J. L. AUSTIN AND THE WAY OF THE WORDS

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The death of J. L. Austin ** in 1960, at the height of his powers, has deprived contemporary philosophy of one of its intellectual glories and one of its acute thinkers. No philosopher had been, since the end of the last war, the most original, the most exact. He has not written much; *** he believed that there were too many articles and books in philosophy. But his influence among the middle generation of Anglo-American philosophers was most powerful and pervasive; and in recent years—articles and comments in philosophical journals are replete with, as one might put it, cells and pockets of Austinian thinking.

In now attempting to characterize and describe his distinctive qualities as a philosopher, we shall, unfortunately, be obliged to ignore the richly and variously active setting in which his philosophical work was done; and thus, though perhaps we can state his leading ideas, we cannot hope to make properly clear, or anything like it, the reasons for, or the force of, their philosophical impact.

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*** Most of Austin's previously published work has been republished in PHILOSOPHICAL PAPERS, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961. Following references will be to this book. Italics are Austin's unless indicated. Two other books were posthumously published: *Sense and Sensibilia*, reconstructed from the manuscript notes by G. J. Warnock, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962 and *How to do Things with Words* (William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955), ed. J. O. Urmson, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962. The editors are gratefully commended for making accessible to students of philosophy these works of a highly remarkable man.

However, there are at least two Austin publications of some philosophical interest, which are not translations or reviews and which are not published in his *Papers*. This was brought to attention recently by Hugo A. Bedau (of which the following accounts are due him) in a note to *Mind*, Vol. 74 (April, 1965), p. 252. One is his "Report on *Analysis* Problem No. 1," (What sort of "if" is the "if" in "I can if I chose") which appeared in *Analysis*, June, 1952 pp. 125-6. The other and more substantial is his discussion outline accompanying the lecture he gave before the American Society of Political and Legal Philosophy in December 1958, "Three Ways of Spilling Ink," in *Authority* (*Nomos* III), ed. Carl Friedrich, New York, Liberal Arts Press, 1960, pp. 305-8. Readers may sometime wish to consult these papers. Neither has been mentioned in any of the obituaries: by J. O. Urmson in *Analysis*, 1960; by H. L. A. Hart in *Oxford Magazine*, 1960; by Stuart Hampshire in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1960.

(Austin's "Performative-Constative," translated by G. J. Warnock, has been published in *Philosophy and Ordinary Language*, ed. Charles E. Caton, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1963, pp. 22-33, including Austin's comments on the discussion, pp. 33-53, *passim*.)

The first point, though fundamental, is strikingly and remarkably flat: Austin believed that philosophical problems could be solved. Does not every philosopher believe that? Well, no; as we shall mention later; some certainly do not. And even those who would say that they do believe it hold to their belief, one may say, in the face of the evidence. For the evidence seems to be that, except in small matters, no one in philosophy is ever really right. Students and teachers are so much preoccupied with pointing out the errors that Plato and Aristotle made, that Kant or Bradley made, that Russell has made; and the pattern, at a humbler level, for many an instance of philosophical discussions, is that a paper is read, an answerer points out mistakes contained in the paper, and discussion then reveals what mistakes the answerer has made. Nothing, it sometimes seems, or nothing of much importance, can ever be put aside as settled, accepted, agreed on, the right answer known.

Most of us in this predicament just soldier on, hoping, presumably, that one day the tide will turn. But Austin, like Kant in a similar situation, stood back for a closer look at the predicament itself. Why should it be that, although in a way we do make some progress, we seem not really able to get anything settled? His answer, less ambitious than Kant's, was that we are unclear; we are careless and inaccurate; we are confused. But why? And his answer to that was: we are impatient. We insist on discussing large problems, on propounding adventurous general theses, on aiming at wide, profound, comprehensive truths. This is all very well; but the topics selected for philosophical attention—as, for example, perception, knowledge, human conduct, morality, the mind, responsibility—are as philosophers themselves can hardly help sometimes noticing, topics of immense complexity and elaboration. To rush into the field, then, armed with two or three distinctions and a doctrine or two, is to invite the fate which indeed is usually encountered—that of being brought down by the intricate maze of tripwires at which, head in air, one has never even looked. Thirty-five years or so ago, the Logical Positivists preached, and in their own dogmatic style practiced, the gospel of clarity. Before long some other philosophers were heard to complain that clarity is not enough. "Perhaps it will be time," Austin said, "to go into that when we are within measurable distance of achieving clarity on some matter." [1]

Austin then, first of all, was unique among philosophers in his estimate of the proper pace of philosophical enquiry. He wanted, as he put it, to "hound down the minutiae," to get the details right

[1] Cf. *Philosophical Papers*, p. 137.

—really right, so right that everyone could agree and go on safely to something else. People observed with astonishment that he was willing to talk about one small point for a whole day, or even, off and on, for a whole term or a year; at this rate, they thought, it will take twenty or thirty years before we can come out with an answer to our large problem. To this Austin would have said: why not? Why suppose that large problems can be settled quickly? The whole history of philosophy surely shows that they cannot be; and would not the achievement—the almost unique achievement—of a solution repay the patience of twenty years' work? Ideally—and this too is a highly novel idea—Austin would have wished philosophers, like scientists, to co-operate in private instead of quarrelling in public, to correct each other's mistakes before and not after they were published to the world. If one has any faith in the idea that truths are attainable by rational enquiry, two heads, or several heads, are surely better than one; for our own eyes are blind precisely to our own mistakes; it is as critics of others that, often, we are most acute.

What, then, were the details that Austin was so relentlessly determined to get right? They are details about *the uses of words and phrases*. Why was this? Austin himself gave a short, clear answer—not, of course, the complete answer—to this question. This is what he said: [2]

> First, words are our tools, and, as a minimum, we should use clean tools: we should know what we mean and what we do not, and we must forearm ourselves against the traps that language sets us. Secondly, words are not (except in their own little corner) facts or things: we need therefore to prise them off the world, to hold them apart from and against it, so that we can realize their inadequacies and arbitrariness, and can re-look at the world without blinkers. Thirdly, and more hopefully, our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any that you or I are likely to think up in our armchairs of an afternoon—the most favoured alternative method.

There are several points worth noticing about this. First, Austin conspicuously did not seek to justify his preoccupation with words, as some would do, by appeal to any general doctrine about the nature of philosophical problems. He had no such doctrine. He did not say, for example: we must concern ourselves with language because philosophical problems are themselves linguistic. Philosoph-

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 129-30.

ical problems are, as he knew very well, markedly various in origin, history, and character. But in any case, we had better discuss them now with "clean tools"; we had better find out what distinctions and assimilations our language provides us with; and we had better seek to use "a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena." [3] If—but also *only* if—our words are clear, we look *through* them without distortion at the matter in hand. If we can really sort out, for example, such nouns as "intention," "motive," "purpose"; such verbs as "intend," "attempt," "decide," and "choose"; and such adverbs as "accidentally," "knowingly," "deliberately," "inadvertently," "by mistake"; then we shall know, not everything, but a lot more about, we shall grasp much better the complexity of, that very complex phenomenon, human behaviour.

In the course of these and other such enquiries we shall learn a good deal about words; but to learn that is already to learn something of what we use words to talk about. To notice how unexpectedly various and subtle are the resources of our vocabulary is to notice also how many, and how various, are the aspects and facets of the facts themselves; it is to notice also in how many ways, often far from apparent, our interests, our powers, and even our disabilities, may shape our thoughts.

Second, it will be clear from the following quotation that the frequent charge that Austin regarded "ordinary language" sacrosanct is simply misinformed. "Certainly, then, ordinary language is *not* the last word: in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded. Only remember, it *is* the *first* word." [4] Unless we get things right at this point, we shall build on sand; and we had better find out how things are before attempting to change them.

Third, Austin plainly had no wish to claim for his mode of proceeding that it was the only way for philosophers to proceed. His was, as he called it, "one fashion of philosophy." He did not deny that there were problems in philosophy to which the patient investigation of linguistic detail might well contribute little or nothing; nor did he dispute the possibility that quite different fashions from his own might be usefully adopted. He was sure only that, in attempting to cope with some problems, detailed anatomization of their attendant vocabularies was one of the tasks that was abundantly worth doing, and was what we would all, probably, be well advised to do first. This may sound unambitious; but a modest

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 130.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 133.

ambition may enjoy the considerable merit of being attainable. Will this procedure enable us to solve all our problems? As Austin once said in reply to this very question: "No—or if you prefer it, alas, no."

We have already mentioned that Austin's procedure sometimes caused astonishment by reason of his extraordinary patience, his readiness to go on with a question, however small, for as long as might be needed to make quite sure of the answer. He sometimes occasioned no less astonishment by being, to all appearances, not engaged in philosophy at all. This was due, in part, to genuine indifference to academic frontiers, or indeed to a positive disbelief in them. If one had said to him, as people sometimes felt inclined to do, that a question he had raised was not philosophical but grammatical, he would have answered that he did not mind what it was called, but if it was grammatical that is surely no reason for ignoring it. But also, as he hinted, he had his eye on the distant—the very distant—prospect of what he called "a true and comprehensive *science of language*," [5] the joint offspring of philosophy, grammar, linguistics, logic, and many other disciplines. Partly for this reason he did not think that philosophers must stay forever in the area traditionally—and not, after all, by very long tradition—marked off as proper philosophical territory.

There was another reason than this for his insistence, at least occasionally, on discussing what his colleagues and others scarcely recognized as philosophy. Around the usual, and particularly the more imposing, topics of philosophy, the air is already thick with philosophical theories, and the ground, in Austin's words, is "trodden into bogs and tracks" by generations of philosophers. We follow the tracks uncritically; we flounder in the bogs; the air is already dense that we can hardly see. In such a case, Austin thought, extreme measures are called for. To escape (to change the image) from the magnetic fields of Plato, or Aristotle, or Kant, even last term's lectures, it may be salutary to place a moratorium on discussion of the state, or virtue, or the moral law, and to consider for a while the duties of professors and policemen, the difference between kindness and kindliness, or exactly what it is to be tactless or inconsiderate. "If only we could forget for a while about the beautiful and get down instead to the dainty and the dumpy." [6] If we can do this, then not only are our questions likely to be of such a size that we have some prospect of agreeing on answers to them; we should

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 180.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 131.

also be out of reach of our own and other people's prejudices and presuppositions, able to move fairly freely and to see things straight.

This, Austin thought, was an objective quite desirable enough to justify a few days or weeks of possibly unexciting exile from the more dramatic storm-centres of philosophy. It might be urged that this led him to discuss unimportant matters. But he preferred to say something true on perhaps a small matter than something not really true on a matter of importance. He did not, in fact, ever concern himself to insist that philosophical problems *are* important; this too, he would have said, it will be time to consider when some such problem begins to be reasonably clear. In the meantime, truth is important, and hard enough to find.

What Austin's influence on philosophy will be in the long run is at present a matter for not very useful speculation. It is likely that it will not be what he would have wished, nor, we dare say, would he really have expected the case to be otherwise; he was too much of a realist to suppose that the turbid stream of philosophy is easily to be deflected. There are, of course, some philosophers who reject in principle the basic assumption of which Austin proceeded—the assumption, namely, that philosophical problems can be solved. There are those who see philosophy in essence as an endless dialectical debate, and thus, will naturally regard as misconceived an approach that is intended to lead, however remotely, to agreement. Others had already contended that, though solid results may perhaps be attainable in philosophy, Austin's programme of "hounding down the minutical", of aiming to get right the details (including the defects) of our "common stock of words," is a fatally wrong road to follow; but these last, for the most part, have argued their case, if at all, at an intellectual level so strikingly below that of their opponent that they have hardly established a claim to be taken seriously.

The crucial questions for the future are, perhaps, these two. Austin attempted to find for philosophy a discipline, a method of work; he wanted, as he once put it, to make genius unnecessary, to achieve independence through methodical industry of the unpredictable (and unreliable) whims of inspiration. But his method was, if not intrinsically hard, yet decidedly austere; how many of his successors will share, to a sufficient degree, his uncompromising distaste for the pretentious and impetuous generalization, the inexact argument, the half-finished investigation, the rough-and-ready distinction? It is certain that he was, among his colleagues and indeed among philosophers in general, without any equal in his refusal to

rest content with the nearly good enough; may not others, so many others, be too easily satisfied to be willing to proceed at his slow (though inexorable) pace?

The second question is this: did he really succeed, as he half-seriously hoped, in making genius unnecessary? It may be found—it is difficult to believe that it will not be found—that that "fashion of philosophy" which, in his incomparable hands, held so much promise, so gleamed with light and wit, and yielded such a harvest, in other hands may look leaden, unilluminating, half-alive. He had hoped to make tools that any other philosopher could use; perhaps he made weapons that only their creator could wield. Perhaps this may prove over-pessimistic. However that may be, it is certain in any case that the integrity of his standards, and the extraordinary force of his mind, have already imprinted upon contemporary philosophy a mark that will neither soon nor easily be erased.

II
LAW