

J. L. AUSTIN: A PLEA FOR EXCUSES (1956)

Philosopher of language J. L. Austin provides a brief philosophical treatment of excuses, making a case for their importance in the fields of moral philosophy, philosophy of language, and linguistics.

- **Excuses are offered when a person is said to have done something bad or wrong**
- To justify means to admit to performing the action but argue that it was good, right, or permissible, either in general or under the circumstances
 - **To justify is to accept responsibility but deny its wrongness**
- To excuse is to admit the action wasn't good, but assert that there are extenuating circumstances, e.g., that it was an accident, or one was forced to do perform the action
 - **To make an excuse is to accept its wrongness but deny responsibility**
 - Few excuses are entirely exonerating
- **The theory of excuses will have major implications on moral philosophy**
 - To attain a foundation for moral philosophy, it's necessary to better understand what it means to do an action
 - Doing an action is more complex than merely making a physical movement with the body
 - It's misleading to take "doing an action" as a concrete description rather than abstract stand-in for a verb
 - What constitutes an action is a complex question that can involve difficult questions of motive and classification
 - Studying excuses, which are a type of abnormal action, will facilitate understanding and classification of actions in general, and clarify the notions of and relationship between freedom and responsibility
- **The theory of excuses has practical implications for ordinary language**
 - It is a good thing to have a clear understanding of the words we use and how to use them
 - Excuses present a good field of language for study, due to its rich, subtle, and practical nature, and the fact that it is relatively untouched by traditional philosophy

- The fact that people may differ in use of terms is no barrier, but actually may help illuminate subtle distinctions
- Ordinary language is not a perfect or finalized system; it is rather a starting point
- Some ways to systematically understand excuses are as follows
 - Dictionary
 - Law, especially common law, and specifically tort law
 - Law must be approached with caution
 - In law, decisions must always be reached and generally must go one way or the other
 - Legal proceedings must fall under generally accepted, established procedures, more limited than the complexity of actual life
 - There is an emphasis in law on precedent
 - Ordinary language and legal language may differ
 - Psychology, including anthropology and zoology
 - Psychology offers insights into behaviors that have not been identified by ordinary language
 - These sources will aid in providing a classification, understanding, and definition of many expressions and actions
- Aim and general lessons to be learned from the study of excuses (numbered as follows):
 1. Normal actions should not be modified by adverbs; adverbs are only used to mark peculiar or abnormal instances of actions
 2. Adverbs generally apply only to a narrow range of verbs
 3. Pairs of words that are ostensibly opposites, like voluntarily/involuntarily, are not necessarily so, and many words such as “inadvertent” have no clear opposite
 4. Adverbs describe different machineries of action, such as the decision stage, the planning stage, and the executive stage (carrying out the action)
 5. There are unacceptable excuses, but standards for acceptance vary by situation
 6. It’s important to pay attention to subtle differences between similar words (such as “intentionally” and deliberately”)
 7. The 1874 court case of *Regina v. Finney*, in which a man accidentally scalds a mental patient to death in the bath, is illustrative of the differences in clarity with which excuses can be described
 8. The object of the study of excuses is to clearly distinguish between terms through illuminating examples
 9. It’s necessary to pay attention to the context and expression in which the word is used, not merely to the meaning of the word in isolation

10. Adverbs may also describe a style of performance, such as a deliberate or careless manner of action
11. **An adequate account of actions, i.e., the stages or stretches of an action and what constitutes an action, is vital to the study of excuses (that is, to know what is being excused)**
12. Etymology can help shed light on difficult words like “result” and “intention”
 - **One must avoid the danger of believing that words should fit neatly together into a single conceptual scheme – terms may overlap, conflict, or be disparate**
 - This is a problem in philosophy more generally, in that key terms like “right” and “good” are often assumed to have the potential to fit in a unified framework
13. Modern science, such as zoology, has revealed gaps in the capacity of language to describe certain actions, such as compulsive behavior

Source: Austin, J. L. “A Plea for Excuses: The Presidential Address.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 57, 1956, pp. 1–30.

The views and opinions expressed in the work featured above reflect those of the original author(s) alone.

The Philosogist (thephilosogist.com), 2018