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'Austin vs. Searle on locutionary and illocutionary acts'

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ABSTRACT

The central pillar of Austin's theory of speech acts is the three-way distinction between locutionary acts like saying, illocutionary acts like asserting, and perlocutionary acts like persuading [Austin, J. L. 1962. *How To Do Things With Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press] (VIII–IX). While the latter distinction has been widely accepted, the former distinction has been frequently rejected due to Searle's objections, who argued that since Austin's locutionary acts are supposed to be forceful in the sense contrasting with neutral expression of a content and all force is by Austin's own definition illocutionary, the notion of a locutionary act collapses into that of an illocutionary act [Searle, J. 1968. "Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts." *The Philosophical Review* 77 (4):405–424. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183008>]. In this paper, I provide an interpretation of Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts and defend it against Searle's objections. I argue that Searle's main objection relies on mistakenly running together two notions of 'force': the notion of representational force as presentation-as-true and the Austinian notion of illocutionary force as the social-communicative significance of the speech act. Once we distinguish these we can see that although Searle is correct that Austin's locutionary acts are forceful in the former sense, he's mistaken in thinking that such force is illocutionary. Given this, his objection that locutionary acts collapse into illocutionary acts misses its mark.

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Introduction

Austin starts his *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) with an initial distinction between *constative* utterances or sayings, and *performative* utterances or doings. However, he then presents himself as having realized

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that all sayings are doings, which leads him to: ‘consider from the ground up how many senses there are in which to say something *is* to do something, or *in* saying something we do something, and even *by* saying something we do something’ (Austin 1962, 94). In other words, it leads him to developing a general theory of speech acts.¹

The central pillar of the theory is the three-way distinction between *locutionary* acts of saying that *p*, asking a question, and telling someone to do something (telling-to); *illocutionary* acts like asserting, predicting, requesting, and ordering which you perform *in* performing the prior acts; and *perlocutionary* acts like alerting or persuading which consist in the achievement of certain effects in the audience or other persons and which you perform *by* performing the prior acts (Austin 1962, VIII–IX). While the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts was widely accepted, the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts came under immediate fire. Its most vocal critic was an otherwise sympathetic Searle, who argued that there is no way of making sense of the notion of a locutionary act as independent of an illocutionary act (Searle 1968; compare Hare 1971). Searle therefore replaced Austin’s distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts with his own distinction between neutral propositional acts or acts of expressing a proposition, and forceful illocutionary acts, codified in his famous formula $F(p)$.

At the center of their disagreement are the most basic speech act verbs ‘say’, ‘ask’, and ‘tell-to’. Austin’s distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts is one between merely *linguistic* acts of meaningful language use vs. *social-communicative* acts that are either in need of uptake or require an extra-linguistic conventional procedure to be successfully performed (Austin 1962, VIII). He thinks that ‘say’, ‘ask’, and ‘tell-to’ *can* pick out merely linguistic acts and can therefore function as locutionary act verbs. Searle’s main objection against this relies on the observation that verbs like ‘say’ pick out *forceful* acts in the sense that contrasts with neutral expression of a content. Just as to judge or suppose that *p* is not merely to entertain the proposition, but to take it to be true, to say that *p* is not merely to express the proposition, but to put it

¹It’s not clear why Austin set up the discussion like this. As Sbisa has argued, the standard reading on which he first proposes the constative-performative distinction and then abandons it is implausible and it might be better to read him as proposing the distinction from the get go only to refute it (Sbisa 2007, 462–463, for discussion see Wanderer and Townsend 2024). Furthermore, as Recanati has pointed out, Austin’s conclusion that all sayings are doings doesn’t really call into question the initial distinction between *constatives* as those sayings that report on pre-existing facts and *performatives* as those that create new ones (Recanati 1987, 70–74).

forward or present it as true. He then argues that everything forceful is by Austin's own lights illocutionary, and thus it follows that 'say' is already an illocutionary act verb, just a determinable or generic one. The notion of locutionary act thus collapses into that of an illocutionary act. And the distinction between saying versus asserting or predicting is really one between a determinable illocutionary act and more determinate illocutionary acts.

Searle's objections to Austin's distinction and his replacement distinction have been very influential. Many speech act theorists barely mention locutionary acts and take Searle's replacement distinction between neutral propositional acts and forceful illocutionary acts together with the formula $F(p)$ as a dogma (see the discussion of Austin in Alston 2000, 16–23). On this view, *any* act reported in indirect speech, including merely linguistic acts like saying, is an illocutionary act (Alston 1991, 57–58). But this Searlean package has several problematic consequences. First, it replaces a necessary distinction between merely linguistic vs. social-communicative acts with a completely different and cross-cutting distinction between neutral vs. forceful acts. Second, it makes it a matter of terminology that all force in the sense contrasting with neutral expression of content is illocutionary. And this hides from view Austin's distinctive notion of an illocutionary act as a social-communicative act in need of uptake or requiring an extra-linguistic procedure (e. g. see Alston 2000, 24, 67).²

My aim in this paper is to provide an interpretation of Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts, and to defend it against Searle's objections. Although some of his criticisms have been successfully responded to by Ferguson and Recanati, in my opinion his main objection discussed above has been left untouched (Ferguson 1973; Recanati 1987, Ch. 9). I will argue that it relies on mistakenly running together two different notions of 'force': the notion of *representational force* contrasting with the neutral expression of a content and the Austinian notion of *illocutionary force* as the social-communicative significance of the speech act. Once we distinguish these two things we can see that although Searle is correct that Austin's locutionary acts are forceful in the former sense, he's mistaken in thinking that such force is by Austin's own lights illocutionary. Given this, his objection that locutionary acts collapse

²There are, of course, other strands of speech act theory which are more Austinian in retaining the notion of a merely linguistic locutionary act (e. g. Bach and Harnish 1979; Kissine 2013) or operating with the Austinian notion of an illocutionary act as a social-communicative act (e. g. Hornsby 1994; Moran 2018).

into illocutionary acts misses its mark and gives us no reason to give up the Austinian framework.

I will proceed as follows. I will start by presenting an overview of Austin's distinctions between phatic, phonetic, and rhetic acts and providing an interpretation of his notion of a locutionary act as contrasted with illocutionary and perlocutionary acts (Sections 1–2). I'll then present Searle's objection (Section 3). Next, I'll discuss how to understand the notion of force, distinguishing between representational and truth-committal force, and then defend Austin against Searle's objection by arguing that the representational and truth-committal notions of force are both distinct from the illocutionary notion of force and that there is no theory-internal reason for Austin to think that the first one depends on the last. (Sections 4-5). Finally, I'll sum up by further elaborating on Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts (Section 6).

1. Austin's framework: phonetic, phatic, rhetic

Austin starts presenting his general theory of speech acts by drawing a distinction between *phonetic* acts, *phatic* acts, and *rhetic* acts, the performance of all of which together results in a *locutionary* act:

The phonetic act is merely the act of uttering certain noises. The phatic act is the uttering of certain vocables or words, i. e. noises of certain types, belonging to and as belonging to, a certain vocabulary, conforming to and as conforming to a certain grammar. The rhetic act is the performance of an act of using those vocables with a certain more-or-less definite sense and reference. Thus 'He said "The cat is on the mat"', reports a phatic act, whereas 'He said that the cat was on the mat' reports a rhetic act. A similar contrast is illustrated by the pairs:

'He said "I shall be there"', 'He said he would be there';

'He said "Get out"', 'He told me to get out';

'He said "Is it in Oxford or Cambridge?"', 'He asked whether it was in Oxford or Cambridge' (Austin 1962, 95)

A *phonetic* act is an act of making certain sounds (or making certain marks or bodily movements). In contrast, a *phatic* act is an act of making certain sounds etc. that count as belonging to some language and uttering them *as* belonging to that language. This means that non-linguistic creatures can't perform phatic acts. As Austin puts it: 'If a monkey makes a noise indistinguishable from "go" it is still not a phatic act' (Austin 1962, 96).

What does performing a phatic act require of the speaker? Although Austin himself doesn't elaborate, it is plausible that the speaker must be to some degree phonologically competent with the language and know that the sounds uttered belong to a language and are meaningful (even though she doesn't have to be semantically competent and grasp their meanings). Furthermore, as Forguson puts it, it plausibly requires that the speaker have something akin to *intentions* to produce a sound that counts as utterance of the sentence of the relevant language (Forguson 1973, 162). Let me illustrate with two examples. First, if a phonologically and syntactically competent speaker coughs and makes a noise indistinguishable from 'go' then she hasn't performed a phatic act because she didn't have the right intentions. Second, take Searle's famous example of an American soldier captured by Italian troops during World War II trying to pass as a German by uttering Goethe's line 'Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn?' (Searle 1969, 35). Let's also assume that he doesn't know the meaning of the line. In uttering the line, he nevertheless performs a phatic act because he produces a sentence of German with the intention to produce sounds that count as utterance of a sentence of German (Recanati 1987, 238–239).

A *rhetic* act is an act of performing a phatic act while using the expression *with* a 'certain more or less definite 'sense' and more or less definite 'reference' (which together are equivalent to meaning)' (Austin 1962, 93, 95). In Kaplan's simpler terms, it's to *use* the expression *with* its *meaning* (or one of its meanings, if it's ambiguous), while doing anything needed to fix the reference of the expressions that need their reference fixed (Kaplan 1989, 603). Fully incompetent speakers, those who don't have a clue about the expression's meaning, plausibly can't perform rhetic acts. To take Searle's example again, the American soldier doesn't perform a rhetic act because, even though he utters a sentence of German, he fails to do so with a meaning and fails to say anything that can be reported by 'He asked whether ...'.

What does performing a rhetic act require of the speaker? As we saw, the speaker must be to some degree semantically competent with the expression he uses. Furthermore, as Forguson puts it, it plausibly requires that the speaker have something akin to semantic intentions to use the expression with its meaning and further intentions that fix the reference of the expressions that need their reference fixed (Forguson 1973, 165). If a semantically competent speaker utters the sentence 'Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn?' just to test the microphone or practice his pronunciation then she still hasn't performed a rhetic act since he

doesn't have the right intentions. However, usually we utter sentences with the right intentions and thus perform rhetic acts. Take an unambiguous sentence like '2+2 = 4'. When one performs a phatic act with such a sentence and does it with its meaning then one performs the rhetic act of using the sentence to say that two plus two is four. Second, take an ambiguous sentence like 'The collapse of the bank shocked us all'. When one performs a phatic act with such a sentence one can do so with either of its meanings and one has to choose one of the meanings to perform a particular rhetic act (Forguson 1973, 163–164).

Let's say a bit more about the contrast between phatic acts and rhetic acts since they're frequently run together.³ First, even though linguistic meaning is relevant to both, it is relevant in very different ways. To perform a phatic act a speaker must make a noise that is a phoneme of some language and thus meaningful and she must know that it is a phoneme of the language and thus know that it's meaningful. However, the speaker doesn't have to know its meaning and doesn't have to *use* it *with* its meaning. In contrast, to perform a rhetic act one must further know its meaning and use it with its meaning.

Second, phatic acts are reported by *direct quotation* like 'He said "I shall be there"', 'Get out!', 'Is it in Oxford or Cambridge?'. In contrast, rhetic acts can be reported by *indirect quotation* like 'He said that he shall be there', 'He told me to get out', 'He asked me whether it is Oxford or Cambridge?'.³

Every rhetic act is also a phatic and phonetic act. Since Austin thought these are distinctions to be drawn on the way to developing the notion of a locutionary act, it's commonplace to think that the *rhetic* act is identical to a *locutionary* act (e. g. Forguson 1973, 166; Hornsby 1994, 204; Recanati 1987, 240; Sbisa 2013, 28). However, this is not quite correct. Austin said at least some things that suggest that he took the words used to be constitutive of the rhetic act. Thus, consider the following passage:

When different phemes are used with the same sense and reference, we might speak of rhetically equivalent acts ('the same statement' in one sense) but not of the same rheme or rhetic acts (which are the same statement in another sense which involves using the same words). (Austin 1962, 97–98)

Here Austin seems to say that for two rhetic acts to be the same rhetic act, the same words need to be used. However, if different words are used

³For example, in a recent paper, de Lara writes: 'The locutionary use of a sentence, or the locutionary act, Austin explains, is, roughly, the act 'of uttering a string of meaningful words in a syntactically acceptable order, regardless of context' (de Lara 2022, 4). This seems like a description of a phatic and not a rhetic act since for a rhetic act the uttered string of words has to not just be meaningful but must be *used with its meaning* and clearly context matters as well since one must fix the reference of whatever needs their reference fixed (see also fn. 10).

with the same sense and reference then we will have two rhetically equivalent acts. Thus, take the synonymous English and Estonian sentences ‘Two plus two is four’ and ‘Kaks pluss kaks on neli’. On the interpretation suggested by the above passage, if you use the English sentence with its meaning you perform one rhetic act, but if you use the synonymous Estonian sentence you perform a different rhetic act. However, since the two sentences have the same meaning and there is no further need to contextually fix the reference of anything, the acts performed are *rhetically equivalent*: in both cases you *say* that two plus two is four (Austin 1962, 97). Ball has therefore suggested that it is the class of rhetically equivalent acts that Austin had in mind by a locutionary act (Ball 2021). This patterns nicely with the fact that in ‘say’-reports we abstract away from the concrete sentence used. Thus, the rhetic act of using a sentence with its meaning is not identical to but *results* in a locutionary act. And different rhetic acts can result in the same locutionary act. It also follows that to report rhetic acts, one would have to use the very same words in indirect speech whereas to report a locutionary act you just need to use synonymous words either in the same or a different language.⁴

2. Austin’s framework: locutionary, illocutionary, perlocutionary

After having arrived at the above conception of locutionary acts, Austin distinguishes them further from illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. *Illocutionary* acts are acts that one performs *in* performing locutionary acts, that is, in saying, asking, and telling-to (Austin 1962, 99).⁵ When one says that p etc. one usually does this in order to do something further. As Austin puts it: ‘To perform a locutionary act is in general, we may say, also and *eo ipso* to perform an illocutionary act’ (Austin 1962, 98,

⁴Some of what Austin wrote seems in tension with the above interpretation of the relationship between rhetic and locutionary acts. For example, he frequently says that he’s going to give examples of rhetic act reports and then gives says-reports where different words are used (Austin 1962, 95). Furthermore, he gives some examples under the heading ‘Locution’ which seem more like rhetic reports (Austin 1962, 101). However, since in the first case he is contrasting phatic with rhetic acts and in the second, locution with illocution, he might’ve not seen the need to be as precise as to the distinction between rhetic and locutionary acts. I would argue that the above passage where he says directly what he thinks carries more interpretive weight than these more indirect pieces of evidence. In any case, nothing in the ensuing argument depends on there being a distinction between rhetic and locutionary acts.

⁵One might wonder whether this is supposed to entail that one always has to perform a locutionary act in order to perform an illocutionary act. There are reasons to doubt that this is true. One might think that some communicative illocutionary acts can be performed without meaningful language use and locutionary acts, for example, with the help of a pointing gesture or a nod. I won’t take a stand on this since it doesn’t matter for our purposes.

for discussion see Bird 1981, 353). When one says that *p* one is usually not just saying that *p* for its own sake, but is doing something with social-communicative significance like asserting, guessing, issuing a warning, predicting etc. Similarly, when one tells someone to do something one is either advising, requesting, ordering etc. Some illocutionary acts are *communicative*: they aim at communication in the sense of transferring information (e. g. telling-that). Some are *social* or institutional: they aim at the creation or modification of social facts and in some cases require a conventional procedure to be performed (e. g. christening a ship, marrying someone).

While illocutionary acts are acts one performs *in* saying, asking, and telling, perlocutionary acts are acts one can perform *by* performing locutionary or illocutionary acts. *Perlocutionary* acts are a matter of the production of certain causal effects in the audience, speaker, or other persons (Austin 1962, 101). For example, in saying that *p* one might be arguing that *p* is the case. And by arguing that *p* is the case one might further manage to achieve the effect of convincing someone that *p* is the case. Similarly, in telling someone to do something one might be requesting that they do it. And by requesting that they do it one might further manage to achieve the effect of persuading them to do it. The acts of arguing and requesting are illocutionary acts whereas the acts of convincing and persuading are perlocutionary acts.

What matters for us here is understanding the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts. But to properly understand the latter it is useful to see two points of contrast between them and perlocutionary acts. Austin thought that both illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts require achieving an effect in the audience but a very different one. Illocutionary acts, or at least *communicative* ones, require audience *uptake* to be 'happily, successfully' performed (Austin 1962, 116).⁶ Since they consist in an attempt to communicate, they require that the audience *understand* both the content and the illocutionary *force* of the act. As he puts it:

I cannot be said to have warned an audience unless it hears what I say and takes what I say in a certain sense. An effect must be achieved on the audience if the

⁶Above we distinguished between *communicative* illocutionary acts, those that involve an attempt to communicate, and *institutional* illocutionary acts, those that involve an attempt to modify social facts and require a conventional procedure to be performed (Bach and Harnish 1979, Ch. 6; Strawson 1964, 456, for criticism see Sbisà 2009). It is widely held that only communicative illocutionary acts are constitutively tied to uptake and that institutional illocutionary acts don't necessarily require uptake to be successfully performed. To perform them, one just has to go through the conventional procedure. This also means that one could perhaps perform some such acts unintentionally as when one places the Queen on an unintended square by accident and is held to it (compare Strawson 1964, 457).

illocutionary act is to be carried out. ... Generally the effect amounts to bringing about the understanding of the meaning and the force of the locution. (Austin 1962, 116)

Strawson suggests that we can therefore distinguish between performing an act with a particular illocutionary *force* (which amounts to *trying* to perform an illocutionary act) for which uptake is not necessary, versus successfully performing the illocutionary act, for which it is (Strawson 1964, 440).⁷ Thus, illocutionary acts require achieving the effect of audience uptake: understanding the content and force of the act. In contrast, perlocutionary acts require more than uptake and consist in the production of certain further causal effects in the audience (for more, see Kissine 2008; Sbisà 2013, 35–37).

As a second point of contrast between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts take Austin's brief, but oft-discussed remark that illocutionary acts are *conventional* while perlocutionary acts aren't. Here's what he says:

Speaking of the 'use of "language"' for arguing or warning' looks just like speaking of 'the use of "language"' for persuading, rousing, alarming; yet the former may, for rough contrast, be said to be conventional, in the sense that at least it could be made explicit by the performative formula; but the latter could not. Thus we can say 'I argue that' or 'I warn you that' but we cannot say 'I convince you that' or 'I alarm you that'. (Austin 1962, 104)

Illocutionary acts can be performed by using illocutionary verbs in an explicit performative formula such as 'I argue that ...' or 'I warn you that ...'. In contrast, you can't do this with perlocutionary act verbs because they consist in the production of certain further causal effects in the audience.⁸

We can sum up the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts in the following table:

Mood	Linguistic/Locutionary	Social-Communicative/Illocutionary
Declarative	saying	asserting, guessing etc.
Interrogative	asking	inquiring, examining etc.
Imperative	telling-to	ordering, requesting etc.

⁷The above is the strongest interpretation of the uptake condition on which securing uptake is necessary for the illocutionary act to take place at all. Some deny this and suggest weaker interpretations on which *aiming* for uptake or *reasonably expecting to secure* uptake are sufficient for the act to take place while securing it is only necessary for a fully unproblematic performance of the act. For recent discussion see de Gaynesford 2011; de Lara 2022; Heal 2013; Longworth 2019, and McDonald 2021. What matters for us here is simply the idea that *locutionary* acts can be theorized without mentioning uptake at all while communicative *illocutionary* acts are somehow related to uptake.

⁸For insightful discussion of Austin on conventionality see de Lara 2022; Sbisà 2009.

With this basic grip of Austin's framework in view, let's proceed to Searle's objections.

3. Searle's objections

Searle found Austin's conception of a locutionary act unclear from the beginning:

In attempting to explore Austin's notion of an illocutionary act I have found his corresponding notion of a locutionary act very unhelpful and have been forced to adopt a quite different distinction between illocutionary acts and propositional acts. (Searle 1968, 405; compare Hare 1971, 100; Strawson 1973, 46; Recanati 1987, 236)

What is Searle's problem?

His first, less important objection is that the distinction can't be general since some sentences contain illocutionary act verbs and in their case performing the locutionary act leads to the performance of an illocutionary act:

... the first difficulty that one encounters with Austin's distinction is that it seems that it cannot be completely general, in the sense of marking off two mutually exclusive classes of acts, because for some sentences at least, meaning, in Austin's sense, determines (at least one) illocutionary force of the utterance of the sentence. Thus, though the sentence "I am going to do it" can be seriously uttered with its literal meaning in any number of illocutionary acts, what about the sentence "I hereby promise that I am going to do it"? Its serious and literal utterance must be a promise. (Searle 1968, 407)

However, there are several problems with this argument. First, Searle smuggles in too much with his mention of seriousness. Not all perfectly *meaningful* uses of language, uses resulting in locutionary acts, are serious uses in the relevant sense. One can finish an overlong phone call with 'I promise to never call you again!' and perform the relevant locutionary act of *saying* that one promises to never call again while being *ironic*. In that case one is clearly not even attempting to promise anything. Second, as Ferguson pointed out, this argument also neglects the distinction between performing an act with an illocutionary force and actually succeeding in performing the illocutionary act. Even if we granted that a serious use of 'I promise that I am going to do it' involves an *attempted* promise, it wouldn't follow that one has performed the illocutionary act of promising since that requires audience uptake (Ferguson 1973, 172–174).

Searle's second, main objection, goes deeper and requires more unpacking. Commenting on the fact that Austin used indirect speech to report locutionary acts, Searle writes:

But now notice a crucial difficulty with the indirect forms: the verb phrases in the reports of rhetic acts invariably contain illocutionary verbs. They are indeed very general illocutionary verbs, but they are illocutionary nonetheless. Consider "He told me to X." Does not the form "He told me to" cover a very general class of illocutionary forces, which includes such specific illocutionary forces as "He ordered, commanded, requested, urged, advised, me to"? The verbs in Austin's examples of indirect speech reports of rhetic acts are all illocutionary verbs of a very general kind, which stand in relation to the verbs in his reports of illocutionary acts as genus to species. (Searle 1968, 411; compare Alston 1994, 32; Hare 1971, 107–108)

Now, on the face of it there is no argument here. Searle just asserts that, contrary to what Austin thinks, 'say', 'ask' and 'tell-to' *always* report illocutionary acts.⁹ Why would he think this? Here's my hypothesis. Let's start from the fact that in distinguishing between locutionary and illocutionary acts, Austin contrasted meaning and illocutionary force:

I explained the performance of an act in this new and second sense as the performance of an 'illocutionary' act, i.e. performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance of an act *of* saying something; and I shall refer to the doctrine of the different types of function of language here in question as the doctrine of 'illocutionary forces'. ... Admittedly we can use 'meaning' also with reference to illocutionary force – 'He meant it as an order', &c. But I want to distinguish force and meaning in the sense in which meaning is equivalent to sense and reference ... (Austin 1962, 99–100)

This remark is commonly read as saying that, for Austin, meaning belongs to one side, and illocutionary force to the other. Here's Strawson's comment on the passage:

Austin distinguishes between the 'meaning' of an utterance and its 'force'. The former he associates with the 'locutionary' act performed in making the utterance, the latter with the 'illocutionary' act performed in making it. (Strawson 1973, 46)

Thus, it's common to take Austin as saying that 'force' is by definition *illocutionary*.

⁹Austin's view, as I interpret it, is that 'say', 'ask, and 'tell-to' *can* and *sometimes* are used to report locutionary acts. This is compatible with the fact that they're sometimes instead used to report illocutionary acts, e. g. some 'say'-reports report assertions and some 'tell-to' reports report commands (compare Sbisà 2013, 28–29).

Now, to see why Searle is confident that ‘say’ etc. are illocutionary act verbs, consider what sort of an act results from using a declarative sentence ‘p’ with its meaning. There are two possibilities.

One possibility is that the locutionary act resulting from using ‘p’ with its meaning is equivalent to what Searle somewhat misleadingly calls the *propositional* act: the act of expressing a proposition without taking any stance towards it. This act is neutral or forceless in the sense of ‘force’ as representation or presentation-as-true.¹⁰ You don’t represent the world correctly/incorrectly if you merely express the proposition that p. To express the proposition that p is just to present it as an object, without presenting it as true. This can be seen from the simple fact that if you use ‘p or q’ with its meaning then you can be reported as having *expressed* the proposition that p, the proposition that q, and the proposition that p or q. However, you’re clearly not presenting either the proposition that p or the proposition that q as true, but, at best, only the proposition that p or q.

The first option is thus that what Austin meant by a *locutionary act* is simply what Searle calls a *propositional* act. The problem with this interpretation is that this is widely taken to be inconsistent with what Austin said about locutionary acts (Hare 1971, 108–109; Ferguson 1973, 182; Recanati 1987, 245–248; Searle 1968). As we saw above, Austin thought that the act that results from using a declarative sentence ‘p’ with its meaning is that of *saying* that p. But, as all the commentators agree, saying is not a neutral, but a *forceful* act in the representational sense of ‘force’! You do represent the world correctly/incorrectly if you say that p. To say that p is not simply to express the proposition that p, but to present it as true.¹¹ This can again be seen from the simple fact that if you use ‘p or q’ with its meaning then you *can’t* be reported as having said that p nor said that q, but just as having said that p or q.

¹⁰This is one aspect of the notion of ‘force’ in play in the recent debates over propositional content and the *Content-Force* distinction (Hanks 2015; Recanati 2019; Reiland 2019; Soames 2015). Searle’s propositional act is thus the linguistic analogue of the neutral mental act of *entertaining* a proposition (Kriegel 2013; Soames 2015). We will look at the notion of force in more depth in the next section.

¹¹One might wonder how this squares with Austin’s ideas about truth. In ‘Truth’ Austin took truth to be a property of statements in the sense of concrete *statings* (Austin 1950/1961, 86–88). And he took the truth of statings to depend on two sorts of conventions, *descriptive conventions* correlating expressions like sentences with *types* of situations in the world, and *demonstrative conventions* correlating utterances of sentences with concrete *token* situations in the world which those utterances are about (Austin 1950/1961, 89–99). The obvious way to square the above picture with this is to say that what Austin in ‘Truth’ called statings are really locutionary sayings. Furthermore, when a speaker uses a sentence with its meaning they have to also demonstratively fix a concrete token situation on which the truth of the saying is supposed to turn. However, all of this happens at the level of locutionary acts, not illocutionary ones. For contemporary articulation and defense of such Austinian views see Recanati 2007; Szabó 2017.

Similar points apply to uses of interrogatives and imperatives with their meaning. As we saw above, Austin thought that the acts that result from using these sentences with their meanings are that of *asking* a question and *telling* someone to do something. And like saying, these are not neutral but *forceful* acts in something like the representational sense of 'force'. Supposing that interrogative contents are questions which can be modeled as sets of propositions, to ask one is not to just express it, but to present it as to be answered. Supposing that imperatival contents are actions which can be thought of as certain properties, to tell someone to perform one is not just to express it, but to present it as to be performed.

Thus, it seems that what Austin had in mind by a *locutionary act* can't be what Searle calls a propositional act since it is forceful in the representational sense. And now comes the crucial move. Searle seems to simply *assume* that the notion of *representational* force and Austinian notion of *illocutionary* force are the same, or at least that you can't get the former without the latter. Once this move is made the rest follows. If locutionary acts are forceful in the representational sense and all force is by definition illocutionary then 'say', 'ask', and 'tell-to' are indeed already illocutionary act verbs and the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts collapses. This is Searle's conclusion:

... no sentence is completely force-neutral. Every sentence has some illocutionary force potential, if only of a very broad kind, built into its meaning. For example, even the most primitive of the old-fashioned grammatical categories of indicative, interrogative, and imperative sentences already contain determinants of illocutionary force. For this reason there is no specification of a locutionary act performed in the utterance of a complete sentence which will not determine the specification of an illocutionary act. Or, to put it more bluntly, on the characterization that Austin has so far given us of locutionary as opposed to illocutionary acts, there are (in the utterance of complete sentences) no rhetic acts as opposed to illocutionary acts at all. (Searle 1968, 412)

Thus, on Searle's view, Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts should be replaced with a distinction between neutral propositional acts and forceful illocutionary acts:

We need to distinguish the illocutionary act from the propositional act – that is, the act of *expressing the proposition* (a phrase which is neutral as to illocutionary force). ... Symbolically, we might represent the sentence as containing an illocutionary force-indicating device and a propositional content indicator. Thus:

$F(p)$

where the range of possible values for F will determine the range of illocutionary forces, and the p is a variable over the infinite range of possible propositions. (Searle 1968, 420–421)

Thus, for Searle, and many others following him, Austin's linguistic, locutionary act of saying is better thought to be already an illocutionary act, just of a determinable kind vs. a more determinate one like asserting, guessing etc. (Searle 1968, 416–417; see also Alston 2000, 20–23; Hare 1971, 111; Recanati 1987, 248–250).¹²

We can sum up Searle's view in the following table:

Mood	Propositional	Linguistic /Determinable Illocutionary	Social-Communicative/Determinate Illocutionary
Declarative	expressing p	saying	asserting, guessing
Interrogative	expressing p	asking	inquiring, examining
Imperative	expressing p	telling-to	ordering, requesting

Searle's replacement distinction and his conception of illocutionary acts as any act reported in indirect speech have several problematic consequences. Austin's distinction respects a strict semantics vs. pragmatics distinction: locutionary acts are merely *linguistic* and belong on the side of semantics and 'what is said', illocutionary acts are *social-communicative* and belong on the side of pragmatics and 'what is meant'.¹³ But Searle's view creates potential for confusion. He uses the same term 'illocutionary' for both determinable illocutionary acts which are supposed to be linguistic and belong on the side of semantics, and determinate ones which are supposed to be social-communicative and belong on the side of

¹²In later work Searle draws the distinction between the illocutionary point of a speech act which is best understood in terms of a particular direction of fit versus its specific illocutionary force. For example, all speech acts in the family of assertives have the same particular illocutionary point and direction of fit, they represent the world as being a certain way, while determinate acts in the class like assertions and suggestions have a further specific illocutionary force (Searle 1979, 12–14). The determinable illocutionary force seems to map neatly into the notion of illocutionary point.

¹³Here's how to think of the semantics-pragmatics distinction. *Semantics* is about the information encoded in the linguistic meaning of an expression and the information conveyed by using it with its meaning, independent of the speaker's further communicative aims or other purposes (Bach 1999; Bach 2001, 22). If the meanings of certain expressions are context-sensitive then using them with their meanings automatically leads to or requires contextual supplementation. The result of such supplementation, semantic content relative to a context or the content of a locutionary act, 'what is said', still belongs on the side of semantics. Thus, the fact that in using 'I am a philosopher' with its meaning Bertrand says that he is a philosopher still belongs on the side of semantics. In contrast, *Pragmatics* is about the information that the speaker conveys that goes beyond using an expression with its meaning: what they speaker mean, implicate, or what sorts of illocutionary acts they perform. Note that this way of thinking of the distinction is widely accepted. The debates are over how much linguistic meaning encodes or how much meaning-driven contextual supplementation there is and how it works.

pragmatics. Once the distinction between determinable and determinate illocutionary acts is missed, we're in a muddle. Second, it makes it a matter of terminology that all force in the sense contrasting with neutral expression of content is illocutionary. And this hides from view Austin's distinctive notion of an illocutionary act as a social-communicative act in need of uptake or an extra-linguistic conventional procedure.

We can see this play out in Alston's work. Alston is primarily interested in sentence meaning and wants to tie it to what he, following Searle, calls illocutionary acts, acts reported in indirect speech (Alston 1991, 57–58, 2000, 14–15). However, since he's aware of the standard reasons to keep semantics apart from pragmatics this leads him to deny that illocutionary acts require uptake to be performed (Alston 2000, 24, 67). From the present point of view what has happened is that Alston is really operating with Austin's conception of a locutionary act but, following Searle, has started calling it an illocutionary act, and lost sight of Austin's original notion of an illocutionary act.

I will argue next that Searle's crucial extra assumption is indefensible and that his objection therefore misses its mark. The notion of representational force as non-neutrality and the Austinian notion of illocutionary force as the social-communicative significance of the speech act are distinct and there is no theory-internal reason for Austin to think that the former depends on the latter. However, before getting to it we need to get clearer on the notion of force.

4. Understanding force: representation vs. truth-commitment

A lot of the literature in speech act theory as well as in the *Act-Based* tradition of thinking of propositional content operates with a very coarse-grained understanding of the division between what is 'neutral' and what is 'forceful'. The paradigmatic neutral acts are thought to be entertaining and expressing a proposition. When one entertains a proposition one just brings it to mind as an object, that is, without taking any attitude or stance towards it (Kriegel 2013, 9–11). Similarly, when one expresses a proposition one just presents it as an object. The paradigmatic forceful acts are thought to be judgment and assertion. When one judges or asserts a proposition one represents things as being a certain way and commits oneself to things being this way in pre-existing reality. 'Neutrality' is thus understood in terms of a lack of truth-commitment, and 'forcefulness' is understood in terms of truth-commitment. We can sum this view up in a simple table:

Mental Acts	Neutral	Forceful
Speech Acts	entertaining expressing	judgment assertion

The problem with this coarse-grained understanding of neutrality and forcefulness is that it neglects acts which are unlike entertaining and expressing insofar as they don't consist simply of bringing a proposition to mind or presenting it as an object, while at the same time also not being truth-committal. Thus, consider the acts of *imagining* that *p* or *supposing* that *p*. To imagine or suppose that *p* is not just to neutrally bring a proposition to mind qua an object that one can then do something further with. Instead, it is to represent the world as being some way, to present the proposition as true (Velleman 1992, 12). If you imagine or suppose that *p* and it's not the case that *p* then you represent the world incorrectly. However, this doesn't immediately mean there's something wrong with your imagining or supposition. Imagining and supposing are representational acts, but, unlike judgment and assertion, not *constative* or truth-committal acts in that they're not making claims about pre-existing reality and are thus not *normed* for correctness.¹⁴ In contrast, judging and asserting are both representational and constative or truth-committal in making claims about pre-existing reality and are thus normed for correctness (compare Green and Marsili 2021, 23–24). If you judge or assert that *p*, and it's not the case that *p* then you not only represent the world incorrectly, but there's also something wrong with your belief or judgment.

The existence of things in this middle category suggests that we do away with the coarse-grained division of acts into neutral and forceful. Entertaining and imagining are both neutral in the sense of lacking truth-commitment. But they're far from being on a par. Entertaining and expressing are non-representational, *objectual* acts where the object is a proposition (Reiland 2019). In contrast, imagining, supposing, judgment and assertion are all representational, contentful acts with propositions as contents. To get a better grip on this distinction consider

¹⁴I will use the term 'constative' for acts which make claims about how things are in pre-existing reality and understand them in terms of truth-commitment or being normed for correctness (compare Recanati 1987, Ch. 6). Such acts could also be called judgmental or assertive. The analogues in the case of interrogative and imperative acts are 'inquisitive' and 'directive' acts. In a genuinely inquisitive act one wants to know the answer or perhaps regards it as desirable that it be provided. In a genuinely directive act, one wants the addressee to perform the act or perhaps regards it as desirable that it be performed. We don't need to decide between these two views here. Thus, the analogue of truth-commitment is something like desire- or desirability-commitment and inquisitive and directive acts are normed for correctness as well: they're correct if the agent has the desire or regards it as desirable.

Grzankowski's recent discussion of the difference between the objectual fear of the proposition that *p* vs. fearing that *p*:

When an attitude has propositional content, the attitude is sensitive to the truth of the proposition. To put things in general terms, for any attitude *V*, *V* is a propositional attitude just in case for a subject *S* and proposition *p* such that *S* stands in *V* to *p*, if *p* were true, then things would be as *S V*'s them to be. For instance, when one believes that *p*, if *p* were true, things would be as one believes them to be. If one fears that *p*, if *p* were true, things would be as one fears them to be. With this observation on the table, we can draw a clear contrast with the non-propositional attitudes for they do not appear to have conditions of accuracy, satisfaction, and so on. ... Propositional attitudes have propositions as contents, which is to say that they are sensitive to the truth of the proposition in the way outlined above. Non-propositional attitudes directed at propositions merely have propositions as objects and so are not sensitive to the truth of the propositions they are about. (Grzankowski 2016, 318–319)

Entertaining and expressing are *objectual* acts towards propositions and as such they aren't sensitive to the truth of the propositions in any way. In contrast, imagining, supposing, judgment and assertion are all *representational*, contentful, propositional acts which are sensitive to the truth of their propositional contents.¹⁵

So the first division is between acts that are objectual and acts that are representational, contentful, or propositional: the former are not representationally correct/incorrect, whereas the latter are. We can also put this by saying that while the former lack any direction of fit, the latter have a mind to world direction of fit: they're correct if they fit the world. The second division is within the category of representational acts between those that are non-truth-committal and those that are truth-committal: imagining and supposing are not, judgment and assertion are. We can sum up the whole division as follows:

	Non-Representational/Objectual	Representational/Contentful	
		Non-Truth-Committal	Truth-Committal
Mental Acts	entertaining	imagining, supposing	judgment
Speech Acts	expressing	saying	assertion

Non-representational acts are truly neutral or forceless. In contrast, representational acts are representationally forceful, but not truth-committally forceful. Finally, truth-committal acts are both representationally and truth-committally forceful.

¹⁵Note that according to this contrast between 'objectual' vs 'propositional' acts what Searle calls propositional acts, acts of expressing propositions, are really objectual.

The division can be extended to acts which don't have propositions as their objects or contents. One can merely entertain or express a question or an action as an object. One can perform acts which present them as to be answered or performed. And one can furthermore commit to wanting to know the answer or wanting the addressee to perform the action or regarding it desirable that an answer be provided or that the addressee perform the action.

With these distinctions under our belt, I can now show that Searle's assumption that representational force is equivalent to illocutionary force is indefensible and that his objection therefore misses its mark.

5. Rescuing Austin from searle

On Austin's view, the use of a declarative sentence with its meaning leads directly to the act of saying that *p* which is representationally forceful in involving the presentation of a proposition as true. The use of an interrogative with its meaning leads directly to the act of asking a question which is forceful in the sense of involving the presentation of a question as to be answered. And the use of an imperative with its meaning leads directly to the act of telling the addressee to do something which is forceful in the sense of involving the presentation of an act as to be performed. One then typically separately performs an illocutionary act which adds truth-committal force and some social-communicative significance. Schematically, a full speech act with the content that *p* usually consists of (where '---' indicates the line between semantics/pragmatics):

1. *Locutionary act*: using a sentence '*p*' with its meaning and thereby saying that *p* which involves presenting the proposition that *p* as true. (*linguistic*) ---
2. *Illocutionary act*: communicating that *p* with some sort of social-communicative significance. (*social-communicative*)
3. *Perlocutionary act*: achieving certain further causal effects in the audience.

On Austin's view there is no neutral expression of a proposition involved to which one then adds representational force. Since it is assumed that mood encodes representational force, using a declarative sentence leads directly to the presentation of a proposition as true.¹⁶ What one

¹⁶Austin's view therefore coheres well with views which take propositional content and basic propositional acts to be intrinsically forceful and think of neutral acts in terms of cancellation, simulation, or as objectual (Hanks 2015; Recanati 2019; Reiland 2019). In contrast, Searle's view coheres better with

does on the illocutionary level is to add Austinian illocutionary force qua social-communicative significance, which, in the constative cases also brings with it truth-committal force.

In contrast, on Searle's view a use of a declarative sentence with its meaning involves both a neutral propositional act of expressing the proposition that *p*, a determinable illocutionary act of saying that presents the proposition as true and a determinate illocutionary act that adds social-communicative significance and truth-committal force. However, on this picture saying with its representational force is a *determinable* illocutionary act in the sense that we abstract it from more determinate social-communicative acts by disregarding their specific significance. Thus, on this picture representational force is derived from social-communicative significance and truth-committal force. Schematically, a full speech act with the content that *p* usually consists of:

1. *Propositional act*: using a sentence 'p' with its meaning and thereby expressing the proposition that *p*. (*linguistic*)
2. *Determinable illocutionary act*: presenting the proposition that *p* as true (*linguistic/social-communicative*)
3. *Determinate illocutionary act*: communicating it with some sort of social-communicative significance. (*social-communicative*)
4. *Perlocutionary act*: achieving certain consequences in the audience.

Again, since it is assumed that mood encodes representational force, using a declarative sentence with its meaning still leads to the presentation of a proposition as true. But this is not separable from the illocutionary level and is an abstraction from the more specific social-communicative act one actually performs.

We can thus summarize Austin's and Searle's different frameworks and conceptions of illocutionary acts in the following tables:

Austin	<i>Verbs</i>	<i>Status</i>
<i>Locutionary</i>	say, ask, tell	linguistic
<i>Illocutionary</i>	assert, order, request etc.	social-communicative
Searle	<i>Verbs</i>	<i>Status</i>
<i>Propositional</i>	express	linguistic
<i>Determinable Illocutionary</i>	say, ask, tell	linguistic/social-communicative
<i>Determinate Illocutionary</i>	assert, order, request etc.	social-communicative

acts which take propositional content and basic propositional acts to be neutral and on which forceful acts require an addition (Soames 2015).

Now, Searle's implicit argument against the Austinian view was the following: Austin's notion of a locutionary act like saying is that of a forceful act in the representational sense, but all force is by Austin's own definition illocutionary so the distinction collapses. To show that this objection misses its mark, we need to show that the representational force as non-neutrality and Austin's notion of illocutionary force as the social-communicative significance of a speech act are different, and there is no reason for Austin to take the former to depend on the latter.

Let's start with the claim that the two notions of force are different. This is easy to see. Both mental states and speech acts can be forceful in both the representational and truth-committal sense. As we saw above, beliefs and judgments, fears, imaginings, and supposings are all forceful in the representational sense while entertaining isn't. And beliefs and judgments are further forceful in the truth-committal sense while imaginings and supposings aren't. The main point for our present purposes is that even though mental states can be forceful in the representational and truth-committal sense, they can't be forceful in the Austinian sense of illocutionary force because that is explicitly tailored for social-communicative speech acts. There is no sense in which belief, judgment, fear, or imagining are tied to uptake by someone else or require an extra-linguistic conventional procedure.

Suppose someone now suggested that we focus just on speech acts and claimed that even though the two notions of force are different, any speech act that is representationally forceful must also have an illocutionary force in the Austinian sense. The idea would be that being representationally forceful is grounded in having Austinian illocutionary force.

Such a claim would amount to a rejection of Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts. On the one hand, locutionary acts are merely linguistic in following from the use of a sentence with its meaning. In this way they're distinct from the illocutionary acts which are social-communicative in being addressed to a particular audience and in need of uptake to be fully successful or leading to a creation or modification of social facts. On the other hand, locutionary acts are representationally forceful acts. So, the claim that representational force is grounded in Austinian illocutionary force couldn't be used to suggest that there's a theory-internal problem with Austin's distinction since it's simply inconsistent with it. At best, one could try to argue against Austin's view along those lines on substantive grounds. However, neither Searle nor anyone else has provided such an

argument and searching for one on their behalf is beyond the scope of this paper.

I conclude that Searle's main objection against Austin's notion of a locutionary act misses its mark and gives us no reason to give up the Austinian framework. It is rather Searle himself who is confused in running together the notion of representational force as non-neutrality and Austin's notion of illocutionary force as the social-communicative significance of the speech act, thereby bastardizing Austin's original notion of an illocutionary act.

6. Austin's distinction

On the present interpretation, Austinian *locutionary* acts are merely linguistic, resulting from the use of a sentence with its meaning. They are not yet social-communicative in that they don't necessarily need to be addressed to anybody, do not need uptake to be successfully performed, and don't aim to create or modify social facts. Depending on the sentence-mood, they can be reported with the indirect speech act verbs 'say', 'ask', and 'tell-to'. And they are representationally forceful involving presentation as true, as to be answered or to be performed (compare Kissine 2013, 23–29). In contrast, Austinian communicative *illocutionary* acts are acts addressed to an audience and in need of uptake to be successfully performed.¹⁷ And Austinian *social* illocutionary acts aim to create or modify social facts.

To walk through some concrete cases, when you use the sentence 'Snow is white' with its meaning you perform the locutionary act of *saying* that snow is white which is not just to express the proposition that snow is white, but to present it as true. But to do that is not yet to do anything genuinely *constative* or commit oneself to the truth. When an actor on the stage says that *p*, they present *p* as true, but that doesn't mean that there's anything wrong with their saying if what they say is false. It is only at the illocutionary level that one further asserts the proposition or takes a guess etc. Similarly, when you use the interrogative sentence 'What was Wittgenstein's nationality?' with its meaning you perform the

¹⁷Austin's notion of an illocutionary act has an interesting precursor in Reinach's theory of social acts (Reinach 1913/1983). Like Austin, Reinach thought that social acts like commanding are essentially *in need of being heard* or *taken in* (*vernehmungsbedürftig*) in order to be performed. And, like Austin, he drew a distinction between non-social speech acts that can be performed in solitude and social speech acts like informing or telling-that (*mitteilung*) that need to be addressed to a particular person and are successful only if taken in (compare Moran's view of telling-that in Moran 2018). For an overview of the development of speech act theory including discussion of Reinach's views see Smith 1990.

locutionary act of *asking* what Wittgenstein's nationality was, which is not just to express the question, but to present it as to be answered. But to do that is not yet to do anything genuinely *inquisitive* or commit oneself to wanting it to be answered or regarding it as desirable that it's answered. Again, you might be an actor or joking or ironic or rhetorical. It is only at the illocutionary level that one further either queries into its answer, expressing a wondering or a desire to know the answer, versus examining someone, merely wanting to know whether they know the answer. Finally, when you use the imperative sentence 'Sleep!' with its meaning you perform a locutionary act of telling the addressee to sleep, which is not just to express the action, but to present it as to be performed. But to do that is not yet to do anything genuinely *directive* or commit oneself to wanting the addressee to do it or regarding it as desirable that they do it. Again, you might be an actor or joking or ironic. It is only at the illocutionary level that one further either orders or requests etc. that the addressee do it.

We can contrast locutionary and illocutionary acts along several further dimensions, all of which derive from their fundamental difference as merely linguistic vs. social-communicative acts. Here, I want to highlight two such dimensions.

The first difference concerns the speaker's power over performing the relevant act. The main point is that if you do everything that's required of *you* to perform a locutionary act, you succeed. Nobody else's reactions are relevant. This is because locutionary acts are merely linguistic. In contrast, you can do everything that's required of you to perform a communicative illocutionary act, you can *try* to perform one, and yet fail because there is no uptake. Other's reactions are relevant.

The second difference I want to highlight concerns the possibility of *retraction* (for recent discussion, see Caponetto 2020). Take assertion as an example. Some people use 'assert' merely as a synonym for 'say' and from the present point of view these people are really theorizing about locutionary acts (Dummett 1973; Kölbel 2010). It makes no sense to retract one's sayings since sayings, while representationally forceful, are not truth-committal, not communicative and performed *to* anyone, and do not carry any social significance. There's nothing wrong with saying false things when you're being ironic etc. In contrast, many people use 'assert' to theorize about an illocutionary act in the sense of a social act which is truth-committal or even a communicative act which needs to be addressed to someone and needs uptake. For example, Goldberg has argued that treating assertion in this way is necessary to account for the fact that with an

assertion one puts the audience in a position to rely on it as a reason for their belief, as well as the fact that assertions are things that can be retracted (Goldberg 2015, 6–8). And it does make sense to retract assertions so conceived since they involve a socially significant commitment to either the general public or an addressee, perhaps to the effect that you know that *p* and authorize them to rely on your knowledge.

Conclusion

Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts is the central pillar of his speech act theory. I've argued that Searle's main objection against it misses its mark. Austin's original view thus survives and is not just of mere historical interest. It provides us with an elegant conception of speech acts that respects the semantics vs. pragmatics distinction: locutionary acts are *linguistic* and belong on the side of semantics and 'what is said', illocutionary acts are *social-communicative* and belong on the side of pragmatics and 'what is meant'. And it leads to an intriguing and plausible conception of saying as being representationally forceful in the sense of presenting a proposition as true as opposed to merely expressing it, without it being truth-committal or having Austinian illocutionary force qua social-communicative significance. Whether this is the conception of saying that we should ultimately accept is a story for another day.

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