Do not pass by my epitaph,
Wayfarer, but when you have stopped,
hear and learn, then depart.
There is no boat, To carry you to Hades,
No ferryman Charon, No judge Aeacus, No Dog Cerberus.
All of us below have become bones and ashes.
Truly, I have nothing more to tell you.
So depart, wayfarer, Lest dead though I am
I seem to you to be a teller of vain tales.
Epitaph of “a third century Roman cynic”

After G. E. Moore suffered a stroke, his physician advised against excitement or fatigue (Malcolm 1958, 67). Accordingly, Moore’s wife limited his philosophical conversations to ninety minutes. Ludwig Wittgenstein disapproved. A conversation with Moore should continue until it reached a proper ending. Moore had spent his whole life in the pursuit of truth. If he collapsed in the course of philosophical discussion, that would be a fitting death.

Mrs. Moore could have replied to Wittgenstein (and perhaps did!) that more truth would be obtained through a longer life. When G. E. Moore died in 1958, his remarks were put at an end.

Death is generally assumed to be the end of all communication. Of course, people are quoted after their deaths. That has long been a solace to authors. Here is the epitaph of the first important Roman poet, Quintus Ennius (239 - 169 BC):

*Behold, citizens, this portrait of Ennius as an old man,
He who told the story of the greatest deeds of your fathers.*

*Let no one adorn my tomb with tears. Why?*

*Because I lit about alive through
the mouths of men.*

*(Shore 1997, 70)*

Quintus Ennius is only speaking metaphorically about being alive. Is he only metaphorically speaking? When you read the epitaph of Quintus Ennius does he thereby make a fresh assertion?

Alan Sidelle answers yes. He thinks people can defer assertions. People make fresh assertions each time their answering machine says ‘I am not here now’. Wills are another example. The assertion takes effect after death.
If deferred assertions are possible, then G. E. Moore was mistaken in claiming that one cannot assert sentences such as ‘I went to the pictures last Tuesday, but I don’t believe that I did’ (1942, 543). The trick is to put it in a suicide note.

I shall defend Moore (and David Kaplan’s theory of demonstratives) by arguing that deferred assertions are as impossible. Since deferred assertions would be possible if there were conditional assertions, I argue also against these conditional speech acts. We can affirm conditionals but cannot conditionally affirm. Our extant categories of linguistic forms can accommodate the data marshaled in support of examples of conditional assertions. For instance, many “conditional assertions” are just hedged assertions.

But Sidelle’s case for deferred assertions forces conservatives to acknowledge a new category of speech act: displaying sentences. A display has a status intermediate between assertion and quotation. When you display an automated email message explaining why you cannot promptly reply to messages, you take responsibility for the accuracy of your automated message -- but not as much responsibility as when you personally reply. As the channel for conveying information becomes increasingly indirect, the connection between utterances and the speaker’s mental states becomes too weak to count as assertion. We may adopt the fiction that an assertion has transpired (say at the moment of death). Composers of wills prepare sentence displays that are designed to have postmortem effects. I can display ‘I am the late the Roy Sorensen’ but cannot assert it.

Some automated speech acts are fictive speech acts. When the automated teller says, “It has been a pleasure to serve you. Have a nice day!” the machine has neither thanked you nor has it bid you to have a nice day. Instead, you have participated in make-believe reminiscent of the make-believe children enjoy with talking dolls and ventriloquists.

But displays are literal just as guesses are literal (as opposed to being make-believe assertions). Their intermediate status explains why the automated email response ‘I cannot immediately reply to your message’ is not self-refuting even though it is sent immediately.

I apply the concept of a sentence display to the automated inscriptions and utterances of computers. This includes a parting treatment of Searle’s Chinese Room thought experiment.

The relevance of Moore’s paradox

At age twelve, G. E. Moore became an evangelical Christian. Christians believe that some of the dead, at least Jesus, communicate after death. In John 20:19-29 Jesus re-appears after his crucifixion and speaks with his disciples.

Spiritualists attempt to document their contacts with photography and auditory recordings. The inventor Thomas Edison wished to improve on the poor reception that plagues séances:

I am inclined to believe that our personality hereafter will be able to affect matter. If this reasoning be correct, then, if we can evolve an instrument so delicate as to be affected, or moved, or manipulated by our personality as it survives in the next life, such an
instrument, when made available, ought to record something. (Quoted by Austin Lescarboura 1920, 47)

Members of the American Association of Electronic Voice Phenomena hunt for voices with the latest acoustic equipment. Their efforts became better known through Don DeLillo’s supernatural thriller White Noise (which was turned into a movie in 2005 starring Michael Keaton).

G. E. Moore’s religious phase was short lived. Moore was a shy boy who experienced emotional difficulty discharging his obligation to convert others. He did not like to preach or distribute religious tracts. This made him receptive to intervention by his eldest brother, the poet Thomas Sturges Moore. The poet persuaded the philosopher that there was no evidence that God exists and almost as little evidence that God does not exist.

Moore stopped being an evangelical Christian. Did he also stop believing in God? Like other philosophers of his generation, Moore became an idealist. This belief, that reality is fundamentally mental (or as Moore would say “spiritual”), was widely perceived as a substitute for religion. The leading British idealist, Francis Herbert Bradley, acknowledged this role: “Metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct, but to find these reasons is no less an instinct” (1893, xiv).

G. E. Moore soon stepped back from his contemporary Bradley and became a follower of Immanuel Kant. In The Critique of Pure Reason, Kant presented his refutations of proofs of God’s existence as a service to religion. Kant’s idea was to make room for faith by showing that there was no hope of gaining evidence for God’s existence.

At the open of the twentieth century, Moore’s allegiance retreated even further backward toward the Reverend Thomas Reid’s (1710-1796) common sense philosophy. Instead of becoming a follower of Reid, Moore developed his own distinctive philosophy (disagreeing with Reid on key issues such as the existence of sense data). Moore gives almost as much weight to common sense as Reid. (Reid is susceptible to grandiose thinking about this touchstone to reality.) Moore is more circumspect about what it implies. He thinks these entailments are most accessible through careful study of ordinary language. Moore pays unprecedented attention to locutions such as ‘good’, ‘believe’, and ‘see’. The smaller the word, the more attention Moore lavishes on it. His (often exasperating) attention to detail makes Moore’s writings technical, pedantic, and extraordinarily fruitful.

In 1946 Moore published a discovery that, in my opinion, undermines agnostic theism (and much else – for a survey read Mitchell Green’s and John Williams’ introduction to their anthology Moore’s Paradox). Moore’s immediate target was Charles Stevenson’s (1942, 80) thesis that ‘It was right of Brutus to stab Caesar’ means ‘I now approve of Brutus' stabbing of Caesar’. Moore objects that this ethical subjectivism confuses what a speaker implies with what he means. The speaker implies that he approves of Brutus stabbing Caesar, but Moore denies that this is what the assertion means. When a speaker says ‘It is raining’, he implies that he believes that it is raining. But the content of the assertion does not contain this claim about the speaker’s
mental state. Stevenson may have been misled by the inconsistency of 'The stabbing was right but I do not approve of it'. This sounds like a contradiction but it is only odd in the way the following statement is odd: 'It is raining but I do not believe it'. The content of that sentence is consistent; it just reports a mistake. The inconsistency lies in the saying of the sentence rather than in what is said. If the speaker's approval were part of the meaning of 'The stabbing was right', then there would be a genuine contradiction in the content of 'The stabbing was right but I do not believe it'. But there is not, so Stevenson's analysis of ethical statements is mistaken.

According to Moore, we almost always believe what we assert. The prevalence of sincerity makes 'It is raining but I do not believe it' surprising. This statistical characterization of the anomaly is generally regarded as shallow – even as a naive underestimate of the frequency of lying. Wittgenstein complains that Moore opened a wasp's nest but the wasps were too listless to get out.

Moore's detection of the anomaly, in contrast, was hailed as an important advance. Ludwig Wittgenstein praised it as Moore's greatest discovery (Malcolm 1958, 56). The historical record is bearing out Wittgenstein's assessment.

Moore shies away from the topic of religion. Consequently, I have no textual support for my application of Moore's paradox to agnostic theism. But the basic idea is straightforward. Recall Kant's interest in making room for faith by removing the possibility of evidence for God's existence. Now consider the analogy between 'It is raining but I do not believe it' and

1. It is raining but I have no evidence that it is raining.
2. I believe it is raining for reasons that are independent of whether it is raining

Sentence 1 is odd because the speaker cannot sincerely assert what he thinks he does not know. When the speaker asserts a proposition he implies that he has a reason for thinking it true. Sentence 2 helps us see that not any reason will do. Practical reasons (such as there being a reward for believing that it is raining) do not produce belief. Only reasons for the truth of p generate belief that p.

This Moorean argument works only if 'evidence' includes meta-evidence. Sometimes the absence of familiar forms of evidence is evidence at a higher level (as when police discovered the total absence of fingerprints in the Hillside Strangler's apartment). Perhaps Tertullian had a higher-level evidential principle when he said 'I believe because it is absurd'; perhaps his premise was that the correct creed was the one that put the greatest strain on our credulity.

Higher order principles (such as simplicity) are also needed to charitably interpret atheists who infer that God does not exist from the absence of evidence that God exists. In the absence of higher order principles, agnostic atheism will share the Moorean absurdity of agnostic theism.

Moore's theory of belief and his areligious lifestyle suggest that he did not believe in God. After he adopted a common sense philosophy, he denied that the near universality of belief in the supernatural makes belief in God common sense.
A Moorean Case Against Postmortem Assertions

If Moore had been asked whether postmortem assertions are possible, he would have answered no. Moore would have granted that he spoke to us and would have granted that these remarks could be remembered or discovered and then repeated to others. But we are only repeating what the dead asserted, not what they are presently asserting or will assert. Moore might well have regarded ‘People do not say anything after they die’ as part of common sense.

As is often the case, common sense can be reinforced by the self-defeat incurred in attempts to deny it. ‘I am dead’ is a pragmatic contradiction. Although internally consistent, the statement is disconfirmed by the fact I am asserting it. Conversely, reports of being alive are pragmatic tautologies. The serious illness of James Ross Clemens led to a report that his cousin Samuel Clemens had died. In May 1897 Samuel Clemens wrote to set the record straight: “The report of my illness grew out of his illness, this report of my death was an exaggeration.”

According to Moore, a speaker can only assert what he intends others to take him to believe. This explains the self-defeating nature of ‘It is raining but I do not believe it’. Although the sentence is consistent, one cannot consistently assert it. In general, you cannot assert a proposition that plainly implies that you lack the psychological state you aim to evince. A person who is dead plainly has no beliefs. That is why it is self-refuting for someone to say ‘I am dead’. All subsequent accounts of assertion labor to accommodate Moore’s result (Williamson 1996, 506).

Recalcitrant postmortem assertions

But how are we to reconcile the Moorean verdict of unassertibility with the quotation that opens this essay? The cynic continues his epitaph:

Do not favor this monument with sweet smelling oils  
or garlands, for it is but a stone.  
Do not feed the funeral flames, it is a waste of money.  
If you can give, give while I live.  
Pouring wine on the ashes will only turn them to mud,  
and besides the dead will not drink.  
For so I shall be. And you have heaped up earth on these remains,  
say that what this was, it will never be again.  
(Shore 1997, 72)

The cynic is not assuming that he somehow survives death. His point is that there is no afterlife. He is dead, dead, dead. The cynic is urging us to devote ourselves to those who are truly alive.

The practical import of the cynic’s message militates against the hypothesis that he is pretending to assert. Generally, it is easier to pretend to do something than to really do it. But speaking is an exception. If the absence of an appropriate intentions and beliefs prevents the dead from speaking, then that absence also prevents the dead from pretending to speak.
One might reply that it is the *hearer* who is pretending that the dead speak. One can suppose of a corpse that it is alive and speaking. Children play with talking dolls this way. The scope of the pretence does not include the doll’s lack of mental states. But in the above passage, the dead’s absence of mental states is the cynic’s central theme. One would be pretending that a speaker correctly believes he is without beliefs.

While strolling through the Dartmouth College cemetery, I solemnly read inscriptions for the edification of my six-year-old son Zachary. This graveyard is full of dedicated professors, virtuous alumni, and altruistic benefactors of the college. Bored, my son inquired where the bad people were buried.

The pretence hypothesis conflicts with the possibility of epitaphs being deceptions. If lapidary puffery were a game of make-believe, then the players would never be fooled.

Finally, some post-mortem statements are not designed to be read by anyone. The spacecrafts Voyager 1 and 2 carry messages about humanity that have almost no chance of being received. But someone who believed that his epitaph about humanity would never be read might still wish to post the statement in the safety of empty space. This commemoration would not be a prop in a game of make-believe.

**The Impact on Direct Reference Theories**

I have focused on how postmortem assertions are an anomaly for G. E. Moore. But they are also anomalies for philosophers of language who came after Moore, especially those who work on direct reference.

In 1985 the famous actor Yul Brynner made an anti-smoking commercial in which he grimly says “When you see this commercial, I'll be dead from lung cancer from years of smoking”. The enduring force of Brynner ’s warning is magnified by his use of the indexicals ‘I’ and ‘you’.

My oldest son, Maxwell, was born in 1995 ten years after Brynner died. But when Maxwell viewed a rerun of this commercial he understood that the ‘you’ includes him.

Yul Brynner’s referential success would be an anomaly for theories of direct reference. According to David Kaplan ‘you’ secures its reference by the addressee’s causal connection with the speaker. So Brynner should not be able to directly refer to people who come into existence after he goes out of existence. He can indirectly refer to a future individual by means of a description such as ‘the eldest son of Roy Sorensen’. Brynner cannot directly refer as I do by *pointing* to my eldest son or by using the name ‘Maxwell’ or by using the demonstrative term ‘that’ as in ‘That is my boy’. But if Brynner can make fresh assertions after death, then he can refer to postmortem people.

Indexical words are governed by rules that borrow properties from the utterance itself: ‘I’ means the speaker of the sentence, ‘you’ means the addressee of the utterance ‘now’ means the time at which the utterance is made, ‘here’ means the place at which the utterance is made. However, ‘I am not speaking’ does not mean the semantic contradiction ‘The speaker of this
sentence is not speaking’. According to Kaplan, ‘I’ is a directly referential term. The individual rather than the description ‘the speaker’ is part of the proposition.

Kaplan thinks that some sentences are contingently analytic. ‘I am not here now’ should always result in a false utterance. If ‘I’ picks outs the speaker and ‘here’ picks out the place of the utterance and ‘now’ picks out the time of the utterance, then necessarily the proposition will be true. The proposition itself is not a necessary truth. The character of the sentence is analytic in the sense that its meaning guarantees a truth but the content of what is expressed will be contingent. Thus Kaplan (1989, 540) describes ‘I am here now’ as contingently analytic. Indeed, he says Descartes’ cogito is analytic.

Deferred Utterances

David Kaplan is vexed by the “answering machine paradox”. When an answering machine says ‘I am not here now’ the utterance is normally an informative truth, not a self-defeating falsehood.

Alan Sidelle’s ingenious solution is that the recorded message is a “deferred utterance”. Instead of being uttered at the time of the recording, the message takes effect when a caller rings the telephone. ‘Now’ is therefore indexed to the time when the message is activated. Since the time of utterance is the time at which the call is made, ‘now’ is indexed to this later time.

On Sidelle’s analysis, Kaplan was right about the rule being that ‘now’ means the time of utterance. He was wrong about when the utterance must occur. Since utterances may be deferred, ‘I am here now’ is not a contingent a priori truth.

Can Kaplan escape the answering machine paradox by instead denying a truth-value to the recorded messages? No. Suppose that the owner of the answering machine is home but allows the machine to respond ‘I am not home now’. Sidelle characterizes this as lying (1991, 533).

Thus, one tells the truth when one’s answering machine plays ‘I’m not here now,’ and one is not at home, and to tell the truth is to make a true assertion. We can perform utterances at a distance . . . (1991, 534)

We can perform many other acts at a distance. After loading his clothes in a washing machine, Sidelle can hurry over to the supermarket. When he meets a friend there, Sidelle can explain his haste by reporting that he is doing his laundry.

Conditional Assertion

Although Alan Sidelle does not mention conditional assertion, deferred utterances can be considered a species of this genus. W. V. Quine credits the idea of conditional assertion to Philip Rhinelander:

An affirmation of the form ‘if p then q’ is commonly felt less as an affirmation of a conditional than as a conditional affirmation of the consequent. If, after we have made such an affirmation, the antecedent turns out true, then we consider ourselves committed
to the consequent, and are ready to acknowledge error if it proves false. If on the other hand the antecedent turns out to have been false, our conditional affirmation is as if it had never been made. (Quine 1950, 12)

The standard analogy is with a conditional bet. If the condition is not satisfied, then the whole thing is off. Commentators on conditionals have suggested that conditional assertion may help resolve the paradoxes of material implication, the raven paradox, and even provide a foundation for understanding all other types of conditionals (DeRose and Grandy 1999).

Deferred utterances can be reduced to conditional assertions. ‘I am not here now’ can be paraphrased as ‘If you are receiving this sentence, then I am not here now’. One might object that in a deferred utterance it is a matter of when the message will be received rather than if. But a traveling salesman can record ‘I am not here now’ on his hotel answering machine just to cover the possibility of a call. Every deferred utterance S that lacks an explicit antecedent has an elliptical antecedent; it is elliptical for ‘If you are receiving this sentence then S’.

A deferred utterance can itself be a conditional assertion. For instance, the answering machine could say ‘If you are calling about the picnic, it is cancelled because of the weather forecast.’ The reduction thesis says this is elliptical for a conditional assertion embedded in another conditional assertion. The reduction schema links the fate of conditional assertions to deferred utterances.

Post-mortem Assertions

If the owner of the answering machine dies, does he continue to make assertions through the machine? Sidelle imposes limits on some deferred utterances. If he finds an old note from his wife saying ‘I am at the store’, Sidelle (1991, 537) dismisses the deferred utterance as defunct. Does Sidelle think all deferred utterances expire with their speakers?

No. Sidelle points out that wills have sentences that are designed to be read after the speaker has died. Consider ‘If my nephew is by now no longer an alcoholic and a gambler, he receives one-sixth of my estate’:

It seems to me that the most natural, and perhaps necessary way of taking this is as an utterance by the writer of the will (to vouchsafe the reference of ‘my’), an utterance that takes place at the time of the reading of the will (to vouchsafe the reference of ‘now’) — and thus, an utterance which he makes after he is dead. Put so baldly, this sounds peculiar – but not if we understand it as a deferred utterance. If one can defer utterances, there is no reason why one cannot defer them until after one has expired. (1990, 526)

I agree with Sidelle’s conditional that if we can make deferred utterances, then we can make them after we are dead. But where he infers by modus ponens, I infer by modus tollens.

If a deferred utterance does not say anything prior to the time it takes effect, then it might as well be in a sealed envelope. The envelope would describe when the envelope was to be opened but contain no more information than this. All of Sidelle’s specimens, however, say something from their inception. This is especially vivid with wills. Octavian discredited Mark Anthony by
 divulging the contents of Mark Anthony’s will. Octavian was merely revealing what Mark Anthony had already said (especially his concessions to Cleopatra -- whom the Romans feared would become their queen).

The assertions contained in wills are deferred with respect to their institutional effects (principally the transfer of entitlements), not with respect to their status as assertions. President Richard Nixon announced his resignation on 8 August 1974. He remained president until the declaration went into effect the next day at 1 PM. Nixon could have deferred his declaration or deferred the institutional effect of his declaration (by designating a later ending for his presidency). He could even have composed a draft of the declaration and then submitted it as a written resignation. The declaration would then be dated to the time of submission. In the case of a will, one submits the document to a legal representative for safekeeping. Full disclosure of the document is generally scheduled after death. Since wills can be amended, death has the effect of finalizing what was last said.

When Nixon’s spokesman made remarks, Nixon was responsible for what the speaker said. But no one can assert by proxy. Nixon could not concede his loss to John F. Kennedy in 1960 by having his spokesman concede. The spokesman can only report Nixon’s concession. Nixon cannot confess to a crime by having his attorney confess to the crime. His attorney can only report Nixon’s confession.

Even autographs must be done in person. If Nixon orders his press secretary to autograph fan photographs, then he issues an impossible command. The best the press secretary can do is to forge Nixon’s signature. The problem is not that another agent has been inserted into the causal chain. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was criticized in 2004 for using an automatic signing machine to imprint his signature on condolence letters to families of slain soldiers. Bereaved families complained that signing a letter means personally signing it.

Advisors to the president can often predict what he will say. But their prediction of what the president will say tomorrow does not advance the date of his assertion. Assertion is a causal concept. For an utterance to be the president’s assertion it must originate or be sustained by the president’s mental states. Since the utterance must be an outward sign of the president’s inner psychology, there cannot be a significant time delay.

For legal purposes, we need a decisive interpretation of what counts as been said. These rules for accepting a remark as an assertion are often so esoteric as to create a resemblance to fiction. For instance, a man can avoid the charge of perjury by pointing out that the lies contained in his letter were never mailed (because the police interrupted his plan to mail the letter). The written lies are assertions but not in the eyes of the law.

Booby Traps and the Killing Paradox

Are all postmortem messages legal fictions? No, because some postmortem messages do not rely on any legal authority for their creation or sustenance. Herodotus (History, IV; 2) reports that the tomb of the Babylonian queen Nitocris bore the inscription “If any king of Babylon after
me should be short of money, he may open this tomb and take as much as he wants, but only if he really is in need of it.” The king of Persia, Darius I (550-486 BC) had conquered the Babylonian empire. Although wealthy, Darius thought it a shame to let riches go to waste. He opened Nitocris’ tomb. Instead of finding money, he found a second message beside the body of the queen: “If you had not been greedy of gold and fond of base gain, you would not have thought of ransacking the graves of the departed.” King Darius could not undo the insult by royal fiat.

Queen Nitocris’s insult was a literary extension of the booby trap. Tombs of the great are commonly portrayed as protected by covered pits, poison powders, and automatic crossbows.

There is a dilemma about dating the killing when the booby dies after the trapper. If the trapper killed the booby when the booby died, then the dead act. If the trapper killed the booby while the booby was still alive, then the booby was killed prior to the booby’s death!

Action theorists have proposed solutions to the killing paradox. Donald Davidson (1969) reduces actions to bodily movements. His answer to the riddle is that the trapper killed the booby when he set the booby trap. The booby was “dead on his feet”.

Sidelle must reject Davidson’s reductive unification. He must join the “action multipliers” who argue that agents perform new actions by virtue of the effects of their bodily movements. The action multiplier’s answer to the riddle is that the dead trapper kills the booby when the booby dies.

The trapper may kill again . . . and again . . . and again . . . . Given an endless sequence of boobies, the trapper can act endlessly, apparently drawing a vampire’s immortality from his victims. Some philosophers argue that death is bad because the dead can no longer act (Hetherington 2005, 217). But action multipliers, such as Sidelle, allow for an open sequence of postmortem deeds.

Some object that since the dead no longer exist there is no agent to be the killer. But Davidson’s solution would face a parallel problem when the booby is born after the death the trapper. Given that the booby does not exist before he is born, the trapper lacks a victim. Both unifier and multiplier must reject the principle that killing requires temporal overlap between killer and victim.

Scattered Events

In an earlier treatment of the killing paradox (Sorensen 1985) I characterized killing as a temporally scattered event. The first sub-event is the setting of the trap and the last sub-event is the death of the booby. The date for a scattered event must encompass all of its sub-events. There is a parallel requirement for scattered objects such as the United States. When asked ‘Where is the United States?’ you can answer ‘In the Northern Hemisphere’ because the Northern Hemisphere includes all of its parts. But you cannot answer ‘In North America’ because that leaves out the state of Hawaii (which is itself a scattered object). Unlike connected objects,
scattered objects fail to fully occupy their places. Although the United States includes Hawaii, none of its parts lie in the Pacific Ocean between California and Hawaii.

Scattered events, such as the dripping of the faucet, are also incomplete occupiers. They resemble “intermittent objects” because their stages are separated by temporal gaps.

My solution to the killing paradox is to reject the disjunction ‘Either the trapper killed the booby when he set the trap or he killed the booby when the booby died’. Since the killing is a scattered event, the killing incompletely occupies its available intervals. The killing has no parts during the interlude between the trapper’s bodily movements and the death of the booby. The serial trapper gains as much immortality from his killing of an endless sequence of boobies as he gets from any other postmortem effects. Which is to say, he gets no immortality at all.

The only peculiarity is that there is no complete date for the action. We can report when he set the trap but cannot report when he completed his killing spree (because he never does complete it). We can say that he killed after he decided to set up the booby trap. But we cannot find a time t to finish the sentence ‘The trapper killed the booby at time t’. Thus there are some events in time that cannot be completely dated.

When Sidelle explains to his friend at the supermarket that he is doing his laundry now, his ‘now’ spans the time from his past bodily movements to the future completion of the wash cycle. When Sidelle leaves a note on the washing machine ‘I am now at the supermarket’, his communication with the reader is a scattered event. The date of the communication must encompass both the composition of the note and its receipt. So we should not concede ‘Either he communicated with the recipient when he wrote the note or when the recipient read the note’. We must date the communication diffusely with a period that encompasses both events. However, the charitable reader of Sidelle’s note must choose a narrower period. Sidelle cannot be in two places at one time! Since indexing to the time the note was written yields a patent falsehood, the reader will index ‘now’ to the time he is reading the note.

The same broad intervals govern non-indexical bequests. Since the bequest is dated broadly, there is a living agent setting up the communication. It is false to date the bequest exclusively at the time that the will is read. That leaves out the act of composing the bequest.

Postmortem Interests

People wish to extend their influence into their postmortem future – well beyond the period in which they can actively participate. Thus they are drawn to projects that have post-mortem effects.
As noted in recent literature on the Non-Identity Problem (Parfit 1984, 351—355), each of us mightily affects the course of history. Just saying “Hello” to a man affects which of his millions of sperm will unite with the egg of his wife and thus affect the identity of his child. Our most casual effects ramify, ensuring that each us makes a bigger and bigger difference as time rolls on. We are far more powerful than is commonly assumed.

But mice have the same sort of ramifying influence over the future of mankind. Our interests in our postmortem futures go well beyond mere power. We want control. We are interested in the integrity of our effects.

Just as the graceful dance movements of a ballerina degenerate into disorganized heat, our effects dissolve into background noise. Special efforts are needed to keep our effects in a recognizable form. Ancient booby traps, for instance, wear out. They pose little danger to current archaelogists (contrary to the Indiana Jones movies).

The word is more enduring than the sword. The poetry of Quintus Ennius persists even though every sentence token he wrote has been destroyed. Those who hope to ease the sting of death by postmortem activity are well advised to try their hand at literature.

G. H. Hardy argued that mathematics provides a better opportunity for “immortality”. Mathematicians often use as epitaphs “eternal sentences” – so-called because their content does not vary with time and place. For instance, a diagram was etched onto Archimedes’ to convey the principle that the sphere has a volume and area in the same ratio as that of a circumscribed straight cylinder.

Archimedes will be remembered when Aeschylus is forgotten, because languages die and mathematical ideas do not. "Immortality" may be a silly word, but probably a mathematician has the best chance of whatever it may mean. (Hardy 1941, 21) Hardy underestimates the portability of poetry. Latin is a dead language but the poetry of Quintus Ennius has been translated into living languages.

More importantly, eternal sentences lack the element of audience participation. A sentence that uses the indexical ‘you’ acquires new content with each new occasion of use. It is nice to be remembered for an abstract theorem. But it is also nice, and often nicer, to make a personal impression.

Human beings fear being left behind and forgotten. This fear is rooted in our hunter-gatherer past. Hunter-gatherers survive by teamwork. They have intense attachments starting from their mothers. The top priority of a separated hunter-gatherer is to re-unite. There is an echo of this drive for reunion in the practice of co-burial. My friend Patrick Grim and his wife bought their tombstones early. They placed the monuments in their backyard to enjoy them while still alive. His tombstone says, “I’m with her”. Her tombstone says, “I’m with him”.

The second-best option for a separated hunter-gatherer is to join another group. There is an echo of this later drive in the extroversion of some epitaphs. From the grave, the outgoing dead hail strangers, offer advice or a humorous remark. People want to be friendly and useful. Old habits die hard.
Death is an irreversible form of separation. The prospect of death triggers the drive for reunion without any realistic hope of fulfilling the desire.

We plan by editing fantasy. Since the desire for postmortem reunion is impossible to fulfill, we get stuck at level of fantasy. The only scope for editorial work lies in literary effects such as consolation and the promotion of solidarity. Authors sometimes magnify these emotional effects by presenting their fiction as fact. For instance, J. R. R. Tolkien presents The Lord of the Rings as an historical account of the origin of man ’s dominion over the earth (written by a hobbit). Myths of an afterlife develop as people seek intersubjective validation of their fantasies.

Separation anxiety can also be channeled, more realistically, into services for those who come after our deaths. An author can have a rational desire to entertain and inform people who are spatially distant from him. He can also have these desires about people who are temporally distant. For instance, G. E. Moore arranged to have his nine notebooks (written informally from 1919-1953) published posthumously as the Commonplace Book. This was done partly for contemporaries who survived him but partly in the hope that his remarks would be of interest to future generations.

Displays

In addition to defending Moore, I am defending David Kaplan. I say Kaplan’s theory of indexicals only applies to assertions. The rules are more flexible for displays of sentences.

Displaying is compatible with asserting. We often assert by exhibiting a pre-fabricated sentence (as when the janitor posts the portable sign: WET FLOOR). But the user of the display has less control over the sentence and so he has less responsibility for what it says. When the janitor forgets to take down the sign, we do not regard him as lying.

People are responsible for the accuracy of their displays in the standoffish way clockmakers are responsible for the accuracy of clocks. Even a broken clock displays the correct time twice a day. The clockmaker must make his timepiece reliably display the correct time (when properly set and maintained). If the clock runs slow, then he is culpable for the inaccuracy but is not thereby a liar. The clockmaker is not asserting the incorrect time.

When the speaker asserts a proposition, he takes responsibility for it being true. This is how knowledge is transmitted by testimony. To stabilize the speaker’s knowledge claim, indexicals are indexed to his situation.

Speakers can abuse their authority. A deceptive asseder can cause his audience to mis-index his utterance (Weatherston 2002). Consider a wily phone caller who says ‘I am having a good time here’ while playing loud background music. The hearer is misled into believing ‘here’ refers to a lively bar. Actually ‘here’ refers to the caller’s apartment (where he is surreptitiously having a good time reading about indexicals).

This kind of deception is more difficult for displays. When there is no asseder to serve as an accessible, salient index for the indexicals, the hearer’s reasonable interpretation of the sentence
becomes the correct interpretation. The displayed message can be false even though the designer of the display intended an interpretation under which it would be true.

The speaker’s responsibility for the accuracy of a sentence display need not be any more focused than the clockmaker’s responsibility. Since the speaker leaves the scene, the hearer dominates displays.

Attempts to index a display in accordance with the speaker’s time of utterance often yield absurdity. When the Mission Impossible message concludes, “This tape will self-destruct in ten seconds” the hearer does not face any practical ambiguity about whether to relativize the future tense from the time of encoding or the time of decoding.

The displayer’s psychological relationship with his display can be quite remote. A responsible displayer is not required to know the proposition that will be expressed by the display. He need not even know which proposition will be expressed by the display. All he needs to know is that the display will express a true proposition. For instance, suppose Mr. French tells Mr. English to tell Mrs. French “Il pleut’. Mr. English does not know any French but he can memorize French sentences and does know that Mr. French is telling the truth. When Mr. English says “Il pleut’ to Mrs. French, he is not asserting “Il pleut’. He lacks the understanding needed for asserting “Il pleut’. Mr. English can assert the meta-linguistic statement ““Il pleut’ is true”. But that is a different remark.

Mr. English is not merely quoting the sentence. He is inviting Mrs. French to take it as a truth. Mr. English is displaying the sentence to Mrs. French.

Yul Brynner did not understand all semantic features of the sentence in his television commercial. In Kaplan’s terminology Brynner understands the character and part of the content. But he did not understand the content of “you’. Brynner could be sure that the sentence tokens in broadcast were going to be true. But he did not understand whom “you’ would refer to. Sentence meaning transcends speaker meaning.

Delegated Assertions

The Roman politician Scipio Nasica Serapio called upon his old friend Quintus Ennius only to be told by a slave that Quintus was not home. Nasica glimpsed the poet slip into a back room of the house. But Nasica said nothing and left. A week later Quintus Ennius went to visit Nasica. From behind the door, Nasica said “Not at home!”. Quintus chided him: “You can’t expect me to believe that—I recognize your voice.” Nasica retorted “Why, you are a nice fellow, I believed your slave, and you won’t believe me.” (Fadiman 1985, 493)

The slave’s assertion was not self-defeating. When Quintus says “I am not here now’ to his slave, the slave understands that he is to report “He is not here now’ to the caller. Thanks to the grammatical change to the third person, the content is no longer in the format of a pragmatic paradox (even though it is still false). Similar transformations can remove the paradoxical air of ‘I do not speak any English’, ‘I am a mute’, ‘I am dead’, ‘I am asleep’, ‘I do not exist’, and G. E. Moore’s ‘It is raining but I do not believe it’.
When the slave asserts the master’s falsehood, the slave lies. The master does not lie because he did not assert anything. After all, Quintus said nothing to Nasica. And Quintus did not assert anything to the slave (though he uttered a sentence that displayed the content of the lie he was ordering). Quintus shares responsibility for the slave’s lie because he instigated the deception. A man who never lies can be guilty of soliciting perjury.

Sidelle’s call screener is responsible when his answering machine falsely displays ‘I am not here now’. The call screener is deceiving the caller by letting the false message play. But nothing is being asserted, so there is no lie.

Like Quintus’ slave, the phone caller hears the unassertible sentence ‘I am not here now’. But pragmatic paradoxes are relative to an illocutionary force. ‘Never give advice’ is paradoxical as advice but not as an order. The very fact that ‘I am not here’ is a pragmatic paradox relative to assertion flags the sentence as a non-assertion. Metaphor works the same way. The speaker blocks a literal reading by blatant falsity (“Death has shaken out the sands of thy glass”) or by blatant triviality (“No man is an island”)

Charitable callers infer ‘I am not here now’ is merely being automatically displayed. Prank recordings deprive the caller of this clue: “Hello . . . I cannot hear you, please speak up . . . . That still is not loud enough . . . .”

If a sentence is merely quoted, the speaker is responsible for accurately reporting what was said, but not for the accuracy of the statement itself. If he asserts the sentence, then the speaker is fully responsible. If a speaker displays a sentence, he assumes an intermediate level of responsibility -- as reflected by our intermediate degree of resentment when we are misled by the displayed sentence.

Suppose I make a weather vane. I am not asserting anything when I engrave on the vane’s arm ‘The wind is blowing this way -->’. When I put the weather vane into service, the inscription will reliably convey much truth. When I consult the weather vane, I will not be consulting my own testimony.

Displays let us convey more truth than we can assert. We cannot assert when we are absent or asleep or dead. But we can display sentences that are reliably true.

Computer Messages

The reliability of displays can be underwritten by processes that have become technically sophisticated. In the Paleolithic era, hunter-gatherers displayed messages via intermediate speakers or by leaving a sign such as a broken branch to mark a trail. Natural regularities were also exploited (as when trappers use a flag that is raised by the movement of the captured animal).

With the advent of writing, more complicated messages could be left. These still exploit natural regularities. A sign on a door can display the conditional: ‘If this door is closed, then I am not here now ’.
Conjunctions of conditionals can also be displayed. As the number of conditionals increase, we group the connections in a contingency table. For instance, the trouble-shooting guide for my dishwasher lists each symptom along the rows and columns along with diagnoses in the corresponding cells.

When the conditionals become embedded in larger conditionals, a flowchart (such as those printed on tax forms) reduces the clutter. Nowadays many taxpayers buy computer software that “interviews” them like an accountant.

The scare quotes around “interview” mark the computer’s lack of psychological states. When my “Turbo Tax” program displays the tax I am to pay, the computer does not believe that this is the amount to be paid. Yet I readily project psychological states on to the computer. I make invidious comparisons between the cheerful warmth of the Turbo Tax persona and the cold impatience of “Helpline” bureaucrats at the Internal Revenue Service. The program is designed to play to the customer’s strength at interpreting of psychological states. Since computers have no psychology they do not assert anything. Yet the sentences they display are reliably true.

Programmers have some responsibility for a computer’s output. The Turbo Tax vendor promises to pay whatever fines the Internal Revenue Service imposes for errors that can be traced to the Turbo Tax software. When a programmed computer displays a false sentence, the programmer is often as deceived as the rest of us. The programmer is not engaged in self-deception. For the most part, programmers are only responsible for what computers do in the way clock manufacturers are responsible for the time displayed by their clocks.

Exogenous First Person Reference

Alan Sidelle’s appeal to deferred utterances only addresses anomalies concerning temporal indexicals such as ‘now’. Epitaphs also challenge the assumption that ‘I’ must refer to the speaker.

_Stranger by the roadside, do not smile_
_When you see this grave, though it is only a dog's,
My master wept when I died, and his own hand_
_Laid me in earth and wrote these lines on my tomb._

Here ‘I’ refers to a dog and the writer acknowledges in the epitaph itself that he is not the dog.

There are also epitaphs that challenge the assumption that ‘us’ always refers to a group that includes the speaker. There is a war memorial to commemorate the soldiers of the British 2nd Division who died in the Battle of Kohima in World War II. The memorial bears the inscription

_When You Go Home, Tell Them Of Us And Say,_
_For Their Tomorrow, We Gave Our Today._

The epitaph was composed by the classicist John Maxwell Edmonds (1875 -1958). Edmonds was not among the fallen. He was inspired by the Greek lyric poet Simonides of Ceos (556-468 BC) who wrote after the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC: "Go tell the Spartans, thou that passest by, That faithful to their precepts here we lie."
The dog epitaph shows that a thought that is normally expressed in the third person (‘He died’) can be cast, for rhetorical effect, in the first person (‘I died’). Exogenous first person reference can prevail against the wishes of the referent. When a prankster places an “I am a fool” placard on the back of his victim, the ‘I’ refers to the victim rather than the prankster – despite the fact that the author of the placard is obviously the victim, not the victim.

Greek playwrights used to enact farces over the graves of the illustrious dead. British comics could post a rain sensitive token of ‘It is raining but I do not believe it’ on G. E. Moore’s headstone in the St. Giles Cemetery (in which Wittgenstein is also buried). The inscription would become visible just when it is raining. French comics could do the same with Rene Descartes. His tombstone would sport the reverse cogito: I do not think, therefore, I am not.

The referent of ‘I’ can be obviously inanimate. In Ayr, Scotland, a southern pier of the Gadgirth bridge bears the inscription: "I was built by Mr. John Steele, of Gadgirth, in 1768.” Since it is common knowledge that bridges do not talk, we do not take the first person reference to be endogenous. (Rhetoricians call this form of personification ‘prosopopoeia’.)

The Kohima epitaph involves a transformation from the third person (‘They died’) into the first person plural (‘We died’). The epitaph writer deviates from the standard third person grammar to secure the intimacy of the first person construction.

The first person, present tense is twice as intimate as the third person, future tense. Compare the clinical ‘He will die’ with the arresting ‘I am dead’. Concrete demonstrations are more vivid than descriptions. Thus the epitaph of the architect Christopher Wren does not dryly report that he designed St. Paul’s Cathedral and is buried therein. His epitaph is an invitation to use your eyes: “Reader, if you seek his monument look around.”

Some of the dead prefer to keep their distance. They choose grammar that increases social distance. For instance, ‘I believe’ can be replaced with the more authoritative ‘We believe’ (intimating group support). Speakers have considerable license. But they can be challenged. When a young minister used ‘we’ to refer to himself, King Edward VII (1841-1910) rebuked him: “Only two people are permitted to refer to themselves as ‘We’—a king, and a man with a tapeworm inside him.” (Fadiman 1985, 185)

The Subjectivity of Scheduling

The constraints imposed by grammar are sensitive to background beliefs. St. Anselm conveys the atemporality of God in his Proslogian with syntax commensurate with his theology and his personal rapport with the Almighty: “You were not, therefore, yesterday, nor will You be tomorrow, but yesterday and today and tomorrow You are.” Similarly, those who think death is not the end of consciousness do say ‘I am dead’ after an apparently fatal event.

Alan Sidelle assumes that utterances can only be scheduled for release at a later date. It is true that we can only control the future. But what matters is the scheduler’s beliefs about what can be controlled. Consider an eccentric who believes he has constructed a time machine. He believes he can send a small slip of paper back to the eighteenth century at an address of his
choosing. He is unsure exactly *when* the message will arrive. To ascertain the precise arrival date, he addresses a message to the curator of the British Museum: ’I do not yet exist but I will later invent a time machine. Please make a note of when you received this message and file it in your archives for my future consultation’. The “inventor” then strolls over to the British Museum to recover his prenatal message.

Re-classification and Re-assembly

The negative part of my paper is a sweeping rejection of conditional assertions and deferred utterances. I reason: If there are conditional assertions, then there are deferred utterances. If there are deferred utterances, then there are postmortem assertions. But postmortem assertions are impossible (by virtue of the Moorean absurdity of statements such as ‘I am dead’). Therefore, deferred assertions and conditional assertions are impossible.

But what am I to say about statements that are misclassified into these impossible categories? Compare me to a paleontologist who challenges the reconstruction of fossil bones into an elasmosaurus. The challenger grants that the dinosaur fossils are genuine and interesting. But he argues that the creature, as assembled, is anatomically impossible.

I agree that the specimens furnished by Philip Rhinelander and Alan Sidelle are instructive. I disagree about which lessons are to be drawn from then.

I say first that “conditional assertions” are not conditionals. They are categorical assertions presented as if they were conditionals. Conditional constructions are politer than flat assertions. If J. L. Austin tells his guest ‘There are biscuits in the sideboard if you want them’ and there are no such biscuits, then what he said was false – even if his guest did not want the biscuits. Genuine conditionals are never falsified solely by the falsehood of their consequents.

Politeness also leads us make assertions with the rising intonation pattern of an interrogative. In a similar spirit, we substitute questions for imperatives. When I ask ‘Can you pass the salt?’ I am not really curious about whether you are able to perform the feat. I am indirectly requesting that you pass the salt to me. That is why it is acceptable to insert ‘please’: Can you please pass the salt?’.

A polite way of issuing an imperative is to inquire into the preparatory conditions of obeying that imperative. Similarly, the antecedents of conditional assertions often concern the preparatory conditions for assertion. They orbit Grice’s conversational maxims of quantity, quality, relevance, and brevity.

As for Alan Sidelle’s examples of “deferred utterances”, I say they fall into two interesting classes. The first are genuine assertions that defer institutional effects. The second are displays.

Assertions may have evolved from displays as our ancestors became more refined consumers of information (Craig 1990). Hearers seek out good informants. They look for some property that will help them discern informants. This property is knowledge. Once the market for knowledge is recognized, people will begin to advertise themselves as knowers. They begin to assert propositions that purport to reveal their mental state of knowledge.
Displays lack this psychological sophistication but are still a potent source of information. Technological advances have conferred new versatility and reliability on displays. With the advent computers, the displays seem to be artificially developing into assertions. Alan Turing conjectured that computers would have mental states by the year 2000. His test for whether a computer is thinking is whether it could pass for a human being in a dialogue with interrogators who were trying to sort people from computers just by conversation.

John Searle (1980) objected to Turing’s test by imagining himself in the role of the computer. He is given a batch of Chinese symbols and a manual for transforming them into other batches of Chinese symbols. The inputs are the Chinese interrogator’s questions and the outputs are Searle’s “answers”. The answers may be good enough to pass Turing’s test. But this verbal behavior would not suffice to make Searle a speaker of Chinese. Searle’s messages are displays rather than assertions.

The dead cannot make new assertions. Before death, people can set up reliable sentence displays. These sentence displays do not satisfy the psychological prerequisites for being assertions. But displays are often presented as assertions. Switching to the first person and the present tense can magnify the rhetorical effect of this illocutionary guise. Videographers are further enhancing displays. Computers will further magnify the intimacy and the flexibility of displays. But none of this will break the fundamental silence of the dead.

References
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