

J. L. AUSTIN ON EXCUSES

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ABSTRACT

J. L. Austin, a well-known figure in the twentieth century, has made significant contributions to philosophy in general and to language philosophy in particular by identifying the complex connections among three factors: action, language, and accountability. This study will investigate Austin's interpretation of excuses. According to him, excuses are a defensive mechanism and a performative speech act that alter social perceptions of responsibility and intention. The study shows that excuses serve a variety of purposes-psychological, social, personal, philosophical, and legal. Its roles influence self-image, interpersonal relationships, and moral reasoning. Austin distinguishes between excuses and justifications; by doing so, he demonstrates how language mediates the complexities of human action and moral dilemmas. Through research into excuse language patterns across different contexts, the study emphasizes their importance in sustaining social harmony. It also addresses the consequences of overuse, which can lead to the manipulation of responsibility.

Keywords: Excuses, J.L Austin, Justification, Performative Speech Actions, Responsibility

1. INTRODUCTION

By considering the complex connections among language, action, and accountability, J.L. Austin has greatly contributed to the development of the philosophy of language. By using common language, he highlights the finer points of human behavior and social interactions. Austin notes that excuses are a linguistic tool that is not only a defensive strategy but also aids in distinguishing between deliberate acts, unintentional mistakes, and accidents. Austin shows how individuals negotiate purpose and responsibility for their behavior within different societal norms by examining excuses. Austin's concept of speech act is the foundation for his examination of excuses. In his view, language is used to convey information and is also a medium through which actions are performed and meaning is constructed. According to Austin, excuses are speech acts that modify the social perception of one's actions. Through expressions like "I didn't mean to" or "I was under pressure," individuals seek to mitigate blame and shift attention from their intentions to external factors. This paper aims to explore Austin's analysis of excuses by considering how he applies his knowledge of language, responsibility, and moral judgment. By investigating the various roles of excuses across different contexts, this paper highlights the applicability of everyday language in mediating human behaviors and social relationships.

2. DEFINITION AND NATURE OF EXCUSES

According to J.L. Austin, excuses are used to defend a wrong act or a failed action, whether our own or others', to avoid blame and ethical or legal responsibility (1956). Excuses neither come in proper voluntary nor full-fledged, purposive, or involuntary actions. Excuses come when actions are done in the wrong manner or at the wrong time, or when they deviate from the original target of the action without being involuntary, and then go in a direction that was not the purpose. These kinds of failed actions somehow fall between entirely voluntary actions and wholly involuntary movements. People have to use the tool of excuses to exclude. Excuses are explanations offered to account for wrong actions, behaviors, or failures, often to avoid blame, responsibility, or accountability. The nature of excuses can vary across situations. Excuses generally possess a few standard features, such as:

- i. **Defensive:** Excuses are often used as a defense mechanism to protect oneself from criticism, guilt, or adverse consequences. People may use them to avoid feeling bad about their mistakes and failures (Baumeister & Scher, 1988).
- ii. **Self-justifying:** Excuses are used to maintain a positive self-image by justifying actions or behaviors and preventing cognitive dissonance. Many excuses are crafted to make people feel that their actions are acceptable, understandable, or even beyond their control. These excuses aim to preserve self-esteem or social image (Anderson & Snow, 1993).

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- iii. **Externalizing Responsibility:** In some cases, excuses often involve placing blame on external factors, circumstances, or other people rather than embracing individual responsibility. This could involve how people tend to externalize responsibility, such as blaming circumstances, others' actions, or things like bad luck, illness, or misunderstandings for their actions rather than taking personal responsibility (Lerner & Simmons, 1966).
- iv. **Temporary or Situational:** Excuses are often made to explain a particular event, mistake, problem, or situation without long-term commitment. They can be seen as a way to temporarily avoid consequences, but they might not be sustainable in the long term (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988).
- v. **Lack of Ownership:** An excuse typically involves deflecting responsibility and denying personal accountability for actions or outcomes. Instead of acknowledging the issue or error directly, the person offering the excuse tries to minimize their role or prevent them from fully owning their actions and taking full responsibility (Exline & Baumeister, 2000).
- vi. **Variety in Intentions:** Sometimes, excuses are made out of a genuine desire to explain circumstances, especially when they involve uncontrollable factors. However, in many cases, they are used to manipulate perceptions or avoid taking full responsibility (Goffman, 1959).

3. EXCUSES AND JUSTIFICATIONS

People often defend themselves when they are accused of doing wrong. People defend themselves in two main ways: justifying their actions or making excuses for them. Austin differentiates excuses from justifications based on their purpose and effect. People give excuses to acknowledge that something wrong or undesirable occurred, but give reasons to minimize the speaker's responsibility or blame for the act. For instance, an excuse like "I didn't mean to" means the speaker accepts that the action was done but denies full culpability by citing the absence of intention. Or if a man murdered someone in battle, he might excuse it by saying that it was accidental or done in self-defense. In contrast, justifications explain why an action, while performed intentionally, is right to do under the circumstances. A justification asserts that the act was appropriate or necessary, often appealing to a broader moral or practical rationale. She might justify dropping a tea tray by saying that to stop an ugly quarrel with angry emotions from all members in the drawing room, she deliberately dropped the tea tray to divert people's attention. Her action is exemplary and should be praised. For example, "I had to do it to protect someone" is a justification that defends the act rather than shifting responsibility. To develop moral goals, people justify their actions themselves. Austin's distinction highlights how these two practices serve different purposes in moral and social discourse: excuses mitigate blame, while justifications seek approval or understanding of the act (Austin, 1956). There are differences between justifications and excuses; they can sometimes overlap or be confused. Understanding these concepts is very important to determine how responsible someone is for their actions.

4. THE STRUCTURE OF EXCUSES

Austin considers the linguistic structures of excuses themselves: How our words and phrases reflect subtle distinctions in meaning and accountability. J.L. Austin investigates the structure of excuses, identifying the key elements influencing their use and function. According to him, excuses are not random or arbitrary but are carefully constructed linguistic tools that help individuals navigate the nuances of responsibility, intention, and causation. Through a detailed analysis, Austin (1956) highlights three primary components that form the structure of excuses: action and agency, circumstances and conditions, and intentions and motives. Each factor in Austin's theory plays a key role in structuring excuses, as it helps establish how a speaker justifies their behavior and whether they hold themselves accountable.

4.1 Action and Agency

The first component of an excuse involves clarifying what was done and who is responsible. Austin emphasizes that excuses often emerge when an act requires explanation. The individual often offers excuses to claim that their actions were unintentional or unavoidable under the circumstances, to avoid blame. The speaker acknowledges that the act occurred but seeks to mitigate their responsibility or

involvement. Agency here refers to the level at which an individual controls the action or decision. In the context of excuses, people try to downplay the element of agency to mitigate their responsibility (Austin, 1962). For example, saying "It was not me" denies agency altogether, while "I didn't mean to" acknowledges agency but attempts to diminish blame by questioning intent.

4.2 Circumstances and Conditions

Excuses frequently point out external circumstances or conditions that influence the actions, identifying that the individual's behavior responded to those factors. According to Austin, they refer to the environment or context that shapes or constrains an action. Excuses may invoke these external factors to explain why the person could not act differently or more appropriately (Searle, 1969). Austin highlights that people often use many excuses to explain how factors beyond their control affect their behavior. Phrases such as "I was forced to" or "I had no choice," for example, reflect an attempt to shift focus from the individual's agency to external pressures or constraints. These explanations show that the action was influenced or controlled by situational conditions rather than choices or decisions entirely within the individual's control.

4.3 Intention and Motive

Another important aspect of an excuse is intentions or motivation of the agents to act. People frequently try to demonstrate that their acts were not malevolent or intentional by describing reasons or purposes of their behaviors. Austin observes that excuses regularly focus on differentiating between purposeful and unintended behaviors. For example, the phrase "I did not mean to" emphasizes that the element of intention is not present but it also implies that, though the consequence was undesired, it was not deliberate. Furthermore, excuses might reflect the individual's motivation, such as "I was trying to help," in order to frame the conduct more positively. Austin claims that these differences are important to evaluate moral and social judgments (Austin 1956).

4.4 The Interplay of the Components

Austin underscores that all the above elements often overlap and work together within a single excuse. Together, they form a ground through which individuals explain, mitigate, or negotiate their responsibility for an action in a way that minimizes blame. Austin illustrates how everyday words represent the complex interaction between human behaviors, morality, and societal standards by considering the components of an apology. The speaker may make the actions more acceptable and excusable by showing that they were caused by external circumstances or without intention while minimizing agency. He goes on to explain that these factors are often subtle and incorporated in everyday language and indicate how individuals comprehend and allocate guilt in various contexts.

5. THE LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

According to J.L. Austin, it is necessary to understand linguistic patterns of excuses. Based on that, men can clearly know how language encodes nuanced disparities in responsibility and culpability. He contends that everyday language is far from imprecise; instead, it is full of nuanced terms that assist people in navigating complicated situations in society. By investigate specific words and phrases and their related situations, Austin demonstrates how excuses as speech acts that address moral, social, and practical concerns.

5.1 Excuses as Speech Acts

Austin (1962) situates excuses within his theory of speech acts and identifies that language not only conveys information but also performs actions that hold social significance. In this framework, excuses are viewed as performative acts that do something rather than state something. They have well replies intended to lessen blame and to reduce the feeling of guilt and responsibility. When someone provides an excuse like "I didn't mean to," he is not only communicating his intentions but also influencing how others' cognition about the accountability for his bad or a failure actions. This verbal move attempts to reframe the circumstance in their favor, lowering possible judgment and reducing the emotional load of blame.

Through the study of speech acts, Austin emphasizes the role of excuses in daily communication. Also, he illuminates how they could help manage one's actions and others' perceptions about someone (Austin, 1962). This perspective shows that language shapes social realities and that individuals' ongoing efforts help protect their place in the community.

5.2 The Precision of Excusatory Language

In fact, there are various terms and expressions used to convey different excuses. It is interesting that many of these words are adverbs that explain how something happened, not just what happened. Along with adverbs, there are other types of words like abstract nouns (like "misconception" or "purpose") and a few phrases (like "couldn't help" or "didn't mean to") that are important for categorizing excuses. Another important group of words is prepositions, such as "under," "on," "by," "through," etc. Prepositions at different places can change the meaning of sentences and help arrange excuses into different groups. Phrases like "by accident," "unintentionally," or "under duress" are not interchangeable, but through them, people can reflect distinct aspects of the situations. "By accident" refers to the unintended action but acknowledges that a particular agency is present there. "Unintentionally" refers to actions done without intention. "Under duress" indicates external pressures constraining the individual's choices. From that, Austin demonstrates how language enables accurate communication about the nature of actions and the circumstances that influence them. Such precise words and phrases have complicated meanings that convey some levels of responsibility. Austin argues that linguistic precision demonstrates the capacity of ordinary language to capture and express the complexities of human behaviors and moral evaluation (Austin, 1956).

5.3 Contexts

Austin also observes that an excuse given is effective and appropriate depending heavily on the context. Excuses can include saying a person did something by accident or without intention. Sometimes, what may seem like an excuse can sound more like an accusation, such as calling someone clumsy or thoughtless. For example, an excuse like "I didn't know" may be more acceptable in some situations (e.g., failing to follow a newly established rule) than in others (e.g., neglecting a fundamental moral obligation). Austin explains how excuses may be used as context-sensitive instruments for negotiating culpability and blame (Austin, 1956).

5.4 The Limitation of Language

While Austin celebrates the precision and richness of ordinary language, he acknowledges its limits as well. The language used daily is based on the experiences and knowledge of past generations. However, this language is not always the best or most accurate communication method, especially when dealing with more complex or intellectual ideas and thoughts. There are cases where excuses cannot capture the full complexity of a situation due to linguistic ambiguities and the unique nature of specific actions. Some adverbs can only be used with certain verbs, for instance, "unwittingly" or "spontaneously." For example, they would not say, "he brushed his teeth impulsively," because that does not make sense. Instead, saying "He laughed spontaneously" is better. Certain words often used by philosophers and jurists, like "voluntarily" and "involuntarily," are not always used in the same way in daily words. For example, one can join the army or give a gift voluntarily, but we can also involuntarily hiccup or make a small gesture. People sometimes think that a word can fit both situations, but it is an exception. For instance, breaking a cup voluntarily could mean doing it on purpose, like as a way to stop an ugly discussion. While breaking a cup involuntarily could mean accidentally breaking it while suddenly moving. Even though, these two actions have the same description (breaking a cup), the former is a voluntary action and the latter is an involuntary action. This shows that these terms are not always as straightforward as they seem. These limitations, Austin argues, highlight the need for philosophical analysis to complement ordinary language in understanding responsibility and human behavior (Austin, 1956). Austin's linguistic analysis of excuses demonstrates how deeply moral and social concepts are in our language. By viewing excuses as speech acts and focusing on their contextual and performative aspects, Austin provides a framework

for understanding how language mediates between human interactions and ethical decision-making. Besides, communication language reveal some of its limitations in excuses used in many contexts.

6. THE ROLES OF EXCUSES: PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, PERSONAL, PHILOSOPHICAL AND LEGAL ASPECTS

Excuses are used particularly in daily life. They contribute to forming personality traits, societal ties, law, and philosophical reasoning. They function as methods for self-defense, image management, moral justification, and legal defense. This section investigates the impacts of excuses in five main dimensions, including psychological, social, personal, philosophical, and legal fields.

6.1 Psychological Role of Excuses

Excuses are a psychological defense mechanism that helps people deal with failure, maintain their self-esteem, and decrease cognitive dissonance. Snyder and Higgins (1988) suggest that excuses help people deal with reality by externalizing guilt and maintaining a good self-image. When individuals fail to meet expectations, they often provide excuses to maintain their belief in their abilities and avoid feelings of shame or guilt. Weiner et al. (1987) emphasize that excuses influence emotion. Individuals mitigate negative feelings like guilt and embarrassment by attributing to external or uncontrollable factors leading to their failures. However, frequent excuse-making can hinder self-improvement because it prevents individuals from acknowledging personal responsibility for their wrong actions.

6.2 Social Role of Excuses

Excuses' social role is critical for preserving interpersonal connections and ensuring social harmony (Austin, 1962). Individuals can navigate disagreements and misunderstandings while preserving their reputation and reducing friction within social interactions by offering an excuse. They can also seek to repair breaches of trust, realign themselves with social norms, and show accountability. For example, "I didn't know" acknowledges a mistake while appealing to shared understandings of reasonable behavior. Excuses thus function as important tools in the complex dance of human relationships, allowing individuals to uphold their social bonds and navigate moral and social expectations, reinforcing that ethics is deeply embedded in daily practices. (Incorporated into daily life.) Schlenker et al. (2001) highlight that while occasional excuse-making can maintain social harmony, excessive use can damage credibility. Chronic excuse-makers may be perceived as untrustworthy or manipulative, decreasing social status and relationships. Excuses are necessary in social interactions, including managing impression and resolving conflicts. Tedeschi and Riess (1981) suggest that people use excuses to justify their actions and protect their social reputation. Excuses allow individuals to maintain positive relationships by deflecting blame and reducing the likelihood of social penalties. Kolditz and Arkin (1982) discuss self-handicapping as a social excuse-making strategy. Individuals protect themselves from negative judgments by preemptively providing excuses for possible failures. Students may, for example, claim a sickness before an exam in order to excuse their poor performance to maintain social standing. Excuses also have crucial role in reflecting and upholding social norms. By providing an excuse, one is tacitly admitting that a common moral or social norm has been broken. However, by providing reasons that appeal to common ideals, the language of excuses enables people to negotiate their position within these frameworks/grounds. Even if the result is negative, an excuse such as "I was trying to help" links the speaker's intentions with socially acceptable conduct (Austin, 1956).

6.3 Personal Role of Excuses

On a personal level, excuses are a coping strategy influencing self-identity and decision-making. Excuses allow individuals to rationalize their behavior, making it easier to reconcile actions with personal values and beliefs (Snyder & Higgins, 1988). Warnock (1969) argues that rationalizing behavior through excuses can be attributed to many factors influencing an individual's thought processes. As people negotiate the expectations and norms imposed by classmates, family, or the larger society, for example, societal pressures may be quite important. People frequently feel pressured to fit in or defend their deviations from these standards. People may also develop complex scenarios or defenses to assist them avoid the harsh reality of their decisions due to deeply ingrained personal fears,

such as a lack of confidence or a fear of being judged. By preserving a sense of control over their life, excuses also assist people in managing their self-concept. Weiner et al. (1987) argue that people who believe their failures are due to external causes remain optimistic about future success, while those who take full responsibility may experience lower motivation. However, Schlenker et al. (2001) caution that if someone overuse excuses, that can lead them to self-deception about self-responsibility for their wrong actions and limits positive personal development and maturity. When someone frequently escapes the accountability by giving excuses for their shortcomings, that one's emotion and psychology cannot grow properly due to missing out on possible opportunities coming from facing troubles and having some lessons from their errors.

6.4 Philosophical Role of Excuses

Philosophically, excuses raise important moral responsibility, free will, and ethical issues. Excuses undermine entire accountability by introducing outside variables that affect human behavior. Schlenker et al. (2001) state that the ethical discussions around excuses focus on whether people should always be held accountable for their deeds or not, or if circumstances should be taken into account. Because it enables humans to examine how individuals use language to explain their acts and intentions, analyzing excuses becomes a useful method for studying ethics. Excuse-makers frequently attempt to escape full accountability for their deeds. Examining excuses can help one comprehend the relationship between freedom and accountability in ethics. It also emphasizes that using words properly is very important when discussing moral matters. Excuses in moral philosophy have to deal with agency. Is someone ethically accountable for their actions if they acted under duress or without full knowledge? According to Tedeschi and Riess (1981), moral philosophers make a distinction between behaviors that are justified and those that are excused. While excused activities admit fault but argue for less culpability, justified actions are in line with moral ideals. Excuses also play a role in ethics. Aristotle argued that moral character is developed through taking responsibility for actions. Frequent excuse-making, therefore, can be seen as a moral failing that prevents individuals from cultivating virtue (Weiner et al., 1987).

6.5 Legal Role of Excuses

Excuses are fundamental in determining responsibility, accountability, and justice in the legal system. Legal excuses, such as duress, insanity (not mentally stable), and self-defense, mitigate or absolve individuals from full legal responsibility for their actions (Schlenker et al., 2001). For example, if someone commits a crime because they were being life-threatened if they did not do it, they might have a legal excuse called duress. This means they could be less responsible for their actions because they were forced into it. Similarly, according to the law, people with mental illness who violate the law are not subject to any form of legal punishment because they are not capable of being sober or controlling their civil behavior. Every person has human rights to life, to work, to be respected, and to have honor, so if they have any behavior to protect themselves from harm, it is considered a legitimate act of self-defense. Their defense is accepted not to be legally responsible, except in cases where they are declared to be excessively self-defensive, causing serious harm to the other party, who will be partly responsible for their behavior. These legal excuses are important in ensuring that justice is served fairly and that people are held accountable for their actions based on their circumstances. Excuses in law also influence sentencing. Courts consider mitigating circumstances when determining punishment, often reducing sentences when an excuse is deemed valid (Tedeschi & Riess, 1981). For example, a judge may consider the fact that the criminal took food because they were hungry and had nowhere else to eat when deciding on the proper penalty. However, justice may be damaged if individuals employ legal defenses to avoid responsibility. This might lead to a less equal justice system for everybody. As a result, while excuses may occasionally help someone get a fair punishment, they may also be misused and cause problems for the legal system. In the domains of psychology, society, personal life, law, and philosophy, excuses have several functions. Excessive excuse-making can damage credibility, impede personal development, and result in moral and ethical quandaries, even while they offer self-defense, social harmony, and legal mitigation. Accountability and excuses need

a proper balance that is able to contribute to maintaining integrity and promoting the growth of each individual.

7. CONCLUSION

With the theory of excuses, Austin provides an important foundation for understanding the function of language. A linguistic tool is frequently applied to manage responsibility and judge morality. Austin reveals the complexities of human behaviors, responsibility, and social factors by carefully analyzing some patterns of excuses used popularly in society. Justification and excuses have a small difference in usage, and this difference helps people understand how people use their language in different cases to deal with self and social responsibility, intent, and liability in their day-to-day interactions. By showing that human linguistic behaviors influence moral frameworks, the study highlights the critical role of daily language in forming ethical and social standards. Excuses are used widely by everyone; therefore, they have a significant effect in various areas related to individuals, organizations, society, and government. Thanks to Austin, people have the fundamental framework for understanding the complexity of language by considering the structure of excuses. This study provides insights into the complexities of moral judgments and social interactions and how people often deal with guilt, intent, and ethics in their different situations in life.

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