according to the innovative theory of predication worked out by Searle in *Speech Acts*, whereby he can consider predication as a constitutive part of any type of illocutionary act²⁴ – performing a speech act means representing its conditions of satisfaction, then it is not only affirmations that represent their own truth conditions: like them, promises too would represent their

²³ Searle 1969, p. 239.

²⁴ Ivi, pp. 29-33.

own fulfillment conditions, just like verdictives, which represent their own obedience conditions²⁵. Hence the validity of a verdictive or a promise would require that the conditions constituting its satisfaction be given or, in relation to the moment of its fulfillment, that some such conditions be effectively and justifiably predictable.

And such an admission, for imperatives too, of an objectively decidable validity claim, like that of the presence or not of the conditions for their satisfaction obtaining or otherwise, is certainly relevant, in a direct way, for the admission of the discursive resolvability of the validity claims of our moral judgments, in favor of which we are arguing here. It is certainly usable in relation to the imperative component recognized by the most recent analyses of language, along the lines of Kant's identification of the categorical imperative, as an expression of moral duty, as an essential component of our moral judgments: it would highlight the descriptive components of evaluative judgments, thus confirming those analyses of moral language that, on the basis of the identification of the descriptive component of value utterances, have been building up against the most radical subjectivist positions.

The speech act theory, however, makes it possible to get over the dichotomy between factual judgments and value judgments not only because of this result, which is consequent on the broadening of the truth criterion to a more general criterion of satisfaction of speech acts, but also because it involves criteria of sincerity and legitimacy for all types of speech act, including imperatives. And in the specific case of verdictives these criteria respectively include the conditions authorizing the speaker to give the order and the conditions justifying his belief that the listener can fulfill the order imparted to him²⁶.

With this, Searle's analysis provides the conceptual instruments for identifying the validity criteria of evaluative speech acts also in relation to their specific difference from mere imperatives, a difference given, according to the results of the most recent analyses by Hare and Habermas, by their universalisability²⁷. If "S is to be p" – which is the

²⁵ Cf. Searle 1983, pp. 4-13.

²⁶ For a more detailed identification of all passages in Searle's work that aim at overcoming the limits of the semantics of truth, allowing an explanation of meaning in terms of acceptability conditions, cf. Di Lorenzo Ajello 2000, pp. 106-28. It is on the basis of the main results of the analysis carried out in it that we are working here on some implications of the speech acts theory as regards overcoming the dichotomy between factual judgments and value judgments.

²⁷ Cf. Habermas 1983, pp. 70-76, and Hare 1981, p. 41.

formula in which every evaluative utterance can be expressed – means that the same can be said of any other *X* that has the characteristics of *S*, in Searle’s perspective it is certainly possible to think of preparatory conditions and an essential condition able to account for such specificity. If for Searle the preparatory conditions of verdictives include the conditions authorizing the speaker to give the order²⁸, those of our moral judgments cannot exclude the conditions rendering them universalisable and hence normatively correct, and that is to say, at least if we accept these acquisitions of the contemporary ethical debate, both the fact of being based on a potential of inter-subjectively shareable reasons and the acceptability of their consequences, effectively verified through their inter-subjective recognition²⁹.

In this way a distinction would be made – through such possible developments of Searle’s perspective, which are those that seems to take it in the direction of that ethic of discourse that it has recently been confronting³⁰ – between speech acts deriving their motivating force from inter-subjectively shareable reasons, which is the case of our moral judgments, and speech acts like orders or threats deriving it from a negative sanctioning power wholly devoid of legitimacy.

Against the thesis of the total subjectivity and arbitrariness of our value judgments, *i.e.* against the dichotomy thesis, these implications of the speech act theory would not only demonstrate its discursive criticizability but would also highlight the fact that their arguability is not, despite all its specificity, less rational or more “objective” than the arguability of our factual judgments.

Because of the extension that they involve of the fundamental evaluative dimension of legitimacy to assertoric acts too, they would also be in line with the most recent acquisitions of contemporary epistemology, which – with the inevitable limitation, after Quine, Wittgenstein and Kuhn, of the epistemological centrality of the truth criterion inside the single “paradigms” or “forms of life” – has more and more been indicating as the correct method of critical discussion in the scientific sphere too the analysis of the “rational acceptability” of our theses and our theories, not excluding that of their consequences.

²⁸ Cf. Searle 1991, p. 93.

²⁹ For these developments of Kantian moral philosophy in the contemporary debate, here we will only mention the fundamental text by J. Rawls 1971 and the previously mentioned Habermas 1983.

³⁰ Cf. Searle 1991.

And though here we cannot dwell thematically on the rapport between normativity underlying speech acts and normativity underlying the practical sphere in general – in which, however, it is clear that linguistic action is first of all action – it seems to us that one can legitimately hypothesize that the normativity underlying it actually prefigures, over and above the merely linguistic dimension, a more general logic of the pragmatic-communicative sphere as its morality.

From this point of view we believe that the central nucleus of the speech act theory, that every speech act obeys rules and that it is through these that its legitimacy can always be founded, can also constitute the fundamental nucleus of an a priori model of morality, as anti-Platonizing as the a priori logic that Wittgenstein thought of, for which knowledge of the idea of good, the right and duty should no longer be presupposed, as an ideal transcendent model, by any action wishing to be moral, while instead it is, rather, practical-moral normativity that should be derived, in a Kantian manner, from the common idea of what is right and good³¹.

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³¹ For some interesting developments of the thesis on the parallel between logic and morality and their origin from the descriptive the reader is referred to Thagard 1982.