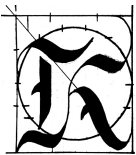


The incongruity between the sophistication of Kant's gelastic theory on the one hand, and his idea of a good joke, on the other, is itself funny. The incongruity inherent in his incongruity theory of humour amounts to an instance and illustration of the theory. The fact that one of the most sophisticated theories of humour in history would be supported by such a weak joke is itself the incongruity.

Justin E.H. Smith. *Kant on Jokes*

Silent Speech. Possible Worlds. Cancellation.



ant's idea of a good joke might well be funny in itself but for all that, it would appear he played out for high audiences. One 'sophisticated'^[1] garden-path, performative utterance, defined in terms of such 'freewheeling witty displays,' is situated in the opening statement to the appendix of his early work the *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens or An Essay on the Constitution and the Mechanical Origin of the Entire Structure of the Universe Based on Newtonian Principles* (1755). Where an even further dilemma for the modern English reader has existed, it is in the way Kant's incongruity has been thrown into both obscurity and relief through its cancellation by recent translators such as Stanley Jaki (1981) and even more comprehensively by Ian Johnston (1998 and 2008), who interacts with the body of the text by remaking the consecutive word 'if' into an exceptive one so as to erase the incongruity in his translation of Kant's writing from German into modern English and where, with my emphasis, we can see the difference:

Kant: In my view it is a disgrace to the nature of philosophy when we use it to maintain with a kind of flippancy free-wheeling witty displays having some apparent truth, if we are immediately willing to explain that we are doing this only as an amusement. (1:351)

Johnston (mis) translating Kant:

In my view it is a disgrace to the nature of philosophy when we use it to maintain with a kind of flippancy free-wheeling witty displays having some apparent truth, unless we are immediately willing to explain that we are doing this only as an amusement.

Weil ich dafür halte, dass es den Charakter der Weltweisheit entehren heisse, wenn man sich ihrer gebraucht, mit einer Art von Leichtsinn freie Ausschweifungen des Witzes mit einiger Scheinbarkeit zu behaupten, wenn man sich gleich erklären wollte, dass es nur geschäbe, um zu belustigen.

A footnote is attached to the passage where the explanation for this re-imagining of the text is that "Kant's text has "if" rather than "unless", which seems clearly wrong in the context of the entire sentence".

We are informed in the first preface to this otherwise well-informed translation (1998), in a passage missing from the most recent edition (2008), that Kant's original footnotes, with translator's footnotes now attached, have been moved from their immediacy within and alongside the text to the end of the book in a passage which stated: "all footnotes have been moved to the end," thus deferring to the end any willingness to immediately explain, before then altogether deleting this explanation of the non-immediate explanation in the later edition.

And in this down-the-rabbit-hole move, where Johnston, like a play within a play, plays out the joke within incongruity in Kant; where we have the contrast between an *'if'* that revels in philosophical impropriety with the presumption of an *'unless'* that might resolve it with simulacra in translation; between the immediacy of the *'immediately willing to explain'* in Kant and the deleted explanation which once explained the deferment of the non-immediate explanation in Johnston; between the manifestation of the *'some apparent truth'* in Kant with the various immediacies or otherwise of the *'seems clearly wrong'* in Johnston; as well as Johnston's assumption that *'unless'* operates as an only or necessary alternative to a disjunctive *'if'*, despite an endless variety of equally coherent alternative options, and his assertion that the context of the entire sentence is sufficient in itself to fully understand Kant's meaning.

But then as introduction to various kinds of the *'seems clearly wrong'* in philosophy, and it seems with Kant in mind, it was John L. Austin (1962) who intimated within the philosophy of language the potential for such configurations by systematically outlining the differing interpretational enlivenments that such a statement "despite an unexceptionable grammatical form", might function relative, if not in truth, then with

at least possible felicities fulfilled in meaning or event where, with uncharacteristic yet suggestive iteration through capitalization of Font he emphasizes:

But now in recent years, many things which would once have been accepted without question as 'statements' by both philosophers and grammarians have been scrutinized with new care. This scrutiny arose somewhat indirectly — at least in philosophy. First came the view, not always formulated without unfortunate dogmatism, that a statement (of fact) ought to be 'verifiable', and this led to the view that many 'statements' are only what may be called pseudo-statements. First and most obviously, many 'statements' were shown to be, as KANT perhaps first argued systematically, strictly nonsense, despite an unexceptionable grammatical form: and the continual discovery of fresh types of nonsense, unsystematic though their classification and mysterious though their explanation is too often allowed to remain, has done on the whole nothing but good. Yet we, that is, even philosophers, set some limits to the amount of nonsense that we are prepared to admit we talk: so that it was natural to go on to ask, as a second stage, whether many apparent pseudo statements really set out to be 'statements' at all. It has come to be commonly held that many utterances which look like statements are either not intended at all, or only intended in part, to record or impart straightforward information about the facts: for example, 'ethical propositions' are perhaps intended, solely or partly, to evince emotion or to prescribe conduct or to influence it in special ways. Here too KANT was among the pioneers. We very often also use utterances in ways beyond the scope at least of traditional grammar. It has come to be seen that many specially perplexing words embedded in apparently descriptive statements do not serve to indicate some specially odd additional feature in the reality reported, but to indicate (not to report) the circumstances in which the statement is made or reservations to which it is subject or the way in which it is to be taken and the like... Along these lines it has by now been shown piecemeal, or at least made to look likely, that many traditional philosophical perplexities have arisen through a mistake - the mistake of taking as straightforward statements of fact utterances which are *either* (in interesting non-grammatical ways) nonsensical *or else* intended as something quite different. (pp.2-3. Emphasis in the original)

Which brings us to the idea that what seems clearly wrong, if not exceptional grammatical form, is rather a necessary and indeed felicitous violation of appropriateness or politeness criteria; and as such to the idea that whatever

implications or categorically inappropriate juxtapositions we find may have been 'intended as something quite different' and not merely as something different or 'seems clearly wrong'. In which case, the thought that Kant's work necessitates re-writing in order to make the logical and/or clause connections somehow acceptable to standards of correctness in speech and politeness in the modern academy is indeed quite the element of our amusement, the beginning of our project and the focus of our first question:

In this statement, where Austin describes the role of "specially perplexing words embedded in apparently descriptive statements," Austin articulates metaphoric significance through anomalous and academically perplexing stylistic rearrangement by the pictorialization of the FONT as KANT thus twice creating the conditions of fulfilment for its own determination beyond the description.

Outside of Hermann Diels, and his elucidation of Aristotle's also twofold treatment of the "vivid picture" made by the Atomists as enaction in metaphor that involves interaction with the typeface by Aristotle, one looks in vein for anything similar in the 'array' of the FONT amongst even the most bloodthirsty of Modernist Philosophers. For Diels, Aristotle likely inherited this directly, perhaps from Leucippus or more probably from Democritus himself, as he put it in his *Elementum: eine Vorarbeit zum Griechischen und Lateinischen Thesaurus*:

Who wouldn't think of the place in *Metaphysics* where the differences between the Democrite atoms according to *ῥυθμός* [rhythm], *διωθινή* [array] and *τροπή* [trope] are given and made clear by the difference between the letters A and N, AN and NA, I and H? There is probably no more suitable example to make clear in a nutshell the creation of composite things from atoms that are similar in quality but different in shape and size. Such a picture was all the more obvious to Democritus because he had carried out grammatical and rhetorical studies with particular attention to the differences in the elements of language down to the last detail. And anyone who still doubts whether the vivid picture goes back to Democritus himself will be won over by a second testimony from Aristotle in the *Gen. et Corr*, where he gives the report on the change in the Abderite [Aberdite was a region in ancient Greece] *σχήματα* [shapes] with the words: "Tragedy and comedy arise from the same letters." We can therefore assume with certainty that Leucippus or, more likely, Democritus used the metaphor of letters in order to demonstrate the infinite variety of atomic connections by means of the infinite combinability of letters, but without the metaphors to condense concepts and probably without using the word *στυχεῖα* [elements]! (1899, pp. 13-14).^[2]

Austin capitalizes the Font in Kant twice. The first time where "First and most obviously, many 'statements' were shown to be, as KANT perhaps first argued systematically, strictly nonsense.." is a provocation which Austin knows to be untrue and cannot be sustained. Kant never systematically argued a theory of pragmatics.

The second time Austin capitalizes the Font he does so in a way where "'ethical propositions' are perhaps intended, solely or partly, to evince emotion or to prescribe conduct or to influence it in special ways. Here too KANT was among the pioneers," is equal in incitement, unless Austin wants us to believe he thinks that no moralist before Kant attempted to influence human behaviour or sway an audience with emotives.

Above all else, Diels *Elementum* is a 'Thesaurus' and therefore focused on the art of the transference of one word into a different one, but where the rendition is such as to retain the same meaning at the level of its explication, usually understood in terms of a change in the word, but also described by Diels here in terms of a difference in the form of its *shapes*.

Not least another similarity between the proposition by Kant and the one found in Austin (unless we interpret Austin as merely 'nonsensical') is that both of them are illustrations of themselves when interpreted this way. Kant condemns the 'free-wheeling flippancy' as an 'amusement,' whilst immediately explaining that it is his intention to do just that - Austin incorporates an instance of 'specially perplexing words embedded in otherwise apparently descriptive statements' in a passage which also provides us with an example of something only coherent when digested into itself.

If instead of reading Austin here in depths we rather posit him at the surface level in terms of what he actually says, and interpret him as making a play on the forms of the incongruity in the opening statement of Kant's *Theory of the Heavens*, while also understanding that a few paragraphs later (1:353) Kant introduces Bernard de Fontenelle in the humorous episode with the flea, we can infer that Austin's array of shapes is rather a plurality of interactions with the FONT where a.) At the level of the typeface we see the change of shape in capitalization rendered twice, as also in Aristotle's references to Democritus and b.) as a play on words relative to both Bernard de Fontenelle's name and also the dialectal form of his book the '*Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*' especially as these relate to c.) the 'heavens', such as to illustrate in concrete visual metaphor the form of language as outlined by Diels, which is also, by means of the circle d.) a description of the infinite atomistic universe of

Democritus that Kant also twice tells us the natural philosophy in his book is premised upon (at 1:226 and 1:227). What was previously imprecise, unclear and vague in Austin now assumes a tantalizing form in coherence.

Is there any other statement written by Kant with anything like this degree of fit relative to what Austin just did?

Was this Austin's way, by describing "specially perplexing words embedded in apparently descriptive statements," with a witticism in FONT; made as reference to a witticism by Kant about the (disgraceful) nature of witticisms in philosophy therefore, articulated in such a way that Austin's witticism, while perplexing in itself, nonetheless attains clarity when read through Diels, as "intended as something quite different," as if to say that he was aware of this in Kant and thereby also, so to speak, claiming a stamp in provenance on the heavenly font in modern times?^[3]

1. A sophisma is a sentence whose truth value is difficult to determine or ambiguous such as "it always rains whenever it never does". In letter 111 of his *Moral letters to Lucilius* titled *On the Vanity of Mental Gymnastics*, the Roman Stoic Seneca writes that "If a man has surrendered himself to them, he weaves many a tricky subtlety, but makes no progress toward real living".

2. Diels' virtual single handed restoration of the doxographical tradition laid a firm foundation on which the whole twentieth-century scholarship in the research of ancient texts rested. Because remarkably little was done to continue his research on the doxographic sources, his authority lasted unchallenged for almost a century - anyone who studied classics or otherwise devolved semantic classifications in the twentieth century was operating in the linguistic and interpretative matrix developed by Diels, and it provides the linguistic frame as well as illuminating the path through which Austin was able to lay the form for his own innovative encryption. It is inconceivable that Austin was not intimately familiar with Diels.

Austin uses the term 'nonsense' in his statement here ironically as a term of art inherited from Logical Positivism. A critical part of his project was to break with the central ideas of this by demonstrating how non truth-functional statements may in fact be meaningful, hence the qualification at the end of the paragraph "or else intended as something quite different".

As a pioneer of 'Ordinary language philosophy' Austin would have been firmly of the conviction that although Aristotle had first introduced us to the idea of non-propositional content in certain sentences, Kant never systematically argued a pragmatic theory of language.

The first systematic account of the action like character of speech was in fact made shortly before WWI independently by Adolf Reinach and Alexander Pfänder, students and assistants to Edmund Husserl at the Munich School of Phenomenology. Influenced by distinctions between psychology and linguistic expression in Brentano's concept of intentionality, Husserl had already developed a theory of linguistic meaning that aside from its emphasis on referentiality, also considered those non-representational uses of language that Reinach and Pfänder were to initiate and Austin was later to develop.

Austin himself suggested naming his philosophy 'Linguistic Phenomenology' being dissatisfied with 'Ordinary Language'. Rejecting Charles Taylor's suggestion that Austin was referring to Husserlian Phenomenology (Taylor in Taylor and Ayer, 1959), but nevertheless detailing how Austin's significant choices in language were at the same time careful, considered and precise if sometimes provocative and enigmatic Lars Leeten writes:

.. It is therefore more than surprising that John L. Austin, in his article "*A Plea for Excuses*" from 1956, suggests that his brand of philosophy of language might be called linguistic phenomenology. This label is perplexing for many reasons and the question of exactly what it is supposed to mean has yet to be answered. Of course, it is tempting not to take Austin's suggestion seriously. Given the way he introduces the concept in "*A Plea for Excuses*," Austin himself seems to struggle with it. But it is nonetheless obvious that the label results from careful consideration:

[Austin writes] "In view of the prevalence of the slogan 'ordinary language', and of such names as 'linguistic' or 'analytic' philosophy or 'the analysis of language', one thing needs specially emphasizing to counter misunderstandings. When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not merely at

words (or 'meanings', whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena. For this reason I think it might be better to use, for this way of doing philosophy, some less misleading name than those given above – for instance, 'linguistic phenomenology', only that is rather a mouthful".

In this passage, Austin is defending himself against the objection of 'linguistic idealism', as was raised by his day-to-day opponent Ayer in particular. And while he introduces the notion of 'linguistic phenomenology' rather hesitantly, he does so with the explicit intent of finding a 'less misleading name'. Stanley Cavell, one of the few commentators who take the label seriously, remarks that Austin "apologizes" for it but "does not retract it." Cavell (1965:99) Therefore, it has to be assumed that it is well chosen. This should not come as a surprise since there is hardly an author as obsessed with the subtle distinctions of language as Austin was. It simply does not seem likely that he could have chosen a term as laden and provocative as 'phenomenology' without having good reasons for doing so. But what specific idea did he have in mind? Why did he pick 'phenomenology' of all terms to characterise his philosophical endeavour? A clarification would certainly contribute to a better understanding of Austin's philosophical method and ordinary language philosophy in general. (Leeten, 2021)

In the series of weekly meetings, dedicated to close reading of texts between Austin and his circle as described by Geoffrey Warnock, where Austin treated the interpretation of the texts "one sentence at a time", I can easily imagine that as a method of reading, such a group process would almost certainly generate more and surprise interpretations of the text and therefore likely to be particularly hermeneutically rich. Perhaps, as William Empson proposes, it is possible to align significance in a way that is suggestive out of the refrain as it is spelled in the minds of one's interlocutors?

3. Austin's book was of course published posthumously based on his notes from the William James lectures at Harvard, as well as other much older lecture notes. His editor J.O. Urmston tells us that they were "reproduced in print as exactly as possible," because "most readers will prefer to have a close approximation of what he is known to have written down rather than what it might be judged that he would have printed or thought that he probably said in lectures". Urmston tells us that while the later pages of each lecture tended to become fragmented, the first few pages of each were typed out as complete and therefore published without alteration. As the passage cited here was near the beginning of the first lecture, it would therefore seem to be an accurate facsimile of what Austin intended to print.



The enigmatic John Langshaw Austin. Philosopher and wartime intelligence officer with an incendiary device and an adjustable as his accoutrements.