CHAPTER 1

Exploring Austin's Galaxy
Searching for Truth through the Lens of Ordinary Language

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> Is it true or false that Belfast is north of London? That the galaxy is the shape of a fried egg? That Beethoven was a drunkard? That Wellington won the battle of Waterloo? There are various *degrees and dimensions* of success in making statements: the statements fit the facts always more or less loosely, in different ways on different occasions for different intents and purposes.
>
> Austin, "Truth"

1 Preliminaries

What is truth? I have no answer of my own and don't propose to advocate for a particular theory of truth. However, by appealing to a number of insightful points made by J. L. Austin in his papers "Truth" (1950; 1979: 117–133) and "Unfair to Facts" (1979: 154–174), I will suggest that truth, as ordinarily conceived, is not only a *relational* phenomenon, but a *spectrum* phenomenon as well. All of this will be in the spirit of Austin and in the spirit of the correspondence theory of truth, yet will fall short of an explicit endorsement of that or any other theory of truth. I will also suggest that, contra Strawson (1950), Searle (1998a), and Neale (2001), "correspondence to the facts" is neither a "misleading idiom," nor an "empty metaphor," nor an "idiomatic form of 'is true.'" Indeed, truth as "correspondence to the facts" wears its semantic heart on its linguistic sleeve: it conveys a word/world relation of correspondence (conformity, fitness, etc.) that – like correspondence more generally and more literally – *admits of degrees*. Hence the idea of truth as a *spectrum* phenomenon. In place of the ideas of Strawson, Searle, and Neale, I will suggest that truth as correspondence (fitness, conformity) to reality (the world, the facts) is akin to what linguists call a "conventional metaphor" – an idea that comports well with Austin's own views on truth. I will, however, take issue with one of Austin's

more controversial claims – that "is true," when predicated of a statement, is *not* "logically superfluous." I will suggest that, although logically potent in some contexts, the phrase is logically superfluous in others. But even in contexts of the latter sort, the phrase is (I will suggest) rich in terms of potential *pragmatic* (or conversational) implications (or Gricean "implicatures"). After a brief discussion as to how the views proposed herein comport (or fail to comport) with traditional theories of truth, I will conclude by suggesting that the "lens" of ordinary language is a reflective lens turned inward, but is not for that reason a lens incapable of revealing insight into what Austin calls the "problem of truth."

2 Austin's Galaxy and the "Problem of Truth"

Midway through "Unfair to Facts," Austin asks: Why raise this cry "Unfair to Facts"? – to which he responds:

> The expression 'fitting the facts' is *not* by any means an isolated idiom in our language. It seems to have a very intimate connexion with a whole series of adverbs and adjectives used in appraising statements – I mean 'precise', 'exact', 'rough', 'accurate' and the like.... All these are connected with the notion of fitting and measuring in ordinary contexts, and it can scarcely be fortuitous that they, along with fitting and corresponding, have been taken over as a group to the sphere of statements and facts. (Austin 1979: 161)

Austin acknowledges that the expressions in the aforementioned "series" *might* be used nonliterally in ordinary everyday assessments of statements. Yet he does not think that this undercuts the importance of their analysis when addressing the "problem of truth."

> Now to some extent the use of this galaxy of words in connexion with statements *may* be a transferred use; yet no one would surely deny that these constitute serious and important notions which can be, and should be elucidated. I should certainly go much farther and claim ... that these are the important terms to elucidate when we address ourselves to the problem of 'truth'. (Austin 1979: 161)

Yet, as Austin regretfully notes:

> All these terms are commonly dismissed along with the supposed useless 'fitting the facts'. (1979: 161)

Let's consider these three (connected) passages one by one, beginning with the first.

I am in complete agreement with Austin that "fitting the facts," as well as "corresponding to the facts," are not "isolated idioms," but are rather part of a "galaxy" of words and phrases used in connection with the ordinary everyday assessment of statements (Reimer 2006). But we should then ask: *Why* has this "galaxy" of expressions been "taken over as a group to the sphere of statements and facts"? Austin admits that this intriguing phenomenon is "scarcely fortuitous." But again, what explains it? Perhaps truth, *as ordinarily understood*, is a *relational* phenomenon and, just as importantly, one that *admits of degrees*. It would therefore be of a piece with the expressions in Austin's galaxy, expressions that suggest a *spectral relation* of statements to facts – expressions like "precise," "exact," "accurate," "rough," "loose," and "approximate." As Austin puts it in the quote that opens the present chapter:

> There are various *degrees* . . . of success in making statements: the statements fit the facts always more or less loosely. (Austin 1950: 124; 1979: 130)

With respect to the second passage, I am again in complete agreement with Austin. The use of expressions in the aforementioned "galaxy" is arguably not always strictly literal. Such use (or uses) may sometimes be "transferred" – that is, metaphorical or otherwise nonliteral. Thus, while clothes *literally* fit persons to varying degrees, statements *metaphorically* fit facts to varying degrees. And while maps *literally* correspond, more or less, to the terrain, statements *metaphorically* correspond, more or less, to the facts.

As to the third passage, I am once again in complete agreement with Austin. Not only Strawson (1950), but decades later Searle (1998a) and soon after that Neale (2001) have wrongly dismissed the notion of "fitting the facts" as useless if not downright misleading. The obvious question is: *Why* the dismissive attitude toward such ordinary language expressions, when these are not used in the strictest and most literal sense possible? Perhaps because of analytic philosophy's traditionally dismissive attitude toward language that isn't strictly literal. Although this attitude finally began to change with the seminal work of Max Black (1962) and Monroe Beardsley (1962), it can still be seen in the works of the three philosophers discussed in the following section. This dismissive attitude toward nonliteral language is a particularly dangerous one as metaphors are often used to capture philosophically, scientifically, politically, and otherwise theoretically important concepts (like that of truth) in cases where the resources of literal language appear not up to the task. Indeed, why else resort to nonliteral language? (Reimer and Camp 2006).

3 Criticisms: Misleading Idiom, Empty Metaphor, or Philosopher's Invention?

Here, I will examine a couple of objections to Austin's view that truth is appropriately conceptualized in terms of the notion of "correspondence to the facts." I will look, in particular, at concerns expressed by Strawson (1950), Searle (1998a), and Neale (2001). I have chosen to discuss these particular objections for two main reasons. First, they are representative of views that are the polar opposite of Austin's views: while Austin thinks the ordinary language locutions in his "galaxy" – including "fitting" and "corresponding to" "the facts" – are *crucial* to an understanding of truth, Strawson, Searle, and Neale regard them as irrelevant if not deeply misleading with regard to such understanding. Second, the views of the latter philosophers (as noted previously) represent outdated thinking about the philosophical importance of nonliteral language that needs to be exposed as such.

3.1 *Strawson (1950): A Misleading Idiom*

According to Strawson, "correspondence to the facts" is a mere idiom and so not to be taken at face value – that is, as implying a *relation* (of correspondence) between statements and facts. Indeed, according to Strawson, the requirement that there be things in the world to which true statements "correspond" is misguided, and "facts" are nothing more than pseudo-entities invented to satisfy this wrong-headed requirement.

I concur with Austin's twofold response to Strawson's objections. Regarding the idea that "corresponds to the facts" is a misleading idiom, I would agree with Austin when he says:

> This seems to me quite implausible – why *should not* we be meaning by it that there is some sort of relation between something and something? (1979: 159–160)

Regarding the idea that facts are ad hoc pseudo-entities invented by philosophers, I would again agree with Austin when he says:

> [T]his is to treat a wholesome English expression as though it were a philosopher's invented expression; to treat 'facts' as though they were in the same position as 'propositions'. (1979: 159)

And, since we are talking about a "wholesome English expression," the definition of "fact" provided by *Wikipedia* (vs. by a professional philosopher) is particularly instructive. There, it is reported that:

> A fact is something that has really occurred or is actually the case. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fact

Not surprisingly, the ordinary everyday sense of "fact" comports with the etymology of the expression. The *Online Etymology Dictionary* reports the word's etymology as follows:

> 1530s "action, anything done," especially "evil deed," from Latin *factum* "an event, occurrence, deed, achievement," in Medieval Latin also "state, condition, circumstance," literally "thing done". www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=fact

Thus, the Austinian view of facts as "things in the world" comports with the current usage of "fact," as well as with the word's etymology.

In response to Strawson's claim that facts are pseudo-entities invented by philosophers, Austin rejoins: "How come that English has invented so unhappy an expression?" (1979: 159). He then offers, only to reject, several responses that Strawson might provide. One of these responses, discussed in section (c) of this chapter, is that "corresponds to the facts" is idiomatic for "is true." But what might Austin say in response to his own question? No doubt, something to the effect that ordinary speakers conceptualize the notion of truth, rightly or wrongly, as involving a correspondence or "fitness" between statements and "the facts" – just as *Wikipedia* suggests. No wonder, then, that we have "invented" the *happy* expression "correspondence to the facts." It "fits" *precisely* our ordinary everyday conception of truth.

3.2 *Searle (1998a): An Empty Metaphor*

According to Searle, the "correspondence metaphor" is (i) of no theoretical value and is (ii) completely empty. In support of point (i), he claims that "the metaphor of correspondence is certainly no clearer than the notion of truth itself, and so the correspondence theory should not be seen as an attempt to reduce complex and obscure notions to simpler and clearer ones" (Searle 1998a: 382). In support of point (ii), he claims that "correspondence is a useful metaphor because it is so empty." As he explains,

> The fact that we can use so many other non-synonymous expressions – "fit," "state," "describe," and even "square with" – to do the same job, should be a clue that "correspondence" is not being used literally. (Searle 1998a: 394)

Let's consider these points in turn, beginning with the first. The "correspondence metaphor" arguably has considerable theoretical value, as the notion of correspondence is indeed clearer than that of truth. *Pace* Searle,

the notion of truth is not so much "complex and obscure" as it is simple yet *unanalyzed*. "Correspondence," when used in connection with the ordinary everyday assessment of statements, might not be used literally. However, its nonliteral meaning is surely grounded in its literal meaning, which is certainly clear and simple. Thus, maps correspond, literally and to varying degrees, to the terrain they are maps of. Similarly, clothes fit, literally and to varying degrees, the individuals who don them. Although the "transferred" uses of the expressions in question might not be as clear and simple as their literal counterparts, such is the nature of metaphor and, I would add, such is the nature of the phenomenon (truth) that the "correspondence metaphor" seeks to capture. I would also suggest, *pace* Searle, that the metaphor is so popular because it is so intuitive and it is so intuitive because the notion of (literal) correspondence is one that we are all familiar with. Although arguably used nonliterally, "correspondence to the facts" is grounded in a familiar and concrete phenomenon.

The "correspondence metaphor," as Searle calls it, also has explanatory value insofar as it can make sense of the frequent use we all make of the myriad of expressions in Austin's "galaxy" when assessing ordinary everyday statements. All of the terms in that galaxy, including "correspondence" and "fitness," are terms appropriate to relational word/world phenomena that exist on spectra.

What now of Searle's second point: that correspondence is a useful metaphor because it is so empty? It certainly sounds odd to say that an expression is useful *because* it is empty. After all, empty expressions lack (semantic) content. Of what use could they possibly be? Perhaps Searle is trying to say that the metaphor is "empty" in the sense that it implies nothing, or at least nothing that is nontrivial. But we have already seen that this is a mistake. Moreover, how is this putatively "empty" metaphor *useful*, according to Searle? What "job" is it alleged to perform? Presumably, the job performed is affirmation – or rather *re*affirmation of (the truth of) some statement, as in:

(1) "Phoenix is the capital of Arizona" corresponds to the facts.

But then wouldn't Searle have to say that the "correspondence metaphor" is *useless* because it's redundant, as (1) says no more than the more concise and more direct (2)?

(2) Phoenix is the capital of Arizona.

The emptiness of the correspondence metaphor is evident, according to Searle, from the fact that it is interchangeable with a host of other,

non-synonymous expressions. However, I would counter that some of the putatively non-synonymous expressions enumerated by Searle ("fits the facts," "squares with the facts") are informative insofar as they suggest that truth is a *relational* phenomenon that admits of degrees – and is therefore a *spectrum* phenomenon. Thus, truth would appear to involve word/world relations that are variable with respect to the degree to which the former corresponds to (or "fits") the latter. So, although the expressions in question are not, on their *literal* interpretation, synonymous, they are close enough in *metaphorical* meaning to be interchangeable (*salva veritate*). Thus, if a statement "corresponds to the facts," it also "fits," "squares with," and "jibes with" those facts. Again, such expressions are anything but "empty" as they suggest relational phenomena that exist on spectra: that (in other words) admit of degrees.

3.3 *Neale (2001): Idiomatic for "Is True" or a Philosopher's Invention?*

According to Neale,

> It is no more illuminating to be told that a sentence is true if and only if it corresponds to the world than to be told that a sentence is true if and only if it is true, states a truth, says the world is as the world is, or fits the facts. For the last of these phrases, perfectly ordinary as it is – unlike the philosopher's invention 'corresponds to a fact' – seems to be an idiomatic form of 'is true'. (Neale 2001: 63)

There are two issues to address here: one concerning the (semantic) content of certain putatively "idiomatic" phrases, the other concerning the idea that "corresponds to a fact" is a "philosopher's invention." Let's consider these in turn.

3.3.1 *Idiomatic?*

My interest is in the two phrases "corresponds to the world" and "fits the facts." Both are arguably "idioms" in the ordinary sense that they are common turns of phrase – in the sense of "idiom" invoked by Austin when he denies that "fitting the facts" is an isolated "idiom" in our language. But neither phrase is an idiom in the technical (and traditional) sense that their respective meanings are *not* compositionally determined. Neither phrase is what Austin refers to as a "fused idiom" (1979: 159). Thus (*pace* Neale), neither phrase is logically equivalent to "is true." Indeed, both phrases – when prefaced with "A sentence is true if and only if it …" suggest that truth involves a *relation* between words and the world. Moreover, given the appropriate sort of preface, both phrases suggest that truth – like (literal)

corresponding and (literal) fitting – is a *spectrum* phenomenon. The idea that the expressions in question lack compositionally determined meanings is incredibly counterintuitive. *Real* idioms, so-called fused idioms, have meanings that have to be learned individually, rather than "figured out." Thus, while no one has trouble *figuring out* what it means to say that a sentence "fits" or "corresponds to" the facts, one has to *learn* what it means to say that it's "raining cats and dogs" or that you are "the apple of my eye." That's why idiom dictionaries are so popular among those seeking to learn a new language.

3.3.2 *A Philosopher's Invention?*

To claim that the phrase "corresponds to a fact" is a "philosopher's invention" is frankly misleading. Perhaps it is true that only a philosopher would say something like:

(3) A sentence is true if and only if it corresponds to a fact.

Yet such a statement is wrongly characterized as the "invention" of a "philosopher" insofar as it derives its intuitive force, which is considerable, from the ordinary everyday idea that truth involves "correspondence to the facts." And, although this latter notion is indeed an ordinary one – just as is "fitting the facts" – and was perhaps "invented" by ordinary folk, it captures a *very* important notion: that of a "match" between one's beliefs (or words) and the facts (reality, the world, the environment). So conceived truth is important, if not essential, for our material survival and flourishing. Thus, "corresponds to the facts" is no more "idiomatic" for "is true" than is "fits the facts." Both expressions, however commonplace, ought to be taken at face value: as suggesting that truth involves a *relation* between words (or beliefs) and the world, a relation whereby the former corresponds, *more or less*, to "the facts" – i.e., reality, the world, the environment, etc.

3.4 *A Conventional Metaphor?*

So if "corresponds to the facts," like "fits the facts," is neither a misleading idiom, nor an empty metaphor, nor idiomatic for "is true," what then is it? Perhaps such expressions are best understood as what linguists call "conventional metaphors": that is, metaphors commonly used in a given culture's ordinary, everyday language to give structure to some aspects of that culture's conceptual scheme. Here, the relevant aspect of the conceptual scheme is, of course, that which concerns truth. Perhaps Austin's

hesitation to say that correspondence and fitting, when used to characterize truth, involve "transferred" uses of those notions stems from the fact that these are arguably *conventional* metaphors. They are *so* common, they are *so* ingrained in our thinking about statements and facts, that they don't *sound* metaphorical; rather they *sound* literal. But a little reflection suggests that they are not literal; clothes fit (more or less) those who don them in a sense that is patently literal; the same cannot be said of statements "fitting" the facts. Maps correspond (more or less) to the terrain they map in a sense that is patently literal; the same cannot be said of statements "corresponding to" the facts. So, although conventional (that is, commonly used), the expressions in question are nonetheless nonliteral; they are metaphorical.

4 Truth as a "Spectral" Phenomenon

The idea that truth is correspondence to the facts, when coupled with the idea that correspondence admits of degrees, leads naturally to the view that truth itself is a degreed or (in other words) "more or less" kind of phenomenon. To get an intuitive sense of this view, let's return to the quote that opened this chapter:

> Is it true or false that Belfast is north of London? That the galaxy is the shape of a fried egg? That Beethoven was a drunkard? That Wellington won the battle of Waterloo? There are various *degrees and dimensions* of success in making statements: the statements fit the facts always more or less loosely, in different ways on different occasions for different intents and purposes. (Austin 1950: 124; 1979: 130)

This passage is in response to the idea that "is true" is logically superfluous – a claim for which I will offer qualified support in section 7. However, I certainly agree with the claim that immediately precedes the foregoing passage: that there are cases "where it is pointless to insist on deciding in simple terms whether a statement is 'true or false.' " Austin then nicely illustrates this point by way of four questions. Indeed, with respect to these particular questions, my inclination would be to agree (with Austin) that a simple "true or false" answer would be "pointless" (if not misleading). With respect to each of Austin's questions, I would probably respond (respectively) with something like:

(4) That's *roughly* true, but Belfast is really more north*west* of London.
(5) That's a colorful way of putting it, but it's *kind of* true, I suppose.
(6) I guess that's *more or less* true; but I wouldn't put it that way. I'd say Beethoven drank to excess.

(7) That's *partially* true; Wellington actually won the battle along with some Prussian general.

The general idea is clear enough: truth, as ordinarily understood, is a "degreed" phenomenon: statements and beliefs vary in the degree to which they are true. Indeed, I would go further and suggest that *truth value* is a degreed phenomenon: statements and beliefs exist on a spectrum from absolutely true to absolutely false. Logical and mathematical truths would be on the far left; logical contradictions would be on the far right. Ordinary truths and falsehoods would lie somewhere between these two extremes. This sort of approach is not inconsistent with Austin's own words (quoted immediately above):

> There are various *degrees and dimensions* of success in making statements: the statements fit the facts always more or less loosely, in different ways on different occasions for different intents and purposes. (Austin 1950: 124; 1979: 130)

I would extend this insightful point by saying:

> There are various degrees of success *or failure* in making statements: the statements fit or *fail to fit* the facts and this success *or failure* is always a matter of degree.

Thus, just as a size 7 engagement ring might fit perfectly an "average" (adult female) ring finger, a pair of pants, sized for a toddler, might fail to fit – and to a dramatic degree – a grown man with a forty-inch waist. These are analogies for factual (vs. logical or metaphysical) statements that are patently if contingently true on the one hand ("Southern Arizona gets very hot in the summer.") and patently if contingently false on the other ("Billionaire businessman Donald Trump is known for his politically correct views").

As to why we might have a tendency to think that (truth evaluable) statements and beliefs are either true or false simpliciter, there are any number of possible explanations. First, most ordinary everyday statements and beliefs are, in fact, either clearly true or clearly false. Second, we are taught by our parents and later (if indirectly) by our teachers with their T/F quizzes and exams that statements are either true or false simpliciter. There's no "in between." And for philosophers, there may be a couple of additional reasons: we are perhaps misled by subjects like mathematics or logic, or by fields like analytic philosophy where the most (philosophically) interesting statements are often logically/metaphysically true or logically/metaphysically false. But this just means that such statements are