
BOĞAZIÇI ÜNİVERSİTESİ DERGİSİ

Beşeri Bilimler – Humanities

Vols. 8-9 – 1980-1981

ELEŞTİRİ – CRITICISM

WHAT FORGETTING IS NOT

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives a philosophical criticism of an article entitled 'On Forgetting' published in the 1979 issue of this journal. The contention is that the two main theses of this article, i.e., first, that certain illocutionary forces accompanying locutions involving the verb 'to forget' constitute some of the semantical properties of this verb, and second, that some differences in the logical behaviour of the expressions 'forgetting' and 'not remembering' in certain contexts are general semantical dissimilarities, are seriously mistaken.

In a paper entitled 'On Forgetting' (This Journal, 1979, Vol. VII) Hilmi Yavuz sets out to analyse various aspects of the concept of forgetting, putting forward several theses, which, as he admits, run counter to the common beliefs of philosophers. (p. 223) I shall here attempt to display that none of the claims he makes can be viewed as adequate.

The paper divides into two parts, in which two different issues are treated. These are, (i) the pragmatic or communicative aspects of forgetting, occupying the second, third and fourth sections, and (ii), the logical implications of the same concept, to which the remaining four sections are devoted. It is not clear whether the author intends to indicate a direct logical connexion between these two parts, since he gives no explicit cues to his reader as to how the two issues are to be related to each other. I shall treat them as elaborations of separate aspects of the concept of forgetting, both

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roughly leading towards a common target which may be expressed in the thesis that 'forgetting' and 'not remembering' are not synonyms.

I

The working out of the pragmatic aspects of forgetting is meant to lead to the rather vague thesis that "forgetting has an illocutionary force". Before following the author's steps towards this conclusion, I propose to give a very brief summary of what it is for something to possess illocutionary force.

A speech act, or an act of communication is the using of an utterance with a particular communicative purpose, which may roughly be characterized as the inducement of a belief in one's audience. Austin categorized the ways in which speech acts, with reliance upon different features, can be described. Accordingly, a speaker merely issuing a linguistic utterance with a specific meaning and reference will be described as performing a locutionary act. But the same speaker, in performing a locutionary act may also perform an illocutionary act, if he performs the former with the intention to do something more than merely uttering his sentence, where this 'something more' will not amount to the achievement of a causal consequence of the first act. For example, a speaker may utter the sentence 'that door has been kept locked for the last two hundred years', which possesses definite truth conditions, and just this act will be a locutionary act. In performing this locutionary act he may perform an illocutionary act (not necessarily always the same) if, for example, he intends to warn his audience, and his audience recognizes this intention. Now, a third category of action is this: if our speaker, by saying the above, has additionally achieved a causal effect upon his audience, such as scaring him, then he has performed a perlocutionary act. It should be clear that in, or by, using the same sentence the speaker may perform different illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, depending upon his different intentions and on the causal effects he achieves. In performing the same locutionary act as above, the speaker may have performed the illocutionary act of joking (supposing his intent was this, and that this was recognized by his audience) and the perlocutionary act of amusing the audience. Contextual features will determine the speaker's intention, the recognition of it, and therefore the particular illocutionary and (if there is one) perlocutionary act the speaker will be said to perform.

Utterances of the speaker which count as locutionary acts will be said to have illocutionary forces if they are issued on proper occasions with relevant intentions. A speaker's locutionary act of uttering the above sentences will be said to possess the illocutionary force (for example) of joking if the context allows, and consequently, if the speaker intends, in producing it, to make a joke. The illocutionary act will be said to be performed successfully on the recognition of this intention by the audience.¹

From this brief account of Austin's doctrine of speech acts four points may be said to emerge, determining what it is for something to possess an illocutionary force;

- i) What can be said to possess an illocutionary force is a speech act, i.e., the uttering, by a speaker, of a full sentence with a definite meaning and reference (i.e., definite truth conditions).
- ii) Given different occasions of utterance, and different intentions, the same sentence may be said to possess different illocutionary forces.
- iii) The truth or falsity of the sentence uttered as a locutionary act is independent of the truth or falsity of whether a particular illocutionary act is performed in performing the locutionary act, and is, therefore independent of the truth of whether it possesses a particular illocutionary force.
- iv) Whatever the illocutionary act performed in uttering a sentence, an explicit verbal expression of it may or may not be added to the locutionary act: a speaker may say 'I warn you that the door there has not been opened for two centuries'. But he will have performed an equally successful illocutionary act even if he omitted the 'I warn you that..' bit.

Now I turn to the particular theses propounded in the first part of the paper I set out to criticise. The first is, in the author's own words, that "In ordinary language 'forgetting', when used in the future (usually negative) tense, has the illocutionary force (of) expressing feelings... 'forgetting' acquires a different sense, viz., a sense in which it performs an illocutionary act." (p. 217) The contention is backed, not by an argument, but by examples of uses of certain sentences containing 'forgetting': (A) 'I shall never forget Chaliapine's singing of Boris Godunof'. (B) (To a lover:) 'I shall never forget you'. Presumably, we are here expected to interpret the author not as asserting that 'forgetting' characterizes an illocutionary act (and therefore the force) such as 'warning' or 'promising'. This would be absurd, and, given the above four points, also clearly false. It appears that we are rather expected to think that a negative statement in the future tense containing the expression 'forgetting' may be used in performing the illocutionary act of promising. This surely is a truth, and the example B is interpretable as a case of promising. It does not seem as easy to think out a case in which A is uttered by a speaker in making a promise, but it is possible: a student of music, after listening to various records promises his teacher in uttering A. But if this is all that can be provided in support of the claim, it certainly falls far from being a genuine proof, for quite obviously,

- a) other locutionary acts not containing 'forgetting' may be used in promis-

ing (e.g., 'I will never be late again'), and

- b) the very same locutions (A and B) may be used in performing other illocutionary acts than promising. Particularly A, sounds outright as a case praising, but may also, given the right occasion, be used in warning, scolding (a bad singer) etc. . . As to B, the author clearly admits (p. 216) that someone may use it in thanking or threatening: the sentence B on a paper "could mean either that he . . is grateful for something I have done for him, or it could equally mean that he is indignant for something I have done for him". It would appear therefore, that promising is not an inherent property attached to forgetting in its use in the future tense. It is just that, just as any other sentence, a sentence containing 'forgetting', too, may be used in the performance of an illocutionary act. There is no justification on the basis of this platitude in asserting a direct logical or pragmatic link between promising and forgetting.

The author declares that in A, "that forgetting.. is not a memory claim at all would.. go without saying." (p. 216) This strikes one as a totally arbitrary assumption, since, contrary to the author's major claim, both A and B may be rewritten, without affecting their truth conditions, in terms of 'not remembering':

- A' : 'There will no time in the future when I will not remember Chaliapine's singing of Boris Godunof.' (or simply: I shall never fail to remember etc..)
- B' : 'There will be no time in the future when I will not remember you.' (I shall never fail to remember you.) I think it is obvious that both A' and B' may equally be used in performing the various different illocutionary acts A and B were seen to yield.. Thus, we may say that so far, no property of 'forgetting' not shared by 'not remembering' has emerged.

Before proceeding any further, I must make the incidental remark that the way the author proposes a distinction between promising and making a resolution is spurious; since according to the doctrine of illocutionary acts the truth of which he assumes, it will be false to say that "a resolution is a sort of promise, i.e., promising oneself". The reason is that 'promising oneself' presents the problem of being a private act, while speech acts require a public dimension, and as the author emphasizes on p. 217, that they require the uptake of an audience. Resolution, on the other hand, in the sense used here, cannot be a speech act, and would seem to be, at best, the 'mental act' of coming to a decision (making up one's mind).

The second thesis of the first part of the paper is that forgetting ".. also has an

illocutionary force when used in the past tense": this is labelled as 'forgetting as excuse'. The author claims that on such uses, sentences containing 'forgetting', typically constitute performances of illocutionary acts of excuses. The claim is supported by the following observation: "It is perfectly clear. . . that in ordinary language 'forgetting' is frequently used whenever we want to be excused for some sort of failure on our part" (p. 217). The example of the statement 'I am truly sorry, but I have forgotten it' in excuse for an omission is offered in support. The author concludes, on the basis of this example that "It is quite clear, therefore, that in (this) case, the utterance 'I have forgotten' is not a simple straightforward memory claim, it is intentionally made to account for my failure to (do what I omitted), viz., it is used as an excuse." (p. 218).

It is indeed quite true that on many occasions we excuse ourselves for our omissions by declaring that our omission (failure to do something) was due to our having failed to remember to do the relevant action. But again, that there is the possibility of using the statement that one has failed to remember something in performing an illocutionary act of excuse does not display a property of the concept, or of the expression of forgetting. If the illocutionary force is to be seen as a property, it is the property not of the expression 'forgetting', but of the use of a full sentence containing 'forgetting' (i.e., of the locutionary act). Furthermore, as in the case of promising, locutionary acts involving 'forgetting' are not (a) the only acts that can be performed in the performance of the illocutionary act of excusing oneself (e.g., One can instead say 'I am sorry I failed to do X, for I fell asleep – or: I was held in the traffic, etc..) and (b) such locutionary acts may be performed in the performance of other illocutionary acts (e.g., If in response to my superior asking why I have not got up now that he is here in my office, I say "I have forgotten", and go on to sit comfortably, rather than an excuse, this will count as defying him, if not mocking him.) So, what the author wishes to establish does not follow from what he offers in support: we are again face to face with the trivial point that locutionary acts (containing or not containing 'forgetting') can be used in the performance of various different illocutionary acts. One more point to be noticed in this respect is that promising and/or excusing oneself cannot be properties of forgetting, because of the characteristic (iii) given above: that I have actually forgotten something may or may not be true, quite independently of the fact whether I am actually promising or excusing myself, in stating this. It is commonplace to lie in an attempt to excuse oneself. Therefore, it transpires that even in their illocutionary uses, statements on forgetting are independently true or false as memory claims.²

We come now to the alleged explanation of why 'forgetting' possesses an illocutionary force as an inherent property. The explanation of a false thesis, as true, must somewhere involve a flaw. It will be instructive to discover it. The explanation offered is that "whenever (forgetting) is used to express the psychological content of our feelings it is used in an illocutionary way" (p. 218). This is serious, since it displays

the conflation of two different doctrines in the philosophy of language, applying at quite different levels, and thus operating quite independently: one is the doctrine of speech acts, and the other the doctrine of connotative or (in Stevenson's terms) 'emotive' meaning. While the former operates at the level of the use of sentences, the latter's field of application is the meaning of, and associations surrounding, expressions (but not of sentences). The latter doctrine, briefly states that besides the meaning or the sense of an expression (which may be characterized as 'cognitive meaning') which is relevant to the truth or falsity of any sentence in which this expression occurs, there are different negative or positive associations which people attach to the expression, and which do not affect the truth of the sentence involving it. These associations may vary from person to person, and are generally determined by the past psycholological or social experiences individuals have had in connexion with the expression or with the object (if there is any) the expression denotes. It is this aspect the author mentions when he states that "The object of our memory claim does sometimes have a special emotional or sentimental significance. When we remember an event or a person the way in which we remember is determined by our emotional or sentimental state towards the object." (p. 218) But two points he makes in this connexion (and unfortunately without substantiation) seem to defy two of the most basic beliefs accepted by many living philosophers of language, and which at least intuitively strike one as true. Here are these beliefs:

- 1) A particular connotation attached to a particular expression does not affect the (descriptive or cognitive) meaning of the expression, and consequently, the truth conditions of a statement involving this expression.
- 2) The connotations attached to an expression do not affect the truth of whether an illocutionary act is or may be performed in uttering a sentence containing this expression.

In conflict with (1), the author says the following: "... when I remember the death scene of my father. . . it is. . . the case that the description I give to this particular event should be different from that of any other person who happened to witness the same event." This does not seem to be true, since there is a distinction between my psychological state with regard to the event and the actual description of the event, i.e., how it occurred. As long as one can give the latter without necessarily giving the former (in spite of the state of sadness one is in while giving this description) the author needs to explain why his remark is not false, which he fails to do.

The author's consideration of connotations is meant to lead, in connexion with statements like 'I shall never forget how my father died', to the following conclusion: "I maintain that in ordinary language, when we use 'forgetting' in the future (simple) tense negative form, we refer not only to something that is the case but also to our

particular state of emotions, and/or feelings towards what is the case... It is this second reference that not forgetting lends itself to being served as a psychological description: and this descriptive reference is precisely what replenishes not forgetting an illocutionary force." (p. 219) Two deficiencies in the line of thought of section IV plague this conclusion. The first is the lack of an account of how the author comes to assert the extraordinary statement that the connotations he first gives in association with the descriptive phrase 'the death of my father', suddenly become the properties of forgetting (in the future). The second, is the absence of an explanation of how, again extraordinarily, connotations embodied in an expression are said to determine or constitute the illocutionary force of the pragmatic act containing the utterance of this expression. This is where the author comes in conflict with the second basic belief mentioned above (i.e., (2)).

As they are, both deficiencies present formidable difficulties. It seems that as long as satisfactory accounts disproving some of the fundamental beliefs constituting the heart of the philosophy of language are not supplemented by the author, we shall have to think that the first part of the paper not only fails to prove the theses it sets forth but also displays an essential misunderstanding of the doctrines of speech acts and connotations.

ii

The second part of the paper seems to suffer difficulties of comparable gravity. I shall attempt to display that in substance, it does not involve more than elaborating two platitudes into muddles. The second part aims to show that even outside those cases covered in part one, where forgetting was not "a straightforward memory claim", even on its uses as a memory claim it 'is not logically on a par with not remembering.' (p. 220) The first platitude the author uses as his starting point is the fact that saying one has forgotten X presupposes one's having had X in one's consciousness either in the form of an intention, or the memory of an event witnessed, or an information, or a skill. Quite obviously, no one could appropriately state that he has forgotten X, if he'd never known (or intended etc.) X.³ From this truism the author directly draws the conclusion that forgetting 'is a conjunction' (p. 220) or that it does necessarily involve a conjunction (p. 221), or that it 'implies' it. (p. 221) Saying these about a concept is saying different things with very different logical implications. But first, the alleged conjuncts: one is the presupposition mentioned and the other the assertion that X is not remembered. To illustrate this, on the author's analysis, 'I forgot X' implies 'I knew/intended/witnessed X' and 'I do not remember X'. This relation is used to show that 'forgetting' and 'not remembering' have 'different meanings'. (p. 221)

The trouble with this line of thought is in its overlooking the logically crucial

distinction between meaning and presupposition (or implication). The author either fuses the presupposition of 'forgetting' into the meaning of it, or simply represents a trivial difference in terms of presuppositions as belonging to a difference in meanings. But both moves are bluntly illegitimate. The declaration 'I forgot X' does not mean I did know X. It merely presupposes it, and on the basis of this presupposition asserts that X is not remembered. Otherwise we would be committed to absurdity, since "I forgot X" also presuppose many other things such as there being an intact faculty of memory, a brain, a man, the universe, etc.. You cannot state that you forgot X, unless you had a faculty of memory! Does one, then, on our author's reasoning, say infinitely many things in saying just one thing?

So, it would appear that the author does not show us a difference in terms of the meanings of 'forgetting' and 'not remembering'. The difference is in their presuppositions: it is not therefore quite true to say that their difference is in that "forgetting implies not remembering and not vice versa." (p. 221) The position is better explained by noting this: on the basis of the platitude mentioned, while saying that one has forgotten X implies (or means) that one does not remember X, saying that one does not remember X does not quite imply that one has forgotten X. 'I do not remember having seen him before' does not imply that I have forgotten having seen him before: I may have never seen him before.

For some unknown reason, the author goes on to try and disprove Ryle's following declaration: "To say that a person either actually is recalling something, or can recall, or be reminded of it implies that he has not forgotten it; whereas to say that he has not forgotten something does not entail that he ever does or could recall it." (The Concept of Mind, Penguin, 258) If 'recalling', and 'remembering' are treated as synonyms, then the contention of the above passage, symbolized, is this:

- 1) $X \text{ is remembered} \supset X \text{ is not forgotten.}$

Now the author's own thesis, which, we re-wrote, and which as a platitude, happens to be true, is:

- 2) $X \text{ is forgotten} \supset X \text{ is not remembered.}$

Now, as it happens, (1) and (2) are logically equivalent on the basis of the relation called contraposition:

$$p \supset q \text{ is equivalent to } \sim q \supset \sim p.$$

Now, if we let p be

$$X \text{ is remembered.}$$

and q be

X is forgotten

then (1) can be restated as $p \supset \sim q$, and (2) as $q \supset \sim p$. Applying contraposition, we get $p \supset \sim q$, which is equivalent to $\sim(\sim q) \supset \sim p$, which, in turn, is equivalent to $q \supset \sim p$; that is, (1) is equivalent to (2). Therefore, it emerges that in attempting to refute Ryle's claim, the author is in an attempt of self-defeat.

It must be noted that while Ryle's relation is equivalent to our author's, Ryle's grounds for asserting it are quite different: he emphasizes the point that while 'remembering (if used in the same sense as 'recalling') X ' presupposes having witnessed X , 'not having forgotten X ' does not presuppose having witnessed X : what I have not forgotten may be something learnt though not necessarily witnessed. However, if I am properly said to recall something, then I could not have merely learnt it without witnessing it.

One correct remark the author makes is found in the second paragraph of page 222. Although the significance of it does not seem to be clearly evaluated by him, it is to the effect that Ryle's relation (1) applies only on usages of 'recalling (or remembering) X '. In uses like 'recalling (or remembering) that X ' we are not reporting something witnessed: we are reporting the fact that X , which may be learnt. In these cases, remembering and not having forgotten may share the same presupposition. Ryle is correct in saying that "there will be an absurdity in saying that I do.. recall Napoleon losing the battle of Waterloo,.. though I have not forgotten (it)." (Ryle, op. cit.) However, it is not absurd to say 'I recall that Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo and I have not forgotten it.'

This correct observation of the author does not refute Ryle: Ryle's remarks in the passage quoted are quite clearly meant to apply only to 'recalling (or remembering) X '. It only shows that Ryle's one way implication cannot be generalized to all uses of forgetting versus remembering. But this is equivalent to saying that the author's own relation (i.e., (2)) which is equivalent to that of Ryle (i.e., (1)) does not display a universal property of forgetting as against remembering, which I think, is hardly what the author wants to establish.

The last section of the paper would seem to develop a second truism into absurdity. The truism is that the past perfect tense is used in expressing something done which was completed before another thing done began. The argument employed is the following:

- (i) "Grammatical rules show that whenever forgetting is used (with the that-clause) it must be used with the past participle tense of the auxiliary verb, i.e., to have." (p. 222)

- (ii) "The reason for this would be that, forgetting with that-clause is, not a memory claim, but it is a memory claim about a memory claim." (p. 223).
- (iii) Therefore 'forgetting that' differs from other uses of forgetting in that it is a memory claim about a memory claim.

The reasoning here goes in terms of proposing a fully general syntactic feature of a use of forgetting, then giving the semantic background of this syntactic feature, and then connecting the use with the semantic background in conclusion.

In support of (i) we are given the statement that 'simple reflexion upon this grammatical fact, makes it quite clear, why this is so.' (pp. 222-3) While this method of persuasion appears rather un-philosophical, it certainly cannot conceal the fact that simple reflexion allows clear exceptions to (i). What the first premise states is in no way general, and furthermore, since it is meant to express a necessity, it is clearly false. Here are exceptions:

I often forget that nothing is impossible.

I know, I will again forget that this door must be kept locked.

Throughout these years I have often forgotten that mere pleasure was not only purpose of life. etc.

If one premise is false, the conclusion, too, is false. However, we may again find instructive to explore only those cases in which 'forget that' is used in the past perfect. Does the conclusion follow from these cases? In other words is the premise (ii) true? The substantiation of this premise, too, is heavily muddled: the author asserts that 'It 'I had forgotten that Ankara is the capital of Turkey' had meant that 'I have forgotten it', then it would follow that 'I do not remember it now' ". (p. 223) But surely the first sentence does not mean the second, since they have a difference in tense! This is another truism, and certainly no support for (ii). But perhaps more substantially, the author goes on to emphasize that in the past perfect use of forget what is said not to be remembered is precisely what is asserted in saying it. In other words, to be able to say that I had forgotten that X, I must now know that X. This is a genuine presupposition of the use of 'forget' in the past perfect tense. But as seen, saying that something is the presupposition of a declaration is not to say that it is the meaning of this declaration. It appears that, the author once again fails to notice this distinction. He goes on to state: "When I say 'I had forgotten that Ankara is the capital of Turkey' I am not saying I have forgotten what is the case; but rather I had forgotten that such-and-such is the case and (though not explicitly) I do remember it now. That is to say I remember now I had forgotten that Ankara is the capital of Turkey. So, when we use forgetting with that-clause, it means we are using it in such a way as to make a memory claim about a memory claim." (p. 223)

Not only is there here a conflation of concepts of meaning and presupposition, there is also the failure to notice that the presupposition employed, rather than being a presupposition of forgetting (with a that clause) springs, from the particular tense used: 'I had not walked here' presupposes that I have walked here, 'I had not intended to X' presupposes that I may have this intention now, 'I had not heard (or seen) X before' presupposes that I have heard (or seen) X now.

I conclude that little in the theses the author advances in connexion with forgetting is philosophically acceptable, and a lot in the paper that happens to be true is a truism.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Some main contributions to the literature behind the doctrine of speech acts are listed below:

Austin, J.L., *How to do Things with Words*, O.U.P., 1962;

Austin, J.L., 'Performative-Constative', in *The Philosophy of Language*, Searle, J., (ed.), O.U.P., 1971.

Searle, J., *Speech Acts*, Cambridge U.P., 1969.

Searle, J., 'What is a Speech Act?' in Searle (ed.) *op. cit.*: Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts', in *Essays on J.L. Austin*, Berlin, Sir Isaiah, (ed.) Clarendon Press, 1973.

Strawson, P.F., 'Intention and Convention in Speech Acts' *Philosophical Review*, V. 73 (1964); 'Austin and "Locutionary Meaning"' in Berlin (ed.) *op. cit.*

Warnock, G. J., 'Some Types of Performative Utterance', in Berlin (ed.) *op. cit.*

Cohen, L.J., 'Do Illocutionary Forces Exist?' *Philosophical Quarterly*, V. 14 (1964)

Cerf, W., 'Critical Review of How to do Things with Words', *Mind*, 1966.

Ferguson, L.W., 'In Pursuit of Performatives', *Philosophy*, 1966; 'Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts' in Berlin (ed.) *op. cit.*

Furberg, M., *Saying and Meaning*, Blackwell, 1971.

Aarson, W., *Philosophy of Language*, Chs. 1 and 2, Prentice-Hall, 1964.
- 2 Which shows that the author ought to have consulted cases of delusive memory claims; see his footnote 6. Also cf. his statement that "Straightforward memory claims are those which do not involve either a promise and a resolution or an excuse." (p. 218).
- 3 The author's choice of the wording of his example (C) is particularly unfortunate, since in common English usage 'I forgot seeing X' and 'I forgot feeling X' express the omission of actions of visiting X and handling X. This reduces example (C) to (B). What should have been used under (C) to express the author's intended case, seems to have been the sentence 'I forgot having seen (or having felt) X', where what is forgotten is an experience or something witnessed.

ÖZET

Bu derginin 1979 sayısında yayımlanan 'Unutmak Üzerine' başlıklı bir makale, 'Unutmak' fiilinin, bazı bağlamlarda doğrudan bellek ile ilgili olmayan bildirimler yapmada kullanıldığı, ve bellek üzerine önermeler yapmada kullanıldığı bağlamlarda da anlamının 'anımsamama' nunkinden önemli başkalklar gösterdiği savlarını ileri sürmüştür. Burada, hangi yanlışlıklardan kaynaklandıkları gösterilerek bu savlar eleştirilmektedir.