

Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy

Volume 2, Number 6

Editor in Chief

Mark Textor, King's College London

Editorial Board

Juliet Floyd, Boston University

Greg Frost-Arnold, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Ryan Hickerson, University of Western Oregon

Henry Jackman, York University

Sandra Lapointe, McMaster University

Chris Pincock, Ohio State University

Richard Zach, University of Calgary

Production Editor

Ryan Hickerson

Editorial Assistant

Daniel Harris, CUNY Graduate Center

Design

Douglas Patterson and Daniel Harris

Martin Gustafsson and Richard Sørli, editors. *The Philosophy of J. L. Austin*. Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2011. ISBN: 9780199219759

Reviewed by Claudia Bianchi

Review: *The Philosophy of J. L. Austin*, edited by Martin Gustafsson and Richard Sørli

Claudia Bianchi

John Austin has had a strange fate: much revered during his lifetime, he was almost forgotten after his death, to the point that his work is still inadequately known and largely underestimated. Many factors contributed to such a fate. During his teaching in Oxford he was celebrated for his extraordinary personality and innovative philosophical method: for Austin, philosophy was not an endeavour to be pursued privately, but a collective effort, as exemplified by his legendary “Saturday mornings”. However his method was better suited for discussion than for publication, and his philosophical talent more fully appreciated in private conversations. Moreover we owe to Searle and Grice many of the developments of Austin’s ideas in speech act theory and pragmatics: as Martin Gustafsson writes in his excellent Introduction, “it seems fair to say that their works have contributed more than anything else to the general sense that Austin’s endeavours have become outdated” (p. 16).

In recent times this situation has changed. Nowadays Austin is studied in research fields as diverse as philosophy of language, linguistics, epistemology, philosophy of action, ethics, legal theory, political thought and feminist philosophy. The collection of essays edited by Martin Gustafsson and Richard Sørli (“the first collection of essays on Austin’s philosophy published by a major Anglophone press in almost forty years”, p. 3) is another indication of this Austinian renaissance. The eight essays and the Introduction focus on Austin’s place in philosophy, epistemological issues (scepticism, epistemology of testimony, contextualism) and Aus-

tin’s work on truth. In what follows, I will offer a concise sketch of each essay, before concluding with some critical remarks.

Martin Gustafsson in the Introduction (“Inheriting Austin”) and Simon Glendinning in Chapter 2 (“Unmasking the Tradition”) situate Austin among his contemporaries and within Western philosophy at large, showing both the continuity and the originality of his approach to philosophy. The British philosopher was deeply dissatisfied with both the traditional way of doing philosophy and with Logical Positivism. In particular, his dissatisfaction was directed towards a way of practicing philosophy which, in his view, was responsible for the production of tidy dichotomies, oversimplifications and dogmatic schemes of thought. As a consequence, he developed a new philosophical methodology and style, which became paradigmatic of Ordinary Language Philosophy. According to Austin, within ordinary language are deposited all the distinctions and connections established by human beings, as if our words in their daily uses “had stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest” (Austin 1956/1961, 182). To be sure, this is not a new methodology in the history of philosophy (consider, for instance, Socratic questioning); yet, this strategy was carried out by Austin with exceptional care and conceived as a collective endeavour.

Chapters 3 to 6 are devoted to epistemological issues. Mark Kaplan in Chapter 3 (“Tales of the Unknown: Austin and the Argument from Ignorance”) and Adam Leite in Chapter 4 (“Austin, Dreams, and Scepticism”) focus on scepticism, and its relation with our ordinary judgements. Kaplan’s essay is the latest of a series of papers devoted to a defence of Austin’s approach to the theory of knowledge as an epistemology true to our ordinary practices. Drawing partially on his previous work, Kaplan here examines a particular variety of what DeRose calls the argument from Ignorance, in order to show that the dichotomy between what one knows and what one doesn’t know is not exhaustive: the adoption

of an Austinian methodology severely undermines sceptical arguments about knowledge. Leite examines a different argument for scepticism, the dream argument: he shows how Austin challenges global scepticism not only with a linguistic strategy, but also with factual claims regarding our ordinary epistemic procedures. In Chapter 5 (“Believing what the Man Says about his own Feelings”), Benjamin McMyler offers an innovative reading of “Other Minds” not only as an essay on the problem of other minds, but also as a work on the epistemology of testimony. In particular, McMyler addresses the Austinian analogy between “I know” and “I promise”, trying to clarify what constitutes the justification of testimonial knowledge – a justification grounded on its essentially interpersonal character. In Chapter 6 (“Knowing Knowing (that Such and Such)”) Avner Baz questions a well-established claim in both contemporary philosophy of language and epistemology, namely that Austin was a contextualist, or at least the forefather (along with Wittgenstein) of contextualism. Baz shows that contextualists and anti-contextualists share the idea that the basic role of “knowing that” is to enable us to *represent* people as knowing this or that. The accent placed on truth-conditions domesticates the Austinian perspective: according to Austin, our everyday epistemological claims are expressive of and answerable to the participants’ “intents and purposes” – those often involving not truth and falsity, but competence, reasonableness and responsibility.

In Chapter 7 (“Truth and Merit”) – an ideal, partial reply to Baz – Charles Travis concentrates on Austin’s conception of truth. Travis underlines that truth/falsity is simply one among many dimensions of evaluation. Statements, as traditionally conceived, are abstractions: stating something is instead just “offering a guide to treating things” (p. 192). The relation between the conceptual (statements) and the non-conceptual (state of affairs) cannot be fixed once and for all: in applying a statement we must exercise

the same sensibility and the same virtues we use in giving advice or issuing verdicts. In a similar vein, Jean-Philippe Narboux (Chapter 8, “There’s Many a Slip between Cup and Lip’: Dimension and Negation in Austin”) examines Austin’s claim that truth and falsity, and felicity and infelicity are on a par as dimensions of evaluations of utterances. In so doing, he underlines the often neglected systematic character of Austin’s work – of his approach and his conceptual tools.

The major value of this collection is unquestionably that of providing an overview of the complexity and variety of Austin’s contributions to philosophy, too often circumscribed to speech act theory, and to his method of ‘linguistic phenomenology’. And yet one feels that something is missing from this very fine volume. It is undeniable that the standard picture of Austin as the doyen of Ordinary Language Philosophy and the founder of speech act theory “hides from view the diversity and variation that are in fact prominent characteristic of [Austin’s philosophical landscape]” (Gustafsson, p. 1). Choosing not to include in the collection a single contribution to speech act theory is, however, at best controversial. Even more so if one claims – as Gustafsson does in the section of his Introduction devoted to Austin’s legacy – that there are still philosophers that “treat Austin as a philosopher to think with, rather than as a respectable but obsolete precursor” (p. 17), such as William Alston and Marina Sbisà (Alston 2000, Sbisà 2007, 2009, 2013), and furthermore that there is at least “a contemporary philosophical debate in which Austin still figures as a living and direct source of influence”, (p. 18), namely the discussion on pornography and free speech. Indeed the debate on free speech, pornography and censorship is one of the most remarkable current applications of speech act theory (cf. Hornsby 1993, Hornsby & Langton 1998, Langton 1993, 2009, Bianchi 2008, Langton, Haslanger and Anderson 2012). Catharine MacKinnon’s claim that *pornography subordinates women* (MacKinnon 1987) has been defended

by Rae Langton and Jennifer Hornsby in terms of speech acts: works of pornography can be understood as *illocutionary acts*. Pornography *subordinates* women by conditioning people to regard women as willing sexual objects; it *silences* women by creating a communicative environment that deprives women of their illocutionary potential. Against the liberal defence of pornography as a form of expression (a simple form of locution), Langton and Hornsby argue that pornography does more than simply *express*; it acts to silence the expressions of women (a form of illocution), thereby restricting their freedom of speech. The debate on free speech and pornography is, then, an excellent example of a domain where “most participants actually read and discuss what Austin says, treating his writings as texts from which there is still something important to learn” (p. 18).

Such remarks notwithstanding, this is an extremely rich and fascinating collection, questioning the generally received picture of Austin, filled with suggestions and innovative analyses of his work. I agree with what is said in the Introduction, that our temporal distance from Austin (and his students and colleagues) can truly be a blessing: the consequences and import of his philosophy can be better understood in light of its recent applications and developments. Once more, a careful analysis of the things we, as philosophers, do with Austin’s words helps to clarify an extensive variety of contemporary issues.

Claudia Bianchi

Faculty of Philosophy
Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele,
Milano, Italy
claudia.bianchi@univr.it

References

- J. L. Austin. A Plea for Excuses. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 57, 1–30: 1956. Reprinted in Austin 1961, 175–204.
- J. L. Austin. *Philosophical Papers*. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, editors, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961. 3rd Edition, 1979.
- J. L. Austin. *How to Do Things with Words*. J. O. Urmson and M. Sbisà, editors, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2nd edition, 1975.
- C. Bianchi. Indexicals, speech acts and pornography. *Analysis* 68 (4): 310–316, 2008.
- J. Hornsby. Speech Acts and Pornography. *Women’s Philosophy Review* 10: 38–45, 1993.
- J. Hornsby and R. Langton. Free Speech and Illocution. *Legal Theory* 4: 21–37, 1998.
- M. Kaplan. To What Must an Epistemology Be True?. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61 (2): 279–304, 2000.
- M. Kaplan. Austin’s Way with Skepticism. In *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, J. Greco, editor. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 348–371, 2008.
- R. Langton. Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22: 293–330, 1993.
- C. MacKinnon. Francis Biddle’s Sister. In MacKinnon, C. 1993, *Only Words*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 163–97, 1987.

- R. Langton, S. Haslanger, and L. Anderson. Language and Race. In *Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, G. Russell and D. Graff Fara, editors. Routledge, 753–67, 2012.
- M. Sbisà. How to Read Austin. *Pragmatics* 17, 461–73, 2007.
- M. Sbisà. Uptake and Conventionality in Illocution. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 5 (1), *Special Issue on Speech Actions*, 33–52, 2009.
- M. Sbisà. Locution, Illocution, Perlocution. In *Pragmatics of Speech Actions, Handbooks of Pragmatics (HoPs)*, Vol. 2, M. Sbisà and K. Turner, editors, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 25–75, 2013.