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'When you (say you) know, you can't be wrong': J.L. Austin on 'I know' claims

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ABSTRACT
In 'Other Minds', J.L. Austin advances a parallel between saying 'I know' and saying 'I promise': much as you are 'prohibited', he says, from saying 'I promise I will, but I may fail', you are also 'prohibited' from saying 'I know it is so, but I may be wrong'. This treatment of 'I know' has been derided for nearly sixty years: while saying 'I promise' amounts to performing the act of promising, Austin seems to miss the fact that saying 'I know' fails to constitute a performance of the act of knowing. In this paper, I advance a defense of Austin's position. I diagnose the principal objections to Austin's account as stemming from detractors' failure to acknowledge: (1) that Austin never characterizes 'I know' as a pure performative; (2) that saying 'I know *p*', unlike simply knowing *p*, occurs in specific interpersonal contexts in which others *rely* on our knowledge claims; (3) Austin's considered account of the felicity conditions of performative utterance; (4) Austin's ultimate repudiation of the performative/constative distinction. I conclude that Austin's treatment of 'I know' rests on a more general commitment to the intrinsically *normative* nature of ordinary language.

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I.

One infamous passage in J.L. Austin's 'Other Minds' has proved perplexing for his later commentators:

> 'When you know you can't be wrong' is perfectly good sense. You are prohibited from saying 'I know it is so, but I may be wrong', just as you are prohibited from saying 'I promise I will, but I may fail'. If you are aware you may be mistaken, you ought not to say you know, just as, if you are aware you may break your word, you have no business to promise. But of course, being aware that you may be mistaken doesn't mean merely being aware that you are a fallible human

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> being: it means that you have some concrete reason to suppose that you may be mistaken in this case. (1946, 98)

What does Austin mean when he says we are 'prohibited' from saying 'I know it is so, but I may be wrong'? What kind of prohibition is this?

A few pages later, Austin asserts a further, even more perplexing claim: in the context of discussing 'I know' and other utterances akin to it, he adds, 'Such phrases cannot, strictly, *be* lies, though they can "imply" lies, as 'I promise" implies that I fully intend, which may be untrue' (103). But, given that I can only lie about states of affairs I know about, shouldn't an utterance in which I stake a claim to knowledge constitute a quintessential instance in which lying would be possible? Austin has seemingly nothing to say in response to such a rebuttal.

Incredulity on this point has contributed to the fact that Austin, once considered the greatest philosopher of the postwar era, has fallen off the philosophical radar. Austin's treatment of 'I know' has been called 'really unprofitable and misguided' (Warnock 1989, 26), 'valueless' (Geach 1965, 463), and 'simply a mistake', as would have been shown by 'ten minutes' reflection' (McGinn 1989, 6–7). Even more recent attempts to rehabilitate Austin have conceded that his treatment of 'I know' does not generalize to *all* instances of 'I know' – let alone to Austin's position more generally – but describes a '*very* rare' use (Baz 2012, 39), that 'we might remain unconvinced that the act of giving one's word or authority is an especially prevalent thing that one does with the words "I know"' (de Lara 2019, 5), and that the 'misstep' Austin made on this point 'is isolable without cost from the rest of his discussion' (Kaplan 2008, 16f). As a result, 'it is commonly thought', both by interpreters of Austin and contemporary epistemologists, 'that the parallel [between knowing and promising] is fundamentally flawed' (Gustafsson 2011, 6).

In this paper, I argue that Austin's characterization of the performative aspects of 'I know' claims, far from being 'isolable without cost', is central to his broader account of the relationship between ordinary language and philosophy. In fact, this much-derided passage serves to set up the view that it is not just 'I know' claims that have a performative dimension, but nearly *all* use of language: 'Even if some language is now purely descriptive, language was not in origin so, and much of it is still not so' (1946, 103). Moreover, this statement serves as an initial articulation of the view Austin would expand and radicalize nine years later, in *How to Do Things with Words*[1], on which nearly every utterance involves 'both

[1]Hereafter abbreviated '*Words*'.

locutionary and illocutionary acts' corresponding to the acts *of* saying something and *in* saying something, respectively (1955, 133). Austin's treatment of 'I know' is not an exception to his general view, but is representative of his position as a whole.

I suggest that this point has been obscured because commentators have often fallen prey to the performative-constative dichotomy that Austin – on the basis of considering the everyday usage of terms such as 'I know' – ultimately repudiates in *Words*. Much of the literature has either reduced the *act of saying* 'I know' (which encompasses both the statement and the situation in which it is said) to the mere descriptive (or semantic) *content* of that utterance,[2] while Austin takes great pains to show that the two are not the same; or treated 'I know' claims as performatives strictly speaking[3] (as performing an act of knowledge), even though Austin never says that 'I know' claims are equivalent to pure performatives, and even comes to reject the notion of a 'pure performative' altogether.[4] It has thus come to seem intuitive either that the performative dimension of an 'I know' claim can easily be rebutted in favor of a narrowly epistemological characterization, or that the invocations of 'I know' Austin has in mind are so singular that they have no greater lesson to bear on Austin's treatment of speech more generally.[5]

Against these two strands of interpretation, I argue that Austin's understanding of 'I know' claims demonstrates his deeper commitment to the normative dimension, not just of 'I know', but of *language as such*. While commentators have, in part, appreciated this point by cashing out Austin's account of 'I know' in terms of the epistemology of testimony (McMyler 2011), the nature of assurance (Lawlor 2013), or acknowledgment (de Lara 2019), none so far have taken Austin's account of 'I know'

[2]See, e.g. McGinn (1989), Kaplan (2006, 2008).

[3]See Baz (2011), who is otherwise sympathetic: '"I know", however akin it might be to "I promise", is surely not a performative' (2011, 149). See also Danto (1962) and Warnock (1989).

[4]'What will *not* survive the transition [from the performative/constative distinction to the theory of speech acts] is the notion of the purity of performatives: this was essentially based upon a belief in the dichotomy of performatives and constatives' (Austin 1955, 150).

[5]As I note above, both de Lara (2019) and Baz (2011) claim that 'I know', as Austin describes its usage, is 'very rare'. By assimilating Austinian 'I know' to Cavell's characterization of acknowledgment (1969) and 'passionate utterance' (2005), as de Lara (2019) does, the uses of 'I know' that instead have to do with epistemic warrant are insufficiently accounted for. For example, acknowledgment may work for instances such as 'I know you're in pain', but the instances that principally interest Austin, such as 'How do you know it's a real stick?' or 'I know it's a goldfinch' (1946, 86, 88), do not function primarily as *acknowledgments* of one's interlocutor, but as staking a claim to the content of one's utterance being true. Limiting Austinian 'I know' to such instances may make Austin's characterization appear much rarer than I take it to be here; in the conclusion of this paper, I argue that my normative interpretation of (epistemic) 'I know' can also extend to cases of acknowledgment.

to rest on a more general view of the nature of everyday language.[6] Here, I argue that Austin holds that in saying 'I know', I am typically staking my authority and committing myself normatively to my interlocutor – aspects on which the function of interpersonal communication *as such* depends, and that 'I know' claims merely bring into relief. Robert Brandom's characterization of language, which picks up on crucial points of Austin's account, helps to show that such attributes are presupposed not just by 'I know' claims, but by the way ordinary language functions in general. Because mutual intelligibility necessitates a backdrop of reciprocal recognition, trust, and responsibility, language takes on a binding character among those occupying an internal perspective within it – the source of Austin's talk of language in terms of 'prohibitions' and 'oughts'. Austin's claims about the usage of 'I know', far from being 'rare' or exceptional instances of this utterance, therefore hold a generalizable lesson as to the conditions required for ordinary language to function.

II.

I start by advancing my rebuttal of four points that have distorted interpretations of Austin's statements about 'I know', before turning, in the next section, to my positive account of what Austin's characterization commits him to vis-à-vis the nature of language.

1. Austin never says that 'I know' claims are strictly equivalent to pure performatives; the performative dimension of 'I know' claims (as, indeed, all performatives) will vary according to the 'total speech situation' in which they are enmeshed.

A few pages after the infamous claim '"When you know you can't be wrong" is perfectly good sense', Austin expands on what he means (and puts forth the further claim about lying):

> To suppose that 'I know' is a descriptive phrase, is only one example of the *descriptive fallacy*, so common in philosophy. Even if some language is now purely descriptive, language was not in origin so, and much of it is still not so. Utterance of obvious ritual phrases, in the appropriate circumstances, is not *describing* the action we are doing, but *doing* it ('I do'): in other cases, it functions,

[6]Other commentators who have drawn generalizable lessons for the nature of language and epistemology from Austin, though not from Austin's treatment of 'I know', that align with aspects of my treatment are Bauer (2015) and Moran (2018); see also Crary (2006) and Bauer and Richard (this volume).

> like tone and expression, or again like punctuation and mood, as an intimation that we are employing language in some special way ('I warn', 'I ask', 'I define'). Such phrases cannot, strictly, *be* lies, though they can 'imply' lies, as 'I promise' implies that I fully intend, which may be untrue. (1946, 103)

Austin likens 'I know' utterances to other 'ritual phrases' in which the saying is the doing (such as uttering 'I do' in the context of a marriage ceremony), which he will later coin 'performative utterances'. Because we are not describing *p* in such cases, but actually, by uttering *p,* doing *p*, the truth value of descriptive (what we might now call 'semantic') content is not separable from the act of asserting it: saying 'I do' in the appropriate circumstances *makes* it true.[7]

Yet here Austin is not claiming that 'I know' is *equivalent* to pure performatives ('obvious ritual phrases'). The fact that he is so often read this way is evidence of the enduring grip of an assumption against which he contends in *Words*: the 'belief in the dichotomy of performatives and constatives, which we see has to be abandoned in favor of more general *families* of related and overlapping speech acts' (1955, 150). If there is no 'dichotomy' between performatives and constatives, rejecting the notion that 'I know' is purely constative does not amount to classifying it as purely performative. Indeed, the outcome of *Words* is that, in a sense, there *is* no such thing as a pure performative: in his final lecture, Austin concludes that 'the traditional "statement" is an abstraction, an ideal', whereas 'the total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating' (1955, 148).

Thus, in certain cases ('in the appropriate circumstances'), 'I know' will take on a more performative coloring than in others. As Austin notes, utterances of even 'obvious ritual phrases' *sometimes* function as the performing of an action; at other times, they serve to convey extra-descriptive content – 'tone', 'expression', 'punctuation', 'mood'.[8] Even apparently clear-cut instances of performatives, as in the case of promising, do not always amount to straightforwardly performing the act of promising. Take the utterance 'I promise' in a claim like 'It will all work out, I promise' or 'I promise they'll change their minds': in such instances, 'I promise' functions to *reassure* rather than to commit oneself to carrying out a designated future action. Either case works just as well if reworded in terms of 'I know': 'It will all work out, I know it'; 'I know they'll change

[7]On the 'truth-making' interpretation of Austin which has now become widely accepted in contemporary philosophy of language, see Lewis (1979).

[8]This claim could be said to point toward the 'passionate' dimension of speech that Cavell argues was neglected in Austin's treatment of the perlocutionary (Cavell 2005).

their minds'. Moreover, as I suggest below, 'I promise' can even function to commit oneself normatively to the *epistemic* content of one's utterance, much like 'I know'.

The parallel between 'I know' and 'I promise', then, does not amount to equating 'I know' with *performing an act of knowing*, since Austin ultimately denies that even claims such as 'I promise' inevitably amount to straightforward performances of promising. Instead, the parallel should be understood in terms of Austin's attempt to attribute a *performative dimension* to *all* utterances, which can be more or less explicit in a given speech act depending on its context and the function for which it is being employed. Whether this dimension is more central to certain uses of 'I promise' than 'I know', I take Austin to emphasize its indispensability to both cases.

To fully understand Austin's parallel between the two, the performative/constative dichotomy must be repudiated for *all* speech acts (outside of, perhaps, certain employments of rare 'ritual phrases'), and thus for nearly every case of both 'I know' and 'I promise'. In either instance, determining the function of a given utterance will depend on an evaluation of the particular context at hand. Consequently, neither 'I know' nor 'I promise' can be definitively categorized as one speech act or another; both can constitute a *range* of different speech acts, depending on the circumstances.

2. Equating 'I know' claims with the mere fact of knowing something (with the propositional content of such claims alone) is contingent on overlooking the contexts of interpersonal commitments in which such claims arise.

Austin's reference to the indispensability of the 'total speech situation' suggests that it's important to maintain a distinction between knowing and *saying* 'I know'. This distinction might seem pedantic, since the two may appear equivalent on first glance: we might take there to be a certain immediacy between the fact of our knowing something and our ability to verbalize that knowledge. But this apparent philosophical immediacy provides evidence of Austin's point: that, in philosophizing, we tend to neglect to consider the specific cases in which claims to knowledge occur, and the different contexts in which those claims can take on varying functions. An instance in which I stake a claim of knowledge to *another person* is distinct from my (unrealized) ability to verbalize a state of affairs of which I have knowledge.[9] The interpersonal contexts in

[9]On the distinct nature of second-personal knowledge or testimony, see Moran (2018).

which 'I know' claims arise are ones in which we, as speakers using the first person, are already implicated in a nexus of commitments to and claims on others. By contrast, reducing 'I know' claims to the mere ability to verbalize knowledge already entails an estrangement from such interpersonal commitments. It is precisely this flight to abstraction and corresponding alienation from ordinary language, and thus from our ordinary practices, that Austin is determined to resist.

Many commentators, however, have fallen into the trap of eliding this difference, thus failing to grasp the force of Austin's account of 'I know'. Kaplan's objection to the account of 'I know' Austin gives is that 'when, in ordinary life, one finds out the proposition one claimed to know is false, one concludes that one did not know after all' (2008, 16f; see also 2006, 185); similarly, Baz counters, 'You can say "I know" fully felicitously and, for all that, not know, it would seem' (2011, 149).[10]

Such a response overlooks the fact that Austin *agrees* that we should conclude that we did not know *p* if we discover we were mistaken about *p*: 'We are often right to say we *know* even in cases where we turn out subsequently to have been mistaken – and indeed we seem always, or practically always, liable to be mistaken' (1946, 98). Austin concurs, then, that we often are mistaken about facts we thought we knew. It seems to follow that he would likewise agree that finding out we were mistaken constitutes grounds for altering our levels of epistemic certainty, and thus for concluding that we did not really know what we thought we did. The sticking point is not whether we really *knew* to begin with, but whether we were justified in *saying* we knew when we were sincere in doing so – when we lacked 'concrete reason' to suspect we might be mistaken (1946, 98). The relevant distinction, between knowledge and the *assertion* 'I know', tracks Crispin Wright's (1992) distinction between truth and warranted assertibility.[11] As Wright argues, we may have warrant to say something that is later revealed to be false. Thus, while I may be licensed to later conclude, on the basis of new evidence, that I did not in fact know *p*, my initial assertion, 'I know *p*', can still nevertheless be warranted.

[10]Similar objections are voiced by Warnock (1989, 27) and McGinn (1989). Geach raises a different objection: that Austin did not account for the fact that 'I know' can function as a 'premise obeying ordinary logical rules', such as in syllogistic inferences (1965, 463). This provides another example of the kind of utterance philosophers would be hard-pressed to find as an ordinary occurrence, and that, Austin would argue, demonstrates their alienation from ordinary language. The mere fact that we *can* imagine a given use of a term does not mean that our philosophical account must be developed on the basis of such a use rather than an ordinary or typical use.

[11]Thanks to Wolfgang Mann for this suggestion.

But Austin, unlike Wright, also emphasizes the *effects* of 'I know' as a warrantedly assertible speech act. Uttering 'I know *p*' has effects in the situations in which we utter it and on the interlocutors to whom it is uttered – effects that cannot be erased simply upon concluding that we didn't know what we thought we did. These effects, and the consequent responsibility intrinsic to any assertion of knowledge, are what I take Austin to bring out in characterizing 'I know' as occupying a dimension with other utterances that cannot, in certain circumstances, 'strictly, be lies' (1946, 103). In uttering 'I know *p*', I advance a commitment to my interlocutors that *p* is true – a commitment that stands, and on which I can be held accountable, regardless of whether my utterance is deceitful or in bad faith.

3. Performatives, insofar as they are actions, can prove unsuccessful or deficient (can fail to satisfy their requisite felicity conditions). So even on a performative interpretation of 'I know', it is still possible for us to qualify our characterization of such claims in the event of mistaken knowledge.

Commentators who equate the utterance 'I know *p*' to the state of knowing *p* can only do so if they see 'I know' claims not as speech *acts* enmeshed in a preexisting interpersonal configuration of commitments, claims, reciprocal responsibility and authority, but as mere statements whose epistemic content is the only possible dimension of discursive 'success'. Indeed, the fact that there are other such aspects of language use is part of what Austin brings out by insisting that we consider a statement 'not as a sentence (or proposition) but as an act of speech', a shift which brings us closer to 'studying the whole thing as an act' (1955, 20). Once it becomes clearer that linguistic utterances can be considered as acts,

> then, as actions, these will be subject to certain whole dimensions of unsatisfactoriness to which all actions are subject … . Actions in general (not all) are liable, for example, to be done under duress, or by accident, or owing to this or that variety of mistake, or otherwise unintentionally. (1955, 21)

The case of someone saying 'I know' when they are mistaken in what they take themselves to know can be thought akin to an action being undertaken accidentally or mistakenly.

Is it then the case to say that such actions aren't really actions – that once the mistake is found out, it would be wrong to say that the action was in fact undertaken? In this passage, Austin does admit that there is

something 'off' about cases of 'unhappy actions': 'In many such cases we are certainly unwilling to say of some such action simply that it was done or that he did it' (1955, 21). Indeed, in 'Other Minds' Austin holds that such cases merely amount to *saying* a performative phrase rather than, in fact, performing it:

> The sense in which you "did promise" is that you did *say* you promised … . But it may well transpire that you never fully intended to do it, or that you had concrete reason to suppose that you wouldn't be able to do it (it might even be manifestly impossible), and in another "sense" of promise you *can't* then have promised to do it, so that you *didn't* promise. (1946, 101)

Thus, in one sense infelicitous performatives are not even actions at all.

Yet, while it is true that we are sometimes unwilling to straightforwardly say that such actions were done, it is also just as true that we are unwilling to say that such actions weren't done *at all*. For example, if I say 'I promise *p*' and renege on my promise, there is another sense in which I *did* promise, but ultimately my action was infelicitous. While I can be held to the commitment I undertook in promising (just as in saying 'I know *p*'), the action of promising requires *an additional condition* to be in place, namely *doing* what I promised (just as knowing what I claimed to know), over the fact of having uttered 'I promise' alone. If you don't do what you promised, in one sense you promised; in another sense, your promise remains unfulfilled, and thus not fully performed.[12]

While this ambiguity is not fully captured until the introduction of Austin's account of felicity conditions in *Words* (1955, 14–18), Austin already implicitly invokes it when he claims in 'Other Minds' that phrases such as 'I know' 'cannot, strictly, *be* lies, though they can "imply" lies, as "I promise" implies that I fully intend, which may be untrue' (1946, 103). 'I know' is not *strictly* a lie, but given that it can 'imply a lie', it can't be taken as a wholly felicitous case of claiming knowledge, either.

Austin's account of felicity conditions indicates an additional sense in which a principal objection to the 'I know'-'I promise' parallel is misguided. That is, objecting that 'I know' doesn't amount to the performance of the act of knowing misses the fact that Austin doesn't hold this view for promising, either. Even when the function of 'I promise' is indeed to promise (which, as I noted above, is not always the case), this utterance does not in and of itself perform the act of promising without the fulfillment of

[12]Austin lists this as felicity condition Γ.2 of performative utterances: that speakers 'must actually … conduct themselves' in accordance to what their utterance stipulates (1955, 15).

additional conditions – which also holds in order for 'I know' to count as a genuine transmission of knowledge.

Thus, Austin's view of both 'I know' and 'I promise' is more nuanced than has often been accounted for. In both cases, the felicity of the speech act depends on the fulfillment of other conditions beyond the mere uttering of the phrase, and this is true, to varying degrees, for all performatives.[13] 'I know' claims can therefore *both* have a performative dimension *and* be possibly mistaken or deficient.

4. Ultimately, Austin rejects the dichotomy between performatives and constatives altogether. Thus, to attribute to him the view that 'I know' is a performative mischaracterizes his considered position, on which there are no 'performatives' as such.

The nuances involved in determining the felicity conditions of a given speech act apply not just to performatives, but to all utterances as such. Austin's study of performatives leads him to conclude: 'In real life, as opposed to the simple situations envisaged in logical theory, one cannot always answer in a simple manner whether it is true or false' (1955, 143). He raises the example of 'France is hexagonal', and asks whether this statement is true or false: 'Well, if you like, up to a point … . It is good enough for a top-ranking general, perhaps, but not for a geographer' (143). He concludes that there *is* no fact of the matter about whether this statement is true or false: 'It is a rough description; it is not a true or false one … . what is judged true in a school book may not be so judged in a work of historical research' (143).[14] The dichotomy of semantic truth and falsity is not any more straightforward than the spectrum of performative 'infelicities', but constitutes yet another 'general dimension of being a right or proper thing to say as opposed to a wrong thing' (145). If the felicity of performatives is subject to the practical needs and context of the speakers who utter them, so is the semantic truth

[13]See my discussion below of authority as a condition of performative felicity, as well as what Austin means by the 'conventionality' of speech acts.

[14]A contemporary understanding of the context of an utterance such as 'France is hexagonal' might parse it in terms of the Gricean cooperative principle ('Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged') and the maxims that comprise it; see Grice (1975). An interesting question here, which I lack the space to take up, is the degree of overlap between the Gricean and Austinian programs, and with it, the extent to which Gricean maxims themselves presuppose what Brandom would emphasize as the ethical (normative) backdrop of communicative intelligibility. For Brandom's criticism of Grice's model of speaker intention, see Brandom (1994): 146-7. I am grateful to Gary Ostertag for pushing me on my response to the Gricean objection.

value of constatives. Ultimately, then, the dimensions of truth, falsity, success, and infelicity are intrinsically bound up in one another; the respective contrasts between them cannot, on a sufficiently detailed consideration of the context of a given utterance, be drawn. As a result, the sorts of considerations I have raised with regards to 'I know' claims will apply, to varying degrees, to *all* language. 'France is hexagonal' may seem to constitute a 'pure constative'. But even here, the pragmatic dimension of this assertion – what it's used for, the intentions of its speaker, the context in which it's uttered – is inextricable from its truth value.[15]

III.

What, then, is brought out by emphasizing the performative dimension of 'I know' claims? We might take up a similarly 'rough' constative case put forth by Charles Travis:

> Suppose that the refrigerator is devoid of milk except for a puddle of milk at the bottom of it. Now consider two possible speakings, by Odile, of the words, 'There's milk in the refrigerator'. For the first, Hugo is seated at the breakfast table, reading the paper, and from time to time looking dejectedly (but meaningfully) at his cup of black coffee, which he is idly stirring with a spoon. Odile volunteers, 'There is milk in the refrigerator'. For the second, Hugo has been given the task of cleaning the refrigerator. He has just changed out of his house-cleaning garb, and is settling with satisfaction into his armchair, book and beverage in hand. Odile opens the refrigerator, looks in, closes it and sternly says the above words. (1989, 18–19)

This example is meant to bring out how the context of an utterance can alter its truth conditions. If we don't consider the total discursive situation, then, as Conant has argued, 'Odile's words say the same thing in each case, thus there [*sic*] truth-conditions should be the same in both cases' (Conant 2011, 410). It's clear, however, that Hugo would consider Odile's statement false in the first case, and true in the second: the truth conditions vary depending on the *situation* in which the statement is uttered rather than its semantic content.

Consider, then, how we would feel about the first case if the dialogue continued. Hugo says, 'Are you sure there's milk in the refrigerator?' and Odile responds, 'Yes, *I know* there's milk in the refrigerator'. Here it no

[15]Bauer (2015) provides a cogent expression of this point: 'Austin's term ['illocutionary force'] points to a dimension of our sentences apart from which they not only would not *do* anything but also would not *mean* anything, except, perhaps, in seriously impoverished ways' (88).

longer looks like the semantic content 'there is milk in the refrigerator' is what's interesting in Odile's reply to Hugo. After all, she has already communicated that there's milk in the refrigerator. Instead, Austin insists, what is novel in this second utterance is that Odile is *staking her authority* here: 'When I say "I know", I *give others my word:* I *give others my authority for saying* that "S is P"' (Austin 1946, 99). In doing so, she is committing herself normatively to Hugo, relying on the trust built up between them in the preexisting configuration of claims on and responsibilities to each other.

Moreover, I take this point to be generalizable for many instances of 'I know'. In cases in which speakers utter 'I know *p*' rather than simply '*p*', Austin holds that the additional content furnished by 'I know' is not that of transparently communicating *p*, since this would already be secured by just uttering '*p*' alone. As Austin argues regarding the difference between 'I know *p*' and 'I am sure that *p*':

> When I have said only that I am sure, and prove to have been mistaken, I am not liable to be rounded on by others in the same way as when I have said 'I know'. I am sure *for my part*, you can take it or leave it … . But I don't know 'for my part', and when I say 'I know' I don't mean you can take it or leave it … . We all *feel* the very great difference between saying even 'I'm absolutely sure' and saying 'I know': it is like the difference between saying even 'I firmly and irrevocably intend' and 'I promise'. (1946, 100)

One implicit aim of adding 'I know' is the advancing of a *commitment* that the information being conveyed is true – thus putting speakers' authority, their word, and their interpersonal relations at stake in the exchange.[16] Part of what Austin is trying to get us to see is the difference in ordinary language between what would bring us to insist 'I know *p*' rather than merely assert '*p*' (or even 'I am sure that *p*'). One additional contribution provided by adding 'I know' is the commitment that one's assertion can be relied on – indeed, bestowing the 'entitle[ment] to rely on it' (1946, 100).[17]

[16]The nature of the relationship between speakers therefore becomes immediately relevant to the determination of whether a given 'I know' claim will be successful. If a strange man approaches you unbidden on the street yelling, 'I know you are a sinner!', you are unlikely to believe him, in the same way that you would be unlikely to give him your wallet had he said, 'I promise I will give it back'. In either case, whether the utterance will be 'made true' (or the speech act felicitous) will depend on the bonds of trust between speakers. While it's outside the scope of this paper, the extent to which a speaker will tend to be believed, or even heard, is also subject to the (often pernicious) social norms governing the authority of different types of speakers; see, e.g. Langton (1993), Langton and West (1999), and McGowan (2018).

[17]Though here again, we must be careful not to posit one paradigmatic use of 'I know', and note that its function will always depend on the particular case in which it's employed. As I conclude below, there will often nevertheless be *continuity* between different kinds of case.

To see this, consider what happens when Hugo opens the refrigerator door. If he finds a mere puddle of milk, Odile will have put the preexisting bonds of trust and reciprocal responsibility at risk (unless she has a good explanation: 'I just picked up a new pint from the grocery store yesterday. What happened to it?'). The resemblance of Odile's assertion 'I know there's milk in the refrigerator' to a pledge or promise – perhaps even 'I promise there's milk in the refrigerator' – seems unambiguous. In fact, these two utterances could even be interchangeable in the context of Odile's reply to Hugo.

What, then, *should* we make of the case where Odile isn't just lying to Hugo, but is genuinely mistaken?:

Odile: I just picked up a new pint from the grocery store yesterday. What happened to it?

Hugo: Oh, I'm so sorry! I've been trying to get past this debilitating hot chocolate addiction. I already used all the milk that you just bought, but I was so dazed from last night's hot chocolate binge that it slipped my mind until I saw its last traces – the milk spill on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator.

In a sense, Odile's statement is false: she says she knows there is milk in the refrigerator, and given that there *is* no milk in the refrigerator, she didn't *really* know that there was. But in another sense, insofar as Odile is staking a claim to a particular epistemic state and had no particular reason to believe herself mistaken at the moment of the utterance, can we comfortably assert that her statement 'I know there is milk in the refrigerator' was just false? While the content of her utterance is false, Odile's utterance itself was warrantedly assertible – she was still *right* to say she knew given her initial evidence. Furthermore, when we reconsider her claim as not just the conveying of new information, but as the staking of authority or responsibility to Hugo, it becomes harder to write off the claim as 'just false'. Austin's terminology – 'unhappy', 'infelicitous', 'didn't come off' – starts to look more intuitive.

Indeed, the parallel between promising and 'I know' goes further. When someone promises me something, I am entitled to rely on that promise, or even make further promises on its basis. Similarly, when someone has said to me 'I know', Austin thinks that

> I am entitled to say *I* know too, at second hand. The right to say "I know" is transmissible, in the sort of way that other authority is transmissible. Hence, if I say it lightly, I may be *responsible* for getting *you* into trouble. (1946, 100).

If saying 'I know' is staking a kind of authority, such claims can be compared with the two classes of performatives Austin associates with the exercising of authority: verdictives (the giving of verdicts) and exercitives ('the exercising of powers, rights, and influence'), in addition to the class associated with promises – behabitives (1955, 151).

However, authorities don't merely exercise special classes of performative speech acts; their claims can also constitute a basis for knowledge:

> Among the cases where we give our reasons for knowing things, a special and important class is formed by those where we cite authorities. If I asked 'How do you know the election is today?', I am apt to reply 'I read it in *The Times*' … . The statement of an authority makes me aware of something, enables me to know something, which I shouldn't otherwise have known. It is a source of knowledge. (1946, 81–82)

When I reassure you that the election is today – that I *know* that it is – I am offering *myself* to you as an authority, much as *The Times* could have been: as another source of knowledge.

What, then, is the distinction between the authority associated with verdictives and exercitives (the judge's handing down of a verdict, a committee's statement conveying the bestowal of an award, and in certain respects, a newspaper's report of an election), and the sort of authority that's exercised in more mundane cases, such as that between Odile and Hugo? In the first, authority is bestowed on individuals (or groups thereof, or institutions) by the larger community to exercise a specific, official role, such as that of a judge, committee, or newspaper. Such utterances constitute performatives *if and only if* uttered by an individual acknowledged to be occupying the requisite authoritative professional position.[18]

In the second case, authority is bestowed *reciprocally* to all speakers of a given language (and, at a more general level, all speakers of *any given* language): all of us who use language share a discursive community and bestow each other membership of that community. The reciprocal bestowing of authority is required because communication, in order to work, requires mutual trust in one another's 'testimony':

> It is fundamental in talking (as in other matters) that we are entitled to trust others, except in so far as there is some concrete reason to distrust them.

[18] I take this and other stringent requirements that have to be in place for such performatives to 'come off' to be what Austin means to pick out in referring to the 'conventional' nature of speech acts: the 'purer' the performative, the more constrained the rules for its context of utterance—the speaker, the setting, the ritual procedure in which it's invoked, and so forth.

> Believing persons, accepting testimony, is the, or one main, point of talking. We don't play (competitive) games except in the faith that our opponent is trying to win: if he isn't, it isn't a game, but something different. So we don't talk with people (descriptively) except in the faith that they are trying to convey information. (1946, 82–83)

The fact that language works at all is contingent on the fact that we must trust that others are genuinely attempting to communicate with us. (Indeed, Austin says here that we are *entitled* to do so, since others have a *responsibility* to express themselves intelligibly to us.) In referring to what we are doing in talking as 'accepting testimony', Austin is referring to the authority imbued in us as discursive agents by our interlocutors' faith that we are able to offer information that can serve as a source of knowledge for others, and vice versa.[19] Saying 'I know it is so, but I may be wrong' is 'prohibited' because saying it would undermine the underlying trust my bestowing of knowledge to others requires.

Consequently, both the performative and the descriptive are contingent on the normative. While 'pure performative' verdictives and exercitives derive their force as actions from the authority of their speakers, Austin also claims that *every* assertion involves a degree of authority basic to the nature of intersubjective communication as such. With this more basic authority comes the responsibility to obey certain norms ('oughts') and restrictions ('prohibitions') on what we say: not to intentionally mislead, not to assert unjustified claims, or, even, not to utter unintelligible sounds in random sequences. The general capacity to do things with words is contingent on the extent to which others imbue us with the authority to advance claims they can rely on, which is affected, in turn, by the extent to which we acknowledge our own responsibility as communicators to others. By attributing performativity to *all* utterances, the performative dimension bottoms out in the *practical – normative –* dimension of language. But the force of Austin's treatment of 'I know' is to *claim that the same holds true for what is usually taken to be the descriptive* – that the descriptive *also* bottoms out in the normative dimension of language. Thus, *both* the performative and descriptive aspects of speech are contingent on the normativity of language use in general.

Austin's depiction of language here resonates with Brandom's account of the normative contours of discursive practices. Indeed, it is just this dimension of responsibility, authority, and trust that opens onto the way

[19]On authority in language, see Bauer (2015): 58-61. On the 'normative power' of epistemic and illocutionary authority, see Moran (2018): chapter 5.

in which language normatively commits us to others: 'What institutes normative statuses is *reciprocal* recognition. Someone becomes responsible only when others *hold* him responsible, and exercises authority only when others *acknowledge* that authority' (2009, 70). Part of what gives language its normatively binding force is that speaking a public language is, in many respects, not up to us: 'Speaking a particular language requires complying with a daunting variety of norms, rules, and standards. The result of failure to comply with enough of them is unintelligibility' (74). We must play by the rules of our language in order to avoid speaking nonsensically, but this involves giving up a certain kind of freedom: we must utter determinate sounds in a given sequence and can't just utter whatever sounds we choose in any possible order. However, constraining ourselves in this fashion opens onto a whole new range of possibilities for ourselves: 'Because of it we can (and do, all the time) make claims, formulate desires, and entertain goals that no one in the history of the world has ever so much as considered' (75). The fact that our linguistic practices have a binding character is recompensed in the countless possibilities they afford us for human action, thought, and decision-making. While our linguistic practices may change gradually over time, no single individual can be solely responsible for such a shift; any alteration must be collective in nature in order to ensure intelligibility.[20]

IV.

We are now in a position to revisit the question I posed at the beginning of this paper: what does Austin mean by saying, 'You are prohibited from saying "I know it is so, but I may be wrong"'? (1946, 98). As Brandom argues, the mere fact that we can collectively engage in a public language is contingent on a shared normative background of rules, standards, and norms that govern its usage. These constraints derive their force from the fact that we implicitly hold each other *responsible* for collectively complying with them and imbue each other with the *authority* to both speak to

[20]While one might take it to be unclear whether Austin would have committed himself to precisely this view of language, Brandom himself takes his own strand of pragmatism to be importantly influenced by Austin—in particular, Austin's analogy between knowing and promising (1994, 288). Austin is less systematic and more particularist in approach than Brandom, which leads him to avoid advancing the same generalizations about the nature of language that Brandom does. While Austin has principled reasons for refraining from doing so, this has led critics of Austin to treat his characterization of 'I know' as a peculiarity rather than as a potential source of insight into Austin's broader view of ordinary language. Consequently, Brandom's account of the normativity of language use confers on us resources to mount a defense to Austin's critics more difficult to procure in Austin's texts alone.

the appropriate uses of our language and to employ it in new ways. Austin, like Brandom, emphasizes the role of 'trust' and 'faith' on the part of hearers, and corresponding 'authority' and 'responsibility' on the part of speakers (1946, 82–83, 100, 99). In uttering 'I know', like 'I promise', this normative commitment becomes explicit: in both cases, Austin claims, 'a new plunge is taken: I have not merely announced my intention, but, by using this formula (performing this ritual), I have bound myself to others, and staked my reputation, in a new way' (1946, 99).

In other words, the point of view from which we are 'prohibited' from saying a phrase bordering on nonsensicality, such as 'I know it is so, but I may be wrong', is one *internal* to a configuration of common practices, to a 'community bound together by reciprocal relations of authority over and responsibility to each other' (Brandom 2009, 70). Discussions of what *we* say, then, are not empirical, but neither are they based on an explicitly worked-out consensus. When I say 'I know *p*', I commit myself to the truth of *p*; I cannot say, 'I know *p*, but given my fallibility I might be wrong', because this would entail estranging myself from the fact that others *rely* on me and the information I might convey to them. In interpreting 'I know' claims as *commitments* we undertake to others, Austin accurately characterizes a dimension of ordinary language many of his commentators have repeatedly failed to acknowledge.

This point is brought out by an example discussed by R.M. Hare: a dinner party is discussing how to dance the Scottish eightsome reel, and they begin to debate how a particular point in the dance is danced (1960, 148). To settle the dispute, they agree to dance the dance after dinner to find out. Perhaps upon reaching the disputed point, the participants bump into each other in their confusion; perhaps they find that what they have danced is not, in fact, the eightsome reel; perhaps they dance it correctly. The fact that the distinction between these three cannot be told apart empirically is evidenced by the fact that a group of foreign anthropologists could not fall into the same dinner party dispute, even after witnessing the dance. The dinner party dancers will be able to formulate, after finally dancing the dance, how the eightsome reel *is* danced – not just on one occasion, but with a 'character of universality' (152). They will be able to arrive at a *definition* of how the eightsome reel is danced. This definition will be ascertained not through empirical observation, but through a 'pre-existing but unformulated idea of how the dance should be danced' – an implicit or tacit understanding the dancers have acquired by way of a general initiation into a configuration of collective practices (156). The

anthropologists occupy an external perspective on the eightsome reel; the dancers occupy an internal one.[21]

In charting out the future of Austinian inquiry, we should take care to fully account for Austin's insight that ordinary language is binding, or *normatively* governed, a locus of 'prohibitions' and 'oughts', as staying within this internal point of view on language allows us to see.[22] As Austin recognized, the transgression of norms internal to language, eliding the difference between the internal and external points of view on our linguistic practices, often results in the unmooring of philosophical investigation from ordinary concerns. Occupying an internal perspective on a given language (say, as a native speaker) requires on the one hand that our locutionary acts not be wholly up to us, and on the other, that we often have an intuitive, implicit (in Hare's terminology, 'unformulated') understanding of those acts.[23] As native speakers, we generally get the grammar of our language right, even if we aren't always able to explicitly formulate the grammatical rules governing *why* one 'must say' a phrase *this* way rather than *that* way. Indeed, this intuitive sense often *just is* what is binding or normative about language.

V.

Over the course of this paper, I have traced the respects in which Austin's characterization of 'I know' might prove central to his broader philosophical position. As I have shown, 'I know' claims often take on the illocutionary character of offering assurance as to the truth of one's utterance and staking oneself as an authority as a source for knowledge: they commit us to each other, epistemically and normatively. As such, they provide a perspicuous illustration of the normative constraints essential to the very function of language. To presume that such constraints can be bracketed is often contingent on a distancing from an internal point of view on our ordinary practices. Staying within the margins of that internal point of view seems to be Austin's aim in insisting on a continual return to our ordinary language, to 'what *we* say', in the doing of philosophy.

[21]The example of the eightsome reel is intended as an extended analogy to our use of language, although 'talking is an infinitely more complex activity than dancing' (157).

[22]Much of the literature on Austin retains the external point of view on linguistic utterance he was attempting to call into question: see, e.g. Kaplan's discussion of how variance between epistemological and ordinary linguistic terms can lead to positive alterations of ordinary language, rather than, as Austin argued, leading us to *question* epistemological lines of inquiry (2008, 365).

[23]On taking an internal point of view, see also Cavell (1969), 'Must We Mean What We Say?' and 'Knowing and Acknowledging.'

As a consequence of the normative account of 'I know' I have defended here, we can bring out the continuity between the primarily epistemic cases that chiefly interest Austin in 'Other Minds', such as (1) 'I know there's milk in the refrigerator' or (2) 'I know it's a goldfinch', and the cases that tend more towards *acknowledgment* of another's status, feelings, or sharing of information. To illustrate the latter, Baz raises the counter-examples:

(3) 'Jack and Jill are getting married!'
'I know!' (with a tone of excitement, or, alternatively, with a sigh).

(4) 'I know he is angry with me; I just haven't had the time to speak with him about what happened'. (Baz 2012, 40)

As Baz argues, in the latter cases, 'I know' functions to *acknowledge* or *recognize* the significance of the first speaker's utterance (3) or the feelings of another interlocutor (4). Yet rather than posit an opposition between cases such as (1-2) and (3-4), the normative account I have laid out here brings out the *continuity* between the two kinds of case. If in (1) and (2), the speaker advances a commitment that the information she is sharing be true, this can only succeed if her interlocutor *recognizes* this commitment. (3) and (4) show the other side, then, of this reciprocity condition (Hornsby 1994): in these cases, 'I know' explicitly voices, not the staking of authority or commitment, but the recognition of another's conveying of information, status, or claims on me for which I am responsible (e.g. being angry at me and expecting acknowledgment of the reasons why). While the restriction of Austin's characterization of 'I know' to the epistemic may look overly narrow, it can be interpreted as a provocation to remap statements and declarations of epistemic fact as continuous with cases of reassurance, acknowledgment, and other illocutionary acts, insofar as the reciprocity conditions of recognition and commitment must obtain for *any* given utterance, even descriptive statements, to 'come off'.

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