

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

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As noted in its introduction, this is “the first collection of essays on Austin’s philosophy published by a major Anglophone press in almost forty years.” (p.3) It’s a good question why that should be. The writings of Paul Grice and John Searle would certainly figure in an explanation, both because of their general criticisms of Austin’s work and because the work that they erected on its basis has seemed to many to make the basis obsolete. But as ever the full explanation is likely to be complex, and to include the fact, also noted in the introduction, that much of Austin’s contribution to philosophy was made behind closed doors. (pp.3–5) As a natural corollary to the first question, we might ask whether this collection fills a needed gap in the market. More specifically, have we progressed so far beyond mid-twentieth century Oxford philosophy that Austin’s work is, at best, of merely historical interest? The essays collected here provide good evidence that we have not. They indicate that, when carried out with appropriate care, engagement with Austin’s work has the potential to be of continuing relevance to contemporary discussions.

The eight essays, including a fine introduction by Martin Gustafsson, form natural pairs. In what follows, I’ll provide a brief overview of three of the pairs, before looking in slightly more detail at the remaining pair.

Gustafsson’s introduction and “Unmasking the Tradition” by Simon Glendinning discuss Austin’s general approach to philosophical questions. (In addition, the introduction discusses how we should approach Austin’s work and how it has continued to figure in more recent work.) Glendinning characterises Austin’s approach to tradition-bound discussions of philosophical issues as involving Disengagement: “first, the refusal to engage on the terrain of and, second, the refusal uncritically to employ the terms of the traditional account.” (p.38) Glendinning usefully explains how, from the perspective that he recommends, certain types of objection can be seen as point-missing.

“Believing what the Man Says about his own Feelings” by Benjamin McMyler and “Knowing Knowing (that Such and Such)” by Avner Baz attend to interactions between the concept of knowledge and some of the speech acts we perform by saying of someone that they know. Both authors depart self-consciously from the letter of Austin’s texts. McMyler provides a useful attempt charitably to reconstruct Austin’s puzzling comparison, in the essay “Other Minds”, of uses of the expression “I know” with uses of the expression “I promise”. The reconstruction exploits Austin’s more careful later work on speech acts in order to suggest that Austin’s central aim, in making the comparison, was to characterise the type of commitment one takes on when one tells someone something. McMyler also provides an insightful account of how Austin seeks to connect knowledge acquired from testimony with knowledge of others’ minds. Baz claims that what speakers are doing when they say of someone that they know

that such and such—precisely which illocutionary act they are performing—is more closely connected with how we should go about describing and evaluating their performance than is acknowledged in contemporary accounts. Although many contemporary accounts allow that the surrounding intents and purposes of speaker or subject can figure in determining the conditions in which it would be true for the speaker to say that the subject knows, Baz thinks that such accounts do not go far enough. According to Baz, many of the things we do when we say someone to know something preclude assessment of what we say as true or false. Baz doesn't claim strict precedent for his view in Austin's work. His view instead seems to be driven by reflection on cases in which saying that someone knows such-and-such is naturally construed as, for example, a rebuke. I wasn't myself convinced by the cases that Baz presents, in part because it wasn't clear to me why one would seek to rebuke someone by saying that they know such and such if one didn't think that it was true that they know such and such.

"Truth and Merit" by Charles Travis and "There's Many a Slip between Cup and Lip: Dimension and Negation in Austin" by Jean-Philippe Narboux seek to connect Austin's work on truth, and other related dimensions of assessment of things we say or think, with Frege's work. Travis argues that, despite appearances, the most important elements in Austin's and Frege's views are compatible with one another. Narboux, by contrast, argues that Austin's work constitutes a radical critique of Frege's. It seemed to me that Travis' discussion turned on reading Frege as allowing that linguistic meaning can fail to determine expressed thought, while Narboux's depended on Frege disallowing that. The essays both indicated ways in which re-assessing Austin's work might depend upon, and perhaps motivate, the re-evaluation of other figures in the tradition.

"Tales of the Unknown: Austin and the Argument from Ignorance" by Mark Kaplan and "Austin, Dreams, and Scepticism" by Adam Leite concern Austin's way with specific forms of sceptical argument. Although they disagree about what that way is, both think that it is effective. They are therefore required to respond to influential objections to Austin's approach to anti-sceptical arguments as found, for example, in the work of Barry Stroud (1984). Stroud's central objection was that Austin's focus on our ordinary use of talk about knowledge meant that he failed adequately to address the most pressing form of sceptical argument. In particular, it is possible to explain why we would ordinarily judge someone to know something even if, as the sceptic contends, they do not in fact know it if, as the sceptic also contends, our ordinary judgments reflect only imperfectly our concept of knowledge. That might be so, for example, if our judgments are explained, not only by our concept of knowledge, but also by practical exigencies of speaking and judging. And it might be so, for another example, if certain commitments built into our concept of knowledge are only revealed in the course of reflecting on sceptical arguments.

Kaplan's piece focuses on a specific case of the argument from ignorance. We ordinarily think that a suitably equipped person might come to know, on the basis of seeing a bird in a tree, that it is a goldfinch. According to Kaplan that seems to be so even if, on the same basis, the person would not be in a position to know that what they see is not a stuffed goldfinch. (We can assume for present purposes either that a stuffed goldfinch is not a goldfinch, or that what the person

comes to know is that it is a live goldfinch.) And yet the person might know that if what they see is a goldfinch, then it is not a stuffed goldfinch. As Kaplan reads him, Austin agrees. In order to defend the three claims, Kaplan argues, Austin should be read holding that someone can know that p and know that if p , then q , without it being the case *either* that they know that q *or* that they don't know that q . Kaplan also responds to Stroud's worry that our judgments in this area might reflect our concept of knowledge only imperfectly. His response is that the only way to determine which of our judgments reflect our concept is to do our best to take as many of them as possible into account.

Leite disagrees with Kaplan's reading of Austin. On Leite's alternative reading, a person who knows that p and knows that if p , then q might lack *independently grounded* knowledge that q , but would nonetheless be in a position to know that q on the basis of their knowing that p . As Kaplan and Leite accept, it is hard to decide which of these options Austin would have accepted, if either. Further interpretative work, including further assessment of the two options, is warranted. Both options should find a place in further work in this area.

In addition, Leite defends a more general principle on Austin's behalf, and argues that it can figure in a viable response to some forms of scepticism:

If one recognises that there is no reason in favour of some possibility that would undermine one's authority, competence, or reliability regarding a certain domain, then (other things being equal) one may reasonably believe things in that domain even if one lacks independent grounds for believing that the possibility does not obtain, and one may reasonably dismiss as groundless the suggestion that it does obtain. (p.94)

Suppose that the principle were correct. In that case, Leite argues, it would sustain a response to certain forms of scepticism. The forms to which it would sustain a response appeal to the possibility of cases in which our experiences would be indistinguishable from our present experiences and yet our beliefs about our environments based on those experiences would be false. Because such cases would be experientially indistinguishable from our present case, our experience couldn't make available to us reasons in favour thinking that we are in such a case. Hence, Leite claims, the principle makes it reasonable to believe that things are as we ordinarily take them to be.

I think the sceptic—and Stroud—might reasonably offer either of two responses. The first response would be to challenge Leite's general principle. The second, more interesting response would be to accept the principle while challenging Leite's application of it. For although it's plausible that it would be impossible to recognise reason in favour of our being in one of the sceptic's cases, it doesn't follow that we are in a position to recognise, positively, that there is no such reason in favour of that possibility. Indeed, Stroud's (1984 pp.67ff.) case of the aircraft spotters has precisely that shape: the spotters' ignorance of a distinction amongst F-planes and G-planes means that it is impossible for them to recognise reason to think that a plane is a G rather than an F. Nonetheless, they are equally foreclosed from recognising that there is no reason to think that a plane is a G rather than an F. For all they can tell, there might be.

I hope to have given a flavour of some of the work in this useful and timely collection.

References

Stroud, B. 1984. *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.