Margaret Macdonald, Philosopher of Language

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I chart the philosophical development of neglected figure Margaret Macdonald and situate that development in the context of mid-century analytic philosophy more broadly. I examine Macdonald's changing attitude towards verificationism, and show that these changing views led her, in 1950 and beyond, to a very thorough appreciation of language use as capable of being employed in the execution of distinctive kinds of performative act. I compare Macdonald's views with the far better known work of J. L. Austin, and I emphasise the extent to which she has, despite her insightful contributions, been omitted from the history of philosophy.

1. Introduction

Margaret Macdonald (1903-1956) is emerging as a figure in the history of analytic philosophy to whom overdue attention is now being paid.[1] In this article I examine Macdonald's changing views in the philosophy of language and the relationship between these views and her treatment of issues in other areas such as aesthetics, ethics, political theory, and religion. I seek also to situate Macdonald's views in the broader context of mid-century analytic philosophy through identifying her influences in such figures as Carnap, Stebbing, and Wittgenstein. I shall not offer an extended diagnosis of just why Macdonald has been so unfairly omitted from the history of philosophy, though it is clearly a plausible hypothesis

[1] See Kremer (2022), Spinney (forthcoming), Whiting (2022), and Vlasits (2022), for recent work on Macdonald. Siobhan Chapman (2024, pp. 179-186) has identified in Macdonald views comparable to those of Austin, according to which language may be used to effect performative acts. In what follows I draw some of the conclusions reached also by Chapman, though see (no. 18), below, for places at which Chapman's approach and mine diverge. This divergence is related to a difference in the focus of our discussions; Chapman gives an illuminating comparison of Macdonald, Alice Ambrose, and Russell with respect to the status of ordinary (as opposed to 'ideal') language. I offer here a sustained account of Macdonald's complex philosophical development which includes her relationship to logical positivism, such that her later views may be situated in the broader context of that development. Chapman's approach and mine are, I think, complementary, insofar as we each identify separate contexts within which Macdonald's work may be placed, and together we provide a fuller picture of her views than has so far been available.

Mind, Vol. XX . XX . XX 2024
https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzae025
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that her gender was a contributing factor.[2] My focus is rather on correcting the omission described.

In §2, I chart the developing line of thought which led Macdonald to examine the role of speech acts in various areas of discourse. In giving the development of Macdonald's thought I aim to portray her as a figure of *depth*, who underwent the kind of philosophical growth often attributed to better known thinkers. I show that Macdonald's early employment of the verification principle was brought under pressure by considerations of language use in the contexts of political theory. This pressure forced Macdonald to reconsider the extent to which it is reasonable to view those uses of language as lacking sense and led her to explore alternative approaches.

In §3 I offer an examination of Macdonald's understanding of aesthetic, ethical, literary, and religious uses of language as constituting speech acts. I describe the ground Macdonald prepares for this conclusion through an assessment of the legal and ritual examples she gives. I outline the striking similarities between Macdonald's and J. L. Austin's views, and I emphasise the extent to which Macdonald's contemporaries and present-day scholars have failed to take notice of her contributions. I do not devote significant space in what follows to expounding Austin's work. Secondary literature discussing Austin is widely available, and to rehearse that material here would detract from my principal aim of introducing the work of Macdonald to a contemporary audience.

2. Macdonald's philosophical development

Macdonald was a research fellow at Cambridge from 1934-37, having previously completed a PhD under Susan Stebbing's supervision at University College London. She is presently known, if at all, for her role in producing notes of Wittgenstein's (1979) lectures she attended in 1934-5. Macdonald was a student of Wittgenstein's *The Blue Book* and *The Brown Book*, and the influence of Wittgenstein's views on her work was considerable. Macdonald was also familiar with logical positivist approaches which themselves emerged from a reading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Macdonald had a relatively early introduction to the

[2] See Connell and Janssen-Lauret (2022) for a detailed discussion of this issue. See also Connell (2021) for a discussion of Ambrose and the contributing factors leading to her present obscurity. Macdonald's omission from history is plausibly explained by similar considerations as Connell offers with respect to Ambrose, for their cases share striking parallels insofar as both were students of Wittgenstein who struggled to attract engagement with their own original views.

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verification principle, for Stebbing had met Moritz Schlick in 1930, and as early as 1933 was introducing, not uncritically, the ideas of Vienna to Britain.[3] We shall now see how these two strands of influence, namely the middle-to-later Wittgenstein, and logical positivist verificationism, expressed themselves in Macdonald's work.

There is evidence of Macdonald's both being critical of the verification principle and also wielding it against views which had become *passé* from the perspective of analytic philosophers.[4] In her 1934 article 'Verification and Understanding'[5] Macdonald argues that identifying the method of verification with the meaning of a proposition produces insoluble difficulties concerning statements about the past. She distinguishes the process by which a proposition is understood from that by which it is verified. In this sense Macdonald rejects logical positivism. She does, though, maintain commitment to a thoroughgoing empiricism which is in spirit reminiscent of the positivist orientation. Macdonald claims that she could not understand a given proposition (sentence)[6] if she did not have *experience* of the notions expressed:

> It is probable that all the descriptions which apply to Queen Elizabeth would apply, individually if not collectively, to living people whom one knows or has known. But if I had no experience, or no possibility of getting experience, of such properties, or of women and dying events then I could not possibly understand the proposition about Queen Elizabeth. There is then a sense in which I must translate all propositions in terms of my own experience if I am to understand them. (1934, p. 156)

A necessary condition for understanding a proposition is, in Macdonald's view, that one has experience of the 'properties' expressed by the proposition's constituents. An implication of this view is that propositions purporting to include reference to properties which cannot in principle be met with in experience are not capable of being understood. The

[3] See Beaney (2016, pp. 239-240), and Stebbing (1933). Stebbing had also invited Schlick to give a lecture at the University of London in 1932, and confirmation of Macdonald's attendance at this lecture can be gleaned from Stebbing's reference to Macdonald's 'verbatim' report of its contents (1933, p. 17, no. 1).

[4] See Vlasits (2022, p. 269, no. 3) for the view that Macdonald accepted the verification principle.

[5] Macdonald's bookending of this article with references to a positivist school consisting of 'Wittgenstein and his followers' (1934, pp. 143, no. 1; 156) marks the work out as pre-dating her studentship with the 'middle' Wittgenstein.

[6] Macdonald (1934, p. 143) identifies a proposition with an 'arrangement of signs'. Consequently, I will here talk of propositions 'expressing' such and such contents, where ordinarily propositions are construed as those items which are themselves expressed by sentences.

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difficulty which emerges from consideration of the fact that we may understand propositions about people and places of which we have no personal experience can be dissolved, Macdonald argues, through analysis; we can understand propositions about complexes which we have not experienced because we do have experience of the constituents which compose them.[7] Macdonald's position involves consequences for the status of metaphysical statements which are shared by the logical positivist view she criticises. For both Macdonald and the logical positivist, metaphysical statements fail to count as understandable on the grounds that the constituent terms of those statements fail to express anything capable of being experienced. Macdonald's acceptance of this implication is clear from her treatment of McTaggart's metaphysics:[8]

> No one can give language a sense except its users, and if metaphysicians can give such sense to 'Time is unreal', 'God exists' that we can see the connections of these expressions with those of ordinary language, then metaphysical propositions will have sense, but they will have ceased to be metaphysical. For we so use language that a proposition whose truth or falsity cannot be tested in experience is not regarded as giving us information about the world at all. (1936, p. 325)

While the method of testing some proposition in experience is, in Macdonald's view, distinct from the meaning of the proposition in question, it remains a necessary condition for something's 'giving information' that it be empirically testable. Tautologous propositions do not convey information about the world and must instead be construed as 'rules in accordance with which we may use the language of experience' (1936, p. 326). Macdonald (1936, p. 327, no. 1), furthermore, cites Carnap approvingly in connection with the view that questions of metaphysics must be treated as questions of *language choice*, rather than as ontological in character.

Macdonald's 1936 treatment of McTaggart exhibits, along with an endorsement of positivist views, the influence of Wittgenstein's teaching. Macdonald explicitly refers to 'Dr. Wittgenstein's lectures' (1936, p. 333, no. 1) in her discussion of McTaggart's claim that we know ourselves by acquaintance. Macdonald argues that McTaggart fails to recognise the uses to which the word 'I' is put in ordinary speech, and that he consequently misconceives that word as referring to a supra-empirical

[7] Macdonald (1936, pp. 153-154) cites Russell here in support of her view. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for identifying this.

[8] See also Macdonald (1936, pp. 330, 332).

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entity with which he is in peculiar contact. She describes one such use through a contrast with demonstrative pronouns:

> In fact, this use of the word 'I' seems much more like that of the gesture in response to 'Who is in favour?', 'Who has a pain?' than like the use of the words 'this' and 'that' to which it has sometimes been compared. (1936, p. 335)

For our purposes it is not the specific character of Macdonald's treatment of the first-person singular pronoun which is important, but her general approach to the diagnosis of error in metaphysical thinking. Macdonald's approach to McTaggart here does not involve a blanket application of the verification principle, but a piecemeal examination of the way in which the word 'I' is used in everyday contexts. Macdonald locates the place at which McTaggart's usage departs from customary practices, and in doing so attempts not only to show *that* McTaggart's claims fail to count as sensible but also *how* they do. This approach to philosophical problems, on which it is imperative that one be able to discover the source of nonsense as opposed to merely identifying it, is characteristically Wittgensteinian.[9] Macdonald's own notes of Wittgenstein's lectures show the precedent for this approach: 'To relieve mental cramp it is not enough to get rid of it; you must also see why you had it' (1979, p. 90).

Macdonald's emphasis on discovering the source of philosophical difficulties continues with her 1938 paper 'The Philosopher's Use of Analogy'. There she argues that philosophical theories

> […] try to operate with ordinary words when they have deprived them of their ordinary functions. They recombine known words in an unfamiliar way while trading on their familiar meanings. But these analogies lead to hopeless difficulties and so it seems that philosophical problems are never solved at all. Nor could they be solved […] while the verbal character of both questions and answers was realised only half, or not at all. (1938, p. 82)

Crucially, Macdonald does not expect us to accept this assessment without demonstration, and she takes the issue of *substance* as her working example. We may ascribe, Macdonald says, any number of predicates to a given *man*. Once we have done so it makes sense for someone to ask, of the words 'tall', 'British', and so on, *what* they have been predicated of; and the answer will be a certain human being, conceived of as

[9] See also Kremer (2022, p. 307) for Macdonald's employment of this approach in a different context.

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separable from the properties expressed. The illicit analogy is this. The phrase 'is a man' shares an adjectival character with those predicates just mentioned, and so we might ask, analogously, of *what* the relevant phrase is predicated, where the individual so predicated is conceived of as separable from that which was ascribed to it. The result is an attempt to conceive of an individual as property-less, and therefore to postulate a *substratum* in which properties may inhere. The superficial grammatical similarity between 'is tall' and 'is a man' has, Macdonald argues, led us to think that any questions asked about the application of the former are legitimate also to ask about the application of the latter. A hasty generalisation is responsible for thinking the analogy helpful. We assume that since it is often sensible to abstract away properties while keeping our subject in view, the abstraction may extend to *all* properties. Having attempted that abstraction, we find the subject isn't any longer in view, but rather than conclude that the attempt was faulty we invent an *unviewable* subject. This 'analogy by extension' is not the only source of philosophical error responsible for our mythologising about the notion of an imperceptible substance, according to Macdonald; she examines further analogies rooted in the use of language concerning *change* as well as *existence*. My aim here though is not to appraise the specific diagnoses she offers but rather to show that her concern is to identify the precise point at which the philosopher's use of language departs from ordinary usage. It is not, in other words, an application of the verification principle which leads her to reject the postulation of substance as senseless. The influence of positivism remains, though, detectable:

> To abstract qualities is to recognise that quality-words may be used in many different contexts. It is wrongly pictured as separating an element from a compound and then naming it, as if it resembled separating a gas from water and calling it oxygen. Such a picture gives the problem a pseudo-scientific air. But that it is not and does not resemble a scientific problem is shown by the admission that it would be logically impossible to verify the existence of material substance [...]. (1938, p. 87)

And:

> [T]he criteria for the truth or falsity of philosophical propositions are the uses of language. [...] I do not at all wish to disparage the making of comparisons and analogies which are often very useful. But as misused by philosophers in giving pseudo-scientific explanations of ordinary propositions they are non-significant. (1938, p. 99)

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Philosophical propositions may, if used to make claims about the usage of words, count as true or false, but when used in the attempt to make unverifiable claims concerning allegedly extra-linguistic facts they count as 'pseudo-scientific' and, importantly, 'non-significant' according to Macdonald. The test of verifiability may be employed to show that a given proposition is pseudo-scientific (and non-significant), though its application is not, as I have shown, Macdonald's principal method of diagnosing philosophical confusion.

We have seen, then, the extent to which recognisably verificationist views figure in Macdonald's philosophical development from 1934 until at least 1938. Insofar as I emphasise this influence upon Macdonald my treatment diverges from that of Chapman, who recognises that Macdonald was 'an early critic of logical positivism' (2024, p. 179) but does not suggest a more complex relationship between Macdonald and verificationism than this. I have shown that while critical of logical positivism Macdonald was also sympathetic to elements of positivist thinking.

During a 1941 meeting of the Aristotelian Society at St. Hilda's college, where Macdonald was then working as a librarian, she presented 'The Language of Political Theory' (1941). Here she considers two distinct approaches to political theory, namely the view that political obligation is secured through consent, and the view that political obligation is secured through appreciation of the fact that the state 'embodies the "real" will and permanent interests of its members' (1941, p. 172). Macdonald notes that expressions of political theory are conceived of by those who utter them as having a *use*:

> The philosophical 'point' of a remark […] is, at least partly, connected with the cause or reason which induces people to go on making it, though it can neither be supported nor refuted by any empirical evidence. It may be false, it may, if taken literally, be meaningless, but they feel that it has some use. (1941, p. 170)

The tension here between construing a given remark as 'literally meaningless', because immune to the support of empirical evidence, while observing its 'serious effects' is one which Macdonald takes up again in her article 'Natural Rights' (1947), which I will examine shortly. Here it is worth appreciating Macdonald's 1941 approach to resolving this tension. She argues that philosophical theories of the kind given by political theorists serve as 'pictures':

> How can they differ in meaning without differing in verifiable consequences? But how *do* they differ? They differ, obviously, in

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> picturing political relationships with the help of two very different images. One represents them under the guise of a contract freely entered into […]. The other picture tells a very different story. My relation to an organism of which I form part or to my 'higher' self is not determined by free choice. (1941, pp. 173-174, emphasis in original)
>
> These two ways of picturing political relationships may, then, have very different practical and psychological effects which may induce people to want to go on using them, although they learn nothing much from them about political affairs. (1941, pp. 174-175)

As well as employing the terminology of 'picturing', Macdonald compares philosophical theories of the relevant kind also with works of poetry in order to explain their effects:

> The theories of the scientist give new information about empirical facts; they also induce certain emotional and intellectual attitudes. The language of the poet is predominantly emotive; that of the philosopher less so, but both also have some relation to certain facts, though not that involved in the application of a scientific analogy. They do, however, partly by the use of certain images and metaphors express or call attention in a very vivid way to facts and experiences of whose existence we all know but which, for some reason, it seems important to emphasise. (1941, p. 176)

Macdonald suggests that theories of political obligation aid in making salient the existence of things of which we are already in some sense aware. Insofar as their role is one of emphasis, such theories do not involve the communication of novel facts and aren't therefore contributions to empirical science. This function is relevantly similar to that played by artworks, and in particular by certain forms of poetry, according to Macdonald.

Macdonald's emphasising the 'use' of expressions from political theory is distinctively Wittgensteinian, while her account of the use so identified is also reminiscent of Carnap.[10] It is worth noting here though that Carnap's 'Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache' (1932), in which he compares philosophical statements with poetic ones, was not published in English until 1959 (Ayer, 1959). I cannot find evidence that Macdonald had read this work in German, though Stebbing had certainly read other articles of Carnap's in German from

[10] An anonymous reviewer rightly points out that Wittgenstein had similarly compared philosophy with poetry; see Wittgenstein (1980, p. 24e).

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the same issue of *Erkenntnis*,[11] and it is plausible to suppose she had read this one as well and communicated those ideas to Macdonald during the latter's studies at University College London. It is not inconceivable that Macdonald's comparison between philosophy and poetry has its roots in Stebbing's understanding of Carnap. In any case, Macdonald's use of that comparison is quite different from Carnap's, and the hypothetical debt to Carnap should not be overemphasised. Carnap had famously viewed philosophical 'pseudo-statements' as 'a substitute, though an inadequate one, for art' (Carnap, 1959, p. 80). Macdonald by contrast does not suggest that philosophical statements whose function is analogous to poetry are *inadequate* to that function. Rather, such statements play a critical role in our public lives:

> The value of the political theorists, however, is not in the general information they give […] but in their skill in emphasising at a critical moment a criterion which is tending to be overlooked or denied. The common sense of Locke and the eloquence of Rousseau reinforced and guided the revolt against dogmatic authority by vividly isolating and underlining with the contract metaphor the fact that no one is obliged to obey laws concerning none of which he has had a chance to express consent or dissent. (1941, p. 186)

Where Macdonald views statements of political theory as valuable for their ability to emphasise what has been 'overlooked or denied', she departs from Carnap's position.

Here my aim is not to assess this conception of political theory but to register it as an explanation offered by Macdonald of the means by which philosophy may 'induce' psychological effects without also imparting factual information. In her 1947 article 'Natural Rights' Macdonald again confronts the question of how to characterise statements which fail to count as verifiable while simultaneously stimulating effects in their recipients:

> And the doctrine of natural law and of the natural rights of men is very obscure which justifies the impatience of its opponents. […] Surely, it will be said, the whole story now has only historical interest as an example of social mythology? Nothing is so dead as dead ideology. *All this may be true, but nevertheless the doctrine is puzzling. For if it is sheer nonsense why did it have psychological, political and legal effects? Men do not reflect and act upon collections of meaningless symbols or nonsense rhymes.* (1947, p. 226, emphasis added)

[11] See Stebbing (1933), where she freely translates from such articles throughout.

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Macdonald argues at length for the conclusion that statements purporting to express the claim that natural rights exist are not statements of 'necessary natural fact' (p. 228) which follow partly from definitions of *humanity*. Moreover, she (1947, p. 243) rejects the view she locates in Ayer (1936, Ch. 6), that expressions of value are expressions of personal *feeling*. In 1947 Macdonald does not conclude, from the fact that expressions of value are not empirically verifiable, that they are specimens of literal nonsense, for she insists that people do not act upon 'meaningless symbols', and furthermore:

> When the contract theorists talked of the rights as human beings which men had enjoyed in the state of nature, they seemed to be asserting unverifiable and nonsensical propositions since there is no evidence of a state of nature in which men lived before the establishment of civil societies. But they were not simply talking nonsense. They were, in effect, saying 'In any society and under every form of government men ought to be able to think and express their thoughts freely […]'. (1947, p. 241)

Here Macdonald is explicit that failing to utter a verifiable claim is not a sufficient condition for the expression of nonsense. She then gives her positive view:

> […] I cannot hope in a necessarily brief discussion to do justice to the enormous variety of value utterances. So I will plunge, and say that value utterances are more like records of *decisions* than propositions. To assert that 'Freedom is better than slavery' or 'All men are of equal worth' is not to state a fact but to *choose a side*. It announces *This is where I stand*. (1947, p. 244, emphases in original)

In Macdonald's view 'value utterances' are more usefully compared with the making of a *choice* than the expression of a factual claim. This construal of value utterances is, I submit, an early conception of speech as capable of being employed in the performance of *acts* as opposed to statements of fact. There is, though, some ambiguity in what Macdonald says, for on the one hand modelling value utterances on the making of choices recognisably involves construing such utterances as *acts*, while on the other hand modelling them on *reports* of acts (for example, decisions) plausibly constitutes a construal of those utterances as factual reports of one's behaviour. Macdonald (1947, p. 244) though alters her phrasing on the following page, where she says that the assertions with which she is concerned are 'more like' *decisions* than propositions. Later in the article Macdonald expressly models value utterances on the making, as opposed to the reporting, of decisions:

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> I can […] indicate only in a general way the type of value assertions and the manner in which they are related to each other and to other assertions. They are not related as evidence strengthening a conclusion. For decisions are not true or false and are not deduced from premises. (1947, p. 247)

Since decisions may not be true or false, value utterances are not, in Macdonald's view, analogous to specimens of evidence upon which we may rely in drawing factual conclusions. The comparison made here could not succeed if 'report of decision' was substituted for 'decision' in the quoted passage. Macdonald's earlier use of the word 'report' threatens to undermine her principal contention, and we shall see that she later avoids this ambiguity.[12]

Macdonald introduces in 1947 a conception of what it is for certain kinds of utterance to be meaningful according to which those utterances may be used to effect acts usefully compared to choosing and deciding. The position is evidently rather sketchy. In the next section we shall see how Macdonald went on to develop this approach in substantially more detail. The fact that Macdonald did develop the view much more thoroughly will justify my reading into her 1947 position an early version of the relevant view.

3. Macdonald's speech acts

In 1949 Macdonald offers an account of *aesthetic* statements which builds upon and develops her position from 1947:[13]

> 'This is good' has the form of the statement 'This is red'; it also has the form of the impersonal verdict 'He is guilty' with which, perhaps, it may be more profitably compared. The function of critics may first be compared with that of judges at show, examiners, and so on. For these, too, estimate certain achievements and indicate a decision of merit by certain signs. 'Good' in the aesthetic sense is rather like a seal on artistic performances […]. Thus to affirm that a work is good is more like bestowing a medal than naming it or any feature of it […]. Verdicts and awards are not true or false. (Macdonald 1949, p. 190)

[12] See no. 19 below.

[13] Chapman, citing Macdonald (1953), says that it was only during the 'final years of her life' (2024, p. 185) that Macdonald would apply an understanding of performative utterances to the examination of language in aesthetic contexts. Given what I say, below, it seems that Macdonald examined the relevant issue several years earlier than Chapman suggests.

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Insofar as Macdonald here maintains that statements of aesthetic evaluation 'indicate a decision' her approach is continuous with the treatment of political language described above. But Macdonald introduces into her 1949 discussion the notion of a *verdict* as central for understanding evaluative language of the relevant kind, and compares statements made in this context to the acts of judges or examiners. Here, then, Macdonald's construal of statements as effecting *acts* is less tentative and draws from a broader range of examples than in 1947. Macdonald makes a comparison between language use and the issuing of verdicts central also to her treatment of ethical language, given in the 1950 work 'Ethics and the Ceremonial Use of Language'. This 1950 paper contains her fullest account of language use as consisting in speech acts. Macdonald's aim in this article is to offer an understanding of ethical language which avoids both the construal of ethical utterances as 'fact stating' and a positivist emotivism attributed to Ayer. This aim is, we have seen, a recurrent theme in Macdonald's writings. The construal of ethical utterances as fact stating does justice to the '*hardness*' (1950, p. 201, emphasis original)[14] of ethical claims, or their 'inescapability' (1950, p. 201). On the relevant construal, though, no candidate facts can serve as the items stated by ethical utterances, according to Macdonald. If those facts are identified as natural, they cannot have the requisite normative force, and if non-natural they constitute a metaphysical region which Macdonald views as 'obscure and unplausible' (1950, p. 202). What is attractive in emotivism, on the other hand, is a ready explanation of the '*power* to produce effects' (1950, p. 205) wielded by ethical utterances, for it is undeniable that we are often moved to act by our emotions. Emotivism though is inadequate to explaining the *authority* with which ethical utterances may be issued, in Macdonald's (1950, p. 206) view, for the expression of an agent's emotions does not place obligations upon me as ethical utterances patently may.

Macdonald consequently draws our attention to uses of language which are neither fact stating nor mere expressions of emotion. Her opening passage is striking:

> When men take an oath, deliver a verdict, recite a creed, utter a curse, or cast a spell, they are using forms of speech much older than those of dispassionate narrative or scientific discourse. For oaths, curses, judgements, incantations, and similar utterances are not designed for the disinterested statement of fact. They exemplify

[14] Here Macdonald's choice of words is remindful of Wittgenstein's famous phrase: 'the hardness of the logical "must"' (Wittgenstein 1956: *VI*, §49).

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> a use of language not as a vehicle of information about nature, but as, itself, one of the powers of nature. (1950, p. 198)

Macdonald calls such uses of language 'performatory' (1950, pp. 208, 209), and she offers the language of 'magical rites' (1950, p. 209) as a first working example. Utterances made in the context of rites are not, Macdonald says, used to convey the mere *hope* that some effect will take place. Nor are they used to (falsely) state the *fact* that certain effects usually follow from the relevant utterance. Rather, such an utterance is itself taken *as effecting* the desired result. As Macdonald says, 'the words *make* the garden fertile or *kill* the enemy' (1950, p. 209, emphases in original).

As well as describing certain uses of language as performatory Macdonald calls them 'ceremonial' (1950, p. 210), and legal or judicial uses of language constitute, she says, distinctive cases. The necessity of speech to the execution of justice can be seen, she says (1950, p. 210), in an observation of the injustice we would ascribe to a 'trial' conducted purely through correspondence. A good trial does include, Macdonald notes, a great deal of investigation into the facts. The announcement of a verdict with which a trial concludes is not though a further statement of fact but an utterance which serves to *bestow* upon a defendant the status judged appropriate. Macdonald says that 'words in the final verdict determine victory or defeat' (1950, p. 211); words are not used merely to *report* the outcome, but to determine it.

Religious language, Macdonald argues, may similarly be used in the performance of ceremonial acts, and is, in her view, erroneously assimilated either to the statement of supernatural fact or to the expression of emotion:

> Whether or not there are supernatural facts, I suggest that the language of creeds, sacraments, articles of faith, and so on, is not used in the manner either of everyday discourse or theoretical statement. Religious services differ from private conversations and scientific conferences. But neither can their utterances be simply labelled 'emotive'. […] They are part of the rite which, whatever else it may be, is certainly a public *act* of adherence to an institution. (1950, pp. 212-213, emphasis in original)

The language employed in religious services is used principally to effect an '*act* of adherence' which may have an emotional effect but does not have the inspiration of that emotion as its chief aim. It is not Macdonald's view that these utterances constitute outward declarations of an inward intention to commit oneself to a given institution. Just as not all religious

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utterances are employed in the statement of supernatural fact, neither are they all reports of psychological facts about the preparedness of their utterers to behave in certain ways; they are not predictions. Insofar as the utterances in question constitute acts of adherence it is implied that adherence to a religious institution is a public matter and not a private one of which, with respect to others, we can at best have indirect knowledge. Macdonald accepts this conclusion and repeatedly emphasises the public nature of the relevant acts in her description of performative or ceremonial utterances.

It is interesting to note here another feature of Macdonald's changing views.[15] The fact that certain utterances have definite *effects* upon their audiences was, we saw, a recurrent consideration in Macdonald's changing attitude towards the verification principle. In her treatment of performatives, though, Macdonald does not solely, or even mainly, explicate the various uses of such utterances in terms of their psychological effects on an audience. Austin (1962, p. 101), as is well known, described as 'perlocutionary' the act of employing language to produce effects in others. I do not think that in failing to characterise examples in terms of perlocutionary force Macdonald can be said to have been in possession of the distinctions which exercised Austin. I think, instead, that Macdonald's shift in emphasis here may be explained through appeal to her conceiving of emotivism as placing *too* central an importance on the effects produced in others by ethical utterances:

> Moral judgements, on this view, are like symptoms of a fever with which the infected person may cause an epidemic. […] But the duty of fidelity is not a private passion or a fever which I seek to spread. […] Neither do we fuss overmuch about the approval of others […] 'Do approve of this as I do' is the occasional cry of the morally insecure. (1950, p. 206)

In seeking to avoid what in her view is a faulty characterisation of ethical utterances as aimed at 'infecting' others with one's passions, Macdonald draws our attention to speech acts without making central to her discussion the effects of those acts on the psychology of others.

Macdonald argues that ethical utterances are usefully understood as performative and ritualistic in character:

> Thus moral judgements never meant (and do not mean) for us things, qualities, or states, but performances. And the performances

[15] My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this consideration.

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> were in company. Our morality plays always had (and have) other actors. We performed in a public theatre, not a set of private theatricals. […] Moral judgements are thus, as it were, impersonal verdicts of a common moral ritual. (1950, p. 214)

Macdonald notices that the 'moral ritual' within which ethical utterances are made is not capable of sharp demarcation as are legal or religious rituals. Rather, 'morality covers the whole of life and may invade every other activity' (1950, p. 214). Ethical utterances may be used, *inter alia*, to *rebuke* or *praise*. We learnt to use moral language, according to Macdonald, through immersion in patterns of behaviour to which rebuking and praising are appropriate responses; and these patterns of behaviour are sufficiently varied to rule out their circumscription. Indeed, and as Macdonald (1950, p. 214) points out, the very same behaviours will be treated morally or not as separate contexts dictate. A further use of ethical language is to 'affect action' by means of authority (Macdonald 1950, p. 214). With our tone, gestures, and so on, we 'invest' our moral judgements[16] with authority. A moral judgement is, though, autonomous, insofar as its authority is not, once established by conventional means, dependent on the status or identity of the individual from which it is issued. This is shown in Macdonald's insistence that '[t]he rightness of justice is not *my* attitude, nor its obligation dependent on my choice' (1950, p. 206, emphasis in original). To say 'that was *wrong*' is to impel the perpetrator, whether oneself or another, to further action, and not through shared appreciation of some intermediary fact but directly, as a consequence of the utterance's being made. The effect of this utterance could not be achieved by stating a natural fact, Macdonald says, nor through the expression of 'personal disapproval' (1950, p. 214). We do not always make the adjustments in behaviour required by ethical utterances, and so we often fail to do what we are committed by those utterances to do. This does not undermine the account Macdonald presents, but only shows that acts which place obligations on others can be thwarted, just as an extended hand may be snubbed.

The similarities between Macdonald's position in 1950 and those of Austin are so obvious that I will not labour the point. The terminology of 'act', 'ceremony', 'performance', and 'ritual' which we have seen

[16] Macdonald moves quite freely between 'judgement' and 'utterance', and we may consequently substitute 'judgement' for 'expression of judgement' where, as here, it is otherwise odd to describe a judgement as accompanied by a 'tone'.

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Macdonald employ is found readily in Austin.[17] The focus also on examples from legal contexts is common to both figures. Austin notes that 'it is worth pointing out – reminding you – how many of the "acts" which concern the jurist are or include the utterance of performatives' (1962, p. 19). Austin identifies in these contexts a particular class of performative utterance he calls '*verdictives*' (1962, p. 42, emphasis in original). We have seen Macdonald identify the giving of verdicts as clear instances of performatives, to the extent that she employs the notion of a *verdict* in her explanation of the uses played by aesthetic and ethical utterances. Macdonald lists 'instruction, warning, announcement' (1950, p. 207) as examples of performative utterances, while Austin similarly includes 'giving some information or an assurance or a warning, announcing a verdict or intention' (1962, p. 98) in his discussion of illocutionary force. I do not deny that Austin provides us with a more rigorous examination of the ways in which performative utterances feature in speech than does Macdonald. Austin (1962, p. 18) for example offers an illuminating taxonomy of ways in which speech acts may *fail* which is absent from Macdonald's treatment, and he makes well-known distinctions (for example, between *illocution* and *perlocution*) which now form an indispensable conceptual base from which inquiries into the relevant subject must begin. What distinguishes Macdonald's approach from Austin's is her application of the relevant ideas to consideration of practices such as aesthetics, ethics, and religion which are not discussed in *How to Do Things with Words*.[18] The application of notions from speech act theory to other areas of philosophical interest can be seen again in 1954, in Macdonald's treatment of *fiction*. Macdonald's approach in 1954 is reminiscent of her 1950 discussion insofar as her concern in each case is to avoid both emotivism and the construal of certain utterances as factual. She presents her positive proposal:

> I want to stress this fact that in fiction language is used to *create*. For it is this which chiefly differentiates it from factual statement. A storyteller performs; he does not – or not primarily – inform or misinform. To tell a story is to originate, not to report. […] For all who communicate use the same language […]. But language may be used differently to obtain different results. (1954*a*, p. 176, emphasis in original)

[17] The terms 'performance' and 'act' are ubiquitous in *How to Do Things with Words*. See Austin (1962, pp. 17, 19, 25, 37, 69) for talk of 'ceremony', and (1962, pp. 17, 19, 20, 33, 36, 69, 84, 85) for 'ritual'.

[18] Excepting one reference to ethical *acts* as ritualistic (1962, pp. 19-20).

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The words and constructions used in fiction may be identical to those employed in factual language, but their *use* is quite different. A failure to appreciate this difference is responsible, Macdonald suggests, for the postulation of peculiar fictional entities conceived of as the subject matter of sentences found in novels. In Macdonald's view that postulation is unwarranted, for the sentences of novels are not statements of fact, even facts of an unusual kind, but items used to effect performances. Macdonald says that 'a work of fiction is a creative performance' (1954*a*, p. 181), and more like 'a symphony than a theory or report'[19] (1954*a*, p. 179). This view faces fairly obvious objections emerging from the observation that some sentences which figure in fictional contexts seem straightforwardly true; Macdonald (1954*a*, pp. 180-181) gives as examples putative historical claims such as those which appear in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Her response is to deny that these sentences are used to make factual claims in fictional contexts, for historical novels are not 'judged by the same standards' (1954*a*, p. 180) as are works of history. My aim here though is not to enter into an extended defence of Macdonald's view, but to demonstrate the direction in which she would develop insights into the use of language we have seen her explore earlier in her career.

Now I shall say something about the historical context in which Macdonald's views were developed, and about the reception, or rather the lack of, with which those views have been met. One thing to address is the originality of Macdonald's approach. I do not aim to argue here that Macdonald was the first figure to examine the importance of speech acts, not least because she cites Hume in this regard (Macdonald 1950, p. 213).[20] I do think, though, that she was a relatively early proponent of the view, at least in the context of twentieth century anglophone philosophy,[21] and that this fact ought to be acknowledged in any accurate assessment of Macdonald's place in history. Austin describes the development of his own views:

> [The views] were formed in 1939. I made use of them in an article on 'Other Minds' published in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume XX (1946) […], and I surfaced rather more of this iceberg shortly afterwards to several societies. (1962, p. v)

[19] Here Macdonald explicitly recognises the propositional implications of the word 'report'.

[20] See also Mulligan (1987) for Reinach's contributions to speech act theory, and Schumann and Smith (1990) for work on Reid in relation to this issue.

[21] See Smith (1990) for a historical treatment of European approaches.

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This assessment is consistent with Isaiah Berlin's emphasis on the importance of Thursday meetings in Oxford from 1936-7 until the summer of 1939 for Austin's philosophical development:

> Austin's particular philosophical position was developed, it seems to me, during those Thursday evenings, in continuous contrast with, and opposition to, the positivism and reductionism of Ayer and his supporters. (1973, p. 12)

Berlin (1973, p. 11) suggests that these discussions were not conducted with conscious reference to Wittgenstein's developing views, though *The Blue Book* had, he says, arrived in Oxford by 1937. It was, Berlin says, principally the doctrines of logical positivism to which Austin was responding in these meetings. Macdonald certainly was, we have seen, influenced by Wittgenstein. She was, though, similarly concerned to address positivist views with which we have seen her wrestle over the course of her philosophical development. Macdonald had never accepted verificationism uncritically, though she had employed it in various instances. The felt need to provide an alternative account of the use to which political or ethical utterances may be put beyond the expression of emotion spurred Macdonald to conceive of those uses first as poetic, then as decisive, and finally as 'ceremonial'.

The first identifiable appearance of Macdonald's conception of utterances as effecting acts is her June 2nd, 1947 presentation of 'Natural Rights',[22] published no earlier than July 1947 in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. *How to do Things with Words* was first published in 1962, seven years after the contents were presented at Harvard. Austin's 'Other Minds' (1946), which he reports as the first published work incorporating his views, appeared in the 1946 *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, which contained papers given during the June 5th-7th, 1946 Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and Mind Association. As Mark Rowe (2023, pp. 409, 411) has shown, Austin had also presented the view that certain uses of language are 'ceremonial' in a paper titled 'Nondescription' to the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club on October 31st, 1946, as well as one titled 'How to do Things with Words' on May 18th, 1947 to the Oxford Philosophical Society. Austin was therefore presenting his views on performative utterances throughout the year leading up to Macdonald's presentation of 'Natural Rights'. Macdonald may well have attended one or more of Austin's talks, or she

[22] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for providing clarity with respect to the dates given in this paragraph, and for drawing my attention to the uses of 'performatory' by Grant, Hart, and Strawson, discussed below.

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may, as an anonymous reviewer suggests, have discussed Austin's ideas with his colleague and her close friend, Gilbert Ryle.[23] The word 'performatory' can be found in print as early as 1949, prior to Macdonald's 1950 article, where C. K. Grant (1949, p. 359), H. L. A. Hart (1949, p. 185), and P. F. Strawson (1949, p. 93) each credit Austin with originating the term. Moreover, Strawson's paper appeared in *Analysis*, which Macdonald then edited, and was subsequently reprinted in a further volume also edited by Macdonald (1954*b*). Macdonald had the opportunity of encountering Austin's views, then, through his own published work, through the work of others in which he is referred to with which we can be sure she was acquainted, and through either attending Austin's talks or learning of their content in discussions. These facts do not undermine my overarching contention, though, that Macdonald developed and applied her conception of speech acts in novel ways; it is her understanding of issues in aesthetics, ethics, and religion which is distinctive and original. Macdonald's treatments of fiction and religious language prefigure related discussions by several years,[24] and her analysis of ethical language as used in the performance of actions constitutes the most sustained such treatment prior to Hare's *The Language of Morals* in 1952.[25]

Austin, at the outset of *How to Do Things with Words*, says, 'The phenomenon to be discussed is very widespread and obvious, and it cannot fail to have been noticed by others. Yet I have not found attention paid to it specifically' (1962, p. 1). It should be clear from what I have said that Macdonald did pay specific attention to the relevant phenomenon. Austin's failure to notice Macdonald's contributions here must therefore be viewed as an omission.[26] It is a plausible hypothesis that subsequent scholars, in observing Austin's own failure to find earlier examples of the view he advances, similarly adopted the view that specific attention had not been paid to the issue of language use as constituting the performance of acts. Even those who certainly had read Macdonald's 1950 article at the time and were in a

[23] In support of this possibility the reviewer identifies Macdonald's expressed debt to Ryle in 'Natural Rights' (1947, p. 242).

[24] See, for example, Ohmann (1971; 1972), and Pratt (1977) for approaches to fiction and literature; for religious language see Smith and McClendon (1972), and Harris (1980).

[25] See especially Hare (1952, pp. 91-92, Ch. 8; 1970). Hare (1949) does acknowledge the relevance of his 1949 discussion of imperatives to ethics, but there he does not pursue the connection at great length. Macdonald assimilates conceptions of ethical utterances as imperatives to emotivist views; see Macdonald (1950, p. 206).

[26] Especially since Austin's biographer describes him as taking Macdonald's views seriously; see Rowe (2023, p. 560).

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position to notice its import did not. David Pears (1951), in a review of the volume in which the article appears, economically summarises Macdonald's piece as offering 'a new analogy', and does not go on to mention her work in later discussions of Austin (Pears 1969; 1973). Stuart Hampshire, who had attended the Thursday meetings with Austin (Berlin 1973, p. 9), and who certainly appreciated the monument of Austin's 'discoveries […] of the element of performativeness' (1969, p. 37), does not mention Macdonald's article in his review (Hampshire 1952) of the same volume. And Max Black (1969), who edited the volume in question, makes no reference to Macdonald in a later discussion of Austin's views on performatives. Whatever the reason for her omission, Macdonald's name does not appear in classic studies of speech acts,[27] nor in the wealth of contemporary literature on the subject, and nor, at the time of writing, in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* entry 'Speech Acts' (Green 2021). This is not to chastise those working today who have failed to take notice of Macdonald, but only to register an unfortunate fact. It is hoped that in the preceding discussion I have said enough to show that this state of affairs is unsatisfactory.[28]

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[27] For example, Hare (1970), Heal (1974), and Searle (1969).

[28] I am very grateful to two anonymous referees from *MIND* for their useful suggestions which led to a much-improved article.

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