Scenes and Sensibilia

J.L Austin: Philosopher and D-Day Intelligence Officer
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I

Benjamin Disraeli wrote: "Read no history: nothing but biography, for that is life without theory." (*Contarini Fleming* (1832) pt. 1, ch. 23). However, many biographies may be said to tacitly advocate a theory, and a highly disputable one at that: namely, the theory that history is driven by the Actions Of Great Individuals. It is common for mass-market historical biographies to use a tag-line that describes their chosen subject as 'the man who saved Britain', or 'the inventor of the modern world', or some such. More than likely, the books themselves do not justify such descriptions – and, if they are intellectually honest, they could not. But the 'Great Individual' idea is nonetheless thereby encouraged. It is perfectly understandable that a biographer, being interested in the person they are writing about, believes that that person is important, and perhaps even that their importance has been overlooked. The relevant sense of 'important' is usually that they have had an influence, that they have left the world different from how they found it, and moreover, that the world we live in today shows continuing signs of their influence – as opposed to them being the kind of historical curio whose influence, if they had any, has long since dissipated. It is worth bearing in mind that influences can be good or bad, or a mixture of both.

The history of philosophy, as it is regularly taught and studied, is bedevilled by its own version of the 'Great Individual' idea. This can have a distorting effect on philosophy, by leading people to focus on what such-a-such a Great Philosopher actually meant when they said such-and-such, rather than on the pros and cons of different philosophical positions. Moreover, it can turn philosophy into a prestige contest where ideas are, not necessarily consciously, assumed to have greater plausibility because they are associated with a Great Philosopher. This latter happens with living philosophers too, and I believe that the world of academic philosophy would be better if all discussions of 'who is the greatest living philosopher?' ceased forthwith. Moreover again, in the last few years there has been much

agonising over whether many of the Great Philosophers were really Bad People. But the currently widely-felt need to take people down off their pedestals might not be nearly so great if they weren't on such high pedestals in the first place.

None of the foregoing is meant to imply that biographies, or biographies of famous philosophers in particular, are without value. One of their potential values is that they can undermine 'Great Individual' myths. What I have in mind here is not the hatchet job, the 'unauthorised biography', whose – often explicitly stated – purpose is to 'expose' a Great Individual as a Great Monster. Biographies of that type – and they are sometimes so distorted in their focus as to not even deserve to be called biographies – reinforce in their own way the idea that there are Great Individuals, albeit that the greatness may consist in Great Wickedness. Rather, what I have in mind is biographies that show how ideas, whether artistic, scientific, political, or philosophical, arise out of milieus rather than being the creations of unique individuals. In a different context, the neologistically-talented Brian Eno has argued that, instead of being so interested in 'genius', we ought to recognise 'scenius' (Eno, 2021, pp. 363-4) He explains this as the existence at various times and places of scenes – milieus and/or sets of circumstances – that are favourable to innovation. We should, he thinks, be more willing to credit innovations to scenes, rather than to individual 'geniuses'. This idea is not itself without its dangers: no doubt many white supremacists and European-exceptionalists believe that Europe, or The West, at various times constituted or contained a 'scene' that fostered great art or great science, whereas other places didn't. And this can, in turn, encourage not only racist ideas, but also ideas of an ideal past and of a great decline from that past. But the idea of 'scenius' does not in itself imply these things. It is perfectly consistent with there being such scenes in many different parts of the world and at many different times. It is, I believe, not intrinsically problematic and distorting in the way that the 'Great Individual' idea is.

Nor should any of the foregoing be taken to imply that there are not talented individuals, or philosophical works from the past that are more deserving of attention than others, albeit the latter may depend on what one's own philosophical interests and projects are. There are philosophers, living and dead, for whom I feel a particular affinity and admiration and read repeatedly with profit. I admit the strong possibility that, in some cases, that affinity and admiration might greatly lessen if I knew more about what they were like in real life. But they ought not to lessen if I find out that their ideas, rather than being originated by them alone, were in fact just as much the product of a scene. Only a very unrealistic set of preconceptions would lead anyone to think otherwise. Moreover, the scene from which ideas

come can itself be of great interest, and again that thought should be no more surprising than the more familiar thought that the lives of famous artists, scientists, philosophers can be of great interest. Thus, as well the value of undermining Great Individual myths, a biography that locates someone in their scene can also have value as a work of social history. The social history of Austin's scene is fascinating: a great deal of very good, and innovative, philosophical work was done in Oxford and Cambridge by people with – as Rowe shows – a very odd educational background, under the influence, often overlooked, of philosophers and philosophy teachers going back several generations, and in circumstances that included two World Wars.

Rowe's book does very well at showing how Austin's philosophical ideas arose from a scene. But, as its subtitle indicates, there are two very different reasons why a biographer might be interested in Austin, or why someone might be interested in reading a biography of him. Austin's work in British Intelligence in the Second World War has been alluded to in various places such as the Dictionary of National Biography entry on him, personal reminiscences, and introductions to volumes about his philosophy. But no-one before Rowe has gone into anywhere near so much detail about it. It would be out of the question for a biography of Austin to omit or briefly pass over such an important part of his life. But it creates a problem of which Rowe is clearly aware: there are potentially two audiences for this book – people interested in the history of modern British philosophy, and people interested in the Second World War. Although a disproportionate number of people in academic philosophy are middle-aged and older men, there is likely to be only a small minority of people in each audience who are also in the other audience. Judging by the amount of space books about the Second World War take up in British high-street bookshops, there is a large number of readers for them. But I take it that more readers of this journal are interested in philosophy than in the Second World War, and consequently many may find the middle section of this book rather dry and heavy-going. Moreover, and even while admitting that Austin's war work is important and deserving of more attention, it is still possible to exaggerate just how important something is. Rowe, in some of his more hyperbolic language in the war section, seems to me to be guilty of this. Consequently, I applaud Rowe for providing useful correctives to the 'Great Individual' idea in the sections of the book covering Austin's philosophy, but regret that he comes dangerously close to reinforcing that idea in the section about his war work.

II

The first chapter of this biography traces Austin's ancestry, going back as far as the seventeenth century for some lines of ancestors. There are some attempts to find precedents for Austin's interests and character traits in some of his ancestors – e.g., we are told that Austin's notes and manuscripts in the late 1920's and 1930's 'have the same kind of mechanical perfection' as the work of his architect grandfather Hubert Austin (16). This seems to be a common habit with biographers, and is a recurring theme in the TV series *Who Do You Think You Are?* It is not clear, either in biographies or in the TV series, if it is meant to imply a causal connection. However, there is interest in this background information, and in the sketches of Austin's early childhood in Lancaster and, from, 1921, in St Andrews. If nothing else, they are a useful reminder of how open and unapologetic was the class-riddenness and snobbishness of British society in the 19th and early 20th century. Austin's parents were not free of that: his mother cherished the belief – apparently unfounded – that she was related to Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, the wife of King George VI and mother of Elizabeth II. However, Austin himself later developed left-wing (but not communist) political sympathies.

Austin's education was typical of that received by the upper and upper-middle classes in Britain (and other European countries) at the time, which means that from a present-day perspective it appears very unbalanced. There was a very heavy emphasis on Classics. Austin attended Shrewsbury public school where, where, according to another former pupil as quoted by Rowe, it was possible for the Classical Sixth to spend twenty-six of the thirty teaching hours a week on Greek and Latin (50). This left four hours a week for all other subjects, and there was virtually no science or mathematics. Many former pupils of Shrewsbury ('Salopians') later testified to extreme levels of bullying in the school, as indeed seems to have been the norm in many other public schools of the time as well – George Orwell's memoir of his time at St Cyprian's (Orwell 1968) is nightmarish in its descriptions. Austin later felt that this permanently affected his character, and it may have been a factor in one of his personality traits most frequently remarked on: his lack of a 'middle distance'. That is, he tended to view people as either a 'relation, friend or follower' or 'a formally-treated outsider whose friendly gestures were unlikely to be fully reciprocated' (494). There was a very small number of family members and friends to whom he was devoted – he was a very loving husband and father – but he held most people at a formal remove. One way this was manifested was in his prohibition of anyone outside the very-close circle calling him by

his first name, and this prohibition seems to have extended even to his 'followers'. Rowe plausibly suggests that this attitude was least in part developed as a defence mechanism in a hostile environment.

After Shrewsbury, Austin went on to study *Literae Humaniores*, or 'Greats', at Oxford, which again involved large amounts of Latin and Greek. The exams included such exercises as translating passages from Lucretius and Ovid into English verse, passages from Gilbert White into Lucretian hexameters, and from Shelley into Greek hexameters (63n39). Some of Austin's contemporaries at Oxford seem to have won their academic awards very largely on the strength of their prowess in Latin and Greek, most notably A.J. Ayer, who performed significantly better in classics than in philosophy. This classics-heavy education enabled Austin to make at least one substantial contribution to Aristotle scholarship ('*Agathon* and *Eudaimonia* in the Ethics of Aristotle'). Austin's former student John Searle later recalled that Austin said, of a passage in Aristotle: "It is just not Greek, it is not good Greek" (Searle 2014, p. 5). To say this takes considerable chutzpah, and I am not qualified to say whether Aristotle, on some particular occasion, had good Greek or not. But Austin was probably close to being as well-qualified as anybody in the modern world to say so, and surely it is good that at least sometimes philosophers are less than reverential towards great figures from the past, even Aristotle. On the other hand, neither Austin nor Ayer became the kind of philosopher (such as Heidegger) who perpetually show off their classical erudition at every opportunity in the apparent belief it makes them authorities on every topic under the sun.

The philosophy component of Austin's Oxford education involved being taught by many figures who are now largely forgotten. There were philosophers at Oxford whose omission gives a false picture of the history of British philosophy in the late 19th and early 20th century. This history is often seen as: British philosophy in the late 19th century was dominated by Idealists such as T.H. Green, F.H. Bradley and J.M.E. McTaggart, and then G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell came along and, in different ways, blew away the cobwebs. It is widely recognised that Russell was in regular contact with the new logicians and philosophers of mathematics on the continent, and indeed with the American pragmatists. But the standard story makes Moore seem more unique than he really was. Moore was undoubtedly an important influence on the Ordinary Language Philosophy movement – and indeed, Austin is reported as having said that Wittgenstein's ideas were 'all in Moore' (Searle 2014, p. 6). But Moore did not engage in the close examination of linguistic usages in their native contexts that was advocated by Wittgenstein and practiced by Austin and Ryle. In any

case, Moore and Russell were both Cambridge-based, whereas Green and Bradley were Oxford-based, so a picture that focusses on Moore and Russell's opposition to idealism risks giving the impression that Oxford was dominated by idealists until the cold wind blew in from Cambridge to blow idealism away.

The Oxford realists are these days much less well-known than those figures, but they represent a robust anti-idealist tradition that can be traced back to the 19th century. Rowe usefully traces the history of Austin's philosophical forebears at Oxford, and finds clear precedents for key ideas of Ordinary Language Philosophy, and of Austin's work in particular, in the work of Oxford realists such as J. Cook Wilson, H.W.B. Joseph, and H.A. Prichard. Cook Wilson was a defender of 'common sense' realist views against the idealists, and in this he resembled Moore. He held, for example "that the world was not mind-dependent but existed objectively in its own right; that knowing did not affect what was known; that truth was a matter of statements corresponding correctly with states of affairs; that the world was roughly as science and common sense thought it was" (80), and so forth. Austin seems to have also held most or all of these views – and I will say more later about his views on truth – but they are not central to his work or definitive of Ordinary Language Philosophy. However, other things that Cook Wilson says are much closer to the spirit of Austin. For example, Cook Wilson wrote:

> Distinctions made or applied in ordinary language are more likely to be right than wrong. Developed, as they have been, in what may be called the natural course of thinking, and in the apprehension of particular truths, whether of everyday life or science, they are not due to any preconceived theory. (quoted on p. 80)

This does not say that the beliefs of ordinary people, as opposed to philosophers, about whether the world is mind-independent and so forth, are more likely to be correct. Nor does it say that ordinary linguistic usage is infallible. It does imply, however, that it is well worth philosophers' time paying close attention to ordinary linguistic usage, and that they need a very good reason to override it. So it is akin to Austin's "most words are *in fact* used in a particular way already, and this fact can't be just disregarded" (Austin 1962, p. 63), which also leaves open the possibility – made explicit by Austin immediately afterwards – of linguistic revision after sufficiently careful consideration.

Also striking is the fact that Cook Wilson speaks of *distinctions* in ordinary language. Austin frequently took fellow-philosophers to task for ignoring distinctions made in ordinary

language, not just because he believed it led them to over-simplify questions, but also because he believed there was positive philosophical insight to be gained from thinking about why those distinctions are made. Thus, in "Three Ways of Spilling Ink", he notes that ordinary language allows us to say that someone did something 'intentionally', 'deliberately', or 'on purpose'. This does not in itself imply, and Austin does not say it implies, that these really are three distinct ways. But it does, Austin thinks, give us prima facie reason to inquire into possible differences that may be indicated by the different words. More often than not, he thinks, we will find real differences, and thinking about those differences may in turn lead us to insights into philosophical questions, such as (in this particular example) moral responsibility and free will. There is a striking similarity of approach in the way in which Cook Wilson took idealist philosophers to task for "calling ordinary declarative statements 'judgements'": Cook Wilson argues that this elides important differences between judgments, "opinions, theories, conjectures, and so forth." (80) Thus, Rowe convincingly demonstrates affinities between Austin and the Oxford realists that cannot be found between Austin and Moore, or even Austin and Wittgenstein (and Russell, despite the shared antipathy to idealism, was engaged on very different, and very largely antithetical, philosophical projects to Austin). This is of course no coincidence, as Cook Wilson's disciples Joseph and Pritchard were among Austin's teachers at Oxford. So Rowe's work here enables us to see Austin's insights as emerging from a philosophical scene that has its roots in the 19th century.

On the subject of influences, it is inevitable that the relationship of Austin's work to Wittgenstein's comes up. The early Wittgenstein was cited by Ayer as an influence, and as a prophet of a new philosophy that, Ayer thought, would sweep away the follies of the past: at a Joint Session in 1933, Ayer exulted: "You've lost, you've lost. The forces of Cambridge and Vienna are descending upon you!" (93) This links Wittgenstein with the logical positivists, a link which Wittgenstein even in his early phase denied. Austin was regarded by some in his early Oxford years as "rather a disciple of Freddie [Ayer]" (136), but if he was, he soon ceased to be. Austin's work, as does Ryle's and other Ordinary Language philosophers, has much greater affinity with later Wittgenstein than early.

It would be too simplistic either to see Ordinary Language philosophy as derivative of, or a watering-down of, Wittgenstein, or as something that developed independently of him. In fact, there is evidence of influence in both directions. Drawing on Harris and Unnsteinsson (2018), Rowe shows the many correspondences between Austin's "The Meaning of a Word", written in 1940, and Wittgenstein's *Blue Book*, which had been in circulation in Oxford since 1937 (145-6). He also observes that Austin could be dismissive of

Wittgenstein after the Second World War, and there was very little direct interaction between them. What may be surprising to many readers is Rowe's suggestion that Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, work on which began in 1949, may have been to some extent influenced by Austin's 1946 paper "Other Minds" (403n.19). Although the latter is "Austin's most Wittgensteinian piece of writing in terms of method and literary format" (403), Wittgenstein had in 1946 not yet turned his attention to external-world scepticism. Rowe points to similarities in details of the arguments of the two works, and suggests that Wittgenstein may have become aware of Austin's arguments via Anscombe and Geach.

III

I will not, in this review, spend much time on the middle section of the book, which deals with the Second World War years, as it falls well outside my expertise as well as, arguably, outside the scope of this journal. Rowe has certainly unearthed a great deal of information, and tells the story of Austin's war work with a level of detail and consideration never attempted before. It certainly seems worth the effort, despite creating the two-audience problem mentioned earlier. There are times when, it seems to me, Rowe is a little over-keen to attribute Allied successes to Austin's individual brilliance. On p. 183, he talks of Rommel as Austin's "main adversary in the months leading up to D-Day", thus perhaps indulging a little too far in the conceit that Austin himself was pitted one-to-one against Rommel. Rowe comes perilously close here to those popular-historical biographers who describe their chosen subjects as 'the man who saved Britain' and so forth. Moreover, in a discussion of Operation KJH, a daring and important reconnaissance mission on the French coast pre-D-Day, Rowe concludes that when people involved later recalled briefings by Bill Williams, it was actually Austin they meant (293-4). While I acknowledge my lack of expertise in the field, Rowe's grounds for this seem a little too speculative. I do not, I hasten to add, mean to deny that Austin's war work was very important or that he himself showed great talent in carrying it out.

It is a fascinating suggestion that Austin took from his war work some ideas that he brought to how he pursued philosophy post-war. While working for British intelligence, he got into the habit of organizing coordinated group work, where tasks would be divided into clearly defined sub-tasks, which were delegated to individual group members who would then report back to the group. This seems to have been a fairly direct inspiration for Austin's

Saturday morning meetings of the post-war years, even to the point of Austin wanting the meetings to be around a table with straight-backed chairs instead of the comfortable armchairs more familiar at Oxford (425).

IV

With the very large exception of the war years, Austin's life was on the whole peaceful and uneventful: a trip to Germany in 1932 alerted him to the danger of Nazism; he had an affair with a slightly older woman in the early 1930's; and he married Jean Coutts in 1941, going on to have four children and a happy family life, tragically cut short by death at age 48. Most of the interest of the third section of the book, dealing with the post-war years, lies in Austin's philosophical activities and interactions with his academic peers. Of his academic peers, he developed a warm friendship with Isaiah Berlin, a fully reciprocated antipathy to A.J. Ayer, and a frosty relationship with Gilbert Ryle.

There were some dramatic episodes in the academic side of Austin's life, which Rowe covers thoughtfully: the appointment of Ayer as Wykeham Professor of Logic in 1959 was controversial, and greatly disapproved of by Austin (583-5). Perhaps the most dramatic event of all was the publication of Ernest Gellner's *Words and Things* (1959), an attack on Ordinary Language Philosophy that, even if one agrees with Gellner, can only be described as very one-sided and bad-tempered (595-601). The controversy surrounding the book reached the letters page of *The Times*, where there was a lengthy correspondence sparked by Ryle's refusal to have the book reviewed in *Mind.* The ensuing dispute is well-known, with Ryle giving as his reason that he considered the book to be 'abusive' rather than serious work, and Russell taking public exception to Ryle's decision. But Rowe gives us the fascinating detail, revealed by Ryle's former student Daniel Dennett, that in private Russell later told Ryle: "What you should have done […] was wait a year and then publish a very brief critical review with the author's name misspelled", about which Ryle commented "he wished he'd thought of that." (599n78). Austin was one of the principal targets – perhaps *the* principal target – of Gellner's attack, and there is evidence apart from the book of Gellner's particular hatred of Austin. However, Austin did not involve himself in the controversy surrounding the book, most likely because by that time he was suffering from what turned out to be his final illness.

The bulk of the third part of the book is discussion of Austin's philosophy rather than of worldly events, even such philosophy-centred events as those just mentioned. Rowe is a philosopher in his own right (I particularly recommend his book *Philosophy and Literature* (Rowe 2004), and both his account of the development of Austin's ideas, and his occasionally-harsh critical discussion of them, are well worth reading, even if I don't always agree with some of his critical verdicts.

After the war, Austin returned to Oxford and began to put into practice the project of closely examining ordinary linguistic usages and distinctions. To this end, in 1947 he initiated his Saturday morning meetings. For twelve years, meetings were held on Saturdays between 10.30 a.m. and about 1, with a group of people that could range from two or three to about twenty, and included as regular attenders for at least some of the time individuals who went on to become big names – for example, Paul Grice, Stuart Hampshire, and Mary Warnock. Austin issued the invitations, and heavily favoured young academics – ones who were no longer students, but young Fellows or college tutors. He thought such participants were more likely to be mentally flexible and open-minded, and to be in need of 'philosophical refreshment' after their weekday work of giving tutorials on standard texts (426). He also avoided inviting people whom he knew to be unsympathetic to his views – such as Anscombe.

It is tempting to think that he just wanted to surround himself with people who would agree with him as to the right meanings or uses of words, but I would suggest that such a suspicion rests on a misunderstanding of what the Saturday morning meetings were doing and what the project of Ordinary Language philosophy is. The meetings would spend a year on a broad topic of philosophical interest – in the first year, it was 'Rules and Games' – and each member of the group was assigned a sub-topic which they would research and then report back to the others. Their report would be discussed by the group, paying particular attention to nuances and apparently trivial differences of linguistic expression – or 'what we would say' – in different circumstances, and reflecting on why such differences might exist. For example, in 1953, following the publication of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, the group considered the differences between 'tools, instruments, utensils, appliances, gear, kit, devices, and even gimmicks.' (428). An obvious objection is that different people might use any of these words differently: one's sense of the correct usage of any of them might vary depending on one's social class, regional background, or generation, and the Saturday morning meetings seem to have been seriously lacking in variety of these characteristics. Thoughts such as this doubtless motivated Arne Naess, who agreed with

Austin on the need to pay close attention to ordinary usage, to conduct empirical studies in the form of questionnaires, involving large numbers of people who were not academic philosophers, in order to determine how they would use words in different situations – or, as Austin might say "what one would say when." (See Chapman 2014 for discussion and comparison.) Naess's approach clearly prefigures the experimental philosophy of more recent times. More often than not, Naess's studies found that non-philosophers' use of words such as 'knowledge' or 'truth' differed significantly from how philosophers used or defined them, and indeed that often there was a lot of variety in how ordinary people used those words.

But to set this approach, and these findings, against Austin and the more characteristic Ordinary Language approaches, is to presuppose that Ordinary Language Philosophy is a project of attempting to determine what the correct meanings, or uses, of words are. If that was the case, then Naess's findings would be devastating. Moreover, while Naess's findings might seem to vindicate Austin's strictures on philosophers' artificial usages, it is not clear what philosophers are then supposed to do about that. Are they supposed to conclude, for example, that there is no such thing as knowledge? Or that one needs, for philosophical purposes, to give artificial definitions to words after all? Either seems a far cry from Austin's (doubtless partly tongue-in-cheek) suggestion that a project like the Saturday morning meetings could solve 'roughly all' the problems of philosophy (415). Moreover again, if ordinary usage, as opposed to philosophers' usage, is key, then surely the validity of any findings of the Saturday morning meetings is undermined by the fact that the participants represented a very narrow demographic range in terms of social class, age, and – for the most part – nationality. This would of course be compounded by the fact that they all had a philosophy education, and nearly all at the same place. Why would their linguistic habits and instincts be any reliable guide to those of people as a whole, or if that's not what they're supposed to be, why should they have authority over those of people as a whole?

But I would suggest a different way of understanding what Ordinary Language Philosophers, and Austin in particular, were doing. Let's say you have a strong feeling that spilling ink 'deliberately' and spilling it 'intentionally' are different: at least to the extent of recognizing that the exact circumstances in which one would use those words are different. One might not have any idea how to define the two words so as to highlight the difference, and further thought might reveal the difference to be non-existent. But the fact that one initially believes there's a difference can be a taken as a clue, a prompt to search for reasons that might underlie it, and those reasons might reveal important distinctions of relevance to how we understand the will, or action. Austin's metaphilosophical conviction, inherited from

Cook Wilson and the other Oxford realists, is that philosophers have a long-standing habit of running things that are distinct together, which he takes to be evidenced in using single terms to cover things that are covered by many different terms in ordinary language. Thus, someone's instinct that there is a difference between the uses of 'intentionally' and 'deliberately' may lead to the discovery that there is a real and important difference that philosophers overlook. A key point here is that, for a project such as this, it does not matter if other people do not share one's instinct that there is a difference. If just one person thinks there is a usage difference, then as long as they are a reasonably competent language-user, that is sufficient grounds for an investigation as to whether there is a difference of fact. Austin called his method 'linguistic phenomenology', and understood as such it is ably defended by Stanley Cavell in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cavell 2002). Understood this way, Ordinary Language Philosophy is a process of reflecting on ordinary linguistic uses, for philosophical ends, not a process of determining what the correct use (even the correct ordinary use) of words is, as an end in itself.

One thing this interpretation emphasises is that Ordinary Language Philosophy is not a project for shutting philosophical discussions down by ruling out certain linguistic usages as wrong. Gellner's critique sometimes seems to rest on the assumption that it is. Rather, it is a project for opening up new philosophical resources, and seeing philosophical questions differently. It is significant, I think, that it is very often *distinctions* that are revealed by such methods. As the quote from Cook Wilson earlier showed, Austin inherited a tradition of taking philosophers to task for ignoring distinctions. This emphasis may account for some people's feeling that Ordinary Language Philosophy, and Austin in particular, are slow-moving, pedantic, and hostile to philosophical ambition. But it is worth bearing in mind that Aristotle, of whose works Austin had a deep knowledge, explicitly recommended making distinctions as a way out of philosophical *aporias*. It does not seem an exaggeration to say that the underlying metaphilosophical principles of Ordinary Language Philosophy did not originate with Austin – or with Ryle, or with Wittgenstein, and certainly not with Moore – but with the Oxford realists. Austin's distinctive contribution was not those principles, but the project of putting them into practice by the means embodied in the Saturday morning meetings, as well as his own distinctive applications of them in his papers and books.

Some of the fruits of this project can be found in Austin's papers of the late 40's and 50's, and in his two posthumously published books. The smallness of Austin's published output means that Rowe can give thoughtful critical consideration to most of these works individually without the book becoming unfeasibly long. His assessment of *Sense and*

Sensibilia, Austin's critique of sense-datum theory, is rather negative (444-54), and echoes Paul Snowdon's (2014). Both take Austin to task for focussing his attack so much on Ayer's arguments in *The Foundations of Emprical Knowledge* (1940) as if that represented all the arguments that have ever been made for sense-data. Moreover, both Rowe and Snowdon argue, many of Austin's critiques of those arguments depend on very precise details of how they are worded, and could be addressed either by re-wording them or by more charitable readings of the wordings as they are. Some of these criticisms of Austin seem fair, but I think *Sense and Sensibilia* is a better book than Snowdon and Rowe lead us to believe. Even if the overall argument does not work, there are gems of insight scattered throughout – such as Austin's observation that a straight stick half-submerged in water does not actually look like a bent stick. Moreover, many of the arguments of Ayer that Austin dissects have a much older provenance – the bent stick example can be found in Berkeley, for example – so that his critique has a wider scope than Ayer after all. One should also allow for the fact that Austin did not intend *Sense and Sensibilia* for publication in the form in which we have it (see Searle 2014, pp. 7-8).

Rowe is much more positive about *How To Do Things With Words*, rightly identifying its importance in starting fruitful new lines of inquiry regarding language. He is also rather positive about the project Austin was beginning to embark on at the end of his life: Austin was beginning to develop an interest in sound symbolism – that is, in the hypothesis that there are primordial associations between linguistic sounds and their meanings that are universal and transcend specific languages. For example, he observed that words "associated with liquids gone astray or under pressure" often begin with *sp* – e.g. spatter, spew, spigot, spill, splash (576). I have to admit that this strikes me as a far-fetched and unpromising project.

Ordinary Language Philosophy is sometimes accused of being intrinsically opposed to conceptual innovation and sometimes, further, of being intrinsically politically conservative, or at least anti-revolutionary (e.g. by Marcuse). Austin was not in fact a political conservative, although he was not impressed by the Soviet Union, and therefore might count as anti-revolutionary in the eyes of some hard leftists. On philosophical issues, he seems often to have leant towards 'classical' views – e.g. the problem of free will, where he seems to have favoured classical, aka libertarian, free will, and on the question of truth, where he seems to have favoured a correspondence view. In neither case did Austin develop a positive view at any length in his writing. Rowe gives a fair account of the subtlety of Austin's arguments in 'Ifs and Cans' against Moore's compatibilist formulation of free will (535-8).

Moore argues that we can analyse expressions such as 'I could have done otherwise' as 'I would have done otherwise if I had chosen to', and argues that in order to have free will it is not necessary that I could have acted differently even if all the conditions had been the same: it is only necessary that I could have acted differently if I had wanted to: i.e. if some background condition had been different. Austin uses the example of someone missing a putt in golf. They might say: 'I could have holed it'. Austin argues that, firstly, this cannot mean 'I would have holed it if I'd chosen to', because they *did* choose to. Moreover, he also argues, they can't mean to imply 'if some circumstance had been different'; rather, they mean: 'I could have holed it in exactly the same circumstances.' It is clear in this paper and in remarks throughout Austin's career that the thought determinism was obviously false. This suggests that we held a libertarian or classical free will view, but he did not develop any positive such view anywhere in his writing. Austin's paper 'Truth' clearly indicates that he held a correspondence view as opposed to, for example, a pragmatist one. Rowe is rather dismissive of the correspondence view of truth, in a way that seems condescending towards something he considers obviously unsophisticated and out-of-date. But it might be worth bearing in mind that Davidson, one of the most sophisticated and influential philosophers to write about truth in the years after Austin, held a correspondence view, and argued both that it was necessary in order to capture some very important uses of 'true', and that it was perfectly compatible with a coherentist view of knowledge-acquisition.

V

No book about Austin can overlook the subject of his legendary wit, which is evident throughout his life both in his philosophical work and in letters to his small circle of intimates. His frequent letters to his younger sister Ann contain long passages of Edward-Lear-like fantastic humour – see, for example, the story about the teacher with the cork leg on pp. 69-70. There are a fair number of anecdotes about Austin's repartee, probably more than any other philosopher. Rowe gives meticulously-referenced sources for all of these that I could think of, making his book a useful one-stop resource for tracing them. Wit is one of life's joys, and to be celebrated, but there are problematic aspects to its celebration becoming a large part of someone's reputation (unless they are a professional comedian, obviously), and there are problematic aspects to its use in philosophy in particular. There are some famous people whose reputation becomes deeply entangled with stories about their wit, that

whenever their names are mentioned it is highly likely that some of these stories will be repeated. The orchestra conductor Thomas Beecham is one such, and Austin is another. There's nothing in itself wrong with repeating witty remarks of course. But while, qua lovers of wit, we may relish his bon mots, we should, qua philosophers, separate the wit from the philosophical argument and insight, and not assume that the former constitutes the latter. In Austin's case, this separation is particularly difficult, because in some remarks by Austin simultaneously constitute both wit and philosophical argument. But this makes it all the more important not to confuse the one with the other.

Whenever the topic of humour is mentioned in a philosophical context, one can be sure that there will be a reference to Wittgenstein's remark that "a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of jokes." This is not verifiably verbatim Wittgenstein, but a paraphrase by Norman Malcolm. As it happens, Wittgenstein is, perhaps more than any other 20th century philosopher, the object of a myth of the Great Individual. Passing remarks by him – even indirectly reported ones – are regularly cited as profound wisdom, lending authority to claims that are far from self-evidently true. This particular remark is germane in the present context, so I want to briefly consider it. Wittgenstein also once said (and this actually is verbatim) that a genuine book on ethics would "with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world", so it's worth considering that one may have to add to some of his remarks the pinch of salt suitable to rhetorically effective hyperbolae. Nonetheless, there is something appealing in the idea that good philosophy can be done by means of jokes. But I would suggest that, as a means of writing philosophy, jokes have some of the same limitations as aphorisms. Both jokes and aphorisms run the risk of deriving their persuasiveness from cleverness and neatness, rather than real insight. They have aesthetic value, and one loves to quote them, but there is, I would suggest, an important difference between quoting them as a neat way of encapsulating a thought, and quoting them as if they, by themselves, constituted evidence for the thought. The very neatness of a joke or aphorism can have the effect of derailing serious argument. It can leave an interlocutor undeservedly looking foolish and, if they resist, looking as though they have what is a great failing in many (especially British) eyes, lack of humour. It is often said that humour punctures pomposity, pulls the powerful down from their pedestals, etc., but that ignores the existence of cruel, marginalising, punching-down humour. Not only that, but humour can puncture not just pomposity, but seriousness. No doubt, seriousness is sometimes misplaced, and at times reminders may be needed that a subject or question does not deserve the seriousness some people give it. However, sometimes whole areas of thought are

dismissed with a witty remark, and this can be so effective that the witty remark becomes the only thing that many people know about the topic. For example, it is routine to dismiss the whole of mediaeval Christian theology and philosophy with the remark that it's about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. One should think very carefully before adding to the world's stock of remarks and tropes that can be used to dismiss things so easily.

Some of Austin's celebrated bon mots could, depending on one's point of view, be seen either as wonderful wit or as closed-mindedness. One widely quoted story concerns a visit to Oxford by the American philosopher Brand Blanshard (486), who gave a talk in which he criticized Ordinary Language Philosophy's tendency to hunt mice instead of tigers. Austin, in the audience, challenged Blanshard to "release a tiger and show us how to hunt it", whereupon Blanshard began to talk about free will. In the account by James Griffin that Rowe quotes, Blanshard "foundered, backtracked, hesitated, and corrected himself before finally guttering out." Whereupon Austin said in a stage whisper "You won't catch mice that way". This no doubt led to laughter at Blanshard's expense, but we should remember that the laughter *was* at someone's expense, and moreover that we only have the word of someone much more sympathetic to Austin that Blanshard's response consisted of foundering, backtracking etc.

However, there is a positive side to Austin's wit, in that it lent his prose writing a vigour and sparkle that is rare in philosophy. Some of the wit in his published papers is of the cutting variety, which is not to say that the cutting is always unwarranted. Beyond that, Austin's style is highly distinctive, as Rowe appreciates and demonstrates, for its unusual amount of clever word-play and allusion. (It is perhaps not surprising that Jacques Derrida appreciated Austin.) It is, perhaps, a little unusual to finish up a book review with an earnest recommendation to read something else, but the finest appreciation of Austin's style that I know of (which Rowe also cites) is 'Austin's Swink' by the literary critic Christopher Ricks (Ricks 1998). Ricks' own work frequently involves a kind of word-by-word dissection of literary passages that is reminiscent of Austin's of philosophical passages. In his essay on Austin, he shows how fond Austin is of making phrases by splicing together multiple already-existing ones – e.g. "any frying-pan in a fire", "barking our way up the wrong gum-tree". Moreover, Austin sometimes makes plays with words that work on the page but not when spoken aloud – e.g. "*Le style, c'est Ryle*", or vice versa – e.g. "a policy of splitting hairs to save starting them." Ricks points to the paradox that Austin championed ordinary language, but nonetheless frequently used language in extraordinary, virtuoso, allusive ways. A second paradox is that, despite this stylistic playfulness, Austin was a champion of what one of my

colleagues once called 'philosophy in slow motion' – a care and attention to the precise use of words that some have found infuriating, but others have found inspirational. There is a kind of pedantry that can coexist with both great intelligence and wit, and Austin's work at its best exemplifies this.

VI

The overall impression one receives from this book is of Austin as a rather guarded, but not cold person: there are stories of his kindness and consideration towards students and junior colleagues. There may have been some truth in Ryle's accusation that Austin was a little too fond of surrounding himself with acolytes. But a more charitable interpretation of this is that Austin had a philosophical project that he thought could be best forwarded by a group of dedicated people with some division of labour, as inspired by his intelligence work in the Second World War. The people in the group would have to at least be cooperative and sympathetic to the project rather than trying to undermine it. Austin's pedantry about details may be in large part responsible for how small his written output is even taking into account his early death. But I cannot say that that pedantry is a weakness of his work, and I would even say that in some ways it is exemplary. It is very rare for such pedantry to coexist with such sparkling and enjoyable prose. Moreover, Austin founded the important project of speech-act theory, and was at least one of the most important exponents of Ordinary Language Philosophy, an approach whose obituary has been read more than once, and always, so far anyway, prematurely. In all of these endeavours, he was either carrying on a line of thinking already being developed for a number of generations or working in close collaboration with his students and younger colleagues, many of whom were first-rate talents in their own right. The fact that a philosopher's ideas thus emerge from an already-existing scene, and are developed in collaboration with others, should in no way be surprising to us, or be considered a slight on the philosopher – at least, not unless we have unrealistic ideas about 'Great Individuals' in the first place.

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