

Austin on Perception, Knowledge and Meaning

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Interpreting Austin on perception

Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962) generates wildly different reactions among philosophers. On the one hand, some allow that the text offers acute criticisms of the argument from illusion for sense data, but see little further value in the work.¹ Some dispute that the lectures achieve even this much, and claim that Austin and sense data theorists simply talk past each other.² On the other hand, some have decidedly positive reactions but differ over the text's main purpose: some see far-reaching ramifications for the philosophy of perception;³ others see the work as a prime instance of an ordinary language philosopher offering us therapy;⁴ while still others find a substantive anti-skeptical agenda supported by complex argumentation.⁵ Philosophers will disagree of course, but the extent of disagreement about Austin's contribution is remarkable, with the main arguments, methodology, and the whole point of the lectures under dispute.

Interpreting Austin on perception starts with a reading of his *Sense and Sensibilia*, and interpreting *Sense and Sensibilia*, I believe, requires reading into the lectures key

¹ Martin 2007; Snowdon 2014.

² Thau 2004; Robinson 1994.

³ Putnam 1994; Travis 2008.

⁴ Locatelli 2014.

⁵ Leite 2011.

ideas from Austin's work on natural language and the theory of knowledge. The lectures paint a methodological agenda, and a sketch of some first-order philosophy, done the way Austin thinks it should be done. Crucially, Austin calls for philosophers to bring a deeper understanding of natural language meaning to bear as they do their tasks. In consequence Austin's lectures provide a fascinating start—but only a start—on a number of key questions in the philosophy of perception. It is easy to read either too little or too much into them; finding the right balance reveals an important view of perceptual knowledge.

My plan for the paper is this: in the next section I provide a brief synopsis of *Sense and Sensibilia*. In the next, I discuss the picture Austin sketches of the role of philosophers in rationally reconstructing commonsense epistemology, and how this picture makes urgent an account of the situation-dependent meaning of our utterances. I then turn to Austin's distinctive contribution to questions about the metaphysics and epistemology of perception. I will argue (i) that he provides a framework in which to address some of the central questions of contemporary philosophy of perception, and (ii) this framework requires appreciation of the situation-dependence of utterance meaning. In the conclusion, I speak to the wider import of Austin's lectures.

A synopsis of Sense and Sensibilia

I think it useful to give a brief synopsis of the lectures. (Note that chapter headings are not Austin's but are to serve as convenient tags.)

Chapter I Introduction

Austin announces he aims to examine the sense data theorist's reasons for holding the doctrine that "direct" perceptual awareness is always of sense data and never of "material objects." His concern is that the facts of perception are more diverse than the sense datum theorist allows. Austin does not aim to defend an answer to the problem of perception⁶—he won't defend direct realism against the sense data

⁶ Crane and French 2015.

theory, for instance. Austin adds that a “blinkering philosophical English” in use by sense data theorists—chiefly A. J. Ayer and H. Price—is a distinct philosophical mistake; it feeds our ability to ignore or distort the facts of perception.⁷

Chapter II Deception, Directness and Commonsense Epistemology

Austin aims to show that Ayer’s attempted recapitulation of ordinary or commonsense epistemology is inaccurate, and he suggests that the mischaracterization is driven by an epistemological agenda. (We will hear more about the agenda in chapter IX.) Ayer represents ordinary thinking about perception as claiming, first, that we are deceived if and only if we don’t perceive “material objects,” and second that we are merely “satisfied” with the extent to which our perceptual beliefs are justified. Austin takes issue with both claims: Commonsense shows itself keenly interested in when perception is direct or indirect—on a natural construal of those terms—and has it that not all cases of being deceived by the senses are of the same kind. Second, commonsense epistemology is more than merely “satisfied” with perceptual justification—in fact, the idea that one might question ordinary perceptual claims made under paradigmatically good circumstances is nonsense. (Austin will return to perceptual incorrigibility in chapters IX-X.)

Chapter III Opening Charge Against the Argument from Illusion

The argument from illusion proceeds in two stages: first, that sometimes what we are directly aware of is sense data, and second, that we are always directly aware only of sense data. Ayer’s argument at the first stage is by cases. Austin examines what Ayer says about each of his cases, and cannot find reason to abandon ordinary ways of thinking about the perceptual facts. A stick in water looks bent (we might say that for want of a better description) though it doesn’t look exactly like a bent stick out of water. Austin asks, must something straight look straight at all times and on all occasions? He notes we readily acknowledge that the same thing looks

⁷ Ayer 1940; Price 1932.

different to us, depending on a wide range of circumstances. Any premise that it must be a different thing we see on every occasion of looking different flies in the face of commonsense.

Chapter IV Looks, Appears, Seems; Meaning in Context

The chapter is an interlude from the argument from illusion in which Austin details some important aspects of commonsense epistemology.

Austin details the way commonsense finds it important to distinguish the way a thing looks (or the look of a thing) from the way it appears or seems. For instance, we might comment on someone's looks, "he looks guilty", but reserve the use of "he appears guilty" for special occasions, where we want to withhold judgment. We might use "he seems guilty" when evidence of guilt is mounting, whether or not he has the look of a guilty person. To talk about how things seem is already to express a judgment (43). Austin cautions: "There is, of course, no general answer at all to the question how 'looks' or 'looks like' is related to 'is'; it depends on the full circumstances of particular cases." (39) So too, the circumstances of an utterance help determine its meaning. (41)

Chapter V The Second Step of the Argument from Illusion: Qualitative Difference

Austin briefly reconstructs the argument for the second step. Ayer and Price both claim that (i) "veridical" and "delusive" perceptions are qualitatively the same.⁸ Next (ii) recall that according to step 1 of the argument, in the "delusive" case what we are aware of is a sense datum. But (iii) if what we are aware of in the "veridical" case is very different in its nature—a material object and not a sense datum—then one would expect experience to register a difference, and distinguish the two perceptions. But by (i) we do not distinguish these perceptions, so by (iii) what we are aware of in both cases is the same—a sense datum. Austin's central point against

⁸ Austin notes that Price's use of this premise is different than Ayer's, as Price takes himself to already have established the doctrine of sense data and is concerned at this point with the question of whether sense data are parts of the surfaces of objects.

the argument targets premise (iii): it doesn't follow from the fact that X is different from Y in nature that X looks different than Y does. "If I am told that a lemon is generically different from a piece of soap, do I 'expect' that no piece of soap could look just like a lemon?" (50)

Chapter VI Ayer's Evaluation of the Argument from Illusion

Austin recaps Ayer's position. Ayer himself is not convinced by the argument from illusion, at least if it aims to demonstrate that we are always aware of sense data. In *Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* he is moved by the objection Austin notes above: why shouldn't things very different in nature look very much alike?

According to Ayer, the argument from illusion is not best understood as answering a question of fact—namely, what in fact is it that we are directly aware of in perception? Rather, the conclusion of the argument answers a question about how we might talk—what is the best language for describing perceptual experience?

Austin rejects Ayer's idea that philosophers have the linguistic freedom presupposed by Ayer's question.⁹ (59) For instance, he suggests that philosophers are constrained in what they mean by "real shape" by what is ordinarily meant when people talk about the real shape of something. The point is pursued in the next two sections.

Chapter VII "Real"

Prompted by "frequent and unexamined occurrences of 'real', 'really', 'real shape' &c." in the arguments, Austin gives an excursus on uses of the word "real." The word "real" is "highly exceptional ... in ... that, unlike 'yellow' or 'horse' or 'walk', it does

⁹ Austin notes that Ayer's official tolerant stance about choices of linguistic framework is belied by his actual view of what is in fact fundamental. Although Ayer represents his own defense of sense data theory as not a theory about the nature of perception, but a choice of linguistic framework, in fact, he insists that there are hard facts about sense data—they are what really exist, and though we may chose to speak as if there were material things, this is a choice made for convenience. (60)

Austin returns again to Ayer's views about material things and their relation to sense data in chapter IX, especially 106ff.

not have one single specifiable, always-the-same meaning.” (64) It is “substantive hungry”—we must be able to specify some respect or other in which a thing is real, and have an answer to the question “A real what?” (68) Further, negative uses are basic: knowing what it is to be “a real duck” requires knowing specific ways of being not a real duck. (70) A thing that is not a real duck is not thereby immaterial or non-existent (68). And what is the shape of a real duck, anyway? The question has no answer. (67) Austin’s aim is to make us wary of any argument that our perceptions must not be *of a thing* because they “fail to reveal its real shape.”

Chapter VIII Ayer on What is “Real”

Austin considers Ayer’s last chapter of *Foundations* in which he attempts to “furnish an explanation of the use of the word ‘real’ as it is applied to the characteristics of material things.” (80, quoting Ayer) Ayer’s basic idea is that those sense data that are “privileged” present the “real qualities” of things, where what makes a sense datum privileged is its predictive value—sensing a datum from middle distance gives one a better chance of predicting the data one will sense from other distances. Austin complains that the resulting judgments about “real” qualities don’t square with commonsense judgments. (“That’s not the real color of his hair—he dyes it” is not a statement about the lack of predictive value of the relevant experience.) In summary, Austin diagnoses Ayer’s failure as owing to a more fundamental failure to attend to issues about natural language: it is fatal “to embark on explaining the use of a word without seriously considering more than a tiny fraction of the contexts in which it is actually used.” (83)

Chapter IX Ayer’s Argument for Sense Data

Ayer suggests that we may choose the sense datum language, which involves a *special philosophical sense* of “perceive” on which “what is seen must really exist and must really have the properties it appears to have.” (102) Austin protests: What would motivate choosing such a language for describing the empirical world? We couldn’t use it to talk about “material things” as they don’t always have the properties they appear to have. Ayer’s official stance is that the new language has

the advantage of avoiding ambiguities found in natural language. But Austin reminds us Ayer has been unable to document any such ambiguities. Austin concludes that Ayer's (and Price's) real motive is to produce a species of statement that will be *incorrigible*. (103) Here we find out what Austin was alluding to in suggesting that an unstated "agenda" lay behind the arguments of the sense datum theorists.

Chapter X Sense Data Theory and the Epistemological Agenda

In the longest chapter of the book Austin delves into the epistemological agenda driving Ayer's and Price's sense datum theory, and into details about commonsense epistemology.

Ayer (and to an extent Price) is attracted to two key epistemic claims: first, that statements about sense data form a special class of *incorrigible* "observation sentences", and second, that such sentences can serve as *conclusive evidence* for other statements, and so serve as an epistemic foundation. Austin argues that no such privileged class of sentences will be found, and he notes that Carnap agrees, although for the wrong reasons, supposing that the point holds because what counts as an "observation sentence" is conventional; Austin argues that the point holds because *sentences* are the wrong type of thing to privilege in the first place. (111) No *kind of* sentence, once uttered, is incapable of being amended or retracted. (112) However, Austin notes, a *particular utterance* made in *particular circumstances* may be in fact incorrigible. (114) (To have a name for it, I will hereafter call this "*de facto* incorrigibility.") The possibility of *de facto* incorrigibility is a tenet of our commonsense epistemology, according to Austin.

What about the second claim, that some sentences serve as conclusive evidence for others? In addition to reiterating his point about sentences being the wrong type of thing to privilege, Austin identifies several key commonsense epistemic principles about evidence. First, not all statements require *evidence* for their support. Sometimes plain sight reveals the presence of something—you see a pig in a pen—and "there is no longer a question of collecting evidence... I can now just see that it

is..." (115). Second, statements about "material objects" may sometimes be *conclusively verified*; it is not the case that conclusive verification is only secured for a more privileged class of statement (117): suppose you see a pig, and that the situation is one where further verification is called for. In that event, you can prod the pig, or do some further biological tests. At a certain point in your investigations you have done quite enough (118) to conclusively verify that it is a pig. You don't have to rule out every statement whose falsity is "entailed" by the claim that it is a pig. (123) Austin goes on to claim that this marks a distinctive problem for foundationalism. He has in mind only foundationalisms built on distinctive sentence (types). (122-123)

We will return to *de facto incorrigibility* and *conclusive verification* below.

Chapter XI is devoted to critical discussion of places in Warnock's book, *Berkeley*, where Warnock accepts the "two-languages doctrine", with an "evidence-language" and a "material-object language" (142) along Ayer's lines.

A picture of philosophical practice

Austin gave his lectures—later published as *Sense and Sensibilia*—in 1958 at the University of California, Berkeley. According to Searle, he was delighted with his time in America, and was eager to spread the word about his vision of how to do philosophy.¹⁰ It is natural to imagine that he saw an opportunity to demonstrate the virtues of his approach to philosophical practice.

This approach is portrayed very clearly in the lectures. He simultaneously exhibits and talks about his preferred philosophical methods throughout. He gives an extended statement about best practices for philosophers in chapter VII, after discussion of Ayer's suggestion that we consider the adoption of a sense data language:

¹⁰ Searle 2014.

... most words are *in fact* used in a particular way already, and this fact can't be just disregarded. ... it is advisable always to bear in mind (a) that the distinctions embodied in our vast and, for the most part, relatively ancient stock of ordinary words are neither few nor always very obvious and almost never just arbitrary; (b) that in any case, before indulging in any tampering on our own account we need to find out what it is that we have to deal with; and (c) that tampering with words in what we take to be one little corner of the field is always liable to have unforeseen repercussions in the adjoining territory. And we must always be particularly wary of the philosophical habit of dismissing some (if not all) the ordinary uses of a word as 'unimportant', a habit which makes distortion practically unavoidable. (62-63)

The picture Austin paints in *Sense and Sensibilia* is of ordinary people with a natural set of concerns and questions about perception—when it works, how it justifies, and so on. Moreover, ordinary people have answers to many such questions, which form a commonsense theory that makes use of important distinctions, and includes significant commitments and explanations. Philosophers have a role in making our ordinary theoretical commitments explicit, and to find out about those commitments they must attend to the ways ordinary people talk. Philosophers also have a role in rationally reconstructing those commitments (that is why ordinary language is not the last word):

Certainly, when we have discovered how any word is in fact used that may not be the end of the matter; there is certainly no reason why, in general, things should be left exactly as we find them; we may wish to tidy the situation up a bit, revise the map here and there, draw the boundaries and distinctions rather differently. (63)

If philosophers are to help sort out ordinary commitments, they must be very careful of how those commitment are revealed by the language ordinary people speak. That is to say, philosophers need a theory of natural language meaning.

Although Austin does not provide this theory, he thinks a central feature of it will be the situation-dependence of utterance meaning. Austin stresses this point over and over again. What we mean is always determined in the particular circumstance of utterance (16, 41, 111). At the end of chapter IV he pleads with philosophers to pay attention to the situation of the utterance:

...it is not enough simply to examine the words themselves; just what is meant and what can be inferred (if anything) can be decided only by examining the full circumstances in which the words are used. (41)

Uttering a sentence on a given occasion involves a form of words that in another circumstance would have a very different meaning or significance:

Consider, 'That cloud is like a horse' and 'That animal is like a horse'. In the case of the cloud, even if we had said it was exactly like a horse, we should not have meant that one might easily mistake it for a horse, succumb to the temptation to try to ride it, &c. But if an animal is said to be like a horse, then probably it might in some circumstances be mistaken for a horse, someone might think of trying to ride it, &c. (41)

And most pointedly:

...the question of truth and falsehood does not turn only on what a sentence is, nor yet on what it means, but on, speaking very broadly, the circumstances in which it is uttered. (111)

That the truth or falsity of what we say does not depend on sentence meaning alone, but is determined by sentence meaning in circumstances, is a key insight of Austin's. We will return to this insight, and see how it informs Austin's positive contribution to a philosophical account of perception.

Austin's substantive results: the metaphysics of perception

Austin does not develop situation semantics in the lectures. For that we must look elsewhere in his work.¹¹ Consequently, his substantive contributions to the theory of perception can only be partial, by his own lights. Nonetheless, Austin seeks to provide some compelling evidence that his approach will be fruitful, by sketching some substantive claims. In this section and the next, I discuss the substantive claims Austin makes about the metaphysics and epistemology of perception.

The argument from illusion generates what we today call “the problem of perception.” This metaphysical problem starts with a question: “What is the direct object of perception?” Austin portrays commonsense as rejecting this question. We directly see many different things, and they are not of one kind, “material” as opposed to “immaterial”, say—or if these objects are of one kind, it's not the philosopher's business to a priori decide what that kind is: “There is no one kind of thing that we 'perceive' but many different kinds, the number being reducible if at all by scientific investigation and not by philosophy.” (4) Is commonsense theory of perception a sort of naïve or direct realism then? Austin adamantly is not arguing in favor of realism either. His point is that “What is the direct object of perception?” is a bad question: “So we are not to look for an answer to the question, what kind of thing we perceive.” (4)

This might lead us to suppose that Austin wants to turn away from metaphysical problems of perception altogether. This impression is fortified by Austin's brief remarks at the end of Chapter III. There he acknowledges that Ayer's case of mirages is a better case for the sense datum theorist to use, but then proceeds in rapid succession to suggest that mirages are none too like the “normal” case, and not very frequently encountered, and anyway there will likely always be qualitative differences between experiencing a mirage and seeing an oasis. To make the matter of interpretation even thornier, this last suggestion is one he goes on to repudiate explicitly. (52) All this suggests a dismissive and haphazard approach to the

¹¹ A central resource is his paper “Truth” in Austin 1979.

metaphysics of perception.¹² But it also suggests a dismissive approach that is without a solid foundation: Austin can seem insufficiently sensitive to the genuine worries behind the argument from illusion. For even if we do reject “What is the direct object of perception?” as somehow a bad question, certainly we can frame a reasonable question about the metaphysics of perception this way: given that on some occasions one can seem to be in perceptual contact with an oasis, say, when there’s no oasis before one, what constitutes one’s perceptual state in the case when the oasis *is* there as the *seeing* of an oasis?

My reading of Austin is that he does not at all ignore this last metaphysical question about perception, however badly he advertises his position. To understand Austin’s position, it is vital that we register that he has a preferred way of addressing questions about the nature of a target phenomenon. His method is to answer such questions by first considering *relevant contrasts*. So for instance, when we wonder about the nature of intentional action, Austin has us consider all manner of kinds of attempted or almost-action.¹³ When we wonder about the nature of seeing, similarly, Austin has us consider various kinds of attempted or almost-seeing. In chapter IV Austin details the way we distinguish varieties of “almost seeing,” noting that commonsense finds it important to distinguish the way a thing looks from the way it appears or from the way it seems. (39-43). Through such observations, we get an initial sense of what makes seeing different than various cases of “almost seeing.” What we find is that the relevant contrasts are differentiated by a variety of factors,

¹² Austin emphasizes his negative program: “What we have above all to do is, negatively, to rid ourselves of such illusions as ‘the argument from illusion’...” (4). It is no wonder we find readers thinking the lectures hold little more than negative critique. A related complaint is that the arguments for sense data theory that Austin criticizes are just bad—bad in simple ways that require no special methods or meta-philosophical approach to rebut them (Martin 2007). This complaint misses the fact that Austin’s positive contribution in critiquing Ayer is different in kind—Austin is not merely rebutting Ayer’s argument but also demonstrating the ways that we can fail to ask the right questions.

¹³ See “A plea for excuses”, “Ifs and cans”, and “Pretending” in Austin 1979.

such as our *readiness* to make a judgment, or the role of *evidence* in our judgment. For instance, *seeing that F* is distinct from being in a state where *it appears that F*, in that we are ready to judge that F in the former but not the latter case.

Let's call this the "method of relevant contrasts." The idea is that we ought not try to answer the question "what constitutes one's perceptual state in paradigmatically normal cases as a *seeing?*" bare as it were. Rather, we look at a range of nearby perceptual states, and try to determine what it is that differentiates them from each other. We ask, "What constitutes one's perceptual state in paradigmatically normal cases as a *seeing F*, as opposed to its only *appearing to one as F?*"

Note here that, in keeping with Austin's philosophical methodology, philosophers must look to ordinary ways of talking about the differentiation of contrasting cases. That in turn means that philosophers must consider a wide variety of concrete instances where we talk about the kinds of almost-seeings. Don't ask about what differentiates seeing F from its appearing to one that F, but ask, of *particular* circumstances, what differentiates seeing the pig there from its appearing that there's a pig there? Concrete instances are important, as Austin's nascent theory of meaning dictates that it is only with such circumstances in view that philosophers can discern what we mean and what we are committed to by the utterances that express our judgments. The method of relevant contrasts requires attention to the situation in which our statements are made, if it is to deliver reliable results.

Austin's substantive results: the epistemology of perception

Austin makes fascinating remarks in *Sense and Sensibilia* about the epistemology of perception, and to understand his contributions we must integrate them with his remarks about knowledge and knowledge claims. The result is a position that speaks to some central preoccupations of contemporary epistemology of perception.

In what follows, I will confine myself to three tasks: first, I'll first sketch the way I reconstruct Austin's position on knowledge and knowledge claims and show how this position makes sense of Austin's position in *Sense and Sensibilia* concerning *de*

facto incorrigibility.¹⁴ Then I'll discuss his position concerning *conclusive verification*. Finally, I'll briefly describe the upshot: a distinctive position regarding the kind of reasons one has in virtue of seeing something.

Knowledge and knowledge claims

Most philosophers are familiar with the idea that Austin lays the ground for a relevant alternatives account of knowledge on which knowledge is true belief backed by evidence or reasons sufficient to rule out all the relevant alternatives.¹⁵ An alternative is, roughly, anything the truth of which would defeat one's knowledge claim. What makes an alternative relevant? I think it best to think of Austin as suggesting a reasonable person standard applies: an alternative is relevant if a reasonable person worries about it enough to become unwilling to give an assurance about the truth of the target proposition. This standard of relevance best rationalizes our practice of giving and evaluating assurances. Visiting the farm with a friend who asks, "Are you sure that's a pig?" you assure her, "Oh yeah, I know it's a pig. I worked for years on a pig farm." An assurance is the speech act of vouching for the truth of a claim, wherein one takes responsibility for having reasons to believe the claim, which reasons also tell against all reasonable alternatives. What one will actually have vouched for with one's assurance depends in part on the meaning of the word "knows", and in part on the circumstances in which assurances are made. Recall here Austin's insight:

...the question of truth and falsehood does not turn only on what a sentence is, nor yet on what it means, but on, speaking very broadly, the circumstances in which it is uttered. (111)

The meaning of "knows" might be simple and circumstance invariant, roughly, *has conclusive reason to think the target belief is true*. But what one means in the broader sense—the truth conditions of one's utterance of "I know" given in an assurance—

¹⁴ Lawlor 2013; 2015.

¹⁵ See "Other minds" in Austin 1979. See also *Sense and Sensibilia* (118, 123).

depends on the circumstances. What it takes to have conclusive reasons depends on what the alternatives are, and this is fixed by the circumstances. The alternatives that must be eliminated for one's knowledge claim to be true are all and only the reasonable alternatives, and what is reasonable to worry about depends on the circumstances. If one is on a small family farm in North America, it is not reasonable to worry about whether it might be a peccary. The reasonable alternatives are that the creature is a cow or a goat, say. Those are all the alternatives that need ruling out, and one's visual experience of a pig is enough to rule them out. If in the circumstances it is a pig, then one's knowledge claim is true.

The resulting account of knowledge is *fallibilist*, where that means one's reasons or evidence can be sufficient for knowing but logically consistent with the falsity of the known proposition.¹⁶ This is a feature of relevant alternatives accounts of knowledge. Adding to this account an Austinian situation semantics for knowledge claims, we can resolve some key difficulties that fallibilist theories confront. I haven't space to demonstrate the point fully here, though I will sketch how situation semantics aids epistemology below.

I want next to briefly develop how this account of knowledge and knowledge claims integrates with observations that Austin isolates for discussion in his chapter X, namely, the issues of *de facto incorrigibility* and *conclusive verification*. His discussion of these topics casts light on some preoccupations of recent epistemology of perception. Recent epistemology of perception is concerned with (i) whether seeing provides a special sort of reason or justification—a “factive reason” such that one could not have that reason without the attendant perceptual belief being true; and (ii) how it might be that, if seeing does not provide such factive reasons, seeing provides reasons or justification sufficient for knowledge. What Austin says about *de facto incorrigibility* and *conclusive verification* bears on both these questions.

¹⁶ Cohen 1988.

De Facto Incorrigoibility

After claiming that the actual agenda of sense data theorists is to find a privileged class of incorrigible sentences (chapter IX), Austin begins his examination of incorrigibility by saying, "The pursuit of the incorrigible is one of the most venerable bugbears in the history of philosophy." (104). He notes that it is a mistake to search for incorrigibility in statements about the way things look:

...descriptions of looks are neither 'incorrigible' nor 'subjective'. ... certainly someone might say, 'It looks heliotrope', and then have doubts either as to whether 'heliotrope' is right for the colour this thing looks, or (taking another look) as to whether this thing really looks heliotrope. There is certainly nothing in principle final, conclusive, irrefutable about anyone's statement that so-and-so looks such-and-such. (42)

Interestingly, Austin has a diagnosis of why this is so, and it has to do with what we mean with our "looks" talk:

... the way things look is, in general, just as much a fact about the world, just as open to public confirmation or challenge, as the way things are. I am not disclosing a fact about myself, but about petrol, when I say that petrol looks like water. (43)

One's commitment in saying "so and so looks such and such" is precisely that others will find the look of the thing a certain way, and in light of this, we should expect descriptions of looks to be *corrigible*.

In spite of these remarks, it is a mistake to suppose that Austin is dismissive about incorrigibility. Austin says no kind of *sentence*, once uttered, is incapable of being amended or retracted. (112) However, Austin notes, a *particular utterance* made in *particular circumstances* may be *in fact* incorrigible (114):

If I carefully scrutinize some patch of colour in my visual field, take careful note of it, I know English well, and pay scrupulous attention to just what I'm saying, I may say, 'It seems to me now as if I were seeing something pink';

and nothing whatever could be produced as showing that I had made a mistake. But equally, if I watch for some time an animal a few feet in front of me, in a good light, if I prod it perhaps, sniff, and take note of the noises it makes, I may say, 'That's a pig'; and this too will be 'incurrigible', nothing could be produced that would show that I had made a mistake.

Utterances have *de facto incurrigibility* when "nothing could be produced that would show I had made a mistake." Austin stresses that this sort of incurrigibility is recognized by our commonsense epistemology.

The problem for the philosopher is to make sense of the commonsense claim that Austin voices, that sometimes "*nothing whatever could be produced that would show I had made a mistake.*" This is something we might say on occasion, but how on earth might it be true? The task for philosophers is to give a story about our commitments in making such claims—and in turn show that the idea of *de facto incurrigibility* is intelligible.

What are the truth conditions for an utterance of "nothing could be produced that would show I had made a mistake"? Considering sentence meaning alone in isolation from circumstances might suggest to us the sentence when uttered is true when there is no possible world in which the creature before one is not a pig. But such a world is after all possible, and so if the truth conditions of our utterance are simply fixed by sentence meaning, then what we say is false.

Here is where we can bring Austin's insights to bear. What the modal claim "nothing could be produced that would show I had made a mistake" commits us to depends on the circumstances. The truth or falsehood of such an utterance is a function of sentence meaning in the circumstances of utterance. Austin notes that utterances are only incurrigible with respect to the circumstances in which they are made:

... many kinds of sentences may be uttered in making statements which are in fact incurrigible—in the sense that, when they are made, the circumstances

are such that they are quite certainly, definitely, and un-retractably true.
(115)

How do circumstances help determine the truth or falsity of the modal claim? Here is one way to make this idea more precise. Suppose the case is one where I see a pig and the reasonable alternatives are that the animal is a large goat or a small cow, and my visual experience rules out these alternatives. “I know it’s a pig” is true. Suppose R is an alternative to the proposition, P, that the creature is a pig. The truth conditions for an utterance of “R could be produced as a cogent ground for retracting the utterance that P” are that R is in the circumstances an uneliminated reasonable alternative. Consequently, the truth conditions for an utterance of “R could be a cogent ground for retracting the utterance that P” are fixed by the same reasonable alternatives that fix the truth conditions of an assurance “I know P” in the same circumstances.¹⁷ This way of making the idea precise seems to be on Austin’s mind when he says

...surely there will be plenty of cases in which what we say by [the] utterance will in fact be incorrigible--cases in which, that is to say, nothing whatever could actually be produced as a cogent ground for retracting [it]. (114)

Utterances are *de facto* incorrigible in particular circumstances when there are *no cogent grounds in those circumstances* for retraction. We’ll say in such circumstances “nothing whatever could be produced that would show I had made a mistake”, and that will be true; the circumstances are also such that “I know it” is also true.

I want to note that my interpretation on this point may align with some things that Charles Travis’s says about how to interpret Austin.¹⁸ Travis frames the problem of perception this way: Let a “ringer” be a condition where, if S were in it, the condition

¹⁷ Note that this reading makes sense of Austin’s claims in “Other Minds” (1979: 159ff) about “reasonable precautions” being sufficient to show it “can’t be” anything else.

¹⁸ Travis 2008. Travis, it should be noted, has been calling for philosophers to appreciate the importance of Austinian semantics for a long while.

would be indistinguishable to her from a condition in which she seems to see that p, yet in which S does not know p. Now we want to accept this claim:

Unmistakability: if S knows p, then it is for S unmistakable that p. Specifically:

- (i) It is not the case that for all S can see, a ringer holds instead of p
- (ii) S sees that this is so (“That what he sees does not admit of ringers is part of what he sees” in knowing p.¹⁹)

But, Travis continues, we want to reject this claim:

Distinguishability: If S knows p, then S can distinguish his state from a ringer case.

The question then is how one can hope to “grasp oneself as seeing what excludes a ringer” since Distinguishability is rejected? If we reject Distinguishability, then it seems to follow that for all one can see, one might be in a ringer condition. So it seems that it cannot be true that one knows unmistakably that p on the basis of seeing p. As I understand Travis, he suggests that the way forward is to realize that “might” is an “occasion-sensitive” term. It is *possible* that Sid doesn’t face a pig, but an animatronic robot; however on this occasion, it is not true that it *might be* an animatronic robot. If I’ve got Travis right on this point, he should find congenial my account of the truth conditions for “nothing could be produced to show I had made a mistake,” and he should treat “might” similarly.²⁰

Philosophers have the task of making cogent our commonsense epistemic commitments. For philosophers to take up their task, it is necessary for them to keep in view the situation dependence of the meaning of our utterances. As we have

¹⁹ Travis 2008: 292.

²⁰ It’s not clear that Travis would want to adopt all that I have formulated above. For instance, it is not entirely clear to me what Unmistakability comes to, whether it expresses a commonsense claim about seeing, or whether Austin would advocate it. Also, Travis inclines to seeing Austin as a disjunctivist (Kalderson and Travis 2013).

seen, we can thereby make sense of commonsense commitments about the incorrigibility of our perceptual claims.

Conclusive verification

Austin's main concern in passages where he discusses seeing and evidence (chapter X) is to counter Ayer's contention that we cannot be incorrigible about, or conclusively verify statements about, ordinary middle-sized dry goods ("material objects"). His main complaint, as we have seen, is that Ayer imagines a type of *sentence* that can have a special epistemic role. But sentences, as distinct from utterances made in particular circumstances, "cannot be divided up at all" (123) into those which are incorrigible, those which provide evidence for other sentences, or those which can (or cannot) be conclusively verified; it is not sentences, but utterances made in particular circumstances that are true or false. Moreover, even if we correct for Ayer's mistake, and consider utterances in circumstances, it is just not the case that utterances about "material objects" will have lesser epistemic standing than utterances about experiences or sense data.

He then illustrates this complaint with various examples. Some show that utterances in circumstances about ordinary "material objects" can be conclusively verified. Other examples show that sometimes such utterances may not stand in need of "verification." (Is that your house? Have you *verified* it is?) And others suggest that not all statements about material objects need evidence: at the barnyard, one gathers evidence that there are pigs about, but when one sees the pig one does not merely have evidence. One just sees that it is a pig. (115)

Does Austin then hold that in every case "seeing is knowing"? Certainly that would be an overly strong claim, and as it happens not Austin's view. He is explicit that it is possible that one might *see* something and yet need to do more in order to have "conclusive verification." (118-9) Seeing the pig might not be enough—if for instance one has reason to think it's a peccary in captivity, then one might need to prod the pig or do a further test. In such a case, seeing the animal is not enough to have conclusive verification or knowledge. A relevant alternatives account of

knowledge lets us say why this is so—which alternatives are relevant depends on the circumstances, which include the target of one’s knowledge claim and what it is reasonable to worry about.

Return now to the questions that occupy recent philosophy of perception:

(i) Does seeing provide a special sort of reason or justification—a “factive reason” such that one could not have that reason without the attendant perceptual belief being true? Epistemological disjunctivists claim that seeing gives one a special epistemic standing that does not share a common epistemic factor with merely seeming to see; seeing provides factive reasons, while merely seeming to see does not.²¹

Given what I’ve attributed to Austin so far, I think he is not best understood as an epistemic disjunctivist. First and most generally, there is good reason to think Austin is a fallibilist, and epistemic disjunctivism is strongly motivated by impatience with fallibilism. Second, as we have seen, Austin countenances the possibility that one might need to do more than see the pig to have “conclusive verification” or knowledge—one might need to prod the pig, if that is what is needed to eliminate reasonable alternatives. This suggests at least that he would resist the idea that seeing always provides factive reasons.

Finally, and most importantly: as we have noted, there is reason to suppose that Austin thinks an utterance’s *de facto incorrigibility* rests on what we might call *de facto conclusive grounds*, and there is a difference between *de facto conclusive grounds* and *factive reasons*.

Let me explain. First, about the epistemic grounds of incorrigible utterances: Austin suggests that statements about ordinary “material objects” may be “conclusively verified.” One way to explicate this idea is in terms of *de facto incorrigibility*. As we’ve seen, an utterance is *de facto* incorrigible when nothing could be produced *in*

²¹ For instance in McDowell 1994; Pritchard 2012.

the circumstances as a cogent grounds for retracting it. One's epistemic grounds in making the utterance eliminate what are in the circumstances all the reasonable alternatives to its truth. In such a case, the statement is conclusively verified. The epistemic grounds one has in making a conclusive verification are grounds one has when one has done all one needs to eliminate what are in the circumstances all the reasonable alternatives. Conclusive verification involves having *de facto conclusive grounds*. But now, we can contrast *de facto conclusive grounds* with *factive reasons*. Factive reasons are reasons you would not have unless the target proposition is true. *De facto* conclusive grounds are grounds that eliminate what are in the circumstances all the reasonable alternatives to the target proposition. It might be that one has *de facto* conclusive grounds for what is a false proposition. You see what looks for all the world like a pig in the barnyard, but it is a peccary shipped in from South America on a trial basis. Your evidence gives you *de facto* conclusive grounds for thinking it is a pig, but it isn't.

For these reasons, I suggest Austin would resist the claim that seeing provides a factive reason.

This makes our second question more pressing: (ii) If seeing provides less than factive reasons, how can it suffice for knowing?

This question can be developed in different ways. One way has us asking, how can the *experience of seeming to see* provide justification sufficient for knowing, given that this experience is consistent with the falsity of one's attendant perceptual belief? Here the key is just to make sense of fallibilism about perceptual knowledge. I argue at length elsewhere that Austin's reasonable alternatives theory of knowledge, combined with his situation semantics, provides a coherent fallibilism.²² Seeing *can* provide reasons sufficient for knowing. One can know it's a pig by looking, because one *can* gain *de facto* conclusive grounds just by looking. If in the circumstances, the only reasonable alternatives are eliminated by the look of the

²² Lawlor 2013.

thing, then one has sufficient reasons for knowledge by seeing the thing. And if in fact it is a pig, then seeing can also give one knowledge.

Another way to push the issues raised by (ii) is more overtly skeptical: your seeming to see there's a pig is consistent with this all being a dream, or your being a brain-in-a-vat merely fed experiences by an evil scientist. How then can your visual experience be the basis of knowledge if you do not know that you're not just dreaming it all up? A version of this skeptical argument is given sharper form by Barry Stroud.²³ Stroud argues that our concept of knowledge has as a necessary condition that if one is to know anything about the world, one must know that it's not the case that all of one's present experiences are merely dream experiences; further Stroud claims that the condition cannot be filled.

Recently, Adam Leite finds in *Sense and Sensibilia* a substantive rejoinder to the Cartesian external world skepticism articulated by Stroud.²⁴ Much of Leite's article suggests that Austin makes a straightforward response to the skeptic, accepting the "Cartesian condition", and claiming that the condition is filled: *I do know* that I'm not merely dreaming all this; *I know* my experiences are not disconnected from the world around me.

I think an alternative approach to skepticism is more readily attributed to Austin. The basic idea is to reject the Cartesian condition. You're at the farm, staring at the pig, and perhaps you've even prodded it a bit. You don't need to know that you're not dreaming this all up in order to know it's a pig. If we pay attention to our actual

²³ Stroud 1984.

²⁴ Leite 2011. I am not certain how to reconcile Leite's claim that circumstances determine whether an alternative is defeated with his circumstance-independent claim that we never have reason to consider "merely metaphysical" possibilities when we worry about what we know.

practices of assurance-giving, the challenges and defenses we're ready to make, we'll see this is so.²⁵

What more needs be done to make good on this response to Stroud's Cartesian skepticism? Two large tasks now face us. One is to respond to Stroud's rejoinder that ordinary linguistic practice or judgments do not reveal the meaning of our words, the content of our concepts or the truth conditions of our utterances; an alternative skeptic-friendly semantic account is coherent, Stroud insists. A second large task is to address apparent inconsistencies in ordinary knowledge ascriptions. For instance, it seems a bit of commonsense that we know what follows from what we know. But "closure" principles raise difficulties. You say you know it's a pig. So do you thereby know it's not a peccary that happens to look just like a pig? You hesitate. So what is it? If the answer is yes, then we'd like a story about how you could know this on the basis of a visual experience that is exactly the experience you would have were it a pig-like peccary. And if the answer is no, then how can you claim to know it's a pig in the first place?

Handling these questions is a large task, and the discussion is longer than space permits, so I will just say this much. First, Stroud's suggestion that a skeptical semantics is a viable alternative semantics for our language echoes Ayer's suggestion that his sense datum language is a viable alternative language for describing the empirical world. If we want to turn back Stroud's skeptic on this front, we do well to return to Austin's criticisms of Ayer on this point. Second, on the matter of closure generated paradoxes: these paradoxes can be successfully handled if we develop Austin's insights about the circumstance dependence of meaning. The paradoxes arise because we are not attentive to the way the truth-values of knowledge claims depend on the situation talked about.²⁶

²⁵ Mark Kaplan makes a strong case that Descartes' condition is not part of our concept of knowledge. Kaplan 2000.

²⁶ For a compact statement of the situation semantic response see Lawlor 2015.

Conclusion

It is easy to read both too much and too little into *Sense and Sensibilia*. Austin does not in the lectures offer a systematic theory of perception or perceptual knowledge, and we read too much in if we suppose that such a theory lies entirely within its pages. Austin aims for his lectures to illustrate his ideas about how philosophy should be pursued, using the theory of perception as an example. In order to demonstrate the fruitfulness of his approach, he delivers substantive results about perception. His contributions are partial, and necessarily so, given his own picture of what the work requires.

Austin's picture is that commonsense encodes important commitments about perception, and the role of philosophy in clarifying and rationally reconstructing these commitments therefore demands attention to ordinary language. Ordinary talk reveals commonsense theory, but only if we understand what utterances really commit speakers to. And to understand that, an account of natural language meaning is essential equipment. But we are cautioned repeatedly: the right theory of natural language meaning will note that utterance meaning depends on the situation in which a thing is said. Austin's picture, which ultimately calls for the development of "situation semantics", has great import for philosophical practice. The theory of perception is where Austin chooses to advertise his picture. But the moral embedded in it applies quite broadly. His picture of how to do philosophy requires philosophers to attend to the situation dependence of the language in which we express our commitments. We read too little into the lectures if we fail to see this fact.

While Austin's target in the lectures is perception, and the tangles philosophers can get into if they aren't sufficiently attentive, his moral is meant for all philosophers as they tackle a wide range of issues, not just those of perception. Austin's work is a provocation to philosophy as practiced, and an invitation to do things differently. The provocation is still apt, and the invitation still largely not accepted. Most urgently, Austin demonstrates the need for a theory of natural language meaning

sufficient for our purposes as philosophers. Here more than on any other point, the moral of the lectures is of great importance, and not yet widely appreciated.

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