Illocutionary Acts & Sentence Meaning. By WILLIAM P. ALSTON. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000. Pp.xiii + 327. Price $48.50.)

The past decade has seen the appearance of no fewer than four major books by William Alston. *Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning* (hereafter, *IASM*) is the latest of these; and it deserves all the attention it is bound to be getting. While the main theses of the book have been presented by Alston in a series of papers over the past several decades, *IASM* represents his most comprehensive attempt to develop and defend a novel account of illocutionary acts and to put this to work in giving a theory of linguistic meaning.

IASM falls into two parts: Part I (Chapters 1-5) provides an account of illocutionary acts according to which performing an illocutionary act of a certain type involves *taking responsibility for* (*"R'ing"*) the obtaining of certain conditions. (In requesting that you close the door, I *R*, among other things, that the door in question is open.) Alston argues that what enables *R'ing* -- that in virtue of which one is rendered liable when one utters a sentence and certain conditions are *not* satisfied -- is that there are rules ("I-rules") to which speakers subject their utterances, and which require certain conditions to obtain in order for those utterances to be correct.

In addition to elaborating the rule-based nature of illocutionary acts, Alston argues for its superiority to others (including, and especially, "perlocutionary intention theories") and surveys the most general categories of illocutionary acts -- assertives, directives, commisives, exercitives and expressives. (These are distinguished by the general character of the conditions for which one takes responsibility, and particular types of each by the detailed contents of those conditions.) The result is a novel and largely unified account of the nature and variety of what, over and above the bare performance of a sentential act, is done in using certain words (sentences; sentence surrogates).

While the material of Part I represents an impressive contribution in its own right, in Alston's view the real significance of his account of illocutionary acts is that it "enables us to give an account of what it is for a linguistic expression to have a certain meaning" (p. 147).

Thus, in Part II (Chapters 6-9), Alston develops a theory of linguistic meaning in terms of the usability of an expression to perform certain illocutionary acts. This usability, in turn, consists (according to Alston) in a sentence's being subject to a rule – the very rule which underpins the performance of an illocutionary act when the speaker subjects his/her *utterance* to it. Putting these points together, the central thesis of Part II is: "A sentence's having a certain meaning consists in its being subject to a certain illocutionary rule" (p. 192); "sentence meaning = IA potential = I-rule governance" (p. 79).

As Alston sees, the view just stated is open to obvious objections: how could the meaning of a sentence be its illocutionary act potential when a given sentence can be used to perform *all sorts* of different illocutionary acts? (There is a mismatch in the other direction as well: we can have sentences with different meanings used to perform the same illocutionary act [p. 179].) Alston's answer is that, while one may not be able to read off of a given sentence the illocutionary act that is (or would be) performed in uttering it, (as he puts it in an earlier paper) "there always will be, for any sentence meaning, an *illocutionary act type* that is made completely explicit by that meaning, in the sense that if someone seriously and literally utters the sentence with that meaning, then, *just by knowing that*, we know that he intends to be performing an illocutionary act of that type" ("Illocutionary Acts and Linguistic Meaning", *Foundations of Speech Act Theory*, S. L. Tsohatzidis, ed.; London: Routledge, p. 37; cf. *IASM*, p. 186). Thus, taking "It's locked" in "[its] most basic meaning", the illocutionary act type that "contains exactly as much content" as that sentence – the *matching illocutionary act type* – would be: asserting that something is locked (p. 180). Generalizing, we get: "What it is for a certain sentence to have a certain meaning is for it to be usable to perform illocutionary acts of the matching type (that is, to have the matching illocutionary act potential)" (p. 180).

In Chapters 7-9, Alston seeks to further elucidate his theory of sentence meaning, presenting accounts of both the meaning of subsentential units (pp. 272-74; cf. pp. 159-60, 286-88) and speaker meaning (pp. 249-50), sample I-rule analyses of the major categories of illocutionary act mentioned above (pp. 239-48), the anticipation of objections to the account (pp.

283-4, 161-2, 229-34, *passim*), and arguments for its superiority to some rival semantic theories (pp. 284-301).

As a whole, *IASM* is both imposing and impressive: Alston provides not only a major contribution to speech act theory, but probably the most comprehensive attempt to date to show how and why illocutionary acts – commonly thought to be a part of the subject matter of pragmatics – might constitute the proper foothold for semantics. Not that readers will find nothing to disagree with: with respect to both Parts of the book, questions are bound to arise. (This is as it should be: it is a testament to the thoroughness, ambitiousness, and novelty of Alston's project that there is much that is controversial in it.) In Part I, for instance, Alston rejects the "perlocutionary intention theory", arguing that intending one's audience to believe, or to take some other attitude towards, some proposition is not necessary to the performance of an illocutionary act (pp. 48-50; cf. pp. 162-73). (I might, e.g., attest to something without having any real expectation of your coming to believe what I say.) But the obvious reply is that such situations – even supposing that they involve genuine illocutionary acts – are parasitic on those in which the speaker does intend and expect to affect the psychology of the speaker in the relevant way. (The move of claiming certain forms of speech to be derivative is made by Alston himself in answering a possible objection to his view: pp. 270-1.)

Alston takes as his "lodestar for semantics...the idea that the meaning of a linguistic unit is a function of what it is *used* by speakers to do (the Use Principle)" (p. 5). In his view, "semantics is based on pragmatics" (p. 288), and a shared failing of the rival theories of sentence meaning he discusses (truth-conditional, referential, and possible worlds theories) is that they "treat the semantic side of language as if it were floating freely in a void, an autonomous realm that is not tied down to any flesh and blood realities on earth" (p. 289). But notice that the "Use Principle" can be read either as a (constitutive) claim about that in which the meaning of an expression consists (its use), or as a (genetic) claim about what gives expressions meaning (their being used by speakers of a language). And one could be a 'use theorist' in the latter sense, and so tie down linguistic meaning to "flesh and blood reality", but insist that meanings are best

represented as truth conditions, sets of possible worlds, or whatever (cf. Robert Stainton, "The Meaning of 'Sentences', *Noûs* 2000, Vol. 34(3), pp. 441-54).

In short, read as a genetic claim, the Use Principle is perfectly compatible with what Alston regards as rival semantic theories; it is Alston's endorsement of the *constitutive* version of the Use Principle that generates the incompatibility. And an obvious question to consider is whether Alston has shown that and how we (theorists) can get by without a *non*-use theory of meaning. For instance: if, in uttering "Close the door", I *R* that a certain door is open, one wants to say that this is in part because of what the sentence means. For Alston, though, that sentence's meaning *just is* its illocutionary act potential (or a potential equal to that of the matching type – see above).Thus, to say that I have performed a given illocutionary act (in part) because of the meaning of the sentence uttered seems to come out as tautologous, rather than explanatory. Alston takes it as a requirement on a satisfactory account of meaning that it will "throw light on" the matter of how an expression's meaning fits it to play its distinctive role in communication (p. 282). But it is not clear how well his own use theory fares on this score. Similarly, the notion of matching illocutionary type, essential to Alston's theory, requires the notion of a speaker's making a "straightforward" (i.a., literal) use of a sentence (see above; *IASM*, pp. 178-90). However, the natural way of understanding literal use is that which involves the speaker's meaning what the expression he/she utters means. Thus, the concern arises that we need an antecedent conception of linguistic meaning in order to understand Alston's theory thereof.

Alston addresses a related (though distinct) worry: namely, that his explication of the notion of matching illocutionary types makes use of an unreduced notion of a particular sentence's having this-or-that meaning. He replies that his theory is "not intended to be a conceptual analysis of the classic type, or a reductive definition.....It is more like a hypothesis as to the real nature of what is functionally defined as valence, heat, magnetism, or fragility. And it should be evaluated in basically the same way" (p. 189). In particular, "[t]he identification of heat with the kinetic energy of molecules is not invalidated if...we have to make use of the concept of heat to determine just what average kinetic energy to identify with a given intensity of

heat. In the same way the IA potential theory is not invalidated by the necessity to use our pretheoretical concept of sentence meaning in determining just what IA potential constitutes a given sentence meaning" (pp. 189-90). However, whereas there is nothing obviously wrong in supposing that one could get a perfectly good handle on the notion of the kinetic energy of molecules without knowing anything about heat, the worry at hand is that the whole notion of illocutionary acts, and not just the task of *specifying* this-or-that IA potential, requires an independent notion of sentence meaning. (It may yet be true that the *phenomenon* of sentence meaning is something to which our using words in certain ways gives rise; that is the genetic version of the Use Principle.)

This objection is not intended as a knock-down argument against Alston's theory -- the point of the previous few paragraphs has been merely to indicate some of the larger questions that *IASM* is liable to prompt. And Alston's latest book *will* stimulate a lot of discussion. It should be read by any serious philosopher of language.

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