

## VENDLER ON WHAT IS STATED

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Suppose that Tom states that Nixon resigned. Since Nixon did resign, we may say in acceptable, everyday English that

- (1) What Tom stated is true, and
- (2) What Tom stated is a fact.

Given that what Tom stated is that Nixon resigned, we may, by substitution, get two equivalent and equally true statements:

- (3) That Nixon resigned is true; and
- (4) That Nixon resigned is a fact.

In (3) and (4), the expression 'that Nixon resigned' appears to function univocally. (3) and (4) are both true, and their compatibility seems to display the fact that a that-clause can function both as grammatical subject of the predicate 'true' and as a device for specifying a fact. As Joseph Margolis points out, "...no grammatical equivocation on 'that *p*' is required, only alternative interpretations of what 'that *p*' designates..."<sup>1</sup> Of course, in (3) we do not know, apart from adopting some theory of truth, *what* 'that Nixon resigned' should be taken as designating. We only know that whatever it is, it is claimed to be true.

Although (3) and (4) seem to be compatible, (1) and (2) – from which (3) and (4) were derived by substitution – are clearly incompatible. That clauses may be used to specify both what is true and what is a fact, as in (3) and (4), but what Tom stated cannot at once

be true *and* be a fact, without equivocating on 'what Tom stated'. On any ordinary reading of facts, facts themselves are not true or false. As Zeno Vendler<sup>2</sup> notes, "the thing which is true is not a fact; it only fits the facts, corresponds to what is the case..." (p. 114).

Thus, comparing (1) and (2), if what Tom stated is true, then what he stated (whatever it is) cannot be a fact. Likewise, if we hold that what Tom stated is a fact, then what Tom stated cannot be something which admits of truth-value. So, despite the apparent truth of each of (1) and (2) when considered separately, one of them must be false; on pain of contradiction we must give up a literal reading of one or the other.

Choosing between (1) and (2) seems at first to be an impossible task, but arguments can be made out. In favor of (1), saying that a statement (or belief) is true is held to mean that what is stated is true, rather than the act of stating it. Acts or events of stating may exist or not exist, but they cannot be the bearers of truth or falsity; only the objects of such acts have truth-values. On such a view, terms like 'statement', 'belief', and 'assertion' are ambiguous – what may be called "act-object-ambiguous" – and are capable of denoting either the mental or speech act in question or the object of that act.<sup>3</sup> In defense of the literalness of (2), one could conceivably hold that a statement is true, but that what is stated is a fact, on the grounds that *what* is stated does not admit of truth or falsity. This would involve rejecting the act-object distinction, of course, but as one can see in comparing (1) and (2), a clash of intuitions is a basic feature of the dispute, and one might well argue that the act-object distinction must yield to more important considerations. The task of this paper is to discern which of (1) and (2) Vendler would defend and to what degree of success, and by way of this, indicate the bearing of the act-object distinction on the questions of what is stated (or believed) and what is (basically) true or false.

Suppose again that Tom states that Nixon resigned. Since Nixon did resign, we may say that

(5) Tom's statement is true.

Now, according to the act-object distinction, the term 'statement' in (5) may be disambiguated by replacing the expression 'Tom's statement' with the expression 'What Tom stated', which of course gives us

(1) What Tom stated is true.

That is, the expression 'Tom's statement' (*qua* object) is treated as equivalent in use to the expression 'what Tom stated'. Disambiguation may be indexed by subscripting 'statement' with either an 'a'

or an 'o' (act or object). Hence, the expression 'what Tom stated' is equivalent in use to the expression 'Tom's statement<sub>o</sub>' but is not equivalent to the expression 'Tom's statement<sub>a</sub>', the reason being that statements<sub>a</sub> to not admit of truth or falsity.

The reduction of (5) to (1) is the first indication that we should choose (1) over (2). However, someone who favors (2), may not find the argument very convincing. After all, we have assumed, in disambiguating (5), that 'Tom's statement<sub>o</sub>' is equivalent to 'what Tom stated'. And since truth may be predicated of statements<sub>o</sub>, it follows that truth may be predicated of what Tom stated, which excludes the possibility that what Tom stated is a fact. The objector is right, of course, since we have not provided an argument at all for (1) except by appealing to ordinary usage. Ordinarily, if someone is puzzled by the claim that Tom's statement is true, we may make ourselves clear by explaining that it is what Tom stated that is true, not his act of stating it. But ordinary use is very much at issue here, so we must oblige the objector by considering his defense of (2). We may reasonably require, however, that the act-object distinction be observed, or if it is to be ignored, that reasons for such linguistic reform be offered.

Vendler appears to have the act-object distinction firmly in mind when he discusses the terms 'statement' and 'what is stated', but there, appearances are deceptive. Vendler says

...his statement and what he stated are very different... his statement may be true, but his statement cannot be a fact. What he stated however, can be; people often state facts.

(p. 113)

Normally, if one were to *distinguish* between these two expressions, we would suppose that 'his statement' was being used to denote a speech-act while 'what he stated' was being used to denote the object of that act. When Vendler says "his statement may be true," then, he must be speaking of statements<sub>o</sub> and not statements<sub>a</sub>. But on the ordinary act-object distinction, the expression 'his statement<sub>o</sub>' may be replaced by the expression 'what he stated'. Therefore, on the act-object distinction the two expressions that Vendler wishes to distinguish are in fact not distinguishable, at least in the way Vendler intends. Of course, Vendler doesn't have the advantage of our subscripts, but if 'statement' and 'what is stated' are to be distinguished, we can't be talking about statements<sub>o</sub>; the act-object distinction stipulates that statements<sub>o</sub> just are what are stated. Nor can statements<sub>a</sub>, the other alternative, be candidates for what may be true,

since acts of any kind cannot be truth-bearers on the act-object distinction.

The proper conclusion at this point, then, is that Vendler has some distinction other than the act-object distinction in mind in the passage quoted above. Precisely what that distinction is we never learn, but it certainly appears to be incompatible with the usual act-object distinction. On the act-object distinction, the expression 'what is stated' denotes something which can be true or false; on Vendler's distinction, just the reverse is true, since what is stated can be a fact. In short, Vendler opts for (2) over (1). Ordinary language is pitted against ordinary language: shall we side with the act-object distinction, and thus with (1), or shall we side with (2), on the basis that "people often state facts," that what is stated can be a fact?

In weighing these two linguistic practices, which one proves the stronger? We do say that people state facts (or, the facts), but we also speak of putting the facts on the table and of getting the facts out to the press. It would be odd to argue from these ways of speaking that facts are things that are put on tables, along with napkins and silverware. But more important, we may well wonder at the thesis that 'what Tom stated is a fact' on considering what Tom could have stated if his statement were false. For example, suppose that Tom states that Nixon pardoned Dean. Since Nixon did not pardon Dean, we may say that

(6) Tom's statement is false.

We know that (6) is acceptable to Vendler since he says that "...his statement may be true..." (p. 113), and if a statement may be true it is also possible for a statement to be false.

Now, normally, (6) would be disambiguated by saying that *what* Tom stated is false. Vendler cannot say so, of course, since he thinks that what is stated can be a fact, and as we saw earlier, what can be a fact cannot be true or false (p. 114). But since what Tom actually stated about Nixon *is not* a fact, *what* did Tom state? In general, what do we state when we make false statements? The question must be answered by anyone who chooses to read (2) above in Vendler's way; but Vendler himself does not answer the question. Indeed, one wonders how anyone could. Since, when one makes a false statement, what is stated cannot be either true or false and cannot be a fact, what alternative is left? Does Tom state possible but nonexistent facts when he makes false statements? This verges on incoherence, but one is hard pressed to think of another alternative.

Vendler's views about statements and what is stated thus suffer from a serious defect, a defect which clearly stems from a too-literal

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regard for talk about stating facts. Perhaps even more surprising is Vendler's lack of regard for a parallel usage concerning facts and what is believed. Consider a variant of the case in (1) and (2) above where Tom *believes* (rather than states) that Nixon resigned. Since Nixon did resign, we may say acceptably both that

(7) What Tom believes is true, and

(8) What Tom believes is a fact.

Even though (8) seems as natural as its counterpart, (2), Vendler's intuitions stop short with (2); (8) cannot be read literally. Vendler says

The thing which is true is not a fact; it only fits the facts, corresponds to what is the case, and, perhaps, agrees with the truth. Consequently, what I believe or what I say may fit the facts, in which case it is true; or it may fail to fit the facts, in which case it is false. (p. 114)

The passage just cited leaves no doubt that what is believed (and what is said, also) cannot be a fact, ever. The most casual reader of *Res Cogitans* knows that this move is forced by Vendler's desire to separate the objects of knowledge from those of belief, facts being exclusively objects of knowledge, i.e., what we know (pp. 113-14). But quite apart from this concern, the view that what is believed can be true or false seems reasonable for precisely the same reasons that incline one to choose a literal reading of (1) over (2) - where we are speaking of what is stated - vis., those linguistic intuitions recorded in the act-object distinction. In short, to hold that what is stated can't be true or false, but that what is believed can be requires that the act-object distinction be allowed with respect to one term, but not to another, even though linguistic practice supports both cases equally.

One is inclined to remark that what is stated may be a very different sort of object from what is believed (though not, perhaps, from what is said), but Vendler's failure to specify what it is that is stated when one's statement is false suggests that it may be more desirable to combine the objects of statements with those of beliefs. Indeed, Vendler devotes an entire chapter to the introduction of propositions as "the common objects of speech and of thought" (p. 73) and frequently insists on "the identity of what can be thought and what can be said" (p. 52). Vendler can consistently hold that what is stated is not included in this identity, of course, but he offers no advantages in doing so, and as we said, his failure to pro-

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vide a full range of objects for what is stated, whether the statement is true or false, is a distinct disadvantage.

Vendler's theory of propositions is beyond the reach of this paper, but there is an obvious economy in uniting all three of what is stated, what is believed, and what is true or false in a single kind of object. We can then understand not only how statements and beliefs (as well as other speech-acts and mental acts) are assessed of truth or falsity, but also how Tom can state what he believes, how Tom and Alice can believe the same thing, and so on. Such a theory requires a uniform application of the act-object distinction and of the corollary thesis that the object of the act, not the act itself, is the bearer of truth or falsity. This achieves the sort of advantages just suggested, and avoids the undesirable view that in some cases, it is a proposition, e.g., *qua* what is believed, which is true or false, while in other cases, it is not the object of the act, but the act itself, which is true or false.<sup>4</sup> Put simply, the utility of a theory of propositions — regardless of the ontological status of propositions — is marginal except in the context of the act-object distinction.<sup>5</sup>

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Joseph Margolis, "Knowledge and Belief; Facts and Propositions," forthcoming in *Grazer Philosophische Studien*.
- <sup>2</sup> Zeno Vendler, *Res Cogitans* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972). All references to Vendler are to this text.
- <sup>3</sup> See John Searle, "Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts," *The Philosophical Review*, 77 (October 1968), 405–24. Reprinted in Jay Rosenberg and Charles Travis (eds.), *Readings in the Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971, esp. pp. 274–75.
- <sup>4</sup> It is thus no surprise that those who reject the act-object distinction also hold that speech-acts are the basic bearers of truth and falsity. On such a view there is no need for propositions; only *acts* of stating or believing can be discerned, and thus are the only candidate truth-bearers. As L.R. Reinhardt argues, we need not suppose that "the 'what' in 'what is said' must be treated as a pronoun, standing for or naming something beyond the act" ("Propositions and Speech Acts," *Mind*, 76 (April 1976),

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182–83). Also see Bruce Aune, "Statements and Propositions," *Nous*, 1 (August 1967), 215–29, and Alan R. White's reply, "'True' and 'Truly,'" *Nous*, 2 (August 1968), 247–51. Richard L. Cartwright defends the act-object distinction in "Propositions Again," in the latter issue, 229–46.

5 Obviously, though, the converse is not true. One may hold that there are objects of our speech-and mental-acts, distinct from those acts, that there is an object common among those acts, and that it is the object, not the act, which is the bearer of truth or falsity, all quite independently of a theory of propositions.