

Propositional attitudes as speech acts

0. In speaking about propositional attitudes philosophers habitually refer to sentences in one way or another reducible to the following form:

(PA) S ϕ s that p

where S is a person, p is a descriptive sentence, and ϕ is a verb used to describe an intentional mental state like 'to believe', 'to hope', 'to fear', 'to wish', etc. The object of the mental state is said to be the propositional content of p .

So, when we say, for instance, 'Mary believes that it is raining outside', we ascribe to Mary the belief that it is raining outside. Mary's belief that it is raining outside, is said, is a propositional attitude, while the sentences of the (PA) kind are to be called 'propositional attitude ascriptions', or 'propositional attitude reports'.

Speech acts, on the other hand, are actions a speaker does in uttering a sentence, besides making noises and pronouncing words in a certain language. The paradigm of a speech act, according to Austin¹, would be an utterance of this sort:

(SA) I ϕ that..., I ϕ to..., or I ϕ .

where ϕ is a particular performative verb in the active voice, first person singular present tense. One criteria for identifying performative verbs is this: if it makes sense to say 'I hereby ϕ that...' instead of 'I ϕ that...', then ϕ is a performative verb. For instance, when I utter 'I promise to come to you tomorrow' I perform the action of promising you to come to you tomorrow, and instead of 'I promise to come to you tomorrow, I could have said 'I hereby promise to come to you tomorrow.'

Now, it would come out straightforwardly that a propositional attitude report is a speech act, only not an explicit one, since we could always substitute 'I report (or claim, affirm, maintain, state) that S ϕ s that p ' for (PA). Indeed, speech act theorists like Austin and Searle² say that every time we say something we perform an illocutionary act³. The background for this claim, I suppose, is offered by Wittgenstein's point that every time we utter a phrase, what we do can be regarded as a move in a language game. In the same vein, it seems, when I utter a first person propositional attitude sentence like 'I believe that it is raining outside', I also perform an illocutionary act. By analogy, one could be tempted to say that the explicit form of the above sentence is 'I report that I believe that it is raining outside.' I want, in what follows, to convince you that this analogy is misleading and that sentences of this kind should be rather regarded as explicit performatives. For this, I will try to see how they could pass the 'hereby test' and what sort of performatives they could be. Since I suspect that the analysis might differ for different attitude verbs, I will concentrate in what follows on 'believe' only. The next thing I want to do is to explore the possibility of solving some puzzles concerning propositional attitude statements by regarding first person propositional attitude statements as explicit performatives. In the end, I will try to suggest that there are some philosophical insights that we might get from this treatment of first person propositional attitude statements.

1. One trouble with 'I believe that p ' is that it fails the 'hereby test'. It does not seem to make sense to say 'I hereby believe that p ', in the same way in which it sounds awkward to say 'I hereby

¹ See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York: 1975, pp. 68-9.

² Searle, in particular, offers a nice argument for this in John R. Searle, *What Is a Speech Act?*, in A. P. Martinich (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language* (3rd edn), Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York: 1996, pp. 130-1.

³ In other words, whenever we utter a sentence it has an illocutionary force.

repent of my misbehavior.' There is, on the other side, a close phrase that will pass the 'hereby test', as in 'I hereby express my belief that *p*'.

Austin distinguishes between (explicit) performative utterances like 'I apologize', half-descriptive performatives like 'I am sorry' and reports like 'I repent' (or 'I feel sorry')⁴. We could say, as Searle suggests⁵, that to apologize is to express the way that you feel about something you did. In the same way, we might be tempted to distinguish between 'believing that *p*' and 'expressing the belief that *p*'⁶. It would come out this way that 'I express my belief that *p*' is an explicit performative, while 'I believe that *p*' is a report of a mental state. Things, however, are far from being quite so.

Let us look at the sentence 'I express my belief that *p*' more closely. We sometimes speak of something being the expression of some other thing, like in 'the movie expressed the novel in an interesting way'. By analogy with this, we might be tempted to say that either *p*, or the explicit 'I express my belief that *p*' are expressions of some private mental state. Wittgenstein's private language argument, I think, provides good reasons for avoiding this sort of assumptions. On this account, 'I express my belief that *p*', regarded as an avowal, is not paralleled by some mental state the expression of which it is and differs in no way from 'I believe that *p*'⁷. In other words, saying that I believe that *p* is showing that I believe that *p*. From this point of view, therefore, 'I believe that *p*' could very well be regarded as an explicit performative among Austin's performatives or Searle's expressives⁸. If we look to other performative verbs in the same class, the resemblance is obvious. We could say, for instance, 'I acclaim (the fact) that...', but also 'I acclaim you'. In the same way, we could say 'I believe that...', but also 'I believe you.' There is also, however, another way in which we sometimes use 'to express'. Consider, for instance, the case in which a government official says 'I express my belief that corruption has highly diminished'. Here, the purpose of the utterance is not to express a mental state. Instead, the speaker associates himself in a certain degree with the thesis that corruption has highly diminished. Were the context of his utterance less official, the speaker could have said simply 'I believe that corruption has highly diminished.' This puts the utterance in the category of Searle's assertives⁹, on the same scale that goes from 'I suggest that *p*', 'I hypothesize that *p*', 'I state that *p*', to 'I insist that *p*' and 'I swear that *p*'¹⁰.

To sum up, both cases in which one could say, for different purposes, 'I express my belief that *p*' are reducible, for different reasons, to cases in which one would say 'I believe that *p*'. This is why 'I believe that *p*' falls in two categories of performatives instead of one. How do we distinguish between the cases? Well, let us look to first to another case. 'To accept' could be used in an assertive, but also in an expressive (as in 'I accept your apologies'). Let us suppose that the grammatical form is of not much help to make a distinction¹¹. Well, we would probably use the context in which a sentence was uttered. Was it a debate? Where we discussing vacation plans? Was I apologizing? In most of the cases this should settle the matter. The same is true for 'I believe'. Were we speaking of your opinions or mine, without arguing for what we believe, were

⁴ See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York: 1975, p. 79.

⁵ See, John R. Searle, *A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts*, in A. P. Martinich (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language* (3rd edn), Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York: 1996, p. 143.

⁶ One could forge a verb for this: to opinate.

⁷ Wittgenstein himself seems to separate 'believing that *p*' not only from 'thinking that *p*', but also from 'saying that *p*'. I do not need to say (not even inwardly) 'The Earth existed a long time before my birth', for instance, in order to believe it. On the other hand, I can say it without believing it, of course.

⁸ For Searle, other expressives are: thank, congratulate, condole, deplore and welcome. Bach and Harnish put this sort of illocutionary verbs in another category - acknowledgements. See K. Bach and R. M. Harnish, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA: 1979.

⁹ Searle's class of *assertives* includes most of Austin's *verdictives* (hold, describe, assess, characterize, etc.) and *expositives* (affirm, emphasize, report, accept, concede, etc.). Bach and Harnish would perhaps speak of *constatives* (affirming, alleging, announcing, claiming, conjecturing, denying, disagreeing, insisting, predicting, reporting, stating, stipulating, etc.).

¹⁰ In *On certainty*, Wittgenstein provides an interesting relation between knowing and swearing, by saying that, instead of saying 'I know that this is my hand', Moore could have said 'I swear that this is my hand'.

¹¹ Compare, for instance, 'I accept (the invitation) to take dinner with you tomorrow' with 'I accept (the prediction) that I will take dinner with you tomorrow'.

you expressing agreement or trust, or were you trying to convince me of something? Depending on the answer to these and similar question we might class the utterance in one of the two categories.

Now, speech act theorists use to speak of different ways in which a performative act could fail, apart from the case in which the locutionary part of the utterance proves false. An expressive, for instance, could fail by flouting the sincerity condition. It seems that if we no longer distinguish between reports of mental states and avowals, there is not point to speak of the sincerity condition anymore. Well, this is not as bad as it seems. Sincerely apologizing is uttering your apology in the proper tone of voice in the appropriate context. In the same manner, sincerely believing is uttering your opinion in the proper tone of voice in the appropriate context.

There is also possible that in uttering an explicit performative one would do a different act¹². I could say, for instance, 'I promise you I did not steal your keys', to assure you that I did not steal your keys by strongly assenting to the sentence that I did not steal your keys. The same holds for 'I believe'. I could say 'I believe that you stole my keys' to accuse you that you stole my keys, or I could say 'I believe the kidnapped journalists will be freed' to assure you (a commissive) that the kidnapped journalists will be freed.

2. So, what does the speech act approach amount to? There are at least two main problems with propositional attitudes. One is to make clear what a proposition is, the other to say what a mental state is and how can it relate to a proposition. For now, we might suspect that at least for first person belief statements, the speech act approach allows us to escape these problems. It makes sense to say that a person performing an action uses something to obtain a result. In uttering a speech act, a speaker uses sounds or written marks to obtain a result from a hearer¹³. He does not use a proposition as a mental or abstract object, and is pointless to speak of his psychological attitude towards such an object.

Instead of saying that my belief that if p occurs than q will occur and my desire that q should occur explains my doing p , I could say that some of my actions are related to each other. I cannot enter my room without opening the door. Some might be inclined to say that opening the door is a prerequisite action for the action of entering my room, while I, for myself, would perhaps say that opening the door is part of entering my room. In the same way, some could say that believing that the best (or the only) way to enter my room is by opening the door is part of an explanation for my behaviour, while I, for myself, would say that it is part of my entering my house and that it shows in my opening the door to enter my room.

I do not wish to insist on these controversial matters right now. I only wanted to suggest that the usual problems that appear when we speak of propositional attitudes might be somehow avoided by the speech act approach.

Let us turn to Frege's puzzle now. Frege said that 'S believes that a is P' and ' $a=b$ ' do not entail that 'S believes that b is P'¹⁴. According to the present view, a propositional attitude report is a report of an action of which a speech act like 'I believe that p' uttered by S is a part. We could look, for comparison, to another speech act and its report. Suppose Smith says 'I promise to give you 100 USD.' It is true that 100 USD is equal to some amount of money in another currency, but from this it does not follow that Smith promised you to pay in that currency. A report like 'Smith promised to give you a sum equal to 100 USD' would not be an accurate report of what Smith did, in uttering the promise.

For certain speech acts an accurate report should stick to the words uttered by the speaker. For others, a report does not have to be precise in this respect. For instance, 'The general ordered

¹² See, for instance, John R. Searle, *Indirect Speech Acts*, in A. P. Martinich (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language* (3rd edn), Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York: 1996, pp. 168-182.

¹³ See Grice's detailed analysis in H. P. Grice, *Meaning*, *Philosophical Review*, vol. 66 (1957), pp. 377-388.

¹⁴ See Gotlob Frege, *On sense and nominatum*, in A. P. Martinich (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language* (3rd edn), Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York: 1996, pp. 186-198.

his troops to attack Berlin' would be a good report of Napoleon having uttered (in French) 'Let's take this city', or something similar. On the other hand, using certain names and certain expressions (instead of others with the same reference) is important when we report the actions performed during a religious ritual¹⁵.

What about belief reports, then? Well, it seems that our choice of words depends on the context a belief was uttered. If I wanted to assent in a certain degree to a sentence I utter in a court of law, it might be important for me that my act is reported in the same words I have used, whereas if I speak in private to a close friend, the words that he might use in reporting my act would not matter so much. In addition, in uttering 'I believe that...' as an expressive, since the accent, so to speak, seems to be on the illocutionary part of my utterance, perhaps it would matter less if some of my words were replaced by co-referential terms in a report of my utterance.

So, roughly speaking, it seems that Frege's puzzle is not a real puzzle after all. It is important in pointing out that in reporting a belief utterance we must sometimes stick to the words used by the speaker, but this is all. Moreover, no speech act could be said to be true or false, but successful or unsuccessful, although in the case of assertives their success seems to depend largely on the truth of the locutionary part of our utterance.

Another way of looking at Frege's so called puzzle would be this. Suppose Smith says 'I believe that Mark Twain was a great writer' and also 'I believe Samuel Longhorn Clemens was not a great writer' (he might reason like this: if he was, I would have heard of him). Now, if we use only one of the two names in our report of Smith's belief utterances, we might, indeed, have a problem. What does the problem consist in? Well, the problem is that according to our report, one of Smith's utterances must have been unsuccessful, since one of the conditions for a successful belief utterance seems to be not to say 'I believe that p ' and then 'I believe that $\sim p$ ', just like that. A subtler version of this requirement shows up, perhaps in this. I cannot threaten you that I will kill you tomorrow and at the same time promise you that I will pay you a million dollars the day after tomorrow. Smith has, however, succeeded to express his beliefs (in any of the two senses). And this time too, it is also the context of his utterance that shows us that for an appropriate report we must stick to his words. Namely, a larger context including the fact that Mark Twain was the nickname used by Samuel L. Clemens as a writer.

Kripke's Peter, on the other hand, is in a different position¹⁶. If Peter says both 'I believe that Paderewski had musical talent' and 'I believe that Paderewski had no musical talent', then, for the reason mentioned above, he does not succeed to make a belief utterance with his second speech act. Indeed, this would not be a successful belief utterance even if there were two persons named Paderewski, as Peter thinks, instead of one. The question whether Peter believes or not that Paderewski had musical talent does not, as a matter of fact, appear.

3. I turn now to the following question: 'How could we put the speech act approach of belief utterances to work?' One important way in which such an approach could prove useful is by indicating different conditions that a belief utterance must respect in order to be successful.

For instance, I will not succeed to express by belief that p if I utter 'I believe that p ' in front of a horse or a 3 years old child. Also, if I say 'I believe that the operation was successful' but I am not a surgeon and know nothing about surgery, I fail to express the belief that the operation went well. This suggests that there are certain condition with respect to the speaker and the hearer that have to obtain for a belief utterance to be successful.

There are also conditions with respect to p . It seems that p cannot be itself an explicit performative. Saying 'I believe that I promise...' or 'I believe that I state...' or 'I believe that I order...', etc. amounts to nothing. In some cases, if p is accepted by most learned people, taught in

¹⁵ In particular, reporting the act of saying something (Austin calls it the rhetic act) to perform an illocutionary act should consist in using the words used by the speaker, thus becoming indistinguishable from quoting. I suppose that Davidson's solution to Frege's paradox, in Donald Davidson, *On Saying That*, Synthese, vol. 19 (1968-69), pp. 130-146, depends of his substitution of 'saying that' for 'believe that'. In addition, it is easy to see that 'saying' passes the 'hereby test'.

¹⁶ See Saul A. Kripke, *A Puzzle about Belief*, in A. P. Martinich (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language* (3rd edn), Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York: 1996, pp. 382-411.

school, and so forth, uttering 'I believe that p ' as an assertive would either fail to result in a speech act, or it would be a very odd one¹⁷.

We have already seen that we cannot hold contradictory beliefs, so to speak. Since uttering that I believe that p is in many cases only part of my expressing my belief that p , there are also other actions that must not contradict my utterance. For instance, if I say 'I believe that this chair will not hold me' and after that I sit down in the same chair, it might be said that I did not succeed to express my belief that the chair will not hold me.

The tone on which I am displaying certain beliefs might also play a role in performing the speech act. If I say, for instance, 'I believe that p ', where p was something said by my interlocutor (in short, 'I believe you'), in a sneering voice, it might be said that I failed to believe that p . In a similar way, there might be problems if I say 'I believe that my best friend died today' while laughing.

[...]

To conclude, it is true that the speech act theory has got its problems, which I am not going to mention here. What I wanted to say, however, is that it might be useful for us, as philosophers interested in understanding how language works, to regard first person propositional attitude sentences as speech acts and propositional attitude reports as reports either of such speech acts, or of actions that include such speech acts.

¹⁷ This is similar to promising to your parents that you won't rape them. Nevertheless, not all cases are like this. In saying 'I believe that stealing is wrong', for example, I could be performing a perfectly successful speech act.