The Philosophy of J. L. Austin

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Introduction: Inheriting Austin

Martin Gustafsson

In a famous passage in *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin considers the question whether it is true or false to say of France that it is hexagonal. He refuses to give a straightforward answer. Instead, he notes that he can understand what it means to say that ‘France is hexagonal’ is ‘true for certain intents and purposes. It is good enough for a top ranking general, perhaps, but not for a geographer.’ He then makes the observation that the most natural thing would often be to say that the description is ‘pretty rough’, without ascribing to it any determinate truth-value. In such cases, insisting that it must be either true or false is a mistake: ‘It is just rough, and that is the right and final answer to the question of the relation of “France is hexagonal” to France’ (Austin 1975: 143).

Something similar might be said about the received picture of Austin. We are all familiar with the standard epithets: he was ‘the doyen of Ordinary Language Philosophy’, ‘a master of observing minutiae of linguistic use’, and, of course, ‘the founder of speech act theory’.\(^1\) The picture such epithets paint is not a mere fantasy, and it is perhaps impossible to avoid promulgating some version of it if one is writing a short presentation in a philosophical dictionary or in an introductory textbook. On the other hand, someone who seriously tries to find his way about in Austin’s philosophical landscape will soon discover that this picture hides from view the diversity and variation that are in fact prominent characteristics of the terrain. It is true that Austin sometimes issues methodological recommendations, emphasizing the philosophical importance of ‘the language of ordinary life’ (1979: 189). But he does so only hesitantly, while making it clear that those recommendations are not universal rules and that their applicability to particular problems will have to be decided piecemeal, from one case to another. It is true that he is often concerned with subtleties of everyday usage and resists what he regards as unnecessary or unwitting employments of technical vocabulary. But he is open to the introduction of technical terms when

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\(^1\) These particular wordings are taken from Culler (1982: 111), Honderich (1991: 217), and Glock (2008: 43), but countless variations on them can be found in the literature.
they are helpful and does not hesitate to make use of simplified models if he finds them illuminating. It is true that he initiated the study of ways in which ‘to say something is to do something’ (1975: 12). But it remains a controversial issue to what extent later developments of speech act theory deal with the issues that Austin thought of as central to his own project (Crary 2002; Sbisà 2007). With respect to Austin, as much as to any other important philosopher, the ‘standard picture’ is bound to be a caricature. Yet, such a picture has often controlled the reception of his thought, perhaps more so than with respect to any other important thinker of the twentieth century.

In fact, this tendency toward oversimplification seems particularly worrisome in the case of Austin. For one thing, taking the standard picture of him too seriously is to manifest precisely the sort of intellectual tendency that he was most concerned to combat. It is ironic that epithets like the ones given above are routinely allowed to shape our conception of a thinker whose whole work is permeated by a desire to make his audience aware of and lose confidence in the habitual imposition of preconceived categories.

More importantly, the received picture serves to confirm and strengthen a widespread view of Austin’s work as effectively obsolete. For we all know—don’t we?—that ordinary language philosophy, once so influential, was methodologically flawed. And we all know—don’t we?—that even if How To Do Things With Words was a great achievement, the developments and revisions made by latter-day speech act theorists have made this pioneering effort outdated. Of course, no one denies that Austin’s work is of considerable historical significance. We have to study it if we want to understand one important phase in the development of analytic philosophy. But is there really anything philosophically important to learn from him today?

If anything unites the contributors to this volume, it is the conviction that the answer to this question is ‘Yes!’ and, hence, that we should not let the standard picture of Austin lure us into treating him as a dusty figure of the past. This is not to say that the authors agree on what we can learn from him. There is much disagreement to be found in the pages of this book, with respect to both exegetical and philosophical points, with respect to questions of detail as well as to broader issues. The overall aim of the volume is not to present a new school of Austin interpretation. Rather it is to collect papers by philosophers who share the conviction that a serious engagement with Austin’s work can be of real help in our struggle with contemporary questions. The papers deal with issues that are on the top of today’s philosophical agenda, such as scepticism and contextualism, the epistemology of testimony, the generality of the conceptual, and the viability of the semantics/pragmatics distinction. The connections made between Austinian ideas and current debates provide both a deeper understanding of Austin’s thought and a clear sense of why his work is still of genuine philosophical significance.

2 The clearest example of Austin’s willingness to make use of technical models is in his paper ‘How to Talk’ (1979: 134–53).
This is the first collection of essays on Austin’s philosophy published by a major Anglophone press in almost forty years. Hence, it seems appropriate to provide it with a substantial introduction that describes the intellectual background and legacy of his thought and which, in doing so, gives a rich account of the character and rationale of this book as a whole. Section 1 discusses in some detail why a revival of Austin’s philosophy requires a cross-fertilizing mode of interpretation that integrates exegesis and contemporary application, treating them as two sides of the same coin rather than as distinct aims. Section 2 provides background for the exegetical aspect of such interpretative cross-fertilization by describing Austin in his intellectual milieu, focusing in particular on the significance of his immediate predecessors, G. E. Moore and H. A. Prichard. Section 3 widens the perspective by tackling the unwieldy issue of the relation between Austin and the tradition of Western philosophy at large. Section 4 looks at Austin’s legacy in contemporary thought, in all its astonishing variety. Finally, section 5 gives an overview of the contributions. Readers who just want a survey of the rest of the papers in order to be able to move on as quickly as possible to the chapters that seem of interest to them, can go directly to that final section.

1. Reading Austin today

In the forties and fifties, Austin was a revered, feared, and deeply controversial figure. In the sixties and seventies, he was posthumously dethroned. And then his work gradually ‘slid into a state of respectable semi-obscurity’ (Crary 2002: 59)—arguably the worst fate that can befall a philosophical corpus. Browsing through the most prestigious journals of Anglo-American philosophy, the mumification process is clearly visible. After 1980, Austin is present almost only in scattered footnotes where dutiful references are made to a few selected passages from ‘Other Minds’, ‘A Plea for Excuses’, and How to Do Things with Words. Even today, K. T. Fann’s Symposium on J. L. Austin from 1969 remains the standard collection of papers on Austin’s philosophy. The second and (until now) last philosophical anthology published by a major Anglophone press and devoted exclusively to Austin is Essays on J. L. Austin, from 1973 (Berlin et al. 1973).

Many of the contributors to these two collections were Austin’s students or colleagues, and it is striking how central a place they give to their experience of him as a teacher and discussion partner. In particular, they take their personal acquaintance with Austin to have provided them with a much better understanding of his philosophical intentions than what is possible to gather from his few publications. Thus, G. J. Warnock complains that many things written about his teacher are vitiated ‘not merely […] by ordinary misconstrual of what Austin wrote, but, more importantly, by apparent

3 Most papers in Fann’s volume were published even earlier, and many before 1965.
misunderstanding of him and his intentions, of what he had tried to do in philosophy, and of his reasons for so trying. Hence, Warnock continues,

it would be desirable and useful to secure the comments of some of those who had had the advantage of, so to speak, observing at close quarters Austin in action, and of having themselves inhabited [...] the philosophical scene in which he was so conspicuous a figure. (Berlin et al. 1973: v)

Even if he is careful not to say that such first-hand experience guarantees correct understanding, Warnock seems to think that the advantage it gives is virtually irreplaceable. Indeed, he and the other contributors manage to convey a sense that even if their testimony regarding what it was like to experience Austin live and in person is indispensable for grasping what his philosophy is all about, it still does not suffice to provide an outsider with a full understanding of Austin’s ideas and procedures. Or, as Warnock nostalgically puts it in his monographic study of Austin’s philosophy:

[I]t is probably inevitable that in a case such as his—in which formal writing for publication played so comparatively small a part—the impression that he made as a philosopher upon those who knew him may be difficult fully to appreciate for those not included in that now diminishing number. (Warnock 1989: 2)

It would be futile to deny that there is a sense in which all this is quite true. In group-discussion, Austin could spend many hours probing some topic that, in a paper, was condensed into one or two short paragraphs. Indeed, most of what he did informally in front of small audiences did not enter his publications at all, and it has been said that it was precisely on such occasions that the nature of his philosophical talent and originality was most visible. We have the two reconstructed lecture series, Sense and Sensibilia and How to Do Things with Words, which are said to provide a somewhat better view of Austin’s style as a teacher. But no one denies that these reconstructions, however carefully made, still only dimly reflect his actual performances.

So, let it be granted that someone who reads only Austin’s published works and ignores what his students and colleagues have to say about his teaching will have a distorted picture of his philosophical procedures, while someone who also reads the testimony of those students and colleagues will have a truer picture, though one which is still bound to be in certain respects incomplete and unreliable. Where does this leave us, late-born inheritors of Austin? Does this mean that our temporal distance only puts

4 Isaiah Berlin even maintains that to fully appreciate Austin’s philosophical gifts, you had to meet with him alone. Between four eyes, ‘[h]e understood what one said perfectly, talked about it with extreme acuteness and lucidity, and made one’s thoughts race [...] and was not obviously trying to convert one to a particular point of view, wasn’t either preaching to one or bullying one.‘ In groups, however, his strong competitive instincts took over, ‘[a]nd this desire to achieve victory sometimes led him into arguments which perhaps were slightly specious, at times. He was usually much cleverer than his interlocutors and usually did win. But the kind of way in which one wanted to talk to him was when he was entirely alone, face to face; then I think he was at his best’ (Berlin 2006: 9).
us at a disadvantage, condemning us to uncertainty, speculation and misunderstanding in our reception of his thought?

Or are there perhaps ways in which this distance can be a blessing? Might there be certain respects in which the close quarters from which his contemporaries observed him were, so to speak, too close? Might there be features of Austin’s philosophy that are in fact easier to register now that it has become history?

Answering the latter questions in the positive may seem to run counter to the aspiration not to treat Austin as a dusty figure of the past. It should be evident, however, that the sense of ‘becoming history’ that is relevant here is not to be identified with becoming outdated. The point is not that Austin’s philosophy is now of ‘merely historical interest’, if that entails that it can safely be ignored by someone who is struggling with contemporary problems. Rather, the point is to question the necessity of that antiquarian notion of ‘historical interest’ which would seem to justify such a conclusion.

The crucial thing here is to recognize the possibility and legitimacy of a conception of past philosophical texts which is genuinely historical and yet not antiquarian. This is a conception according to which the achievement of a great philosopher can only come into clear view when the philosopher’s thought is placed in relation to subsequent developments—developments which, though the philosopher himself would not have been aware of them, confer a special sort of significance on what he was able to do then and what we can still allow us to see now. The content of a philosophical achievement, measured in this way, is of the sort that unfolds and displays itself as time goes on.

While this approach is different from antiquarianism, it is also to be sharply distinguished from what Bernard Williams calls ‘triumphant anachronism’, exemplified by the view that ‘we should approach the works of Plato as though they had appeared in last month’s issue of Mind’ (Williams 2006: 258). Triumphant anachronism is fundamentally ahistorical, as it operates on the assumption that the content and value of past ideas is determined by how well they can be made to fit with present views and modes of discourse. In contrast, the sort of non-antiquarian history envisaged here does not use our present convictions as the touchstone of philosophical significance or intelligibility. Rather, it uses past ideas to gain a critical distance to our own preconceptions. In Williams’s words, such history should ‘help us in reviving a sense of strangeness or questionability about our own philosophical assumptions’ (2006: 260).

In calling triumphant anachronism ‘ahistorical’, I am claiming that such purported history of philosophy does not deserve the name of history at all. Williams seems to take a similar view, arguing that such ‘extreme forms of [...] history of philosophy’, in removing the distance from the present altogether, ‘lost the title to being any pointful form of historical activity’ (2006: 259).

What I call ‘antiquarianism’, Williams calls ‘history of ideas’, whereas his label for the sort of genuinely historical and yet not antiquarian approach I am describing is ‘history of philosophy’. Williams’s terminology is not entirely fortunate, since the important point is not that the work of actual historians of ideas always fits, or even aspires to fit, the antiquarian ideal. A fully satisfactory treatment of these and related issues would require a more extensive discussion than there is room for in an introduction such as this. An essay that comes
Consider again Warnock’s worry, quoted earlier, that discussions of Austin’s philosophy by people who have not seen him in action are vitiated by misunderstanding ‘of him and his intentions, of what he had tried to do in philosophy, and of his reasons for so trying’. This worry gives rise to the question of what it is to understand ‘what Austin tried to do in philosophy’. It is of course undeniable that his own articulations of his philosophical intentions are of central importance, and that those articulations must be interpreted in the light of the wider intellectual context in which he was situated. But there is also an important sense in which the full significance of some of the intentions of a past thinker might not be entirely clear to anyone of his contemporaries, including the philosopher himself.

To get a more concrete sense of what this might mean, consider an example. In his 1946 paper, ‘Other Minds’, Austin makes the notorious proposal that there is a close parallel between saying ‘I know’ and saying ‘I promise’. He makes some suggestive remarks about the putative similarities between these two speech acts. But he also says things that seem quite confused, and he does admit that he fails to see his way clearly through the issues that arise in connection with the proposed parallel (Austin 1979: 99–103, 113–15). The parallel and its significance were much discussed in the fifties and sixties, but no one came up with a very satisfactory interpretation of what Austin might have been trying to get at. In his monograph on Austin, Warnock struggles with the issue but does not get very much further. Today, it is commonly thought that the parallel is fundamentally flawed.

A central question is obviously what speech act someone is actually performing in uttering ‘I know’. Warnock takes Austin’s parallel to mean that just as to utter ‘I promise’ is to perform an act of promising, to utter ‘I know’ is to perform an act of knowing. As Benjamin McMyler points out in his contribution to the present volume, this interpretation makes impossible any plausible and interesting development of Austin’s proposal. After all, knowing is not an act but a state, and saying ‘I know that p’ is neither necessary nor sufficient for knowing that p. McMyler therefore offers a different interpretation. He claims that Austin’s real point is that the speech act performed by someone who utters ‘I know’ is the act of testifying, where the notion of testifying is understood in a sense broad enough to include ordinary cases of telling someone something. According to McMyler, ‘Austin’s interest in the parallel is an interest in the way in which the act of testifying, one of the primary ways in which we communicate information to others, is in many ways analogous to the act of promising’ (McMyler, this volume, p. 121).

The details of McMyler’s reading need not concern us here. For present purposes, what matters is that McMyler is able to make sense of Austin’s discussion not only by reflecting on the details of Austin’s actual text but also by relating Austin’s discussion to the contemporary debate on the epistemology of testimony. On the one hand, Austin’s much closer to providing such a satisfactory treatment, and which makes use of Williams’s distinction between the history of philosophy and the history of ideas, is Kremer (forthcoming).
discussion is used to help us revive a sense of questionability about some of the philosophical assumptions that are usually made in the contemporary discussion. On the other hand, McMyler’s viewpoint in the present helps him criticize and reject certain passages in Austin’s text, by arguing that they fail to cohere with what we can now see as Austin’s most valuable and basic objectives and insights.

If McMyler’s reading is correct, he has managed to identify ideas which, on the one hand, can rightly be ascribed to Austin, but which, on the other hand, were not entirely clear to Austin himself or to his contemporaries. The striving for this sort of understanding can be found in all contributions to this volume, and makes them different from the contributions to the earlier volumes on Austin’s philosophy mentioned above. Such striving is not only a legitimate sort of enterprise: the persistent vitality of a past thinker hangs precisely on our will and capacity to subject his ideas to this sort of inquiry.

We said earlier that the standard picture of Austin makes his philosophy seem obsolete. We can now understand better what this means. What the standard picture does is to thwart any expectation that Austin’s work might have the power to revive in us a genuine sense of strangeness or questionability about our own philosophical assumptions. It fosters the tendency to assume that his work can be of merely historical interest, where this ‘merely’ implies that the sort of interest Austin’s philosophy does have is only as an object of antiquarian history-writing.

Consider Colin McGinn’s review of Warnock’s monograph on Austin, a piece that was originally published in 1989 in the London Review of Books. Basing his claims entirely on a reading of Warnock, McGinn finds himself warranted to issue verdicts such as the following on the philosophical quality of Austin’s work:

He may have initiated some fruitful lines of inquiry, later developed by others, but he himself seems to have been unable to pursue these lines with any surefootedness or perspicacity. You begin to understand why he wrote so little. (McGinn 1997: 165)

As an example of Austin’s lack of perspicacity, McGinn considers the parallel between saying ‘I know’ and saying ‘I promise’:

Contrary to Austin’s thesis, ‘I know’, unlike ‘I promise’, is as descriptive as any first-person attribution. And, I would add, knowing is not an act at all, which precludes its being effected by the utterance of a performative verb. These objections are (a) elementary and (b) definitive. Ten minutes reflection should have made it clear that the assimilation is simply a mistake, prompted by the most superficial of similarities between the two verbs as they (sometimes) occur in the first person. (McGinn 1997: 168–9)

Would the lack of charity manifested here seem at all acceptable if it were not simply taken for granted—by McGinn as well as by his intended audience—that we have very little of philosophical value to learn from Austin? Would not a serious engagement with a philosopher’s work have to start from the quite contrary presumption, that an adequate appropriation and assessment of his ideas—especially when he is groping his
way through unexplored territory while explicitly admitting that he does not see his way clearly—might in fact require not ten minutes but half a century or more of philosophical reflection?

The best way of contesting the habitual caricaturing of Austin’s philosophy, and the resulting belittling of its contemporary significance, is by counterexample. The task, thus generally described, can be variously implemented, and this volume provides many illustrations of such variation. There are contributors who focus on some sharply delimited topic in Austin’s work. They offer rational reconstructions that move at a level that throughout remains close to the details of Austin’s texts. Others try to achieve unexpected syntheses that tie together seemingly disparate parts of his thinking. They give imaginative accounts of putatively implicit points and connections, in ways that take them beyond the mere letter of Austin’s text. These different implementations of the task are each indispensable forms of the sort of history, and the sort of philosophy, that this book is meant to provide.

2. Austin, Moore, and Prichard

Probably the two then living thinkers who had the strongest influence on Austin’s philosophical development were George Edward Moore and Harold Arthur Prichard (Hampshire 1969b: 91). Together with Russell, Moore had been the leading figure in the Cambridge revolt against the idealist school of Thomas Hill Green—a school often referred to by its opponents as an ‘Hegelian’ movement, even if its members repudiated that label. Prichard was engaged in a similar revolt at Oxford, which had been the original home of Green’s school and which housed some of its most prominent members. The original leader of the Oxford revolt had been Prichard’s teacher and the front figure of Oxford ‘realism’, John Cook Wilson, who died in 1915.

Not that the Cambridge and the Oxford resistance movements formed a united front. Quite the contrary: Cook Wilson had an extremely dismissive attitude toward the logic of *Principia Mathematica* and thought that even Green’s followers had a deeper understanding of logico-philosophical problems than Russell (Passmore 1957: 243). Prichard and Moore are both describable broadly as ethical intuitionists, but their forms of intuitionism differ considerably; and Prichard rejected other conceptions central to both Russell and Moore, such as the notion of a sense datum (Dancy 2009).

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7 See Collingwood (1939: 15). Bradley writes: ‘For Hegel himself, assuredly I think him a great philosopher; but I never could have called myself an Hegelian, partly because I can not say that I have mastered his system, and partly because I could not accept what seems his main principle, or at least part of that principle’ (1883: x; quoted in Candlish 2007: 8). It was said above that the reception of Austin’s thinking has been shaped by a stereotype, perhaps to a larger extent than the reception of any other important twentieth-century thinker. The reception of Bradley and other members of Green’s school is another instance of a similar phenomenon, even if in recent years a number of more nuanced and fair-minded readings have been published, such as Hylton (1990), Nicholson (1990), and Candlish (2007).
Still, C. D. Broad could say of Prichard that he was ‘a man of immense ability whom I have always regarded as the Oxford Moore’ (quoted in Cheney 1971, 14; cf. Dancy 2009). The similarity Broad saw between Moore and Prichard seems to have been a matter of philosophical attitude and procedure rather than of shared doctrines. In reaction to what they regarded as the speculative flights and inflated language of Green, Bradley, Bosanquet, Caird, and McTaggart, Moore and Prichard both aimed at breaking down unwieldy issues into well-demarcated questions suited for piecemeal treatment, using a clear-headed style that was meant to keep philosophy down to earth. Passmore describes Moore’s approach as ‘that minute philosophical procedure, with its careful distinction of issues, its insistence that this, not that, is the real question—where this and that had ordinarily been regarded as alternative formulations of the same problem’ (1957: 210). Jim MacAdam talks of Prichard’s ‘methods of isolating small, manageable philosophical problems as exact questions, and insisting upon solutions in clear everyday English’ (2002: xiv). The two descriptions can be swapped: they fit both thinkers equally well.

And they fit Austin too. Certainly there were a number of more specific points at which Moore and Prichard also influenced him. It seems, for example, that Austin started developing his conception of performatives in connection with a correspondence with Prichard in the thirties (Warnock 1989: 105). It seems fair to say, though, that Moore’s and Prichard’s deepest impact on Austin had to do with their resistance to oversimplification and sweeping apriorism. In their preference for slow, piecemeal inquiry over impatient generalization and pigeonholing, their investigations served for Austin as models of what lucidity and rationality may amount to in philosophy (cf. Warnock 1969: 5–7).

And in being thus influenced, he was by no means alone in his generation. When he came to Oxford as an undergraduate in 1929, the old conflict between Green’s and Cook Wilson’s followers still retained some of its animus. It was pretty clear, however, that those of Green’s followers who were still teaching there—amongst whom H. H. Joachim was the most prominent—had for a long time been unable to attract the ablest young minds. Not that those younger people wanted to fight in the realist trench either. They saw the old controversy as a senseless war that had been going on for far too long. What united them seems rather to have been a general sense of wanting to do something useful and manageable in philosophy, without the premature adoption of any particular ‘ism’.

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8 Which is not to say that Austin found Prichard very open-minded or philosophically creative. According to J. O. Urmson, ‘Prichard was no doubt a menace in many ways—dogmatic, repressive of all divergent thinking, and, on the whole, sterile’ (Urmson 1988: 12). There is no reason to think Austin would have disagreed with this verdict. However, it should also be noted that Urmson goes on by making the following qualification: ‘If he [Prichard] was dogmatically dismissive of heresy in debate, in foro interno he was endlessly questioning himself, and what at one time was publicly proclaimed to be obvious to anyone willing and able to think might later come to be equally firmly rejected’ (ibid.).
This, however, did involve a sense of affinity with the philosophical temperament of old-school realism. As Isaiah Berlin says about the followers of Cook Wilson, ‘before building an enormous building they wanted to test every brick’—and this was true of people in the younger generation as well (Berlin 2006: 2). ‘The whole atmosphere’, Berlin remembers, was

away from huge, not wholly intelligible, masses of words into something which was clear and distinct and honest and lucid and empirical, and provided one could sort of deflate the language, and get talking about something which one could really understand and operate with, one felt that perhaps there was a subject there worth discussing. (Berlin 2006: 4)

What Berlin describes here is an inchoate attitude rather than a well-developed conception of how philosophy ought to be done. Sharing this attitude seems to have been enough to induce a strong sense of common purpose among the people gathering around Austin in 1936–7, when he and Berlin began organizing weekly discussions on Thursday evenings.9 With the exception of Ayer, who, under the influence of the logical positivists, had already formed a relatively determinate view of the nature of philosophy, these young men—the oldest was 27—had no clear program or method. Yet the sense of intellectual vitality was strong: ‘we thought we were making progress, breaking through old categories, escaping from all kinds of cages, and this is of course an absolutely irreplaceable feeling. It’s a thing which I’ve never had with the same intensity since’ (Berlin 2006: 11).10

It appears to have been only after the war, when Green’s and Cook Wilson’s followers were all definitely gone, that Austin found his own, mature voice in philosophy. In 1946 he published ‘Other Minds’, and it is from this point on that there can be said to exist something like a developed, distinctively Austinian way of philosophizing—an approach to philosophy which would be further chiselled out during the remaining fifteen years of his life, and achieve its most paradigmatic expression in later papers such as ‘Ifs and Cans’ and ‘A Plea for Excuses’, both published in 1956.

9 Besides Austin and Berlin, the regular members of this early discussion group were A. J. Ayer, Donald MacNabb, Anthony Wootzley, Stuart Hampshire, and Donald MacKinnon (Berlin 1973: 9).

10 It is interesting to compare Berlin’s description with Collingwood’s opposite assessments of the realists’ impact on the younger generation: ‘I have already said of “realism” that its positive doctrine was nugatory, its critical technique deadly: all the deadlier because its effectiveness did not depend on errors native to the doctrines criticized, but on a kind of disintegration produced by itself in whatever it touched. It was therefore inevitable that by degrees “realism” should part with all positive doctrines whatever, congratulating itself at each new jettison that it was rid of a knave. [... ] In this process, by which anything that could be recognized as a philosophical doctrine was stuck up and shot to pieces by the “realistic” criticism, the “realists” little by little destroyed everything in the way of positive doctrine that they had ever possessed. Once more, I am concerned only with the effect on their pupils. It was (how could it not have been?) to convince them that philosophy was a silly and trifling game, and to give them a lifelong contempt for the subject and a life-long grudge against the men who had wasted their time by forcing it upon their attention’ (Collingwood 1939: 46–50).
In the discussion group led by Austin—now, famously, on Saturday mornings—his coming to philosophical maturity had equally tangible effects. Before the war, Stuart Hampshire recalls, ‘[w]e attended to words with exactness in the sort of way that Prichard and Moore did under Austin’s guidance, but no more than that’ (Berlin 2006: 12). After the war, there was a shift to a new, higher (or should one say lower, and slower?) gear in this pursuit of linguistic clarity. Patterns of usage were charted and distinguished with a meticulousness that made the efforts of Moore and Prichard look coarse and prejudiced in comparison. Moore’s wish that analyses should take the form of traditional Socratic definitions appeared fraught with misguided philosophical assumptions, and Prichard’s efforts to ‘worry things out’ seemed fruitlessly trapped within antiquated frameworks of thought (Berlin 1973: 3).

So, the relation between the mature Austin on the one hand and Moore and Prichard on the other is rather complicated. To someone unaccustomed to the mechanisms of intellectual influence it may seem paradoxical that the doyen of ordinary language philosophy should have been deeply influenced by ‘the doyen of the old-style, non-linguistic Oxford philosophy’ (this is Nicola Lacey’s description of Prichard; see her 2004: 139). But remember that what Austin found exemplary in Prichard’s work was his ‘bubble-pricking’ (Carritt 1948: 146), whereas he ‘accepted neither Prichard’s premises nor his conclusions’ (Berlin 1973: 2). Similarly, as Ryle notes, ‘Austin took […] a lot after Moore—the un-muddler, not the definer’ (Ryle 1971: 273). Of particular significance is to keep in mind that what Austin admired in the works of these two men was not their rejection of the systems of Green or Bradley or McTaggart in particular. Rather, what impressed him seems to have been their striving not to let any simplistic and prematurely invoked schema or system determine beforehand how things must be, or what possible views there are available on a given topic. Not that he thought they were entirely successful at this venture. On the contrary, it is clear that he thought they were unsuccessful. But he also thought it would be possible to reveal their failures, precisely by doing more consistently what they had managed to do only imperfectly.

In other words, Austin learnt from Prichard and Moore the art of philosophical criticism, but he thought of himself as having developed and radicalized this art so that it could now be turned against his own teachers. By Austin’s lights, the admirable striving for non-dogmatic, unprejudiced clarity stands in internal conflict with many of Moore’s and Prichard’s most cherished views. According to Austin, doing full justice to what is most valuable in Moore’s and Prichard’s thinking therefore means rejecting many of the ideas that they themselves were most concerned to defend.12

11 The classic description of these meetings is Warnock (1973). Among the regular participants were Paul Grice, R. M. Hare, H. L. A. Hart, David Pears, Peter Strawson, G. J. Warnock, Anthony Woozley, and J. O. Urmson.

12 Lacey describes the relation between Austin’s long-time discussion partner Herbert Hart and his teacher, H. W. B. Joseph (who, besides Prichard, was the most important realist at Oxford, albeit with a strongly Platonist bent), in similarly ‘paradoxical’ terms: ‘Ironically it was Joseph, the man who must have felt most betrayed by Herbert’s later turn from Platonism and espousal of the new linguistic philosophy, who
3. Austin and philosophy

At this point it is impossible to resist raising a related but rather unwieldy question that some commentators prefer not to consider at all, and which others tend to answer in one of two seemingly contradictory ways. The question is how Austin’s mature thinking is related, not to a couple of teachers whose influence can be comparatively clearly identified, but to Western philosophy at large. Some say, with Juliet Floyd, that Austin ‘hoped that philosophy teachers would teach something different, and differently, from much of what they had taught before. [...] He really believed, and more or less said, that most philosophers were just making mistakes and wasting students’ time’ (Floyd 2006: 140). Others would agree with Antony Flew that Austin’s philosophy ‘was not so new [...] as to constitute an abandonment of the activity pursued by the men of old’ (Flew 1986: 80), and with J. O. Urmson that

[what he conceived of as the central task, the careful elucidation of the forms and concepts of ordinary language [...] was, as Austin himself was well aware, not new but characteristic of countless philosophers from Socrates to G. E. Moore. [...] there was nothing essentially novel in Austin’s philosophical aims; what was new was the skill, the rigor, and the patience with which he pursued these aims. (Urmson 1969: 23–4)

What is difficult here is that Austin’s work seems to lend itself to either sort of interpretation. There seems to be something right both in Flew’s and Urmson’s claim that what Austin does is in an important sense similar to what others have done before, and in Floyd’s claim that he is doing something very different from what earlier philosophers have done. Still it appears as if at least one of these readings must be wrong—for aren’t they straightforwardly incompatible?

On second thoughts, things look less straightforward. The sense of incompatibility seems based on a superficial conception of how philosophical influence and criticism can function. In the previous section, an explanation was given of how Austin could have been both strongly influenced by and deeply critical of Moore and Prichard. His relation to Western philosophy at large can be conceived along similar lines. It was precisely by taking the traditional philosophical virtues of carefulness and clarity fully seriously that Austin claimed to be able to reach his subversive conclusions, undermining the tradition from within by taking its own alleged ideals ad notam, so to speak. Austin conceived much of Western philosophy in its various forms, from grandiose idealism to tough-minded logical positivism, as being vitiated by the dogmatic, unquestioned, and often even unnoticed adherence to various oversimplified schemas of thought. As Simon Glendinning emphasizes in his contribution to this volume, Austin thought the function of such schematization was not to force everyone to agree unflinchingly on one single position, but, more subtly, to create a framework for the helped to inspire him with the passion for clarity, accuracy, and detail which the linguistic approach promised to satisfy’ (Lacey 2004: 27).
determination of a limited space of possible positions—positions that will then appear like the only ones over which one can meaningfully disagree.

A standard way of creating such a closed dialectical space is by invoking tidy dichotomies, thereby restricting the philosophical field of vision to theses and their anti-theses. But more complex patterns are also possible, and by the intermingling of various schemas the landscape of available options can become bewilderingly complex. Yet, according to Austin, the schematic, artificial character remains. And this schematic character is seductive because it provides philosophical discussions with a seemingly satisfying cogency. Even if we disagree, we are still players of the same tidy game, and it seems we can therefore agree on what our disagreement consists in and on how we should go about in resolving it. According to Austin, however, this apparent cogency is artificially created and hence achieved at the expense of genuine significance. His worry is precisely that philosophers tend to distort their own admirable ideals of clarity and rational argument by such premature schematizing. They are seduced into thinking that the formally rigorous though empty moves made within such a framework are what rational argumentation should look like, and that the oversimplified claims or analyses that come out of such argumentation are in fact prime examples of philosophical lucidity.

So, Austin may be read as trying to safeguard the ideals of clarity and rational argumentation precisely by exposing how this sort of imposed regimentation actually closes off and makes us blind to routes of investigation that might lead to genuine progress. He is trying to disentangle the ideals of clarity and rationality, central to Western thought, from the perhaps equally central but nonetheless misguided tendency toward premature schematization.

Now Flew and Urmson are certainly right that he is not the first philosopher whose work has tended toward such a goal. Part of the greatness of the great philosophers consists precisely in their exposing and criticizing hitherto unquestioned assumptions about what philosophical positions are available and what lines of argument can rationally be pursued. However, Austin can be read as suggesting that most such critics did not fully resist the temptation to oversimplify, but instead tended to replace one simplistic schema by another. By contrast, what Austin wants is to make us realize that we need not confine ourselves within any of those different frameworks of possibilities that various philosophers have thought of as compulsory and exhaustive. He wants consistently to disentangle the ideals of clarity and rational argumentation from the tendency to oversimplify. And it is perhaps not surprising if in this process of disentanglement, the ideals themselves will so to speak shed their traditional philosophical skins and take on a somewhat different, seemingly ‘non-philosophical’ appearance. Freed from their confinement within artificial frameworks, clarification and rational argumentation may look too unprincipled, too banal, or too philological for the traditional philosophical imagination to be willing to recognize them as properly philosophical at all.
At this point, we can begin to understand the rationale behind Austin’s view that philosophy should proceed from ordinary language. His sense seems to have been that the sort of cogency that reflection on ordinary language can provide is not artificial in the sense indicated above. According to Austin, established linguistic practices do not just give us a well-structured but empty game of philosophical argumentation and counter-argumentation. Rather, the way ordinary language is anchored in our real-life circumstances and needs—the way it has developed from and become shaped by those circumstances and needs—ensures that there is something of substantial significance here that we can ‘really understand and operate with’. He believed that it is precisely by contrasting such organically developed practices with the frameworks invoked by philosophers that we can reveal the latter’s artificiality and arbitrariness.

But what, more precisely, does this mean? This is a very difficult question to answer. A satisfactory response would have to be based on detailed investigations of concrete instances of Austin’s philosophical practice—investigations of a sort that several of the contributions to this volume provide. What I will do here is only to gesture at some main sources of perplexity. To begin with, as is often pointed out, Austin cannot be ascribed a conception of ordinary language as sacrosanct or as totally uncontaminated by philosophical views or theories. It would indeed be ironic if he had believed that one can abandon the philosophical tendency to dichotomize by invoking a new grand dichotomy between bad philosophical language (to be eradicated) and the good old vernacular (to be cherished and protected). In fact, Austin is well aware that everyday patterns of use might prove insufficient to handle various practical and theoretical needs that can arise, and that such ordinary forms of usage might therefore have to be revised or abandoned. He also notes that ‘superstition and error and fantasy of all kinds do become incorporated in ordinary language’, and that ‘even “ordinary” language will often have become infected with the jargon of extinct theories, and our own prejudices too’ (1979: 185, 182).

So it is clearly no part of Austin’s conception that established habits of language use are to be just uncritically accepted and invoked as definite touchstones in the investigations of philosophical problems. Nor is it true to say that his thinking is ‘resolutely anti-technical and anti-theoretical’ (Hurka 2004: 249). His openness to the introduction of technical terms and models has already been mentioned. It is equally clear that he viewed the construction of theories as a highly desirable form of intellectual activity. In his famous image of philosophy as ‘the initial central sun, seminal and tumultuous’ which from time to time ‘throws off some portion of itself to take station as a science, a planet, cool and well regulated’, the latter state of coolness and regulation certainly figures as something that is worth striving for. Right after this comparison he even expresses the hope that ‘the next century may see the birth, through the joint labours of philosophers, grammarians, and numerous other students of language, of a true and comprehensive science of language’ (1979: 232, original emphasis).

Such brief and suggestive statements and analogies leave many questions unanswered. It remains an open issue what, exactly, Austin’s conception of the relations
between philosophy, ordinary language, and theory-construction amounts to. Clearly, much of his own work is being done on the tumultuous philosophical sun, rather than on some cool, scientific planet. His aim seems often to be to cool hot things down, perhaps as preparation for theory-construction. He would clearly regard it as a grave mistake to be impatient in this process and start theorizing prematurely, acting as if the relevant portion of the sun has already cooled off and taken station as a science. On the other hand, it is not clear that the two forms of activity—the preparatory clarification of established usage and the construction of theories—can be neatly separated, if Austin’s just mentioned refusal to invoke an entirely sharp dichotomy between ordinary language and scientific theory is strictly thought through.

Warnock at one place says that Austin’s conception of the philosophical significance of ordinary language ‘is really quite simple’ (Warnock 1969: 12). One aim of the present section has been to convey the opposite view—to provide some sense of how difficult it is to achieve a clear understanding of the character and point of Austin’s philosophical procedures. It has to be admitted that his writings lend themselves to very different understandings of where he is going and what he is leaving behind. The aim here has not been to give a detailed account of his approach and its relation to more traditional kinds of philosophizing, but only to give the reader some idea of the vexed issues that such an account would have to address.

It is an interesting fact about Austin’s work that it is hard to imagine a reading of it that is truly helpful and which at the same time just ignores these questions. All the contributors, including those whose main focus is on some much more specific philosophical point, have found it necessary to attend to these issues in one way or another. It is true that Austin himself seems to have found such philosophizing about his philosophy dubious or at least not very illuminating; he famously referred to his own attempts in this direction as ‘cackle’ (1979: 189). However, as long as those habits of thinking that Austin is criticizing retain their attraction, the character of his procedures, and their puzzling capacity both to engage with and differ from inquiries of a more paradigmatically philosophical kind—a capacity whose nature is the main theme of Glendinning’s paper—will presumably make such ‘cackling’ an unavoidable element in the reception of his thought.

4. Austin’s legacy

Given the difficulty of understanding exactly what Austin is trying to achieve in philosophy, it should not come as a surprise that those who take themselves to have learned something from him diverge substantially in their views of what he means and how his ideas are to be appropriated. Nonetheless, one can hardly avoid being astonished by the enormously different ways in which people have read and tried to make use of his work.

The most spectacular manifestation of such difference is the famous clash between John Searle and Jacques Derrida over Austin in the journal Glyph in the seventies,
a painfully vivid illustration of the sort of acrimony that such different readings can excite. I will not say much about this particular fight as there is little to add to what has already been said elsewhere.\footnote{Three interestingly different assessments are found in Cavell (1994), Glendinning (2001), and Glock (2008).} It is, however, worth mentioning that the influence of Derrida’s reading and criticism of Austin has been considerable, indeed much greater than is visible from the confines of mainstream analytic philosophy where Derrida’s discussion of Austin is often simply brushed aside as ridiculous. Stanley Fish’s siding with Derrida played an important role (Fish 1980, 1989), but in the last couple of decades a more important figure has been Judith Butler. Combining Derrida’s ‘rewriting’ of Austin (Osborne and Segal 1994: 33) with ideas from Michel Foucault about how power works through discourse, Butler’s book \textit{Gender Trouble} (1990) launched a notion of performativity that has played an enormously important role in theoretical debates within many branches of the humanities during the last two decades.

This use of Austin gives support to the claim that his influence has been greatest outside philosophy departments. However, it is a striking fact that in most work done by performativity theorists within Gay and Lesbian studies, cultural studies, cinema studies, post-colonial studies, and so on, there is little direct engagement with Austin’s writings. This inheritance of Austin is very much second or third hand, via Derrida, or via Derrida and Butler. In fact, \textit{Gender Trouble} itself contains no discussion of Austin’s actual texts. Some important theorists, such as Shoshana Felman and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, do engage directly and in original ways with Austin’s writings, and the same is true of Butler in some of her later works (Felman 1983; Sedgwick 1993, 2003; Butler 1997). However, it remains true of most people in these fields that they do not reflect in any detail on how their own use of the term ‘performat ive’ and its cognates is related to Austin’s employment of such notions.

If the average analytic philosopher knows little about the Derridean and Butlerian ways of inheriting Austin, he is of course well acquainted with Searle’s developments of Austin’s ideas. Together with Paul Grice’s 1967 lecture series, ‘Logic and Conversation’ (Grice 1989: 3–143), Searle’s \textit{Speech Acts} from 1969 set much of the agenda for subsequent developments of speech act theory and pragmatics in linguistics and in the philosophy of language. In fact, Searle’s and Grice’s importance for Austin’s legacy in analytic philosophy can hardly be overrated, and, for all their mutual disagreements, their role in this story is similarly double-edged. On the one hand, they are both deeply influenced by and have great respect for Austin. On the other hand, 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. The spirit of both Searle’s and Grice’s engagements with Austin’s philosophy is encapsulated in the idea that the greatest tribute one may pay to a theoretical pioneer is to criticize and develop the theory so that his pioneering efforts become obsolete.\footnote{The tendency to read Austin via Searle and Grice is strong also among philosophers outside the domain of analytic philosophy narrowly conceived. For example, even if Jürgen Habermas devotes much space in his}
In sum, even if performativity theory and speech act theory are by far the most extensive and influential areas in which Austinian notions are of central importance today, Austin’s own position in relation to these fields is mostly that of a dead predecessor rather than a living source of influence. Again, there are exceptions. The works of Felman and Sedgwick have already been mentioned. Within speech act theory and pragmatics, William Alston and Marina Sbisa are examples of writers who treat Austin as a philosopher to think with, rather than as a respectable but obsolete precursor (see, for example, Alston 2000; and Sbisa 2001, 2006, 2007). Nonetheless, if we want to gain a fuller understanding of how Austin’s philosophy matters to contemporary thought, it will be necessary to look beyond its Derridean–Butlerian and Searlean–Gricean offspring.

Two other very significant examples of Austin’s impact on areas at the interface between philosophy and neighbouring disciplines should be mentioned. First, there is the deep and direct influence he had on H. L. A. Hart, and thereby on legal theory in general and the post-war development of legal positivism in particular. (Classic works here are Hart 1961 and 1968, where Austin’s influence is much more pervasive than the relatively few references may be taken to indicate. For an interesting account of Austin’s influence on Hart, see Lacey 2004. A recent attempt to apply Austin’s philosophy to legal theory is Yeager 2006.)

Second, there is Austin’s impact on Quentin Skinner’s development of a ‘contextual’, ‘Cambridge school’ approach in intellectual history in general and the history of political thought in particular. According to Skinner, ‘if we are to write the history of ideas in a properly historical style, we need to situate the texts we study within such intellectual contexts and frameworks of discourse as enable us to recognise what their authors were doing in writing them’ (Skinner 2002, vii; original emphasis). Skinner’s way of spelling out the ‘doing’ that we need to recognize, and the methods by means of which can come to recognize it, is deeply influenced by Austin’s discussions of language, action, and intentionality. (Austin’s impact is particularly visible in Skinner 2002, especially in chapters 5 and 6.)

The Theory of Communicative Action ostensibly discussing Austin, he freely acknowledges that ‘I shall leave aside the development that speech act theory underwent in the hands of Austin himself [. . .] and take as my point of departure that Searle has given to this theory’ (Habermas 1984: 439, n. 32). Karl-Otto Apel’s use of speech act theory is also influenced by Searle’s interpretation, even if both he and Habermas have criticized what they regard as ‘intentionalist’ tendencies in Searle’s later works (Apel 1991, Habermas 1991).

It seems that in the long run, Searle’s and Grice’s respectful criticisms have played a more important role for Austin’s mummification process than the earlier vehement attacks on him by people such as Gellner, Russell, Ayer, Bergmann, and others. (The locus classicus here is Gellner 1959, with its preface by Russell (1959). An outsider’s description of this quarrel over ordinary language philosophy, and of the Oxford scene more generally, can be found in Mehta 1963.) Those vehement attacks are indeed of ‘merely historical interest’ for us today. None of the contributors to this volume seem to see any use in dwelling on or responding to them, finding such polemics simply unhelpful if one is genuinely interested in understanding what is and is not valuable in Austin’s philosophy.
However, if one is searching for a contemporary philosophical debate in which Austin still figures as a living and direct source of influence, an even better place to look is at the discussion of pornography and free speech. An igniting event took place in 1984, when Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin tried to enact a civil rights ordinance in Indianapolis that would have made pornographers and those selling their wares vulnerable to civil action. The MacKinnon–Dworkin argument, which was ultimately unconvincing to an appeals court, was based in part on the claim that pornography is in effect a speech act that does not just cause the subordination of women but *constitutes* a kind of subordination. In the nineties, the debate took a decisively Austinian turn due to a series of papers by Jennifer Hornsby and Rae Langton (Hornsby 1993, 1995, 2000; Langton 1993; Hornsby and Langton 1998). Hornsby and Langton use Austin in their attempts to lend philosophical rigour and precision to MacKinnon’s and Dworkin’s argument, which some philosophers had argued was incoherent (see, for example, Parent 1990). Even if Hornsby and Langton differ on details, their basic and shared idea is that the alleged discrimination is not just a perlocutionary effect of the publication of pornography. Rather, they spell out MacKinnon’s and Dworkin’s claim as follows. In publishing pornography one performs an *illocutionary* act of subordination, and one also creates an environment in which the protests women may want to issue against sexual discrimination and violence will misfire. In these ways, the publication of pornography not just causes but constitutes discrimination of women. According to Hornsby and Langton, this is a perfectly coherent thesis that should be taken quite seriously.

Many different objections have been raised against this analysis (a collection of central papers is Dwyer 1995; more recent contributions include Jacobson 1995, Bird 2002, Bauer 2006, Saul 2006, Bianchi 2008, Mikkola 2008, De Gaynesford 2009). The details and validity of these objections need not concern us here. Rather, the relevant point is that most participants in this debate treat Austin differently from how he is usually treated by speech act theorists and performativity theorists. Within the pornography debate most participants actually read and discuss what Austin says, treating his writings as texts from which there is still something important to learn.

There seems to be no other similarly extensive debate in contemporary philosophy where Austin plays such a central role. However, there are important individual thinkers for whom his philosophy is of fundamental significance and very much alive. Stanley Cavell comes to mind here. His engagement with Austin’s work is characterized by a deep clash of philosophical temperaments, and often takes the form of profound objections. What Cavell takes to be of sustaining value in Austin’s work is not so much his specific philosophical theses as certain questions or themes, the forgetting of which Cavell regards not just as an accidental feature of contemporary philosophy but as a natural tendency and danger of all philosophizing. Austin’s emphasis on language as something human beings use in real-life situations, his sense that it is characteristic of philosophy to overlook and distort the intricacy, adaptability, and contextual sensitivity of this usage by imposing preconceived and much cruder
schemes, and his insistence that defying such schematization does not mean defying articulation altogether—these are all themes which are central to Cavell’s thinking too, albeit ones that he develops in his own, sometimes rather un-Austinian fashion. Cavell maintains that the philosophical ignorance or falsification of our life with language—what he calls ‘the flight from the ordinary’—is not a matter of mere carelessness or impatience, but an irredeemable human temptation. This gives rise to a more complex notion of ‘the ordinary’ than what seems possible to find in Austin, as something that cannot be neatly distinguished from the will to philosophize but contains a pull towards its own distortion (Cavell 1979, 2005; Gustafsson 2005).

Another philosopher who for a long time has insisted that there are still important things to be learned from Austin is Charles Travis. In Travis’s case, the Austinian inheritance takes the form of a questioning of presumptions central to much analytic philosophy of language. For example, Travis has argued that the radical sort of contextualism that he finds in Austin’s work defuses Grice’s claim that Austin’s way of philosophizing often ignores the distinction between what is said and what is implicated. According to Travis, Grice’s rejection of Austinian procedures is question begging, since the Gricean distinction between what is said and what is implicated presupposes that the context-sensitivity of natural language is restricted in ways that Austin would not admit (Travis 1985, 1991, 2008). In making this sort of point, Travis has not been entirely alone. For example, François Recanati is another important figure who has made Austinian objections against Grice (Recanati 1994), even if the so-called ‘meaning eliminativist’ conception that Recanati associates with Austin (Recanati 2004: 146ff.) is one which Travis rejects both as an interpretation of Austin and as a view in its own right.

Travis has also done much to clarify how he thinks the conception of language as pervaded by context-sensitivity shapes Austin’s views on other issues such as knowledge and truth. In the last few years, Travis’s Austin-inspired work on perception has gained much attention (see, for example, Travis 2004).

A third thinker to be mentioned here is Mark Kaplan. In a series of papers published over the last couple of decades, he has been clarifying and defending an Austinian approach to issues in epistemology, explaining its critical potential in relation to the views of Chisholm, Sosa, Stroud, and others (Kaplan 1991, 2000, 2006, 2008). Perhaps more than anyone else, Kaplan stresses Austin’s openness to revision of established linguistic and justificatory practices. Being a defender of Bayesianism in epistemology and in the philosophy of science, Kaplan himself advocates such revision. What he takes to be the real target of Austin’s criticism is rather the Chisholmian sort of project, characteristic of much contemporary epistemology, of looking for a theory of justification deprived of any real consequences for how everyday and scientific inquiry should actually be done. It is worth noting here the difference between Kaplan’s and

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15 Cavell’s recent autobiography (Cavell 2010) contains some very fine sketches of Austin, the man and the philosopher; see, in particular, pp. 322–6.
Cavell’s conceptions: there is in Kaplan’s work no trace of Cavell’s view that the tendency toward such inert theorizing is in a sense made irresistible by our ordinary ways of talking and acting.\footnote{A fourth figure worth mentioning here is Burton Dreben, who knew Austin personally and regarded ‘Other Minds’ as one of the greatest philosophical essays of the twentieth century. Even if the Austinian influence is not immediately evident from his few published writings, in his teaching Dreben would convey to many students how important and radical he took Austin’s challenge to more traditional forms of philosophy to be (Juliet Floyd, personal communication).}

In this introduction, a central theme has been the mummification of Austin’s philosophy within mainstream Anglophone philosophy. It is appropriate, however, to end the discussion of Austin’s legacy by qualifying precisely that point. It might be too early to tell, but perhaps the years around 1990 marked the low ebb of the reception of Austin. Since then, there have been signs that a revival is going on. One such sign is Hilary Putnam’s 1994 John Dewey Lectures, where Austin plays a central role (Putnam 1994). Even more telling is the fact that Austin seems to be taken seriously again by many relatively young philosophers. Besides writings by the contributors to this volume, one might mention such diverse examples as Quassim Cassam’s work in epistemology (Cassam 2007), Alice Crary’s application of Austin to problems in moral philosophy (Crary 2007), Eugen Fischer’s invoking Austin as an exemplary ‘therapeutic’ philosopher (Fischer 2005, 2011), M. G. F. Martin’s work on perception (Martin, forthcoming), and José Medina’s cross-disciplinary attempt to develop a new form of contextualism by interweaving Austin’s philosophy with Wittgensteinian, neo-pragmatist, and feminist ideas (Medina 2006).\footnote{This revival of interest in Austin goes hand in hand with a revival of interest in so-called ordinary language philosophy and its two other main representatives, Ryle and the later Wittgenstein. In the last decade, it has become clearer and clearer that the heated and extensive debate over whether Wittgenstein’s \textit{Tractatus} is to be read ‘resolutely’ or not is also a debate over how to interpret his later works (see, for example, several of the papers in Ammereller and Fischer 2004, and Köhlbel and Weiss 2004). Examples of a renewed interest in Ryle include Tanney (2009) and Dolby (forthcoming). It would be very interesting to try to bring all this recent research together, in order to gain a new and better understanding of the character and significance of ordinary language philosophy, and of the similarities and differences between Austin, Ryle, and Wittgenstein.}

Then there is also the fact that in recent years several recognizably Austinian themes have gained prominence in the philosophical discussion. Consider the enormous interest in the phenomenon of context-sensitivity. In this literature, Austin is often referred to as a precursor. One may quarrel with this reading of Austin—as Avner Baz does in his contribution to this volume, arguing that Austin’s contextualism is quite different from most contemporary varieties—and one may note that few contemporary contextualists make any substantial use of Austin’s work. Nevertheless, it would be surprising if the heated debates over contextualist views would not be conducive to a renewed interest in Austin’s philosophy.

A second example is the extensive discussion of disjunctivist responses to the argument from illusion, in epistemology and in the philosophy of perception. Here, \textit{Sense and Sensibilia} is sometimes referred to as an early example of a disjunctivist
analysis. Again, this reading may be questioned, and it is true that most contemporary disjunctivists do not make use of Austin’s work. Still, the debate may well motivate people to actually read his texts and see what he has to say. (An interesting sketch of Austin’s significance for contemporary philosophy of perception, in relation to the disjunctivist debate, is Schwartz 2004.)

A third example is the recent methodological debate, sparked by criticisms of the reliance on ‘intuitions’ in analytic philosophy. Linked to this criticism is an explosion of studies in so-called experimental philosophy where philosophical claims about what is intuitive and what is not are tested against how people actually respond in polls (a helpful introduction to this field is Knobe and Nichols 2008). It would certainly be absurd to describe Austin as an early proponent of such an experimental methodology. Indeed, his mode of investigation is sometimes described as one particularly pertinacious variety of the sort of armchair philosophy that the experimentalists reject. But that description does not seem fair either. In fact, Austin’s emphasis on the importance of group discussions in philosophy, his criticism of the use of outlandish thought-experiments in philosophical arguments, and his insistence that reflections on what we should say in everyday cases require very detailed descriptions of the relevant speech situations, suggests that he shares some of the concerns of the experimentalists (Alexander and Weinberg 2007; Hansen, MS). What we have in Austin seems like an interesting and developable attempt to navigate between the rightly criticized habit of armchair intuition-mongering and the equally problematic reduction of linguistic practices to response-patterns charted in poll-based statistics.

Finally, it deserves to be repeated that the hope for an Austin renaissance expressed above is not the hope for an uncritical acceptance of Austin’s views or of his way of doing philosophy. There is fortunately no indication that this sort of uncritical attitude is on the increase. What might be gaining ground is a sense that Austin’s philosophy is still worth engaging with, critically and seriously. That is the sort of development that this book is meant to promote.

5. Overview of the contributions

The contributions are thematically organized. The first paper develops an original account of Austin’s way of philosophizing. Then come four intricately interrelated and interestingly different papers on epistemological topics. The two final papers both discuss the relation between Austin and Frege, bringing up issues in the philosophy of language and logic that are rarely discussed in the secondary literature on Austin.

In ‘Unmasking the Tradition’, Simon Glendinning ponders the relation between Austin’s procedures and the tradition of Western philosophy, as that tradition comes into view in Austin’s own work. According to Glendinning, Austin’s approach involves an intriguing sort of balancing act. On the one hand, Austin’s aim is to free us from traditionally invoked frameworks of thought. This means that his mode of criticism has to be sufficiently distanced from those conceptual maelstoms not to be
drawn into them. On the other hand, Austin’s criticism cannot just isolate itself from traditional philosophical thinking. If so, it would lose all contact with it and become irrelevant. Thus, Austin must find a way between immersion and isolation. As Glendinning puts it, Austin has to situate his inquiries on the ‘margins’ of traditional philosophy. Instead of addressing the logic of statements, he explores performatives; instead of addressing the possibility of knowledge, he explores perception; instead of addressing the logic of reasons, he explores excuses; and so on and so forth. Glendinning explores this strategy in detail and argues that it is widely misrepresented and misunderstood, not only by critics such as Jonathan Bennett, but also by more friendly readers like Warnock and Cavell.

In the first of the four papers on epistemological issues, Mark Kaplan discusses how Austin can deal with the sceptical challenge posed by what is nowadays called ‘the argument from ignorance’. Visiting the zoo, I claim to know that there is a zebra in the enclosure in front of me. But what if someone challenges my claim, arguing that I have done nothing to show that the animal is not just a cleverly painted mule? According to such a sceptic, I do not know that the animal is not a painted mule; and, if I do not know that the animal is not a painted mule, then I do not know that it is a zebra; so, by modus ponens, I do not know that the animal is a zebra.

As Kaplan notes, Austin thinks this challenge is faulty. But wherein lies the mistake? According to Kaplan, it is not enough to say that Austin thinks the sceptic would need some concrete positive reason to appropriately bring up the suspicion that the animal is just a painted mule. This is right, as far as it goes. But, Kaplan argues, it does not suffice to solve the problem. For Austin would still acknowledge that I cannot be said to know that the animal is not a painted mule. And it is hard to see how Austin could deny the conditional, that if I do not know that the animal is not a painted mule, then I do not know that it is a zebra. But then, how can he avoid the sceptic’s conclusion?

Kaplan’s answer is that even if Austin acknowledges that I cannot be said to know that the animal is not a painted mule, he is not thereby committed to the claim that I do not know that the animal is not a painted mule. The key idea here is that the distinction between what one knows and what one does not know is not exhaustive. ‘I do not know that p’ is not simply the negation of ‘I know that p’. Rather, there are instances of ‘p’ such that my relation to those instances is neither one of knowing nor one of not knowing. Such cases are similar to knowledge in that I am entitled to act on p, but different from knowledge in that I cannot prove that p is true. These are things that are in deed not doubted—and rightly so—but for which we are nonetheless unable to give a proof if someone asks for it. According to Kaplan, it is a central idea of Austin’s that such practical entitlements can exist even in the absence of an ability to prove the relevant belief.

Adam Leite offers a different interpretation of Austin’s epistemological views. Drawing mainly on Sense and Sensibilia—or, rather, on unpublished notes from Austin’s 1958 presentation of those lectures at Berkeley, notes that differ considerably from the published version—Leite discusses Austin’s rejection of global sceptical arguments.
In particular, Leite considers the apparently question begging character of Austin’s rejection of the Cartesian Dream Argument. Against the sceptic who makes use of this argument, Austin claims that there are in fact phenomenological differences between dream experiences and ordinary waking experiences, and that I can show that I am currently not dreaming by noting that my experiences are not dream-like. Leite shows in detail why such reliance on empirical background information about what dreams are like is not question begging, given certain general Austinian views on what it is for something to constitute a reason for believing something else. First, if there is no pro tanto reason in favour of a certain hypothesis—if the hypothesis expresses only a ‘conceptual’ or ‘metaphysical’ possibility—it constitutes no genuine reason to revise established beliefs. Second, epistemic priority relations are not determined once and for all and \textit{a priori}, but depend upon the circumstances. Even in cases where there is some pro tanto reason in favour of a hypothesis, we have to look at the details of the case in order to become clear about what can and what cannot be used as arguments against the hypothesis. And, Leite argues, if we look at the claim that I am currently dreaming, there is a pro tanto reason in favour of it only if the dreaming is taken to be of the ordinary kind, viz. as involving experiences that differ phenomenologically from waking experiences. And if the dreaming is taken to be of the ordinary kind, we can without begging the question reject the hypothesis simply by noting that our experiences do in fact have the characteristic phenomenological features of waking experiences.

Leite generalizes this result so as to cover other global sceptical hypotheses, such as those about evil demons and brains in vats. According to Leite’s Austin, it is possible to reject such hypotheses by noting that there are in fact no evil demons, and that we do not yet have the technology to create brains in vats. As Leite points out, this challenges a widespread conception of the task of epistemology found in the works of such prominent contemporary philosophers as Barry Stroud, Marie McGinn, and Laurence BonJour. Leite also notes that less global forms of sceptical arguments, such as the one with the painted mule, can be treated along similar lines. This puts his interpretation in explicit conflict with Kaplan’s. According to Leite’s Austin, just as the mere possibility that we are dreaming does not make it false to say that we know that we are not dreaming, the mere possibility that the animal in front of us is a painted mule does not make it false to say that we know that the animal is not a painted mule.

Benjamin McMyler’s contribution has been mentioned earlier, and his account of the analogy between saying ‘I know’ and saying ‘I promise’ has been briefly sketched. What McMyler does in his paper is to explore the connection Austin sees between knowledge by testimony and the problem of other minds. According to McMyler, Austin thinks of testimony as a fundamental mode of access to the minds of other people, and his account of this mode of access emphasizes not only its non-inferential character, but, most of all, its irreducibly social nature. More precisely, McMyler’s Austin thinks that testifying, like promising, is a matter of entering into a special kind of relationship with one’s audience—a relationship characterized by the speaker’s
taking on responsibility for his words, and by the audience’s acknowledging that responsibility. If I tell Paul, ‘I know that Gloria was at the party’, I thereby give Paul the entitlement to tell others that he knows that Gloria was at the party, and to act on that piece of information; and if someone challenges Paul’s claim to know that Gloria was at the party, he has the right to defer that challenge back to me, expecting me to be able to provide an appropriate defence.

McMyler’s Austin thinks of our preparedness to enter into such social relationships of responsibility and dependence as a fundamental feature of our lives as minded, language-using creatures. Moreover, he thinks of the philosophical problem of other minds as emerging from a theoretical unwillingness to fully acknowledge the necessity of such dependence. Furthermore, he thinks that this problem gains its depth from a sense of loneliness bound up precisely with this sort of unwillingness. If this is right, the philosophical tendency to try to solve the problem of other minds by reducing the reliance on testimony to the reliance on other epistemological sources, such as inference or perception, will in the end be counterproductive. Rather than liberating us from our worry, such a reductionist strategy will make it worse.

In his ‘Knowing Knowing (that Such and Such)’, Avner Baz criticizes the widespread idea that contemporary epistemological contextualism constitutes a continuation and development of Austin’s most significant insights about language and knowledge. Baz mentions Keith DeRose’s observation that Austin often seems to avoid the question whether epistemological claims are true or false, in favour of characterizations such as ‘right’, ‘within reason’, ‘silly’, ‘outrageous’, and so forth. According to Baz, it is no coincidence that this feature of Austin’s discussion makes DeRose uncomfortable. For, Baz argues, it marks a very significant difference between Austin’s philosophical viewpoint and that of DeRose and his contextualist peers. Indeed, Baz claims that this difference is much deeper than the difference between the contextualists and their anti-contextualist foes. According to Baz, the contextualist and the anti-contextualist both take it for granted that it is always a sensible and important task to determine the truth-value of an epistemological claim. What they disagree about is the extent to which contextual features are relevant for such determination. By contrast, Baz takes Austin to be questioning the shared presupposition that such determination is always in place. In fact, Baz claims, Austin thinks the philosophical demand for such determination itself means that the real-life significance of epistemological claims disappears from view. By agreeing with their alleged opponents about the general viability of asking whether epistemological claims are true or false, the contextualists miss the way in which such claims are anchored in the actual needs and circumstances of use. According to Baz, the contextualists bring in context-dependence too late in the discussion, for the very problem they want to solve is already a fundamentally de-contextualized, artificial question. Baz argues that the debate over this question is bound to end in stalemate: both sides rely on their favourite ‘intuitions’, but those intuitions have no clear connection with anything that matters to us outside the philosophical seminar room.
It is interesting to read Baz’s paper together with Kaplan’s and Leite’s. These contributions work out in full detail three sharply different interpretations of how the contexts of real-life knowledge seeking matter to Austin’s treatment of epistemological worries. Any future discussion of Austin’s way with scepticism will have to situate itself in relation to these three interpretative possibilities.

However, the appropriation of Austin by contemporary epistemological contextualism figures in Baz’s paper only as an example of a more general tendency to domesticate his philosophical radicalism. More precisely, Baz is reacting against the view that what is valuable in Austin has to be made compatible with the idea that the basic function of our words is to serve as instruments for representation. According to Baz, this is precisely to repress Austin’s most challenging insight: that what we illocutionarily do with our words does not belong to a separable ‘pragmatic’ level of linguistic practice, but matters to the very meanings or concepts that our words serve to express.

Charles Travis’s contribution is a detailed investigation of Austin’s claim that statements and their truth, as philosophers have traditionally conceived them, are abstractions. Travis approaches Austin’s conception by comparing it with what Frege has to say about truth. He notes that both Austin’s and Frege’s views are deep and persuasive, while also seemingly very different. The most immediately striking contrast is between Frege’s and Austin’s conceptions of what it is that constitutes the fundamental sort of truth-bearer. For Frege, anything that is perceivable is excluded from playing that sort of fundamental role. Instead, he thinks questions of truth and falsity arise in the first instance with respect to thoughts, and thoughts are not the sort of entities that can be perceived. By contrast, Austin thinks statements are what is most fundamentally true or false, and he thinks of the making of a statement as a concrete, observable historic event: it is an utterance made by a speaker to an audience in a particular, real-life situation.

According to Travis, what is really at stake here is how to understand the relation between the conceptual and the non-conceptual. In particular, the crucial issue is how to understand the sort of generality that characterizes the conceptual. Frege and Austin agree that the conceptual somehow looks beyond the particular case. If I say of a cat that it is on the mat, what I say of it may also be said by others, it may be true of other cats, and it may be true on other occasions of utterance. But how is this looking beyond the particular case to be understood, more exactly? Frege thinks of it in terms of the generality of a function mapping objects onto truth-values, and his conception means that once the function is determined it will not be left open how to apply it in a particular case. By contrast, Austin rejects the very idea of such determinacy. For him, a concept does determine something, but what it determines leaves its application in particular cases negotiable. What if the cat is in a box with cat litter, which is on the mat? What if most of the cat’s body is outside the mat? What if the mat is rolled up, the cat being inside the roll? According to Travis’s Austin, no rule can determine whether such cases are instances of the cat’s being on the mat or not. No Fregean function can

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relieve us from the need to employ our human, unregularizable sensitivity in applying the conceptual to the non-conceptual, taking into consideration the needs and circumstances of the particular situation. Determining truth-value is, in this sense, like determining other values: it requires virtues of the same sort as those needed in giving a fitting advice or making a just verdict.

But now, how different from Frege does this make Austin? Travis argues that the difference is surprisingly slight. He claims that Austin retains many of Frege’s central insights, such as the indefinability of truth, the shareability of content, the notion of a fundamental distinction between the generality of the conceptual and particularity of the non-conceptual, and a notion of truth as a matter of how the conceptual stands towards the non-conceptual. Indeed, in the final section of his paper, Travis even suggests that Frege’s and Austin’s views can be fully reconciled, in consideration of the quite different philosophical purposes for which those views were originally proposed.

According to Travis, Austin makes the fact-value dichotomy collapse, in that he rejects the sort of contrast between questions of truth and questions of value that this dichotomy requires. In this connection, Travis quotes Austin’s claim that truth and falsity do not stand for anything simple, but for ‘a general dimension for being a right or proper thing to say as opposed to a wrong thing’ (Austin 1975: 145). This notion of ‘dimension’ is puzzling and rarely discussed. Yet it seems important to Austin, since it recurs at central moments in his works. Jean-Philippe Narboux explores this aspect of Austin’s philosophy, and argues that the concept of dimension is a key tool for him in his attack on the philosophical tendency to structure thought by invoking oversimplified conceptual patterns. According to Narboux, Austin charges traditional philosophy with having given a few selected words such as ‘truth’, ‘meaningfulness’, ‘goodness’, ‘freedom’, and ‘reality’, an overly exalted status. Narboux’s Austin thinks this sort of ‘onomatolatry’ has made philosophers forget about and do violence to the significance of whole arrays of other terms of assessment that fulfil equally important functions. Thus, Narboux reads Austin as holding that the notions of truth and falsity belong to a dimension that also includes words such as ‘precise’, ‘exact’, ‘accurate’, ‘rough’, ‘exaggerated’, and ‘vague’, each playing its own particular role, and none of which is more fundamental than any other. Similarly, the notions of meaningfulness and meaninglessness are just two words in a dimension that also includes terms such as ‘void’, ‘vitiated’, and ‘hollow’; the notions of acting ‘freely’ and ‘not freely’ belong to a dimension that also involves terms such as ‘tactlessly’, ‘spontaneously’, and ‘clumsily’; and so on and so forth.

Like Glendinning, Narboux portrays Austin as someone who wants to draw our attention to areas of language that have been unjustifiably marginalized by traditional philosophy. And Narboux’s Austin is no less radical than Glendinning’s: He wants to shake the very foundations of traditional Western philosophy. There is, however, one sense in which Narboux’s Austin is traditional: He is in certain respects a deeply systematic thinker. Indeed, Narboux claims that it is only by bringing out the systematic
structure of Austin’s method and conceptual apparatus—and in this sense ‘read him as a classic’—that it becomes possible to see clearly the radical consequences of his criticism.

Like Travis, Narboux thinks Austin is indebted to Frege and argues that he must be read against the background of Frege’s work. Unlike Travis, Narboux thinks that, in the end, the difference between Austin and Frege is nonetheless fundamental and irreconcilable. It is impossible here even to begin to pinpoint the complexities involved in the disagreement between Travis and Narboux. What is clear is that investigating this disagreement will force the reader to explore very deep strata of both Austin’s and Frege’s thinking.

At the beginning of this introduction, it was emphasized that the aim of the present collection is not to promote a new school of Austin interpretation. The just given survey substantiates this claim. It should have become clear that the book contains a variety of readings that hang together, not by way of mutual agreement, but by way of deeply interesting differences and penetrating disputes. Evidently, these papers are not the last but the first steps in a discussion that is meant to continue beyond this volume, and give rise to further and unexpected suggestions for how to understand and explore the contemporary significance of Austin’s philosophy.18

Bibliography


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