J. L. Austin: Knowing in the Round

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J. L. Austin, the British philosopher, returned from his experience serving in the British Intelligence Corps during the Second World War with the conviction that philosophy, like intelligence, could be a more collective endeavour. Austin hoped that if philosophers focused on the ways we ordinarily think and talk about particular cases, they might work together to assemble a set of agreed starting points. Intelligence work also raises, in stark form, questions that each of us faces every day, now more than ever in the age of "fake news": which sources can we rely on, and with respect to which topics?

One of Austin's most famous essays, "Other Minds", published in 1946, explores the fine line between gullibility—simply accepting whatever we are told—and unreasonable caution—refusing to accept anything without proof—by describing how we might react if someone claimed that a goldfinch was nearby. Our first reaction might be to ask, "How do you know?" Our acceptance of their claim will depend on their ability to answer this question.

From this relatively simple question about how someone knows whether a goldfinch is near, traditional philosophy takes flight. Besides questioning how we know what makes something a goldfinch—its behavior, its markings, what it eats, its red head—philosophers also question how we know that seeing is a way of knowing, how we can be certain we aren't dreaming, and so forth. Our inability to answer such questions definitively leads some philosophers to suggest that we don't know. In doing so, they are like the unreasonably cautious person who refuses to accept anything they're told without proof. Austin instead argues that our ordinary practice is less demanding. "Enough is enough: it doesn't mean everything," he writes. "Enough means enough to show that (within reason, and for presents intents and purposes) it 'can't' be anything else, there is no room for an alternative, competing, description of it. It does *not* mean, e.g., enough to show it isn't a *stuffed* goldfinch."

Austin's thought is that although someone who claims to know that there is a goldfinch should be able to say how they know, they needn't be able to provide others with proof. In a case in which

I. You know that there's a goldfinch,

the fact that our practice is to ask how someone knows supports the claim that:

> II. If you know that there's a goldfinch, then you can show that there's a goldfinch.

You are able to meet that requirement, Austin thinks, even if

> III. You can't show that what's there isn't stuffed.

It's at this point that the traditional philosopher might seize their chance to challenge our claim to know. They will point out that, if we accept II, we should also accept IV:

> IV. If you know that what's there isn't stuffed, then you can show that what's there isn't stuffed.

But according to claim III, you can't show this. III and IV together lead to another conclusion:

> V. You don't know that what's there isn't stuffed.

The traditional philosopher will then then note that

> VI. You know that if there is a goldfinch, then what's there isn't stuffed.

They will argue that you can use deduction to take claim VI further. If (I) you know that there's a goldfinch, and (VI) you know that if there's a goldfinch, then what's there isn't stuffed, then, by deduction,

> VII. You know that what's there isn't stuffed.

V contradicts VIII. At least one of the claims must be rejected.

Austin isn't explicit about which of these claims he rejects, and the question has been contested by philosophers. One suggestion is that Austin would reject VII: although deduction is often a way of extending knowledge, perhaps it isn't in this case.

An alternative is that Austin invites us to reconsider the general claim that "if you know, you can show." I, VI, and VII all indicate that one can use knowledge that there is a goldfinch to know that what's there isn't stuffed. But III, which denies that one can show that what's there isn't stuffed, suggests that Austin has something more specific in mind about the way we know. Perhaps Austin is proposing that it isn't invariably true that knowing something means you can show something without some presupposition—for example, that if you know that what is there isn't stuffed, then you can say how you know without appealing to your knowledge that it's a goldfinch. Put another way, one who knows needn't be able to provide others with proof. It's reasonable to expect those who claim to know to be able to say something about how they know, but it would be overly cautious to expect them to be able to provide independent responses to all imaginable challenges.

Austin was honoured for his intelligence work with an Order of the British Empire, the French Croix de Guerre, and the U.S. Officer of the Legion of Merit. It's been said that, "he more than anybody was responsible for the life-saving accuracy of the D-Day intelligence." As in his intelligence work, he sought to bring general philosophical claims into contact with our ordinary judgements about specific cases. His

hope was that philosophers working together on the collection and analysis of such data might achieve the same sort of progress as his wartime intelligence operations. Even philosophers who don't accept Austin's more specific claims are now liable to be more sensitive than his predecessors to the need for philosophical views to connect with ordinary thinking. But reflection on the details of his work can also help us to think about how we can navigate between the extremes of unreasonable caution and gullibility. There is no infallible method for telling real news apart from fake, but discerning application of the question, "How do you know?" can help.