

Sense and Sensibilia and the significance of linguistic phenomenology ¹

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Today, Austin seems confined to a (not memorable) page in history of philosophy. As Warnock remarked, his reception has been marked

... not merely by ordinary misconstrual of what Austin wrote, but, more importantly, by apparent misunderstanding of [...] what he had tried to do in philosophy, and of his reasons for so trying. (Warnock 1973: v).

Austin's method was described as a pedantic description of how English is used, "the philosophical interest of which [...] is by no means always clear" and which, moreover, is so trivial that "a fine scholar of English could have made a better job of it" (Harrod 1963). His focus on ordinary language was interpreted as a substantial lack of interest in the phenomena studied, as a deliberate refusal to see the source of philosophical problems, and as mocking philosophical enquiry². Alternatively his method was depicted as aiming at solving or dissolving philosophical problems only by means of looking at how words are ordinarily used. Austin was hence seen as assuming that the mere observation of ordinary language would reveal metaphysical and factual truths about our object of enquiry and that any use of language which departs from the ordinary use is false.³

1 Ancestors of this chapter were presented at the Conference for Austin's Centenary in Lancaster and at the Conference on Cook Wilson in Liège. I am grateful to the audiences on those occasions, especially to Mark Kalderon, Marina Sbisà and Timothy Williamson for their insightful comments and challenging criticisms. Special thanks to MGF Martin and Paul Snowdon for invaluable discussions on this material and to Guy Longworth and Matthew Soteriou for their extremely useful comments on previous versions of the manuscript.

2 Ayer recalled that he once said to Austin in exasperation: "You are like a greyhound that refuses to race but bites the other greyhounds to prevent their racing either" (Ayer 1977: 160).

Being depicted for so long in this way, the current dismissal of his work is no surprise. We will not explore in this essay the sociological and historical reasons for such a long-standing misunderstanding and consequent dismissal of Austin's work. Our aim is to analyze some aspects of Austin's philosophical approach in order to counter the caricature that some hurried history of philosophy has made of it.

This will be done through an examination of "A Plea for Excuses" (1975), one of the rare occasions on which Austin discusses at some length his own method, and *Sense and Sensibilia*, the series of lectures he gave between 1947 and 1959, edited posthumously by G.J. Warnock. *Sense and Sensibilia* will serve us as a case study to show that, contrary to what is widely held, linguistic phenomenology can bring a positive contribution to the philosophical enquiry, one that goes far beyond making some negative points local to a specific debate or certain philosophical misuses of ordinary words.

1.

In "A Plea for Excuses", Austin calls his approach 'linguistic phenomenology', hoping that this might help counter some misunderstandings suggested by the prevailing slogans 'ordinary language', 'linguistic' or 'analytic' philosophy, labels under which are lumped together post-Wittgensteinians and Oxford philosophers as different as Austin and Strawson. Austin characterizes linguistic phenomenology as follows:

When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not merely at words (or 'meanings', whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena. (1975: 182)

3 Cf. Chisholm (1951: 175). In this essay Chisholm's primary target is Malcolm (1942), where Chisholm located (rightly or not) the most explicit endorsement of the thesis that "any philosophical statement which violates ordinary language is false" and, vice versa, that any statement which is in accord with ordinary language is true. However his criticism was meant to spread to all the so-called 'ordinary language' philosophers.

Austin makes clear that the object of his inquiry is not the language, but the "realities we use the words to talk about". It is a "phenomenology" in the sense that its object of inquiry are the phenomena; and it is "linguistic" because "words are our tools" (ibid) and we can sharpen our awareness of reality only through sharpening our tools.

It is also quite clear that the analysis of language is not supposed to deliver some truths about the world, as if the distinctions that ordinary language draws would transparently reflect essential distinctions in the world. The analysis of ordinary language can at best enable us to "forearm ourselves against the traps that language sets us." (ibid).

Linguistic phenomenology is hence primarily therapeutic: a therapy that language addresses to itself, having however always as its final aim the knowledge of the world. The therapy is often directed toward philosophical language, which is, in his view, far more likely to mislead us than ordinary language, because of philosopher's proclivity to "over-simplification, schematization, and constant obsessive repetition of the same small range of jejune 'examples'" (1962: 3).

2.

Sense and Sensibilia is an apt place to assess the nature of this therapeutic approach. In these lectures Austin criticizes the theory whereby we never directly perceive material objects, but rather sense-data. Austin's main target is Ayer's book *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, but he traces this idea as far back as Heraclitus. This view is motivated by an argument that could be reconstructed as follows:

1. The ordinary man believes that we directly perceive material objects (Naïve Realism -thesis to reject)
2. There are cases of illusion where the material objects the man of the street takes to be the objects of perception are presented as having properties they do not possess.
3. Any perception, veridical or illusory, has a (direct) object of perception.

4. Two objects having contradictory properties are numerically distinct.
5. In illusion the direct object of perception is not a material object, but a sense-datum.
6. Illusions are qualitatively very similar or even identical to veridical perceptions.
7. If we cannot introspectively distinguish the objects of two experiences, then those experiences must have objects of the same sort.
8. All experiences have sense-data rather than material objects as their direct object.

Austin's attitude toward such a venerable tradition couldn't be more relentless: the argument is said to rely on "a mass of seductive (mainly verbal) fallacies [and] a wide variety of concealed motives" (1962: 5), most of which spread from philosophers' tendency to over-generalize, which lead them to overlook the phenomena they are supposed to elucidate. In doing so, it is easy for philosophers to overlook the contexts in which it makes sense to use certain expressions, and stretch their meaning to the point where they become misleading or even nonsense (1950: 58). Asking ourselves under which conditions it makes sense to use certain expressions, can allow us to identify the "traps that language sets us, [...] realize their inadequacies and arbitrariness, and re-look at the world without blinkers" (1957: 181).

This doesn't mean that the only legitimate language is ordinary language or that an appeal to ordinary language is always right and suffices to solve (or dissolve) philosophical problems. Quite the contrary: the traps that language sets us are constitutive of ordinary language, of its limits and its being designed to work only in certain circumstances. Austin is not driven by faith in the omnipotence of ordinary language (as he is often depicted), but by the acknowledgment of its limits:

The difficulty is just that: there is no short description which is not misleading: the only thing to do, and that can easily be done, is to set out the description of the facts at length. Ordinary

language breaks down in extraordinary cases. [...] Now no doubt an ideal language would not break down, whatever happened. In doing physics for example, where our language is tightened up in order precisely to describe complicated and unusual cases concisely, we prepare linguistically for the worst. In ordinary language we do not: words fail us. If we talk as though an ordinary must be like an ideal language, we shall misrepresent the facts. (1940: 68)

Austin doesn't blame philosophical jargon for not conforming to ordinary use: departing from ordinary use is in principle permitted and sometimes required⁴. Philosophers should be aware of the limits of language and start with detailed description of the facts, avoiding lumping together in "short descriptions" different phenomena. Alternatively, if ordinary language "breaks down", philosophers can introduce an artificial language, or technical words, but in that case they have the duty to define clearly their technical vocabulary and their standards of accuracy and truth.

The problem, according to Austin, is that most often philosophers use ordinary language words in a special way without signalling it, or without providing the appropriate standards of correctness for their new use, and "without [even] realizing" (1962: 15) that one is departing from the common-sense use.

3.

Sense and Sensibilia offers several examples of philosophical misuse of ordinary terms, i.e. words introduced as if everybody were familiar with their meaning, just because they are ordinarily used, but that occur in sentences in which, if we apply the ordinary standards of appropriateness, sound clearly false or non-sense.

A first example is, once again, in the very question which structures the traditional debate on perception: 'what are the objects of perception? Of what things does perception make us immediately aware?'. This is, for Austin, an instance of the "fallacy of asking about 'nothing-in-particular'" (1940: 58), that characterizes many philosophical debates.

⁴ Austin himself is responsible for introducing not a few neologisms, think at the famous distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts.

To this question broadly two replies are available: either one thinks that we are directly aware of material objects, or that we are aware of material objects only indirectly through being *prima facie* aware of sense-data. The first one is supposed to be the common sense view while the second one is the view to which the reflection on perceptual illusions should commit us.

Austin complains that this dispute is spurious, because it isn't clear what 'material objects', as opposed to 'sense-data', means and hence what the competing views are supposed to be committed to. *Prima facie*, it doesn't seem difficult to say what 'material objects' means: ordinarily people use this expression to refer to "moderate-sized specimens of dry goods" (1962: 8). However, if we take 'material objects' under this acceptance, the idea that the ordinary man thinks that we directly perceive only material objects would be false: we all are prepared to admit that we experience, for instance, voices, mountains, rainbows, gases and so on, which are not material objects in the common sense use of the term (*ibid*). This would already make the sense-datum theory appear less needed, since it is presented as a solution to the inadequacy of the view whereby we perceive material objects to account for cases in which no material object is seen. But the latter is not the naive realist view. Austin suggests then that the sense-datum theorist uses 'material object' "from the very beginning, simply as a foil for 'sense-data'" (*ibid*). However, at the same time the notion of sense-datum is not autonomously defined:⁵ it is introduced as an entity we must appeal to when no material object is available to be perceived, and the only thing on which all the sense-datum theorists agree about those strange objects is that they are non-material.

In a similar vein, Austin criticizes the use of the word 'directly':

... a typical case of a word, which already has a very special use [connected with the idea of a deviation of direction], being gradually stretched, without caution or definition or any limit, until it becomes, first perhaps obscurely metaphorical, but ultimately meaningless. (1962: 15).

⁵ We know in fact that an intense debate about the nature of sense-data animated the debate of the early twentieth century and that the difficulty of finding an adequate metaphysical characterization of these strange entities ultimately led some to abandon the view.

But what better exemplifies Austin's approach is his complaint that the examples of illusion proposed in support of premiss (2) cover a variety of different phenomena, going from cases of perspectival changes to mirages, passing through a variety of cases such as optical illusions, mirror-images, apparent deformation of objects due to refraction in water, drug-induced alterations of vision, apparent variations in taste and felt warmth (1962: 20-1).

Austin points out that most of these cases cannot be considered illusions in any interesting sense. My face reflected in a mirror, the coin that looks elliptical from some points of view, or the stick looking bent when partly immersed in water look exactly how we expect them to look (1962: 26): the stick in the water looks different from the stick out of water just because they are two different situations: a stick in water and a stick out of water. We might ignore the laws of refraction or fail to notice the water, but it's not the fault of the experience: experience presents us exactly with what is there to be seen. The same can be said of perspectival changes. When a coin looks more and more elliptical when I move around the table on which it is, my experience is not misleading me: quite the contrary, it is allowing me to be aware of the spatial relations between me and the coin (the experience would mislead me, and I would be puzzled, if the appearance of the coin didn't change from whatever distance and position I see it: our perception of tridimensional objects in space depends on these laws of perspective we are all familiar with).

If most of the cases mentioned by Ayer are not genuine illusions, there are still cases which it is appropriate to refer to as illusion (typical cases are optical illusions). However, Austin thinks that also the following premiss (3) hinges on a (possibly deliberate) misconception of illusion, in particular on conflating the notions of delusion and illusion. Ayer in fact says of all cases of illusions mentioned that they are delusive. Austin notices that illusions and delusions are altogether different phenomena and the respective notions bring mutually incompatible implications. Delusions are grossly disordered beliefs, typically delusions of grandeur or of persecution. Sometimes 'delusion' can refer to cases where perceptual experience is involved –for instance when one sees pink rats. But even in this case the appropriateness of the word 'delusion' depends on the

wrong belief one holds, not on experience per se: if one hallucinated pink rats without believing that there actually are pink rats, one wouldn't be deluded. But, still, it cannot be applied to all cases in which one takes at face value what one experiences. The term 'delusion' "suggests that something totally unreal is conjured up" (1962: 23). This is not true of optical illusions: when I see the Müller-Lyer diagram, nothing is conjured up, I see something material, an arrangement of lines and arrows, even if a line appears longer than it actually is. Premiss (3), for Austin, "positively trades on not distinguishing illusion from delusions" (1962: 25): the notion of illusion carries the idea that there is really something that we see, while the notion of delusion suggests that the thing that is seen is unreal, definitely not material. Saying that all illusions are delusions, the argument can go on saying that in illusion there is something that we see, but this thing cannot be a material object; hence it has to be a sense-datum.

4.

This last remark of Austin's is seen by many philosophers as a paradigmatic example of the intrinsic limits of Austin's method. Even those who do not credit the caricature of Austin's linguistic phenomenology, consider Austin's criticism of the argument from illusion somehow "disingenuous" (Martin 1997: 103). Martin (manuscript) esteems that Austin's arguments are at best successful against a limited range of opponents: the sense-datum theorists of his time. His assessment of the problem of perception is hence of little interest to the current debate and not convincing.⁶

Austin's insistence, almost word by word, on the idiosyncrasies of Ayer's presentation makes him fail to appreciate the deep motivations that appealed to so many philosophers since Heraclitus. One of the deepest motivations seems to rely precisely on premiss (3), which states a principle, known as the phenomenal principle, which is often deemed obvious and uncontroversial:

⁶ See Paul Snowdon's "Austin on the Philosophy of Perception" (this volume) for a similar, although possibly more severe, take on Austin's work on perception.

When I say ‘This table appears brown to me’ it is quite plain that I am acquainted with an actual instance of brownness (or equally plainly with a pair of instances when I see double). This cannot indeed be proven, but it is absolutely evident and indubitable. (Price 1932: 108)

Austin considers that this principle derives its purported obviousness from not distinguishing between illusion and delusion. But, Martin points out, it is hardly likely that so many philosophers in different times and traditions, have been liable to accept this principle only in virtue of a linguistic confusion. The principle seems motivated by the phenomenological remark that, even when one’s experience is hallucinatory, or illusory, it seems to the subject that there is an object. In other words, if we confine ourselves to the domain of what is introspectively detectable, the subject seems to be presented with an object (an object of awareness) in the case of hallucination no less than in the case of veridical perception. It seems hence that, whether there is some object in the world or not, some object of awareness is present to the mind. This seems a phenomenological datum, not simply an assumption that has arisen from a linguistic confusion.

Certainly, Austin is right in stressing that, even if we acknowledge that we are aware of something in the case of hallucination no less than in the case of perception, there is no need to postulate an entity of which we are aware. However, as Martin (manuscript) shows, behind this possibly inaccurate notion of “object of awareness” there is an insight which is pretty undeniable: in both hallucination and veridical perception one is aware of something, in both cases it appears to the subject as if there were something out there. If one is worried about the reification suggested by words such as “object” and “something”, one can reformulate this idea in a more neutral way: in both perception and hallucination there is a visual appearance and it is not possible, for the subject, to tell through introspection alone whether or not she is veridically perceiving or not. Or so most contemporary philosophers think.

Given that, another concern arises. If the visual experience that I have in the case of veridical perception is such that I can have it even when no object is there (when I hallucinate), then it seems

that perception and hallucination are states of mind of the same kind. One can then mount another argument, the argument from hallucination:

1*. Naïve realism (NR) claims that experiencing (at least in certain cases) is being sensorily conscious of mind-independent objects.

2*. In a case of perfect hallucination, one has an experience which is introspectively indistinguishable from an experience one may have in a veridical case.

3*. In a case of perfect hallucination, there is no mind-independent object one is aware of.

Hence :

4*. In the case of perfect hallucination, one is not conscious of mind-independent objects.

5*. Two experiences which introspectively appear the same must be fundamentally identical and require the same account.

Hence :

6*.NR cannot be true.

Notice that this argument isn't committed to any of the errors committed by the sense-datum theorists:

(1) The disingenuous qualification as illusory of "far too familiar" cases is abandoned in favour of hallucinations alone. Thus, the argument doesn't trade on the conflation of 'delusion' and 'illusion'.

(2) the opposition direct-indirect is not used any more: NR (the view of the man of the street) is formulated in a way that Austin could be willing to accept, since it doesn't rely on the oppositions 'direct-indirect'.

(3) The spurious opposition between material object and sense-datum doesn't figure either. Indeed, the problem doesn't have anymore to do with the object of experience, but with the nature of experience itself.

(4) It isn't any more assumed that experience has always an object of awareness (premiss 3).

(5) Accordingly, the conclusion is not any more that the direct objects of perception are sense-data, but simply that naïve realism cannot be true, leaving open what alternative account one shall adopt.

Philosophers of perception are currently engaged with this latter argument. One, very widespread, way of addressing the argument consists in accepting all the premisses of the argument but thinking that NR can be preserved through a deeper understanding of the structure of perception. Perceptual experience is hence conceived as a representational state whose content represents that something is such-and-such. If the experience is veridical, the object represented in the content of experience are mind-independent. If the experience is illusory, the content of the experience attributes to a mind-independent object properties that it doesn't have. If one hallucinates, the object represented doesn't exist. Although the object represented in experience may or may not exist, the sameness of account between perception and hallucination prescribed by premiss (4*) is preserved: both perception and hallucination are representational states and in this respect they are of the same psychologic kind. Knowing whether what is represented in perception exists is a further, extrinsic question, which doesn't affect the fundamental nature of experience. At the same time also, the core intuition of NR that experiencing (at least in certain cases) is being sensorily conscious of mind-independent objects is preserved, because when experience is veridical what is represented is a mind-independent object.

Even if representationalism preserve the mind-independentness of the object of perception, it rejects another claim contained in our ordinary intuition about perception, and hence in NR, namely that the mind-independent objects determine (in part, but crucially) the phenomenal character of one's perception, what it is like to perceive them (see Martin 2004). Moreover, some contend to representationalism that it introduces an interface between the subject and the mind-independent reality (See McDowell: 1996; Putnam: 1999). For these reasons some philosophers think that

representationalism is inadequate and NR should be preserved by rejecting one or more premisses of the argument from hallucination.

Whatever our evaluation of this controversy is, all parties seem to agree that Austin's criticism is helpless against this line of reasoning, as it is too narrowly focused on the specific theory promoted by Ayer. This failure is often attributed to his method of linguistic phenomenology that would prevent him going beyond the letter of Ayer's formulation and acknowledging the real motivations beyond the argument. Hence, *Sense and Sensibilia* is considered outdated: even if it played a very important role in getting rid of many fallacies contained in the sense-datum theory and in reshaping the terms of the philosophical debate in perception, it cannot be of any use once the debate has shifted to those new issues.

In the following section I will argue that *Sense and Sensibilia* contains indeed the resources to counter the argument from hallucination and to answer worries that go beyond the local debate on sense-data. I will also show that this contribution isn't separable from Austin's specific methodology.

5.

As we have seen, Austin's general complaint toward the argument from illusion was the lack of interest in the phenomena considered by the argument, namely different kind of illusions (or alleged illusions). This inattention to the phenomena is manifest not only at the stage where many different cases (from perspectival changes to mirages) are lumped together under the labels "delusion" and "illusion", but also at a later stage (premiss 7) of the argument, where it is assumed that those cases are phenomenally indistinguishable from normal cases of perception. He writes:

We should be wise not to accept too readily the statement that what he is experiencing [when hallucinating] is 'similar in character to what he would be experiencing if he were seeing a real oasis'. For is it at all likely, really, to be very similar? And, looking ahead, if we were to concede this point we should find the concession being used against us at a later stage - namely, at the

stage where we shall be invited to agree that we see sense-data always, in normal cases too.

(1962: 32)

This criticism can be extended from the argument from illusion to the updated argument from hallucinations, where, in premiss (2*), it is assumed that a perfect hallucination is indistinguishable from a veridical perception. Interestingly, in this passage, Austin seems to have in mind a restricted version of the argument in which only hallucinations are considered. He implicitly suggests that Ayer's argument can be blocked at two different stages, according to what phenomena are considered. If we consider cases such as mirror images, the stick in the water, the coin which appears elliptical, or cases of optical illusions, the argument can be blocked at the initial stage (2-5): we mischaracterize these phenomena if we say that in these cases we do not perceive a physical object. A case of hallucination, instead, is “significantly more amenable to the treatment it is given” (ibid); however, hallucinations seem “a good deal less useful” (ibid) when it comes to the second stage of the argument (6-8), where in virtue of the indistinguishability between these cases and the normal cases, the denial of NR is generalized to all cases of perception. It is worth pointing out that the updated argument from hallucination expands the stage (6-8) of the traditional argument from illusion.

In fact, he notices, for many obvious cases of hallucinations, saying that what one experiences is exactly like what one would experience if she had a corresponding successful perception, is at least “perfectly extraordinary” (1962: 48). Maybe those hallucinations are “narrated in the same terms as [successful] experiences” (ibid), but they aren't qualitatively identical to the latter :

When we are hit on the head we sometimes say that we 'see stars'; but for all that, seeing stars when you are hit on the head is not 'qualitatively' indistinguishable from seeing stars when you look at the sky.

Again, it is simply not true to say that seeing a bright green after-image against a white wall is exactly like seeing a bright green patch actually on the wall; or that seeing a white wall through blue spectacles is exactly like seeing a blue wall; or that seeing pink rats in D.T.s is exactly like really seeing pink rats. (1962: 49).

Once again, Austin warns us about the traps that language sets us: the fact that we can sometimes describe a hallucination using the same terms we would use to describe a normal perception doesn't mean that one case is exactly like the other.

One might fail to realize that one is hallucinating (it is, indeed, a definitional character of hallucinations that we are liable to take them, at least momentary, as normal perceptions); however, this doesn't mean that hallucinations are perfectly indistinguishable from perceptions. Clinical studies of pathological hallucinations, as well as the less severe hallucinations we might all undergo, are incoherent, less stable, dream-like, momentary, less vivid or, on the contrary, extremely bright (as in many hallucinations induced by psychotropic drugs).

One might retort that it might be true that most hallucinations aren't perfectly indistinguishable from normal perceptions, but sometimes they are, or they can be. This would be enough for the argument to go through. In fact, by talking of 'perfect hallucinations', the argument implicitly assumes that in most cases hallucinations can be distinguished from normal perceptions. However, we can conceive of rich, multimodal hallucinatory experiences in which the scene experienced matches exactly the scene of a possible veridical scenario. Philosophers often call these experiences 'perfect hallucinations'. For the sake of the argument it doesn't matter how often this specific type of hallucinations happens, what matters is only that it be possible.

Now the question is: is it indeed true that perfect hallucinations are possible, although rare? If by "possible" we mean that these hallucinations sometimes happen, although very rarely, this seems false: the clinical literature hasn't yet provided any record of hallucinations in which all the different modalities concur to create an hallucinatory scene sufficiently coherent and stable to be fully indistinguishable from a normal perception.⁷ So, at best, it can be said that perfect hallucinations are

⁷ Schizophrenic patients sometimes describe their hallucinations as exactly like normal experiences. However, it is controversial whether we have to take their report as phenomenological accurate. Some neuroscientists tend to understand hallucinations in schizophrenia as the result of an alteration in the capacity of self-attribution of cognitive states, which makes one unable to distinguish what one experiences from what one imagines (see Brüne 2005). This meta-cognitive error doesn't necessarily underly the

possible in the sense that they are conceivable: we can coherently imagine such a phenomenon to occur.

Austin would most probably doubt that the mere fact that perfect hallucinations are conceivable can have any bearing on the theory of perception we are committed to. For him, the minimal and mandatory precondition for any philosophical progress is the careful examination of actual examples of the phenomena studied. Those examples must be as varied as possible and they must be described at length, in order to avoid the temptation of opting for reductive, ready-made descriptions which attribute to the phenomena our prejudgments. Austin would have probably thought that the very assumption that perfect hallucinations are possible derives from our prejudices, in particular the assumption that there is only one way in which experience can go wrong: by telling us something false.

Perfect hallucinations are considered philosophically relevant by the proponents of the argument for the same reason that led Ayer to treat experiences such as perspectival changes and mirror-images as cases of delusive experience. The assumption behind both moves is that illusions and hallucinations have one thing in common: they lie to us.

If all hallucinations are experiences that tell us something false, it doesn't really make any serious difference whether they are hallucinations which are experienced by the subject or are documented, or rather experiences which are only postulated as conceivable. If hallucinations are unreliable witnesses which lie to us, the difference between a hallucination and another misleading experience is never substantial or qualitative: it is only a matter of how far and how convincingly the experience lies to us. Hence, for the sake of the argument, it is useful to consider the cases in which experience lies fully and more convincingly, no matter whether it is a real case or not.

Austin strongly rejects this conception of experience:

Now first, though the phrase 'deceived by our senses' is a common metaphor, it is a metaphor; and this is worth noting, for in what follows the same metaphor is frequently taken up by the expression 'veridical' and taken very seriously. In fact, of course, our

phenomenological identity of the hallucinatory case with a normal case.

senses are dumb – though Descartes and others speak of 'the testimony of the senses', our senses do not tell us anything, true or false. (1962: 11)

Once again, Austin points out that a widespread philosophical presupposition (this time one which is pivotal in the traditional epistemology) stems from a trap set by ordinary language. We commonly use a metaphor such as 'deceived by the senses' and then philosophers take this loose way of speaking at face value and start thinking of experiences as divided into two categories: those which tell the truth (veridical) and those which lie to us (illusions and hallucinations). Under this assumption, illusions and hallucinations are fundamentally all the same: they lie to us.

But for Austin this is a gross mistake. The distinction between veridical and non-veridical experiences is spurious, because experience is not a witness that tells us something either true or false: "senses are dumb" and do not tell us anything.⁸

If we get rid of this assumption that hallucinations are experiences exactly like veridical ones, except that they tell us something false, the idea that it is perfectly legitimate to philosophize about the nature of perception by using a merely hypothetical case of hallucination, such as perfect hallucinations, already becomes less appealing.

Moreover, if we appreciate that experience can go wrong in many ways and that there is a variety of hallucinations, we can explain why it happens that we might take a hallucination for a normal perception, although one and the other are not perfectly indistinguishable. We will then realize, case by case, that hallucinations do not threaten NR, because either it is possible to account for them within NR, or they aren't at all the same phenomenon that happens when we perceive, and hence even if a naive realist explanation isn't available for certain hallucinations, this doesn't affect the validity of NR for normal cases of perceptions.

Certain hallucinations are easily explained within NR. Take the case of the mirage of an oasis. It is well known that this is a natural phenomenon with a very clear explanation: it is the refraction of light rays by alternate layers of hot and cool air. In this case, we can perfectly apply the

⁸ See Travis (2004) for a development of the Austinian idea that senses are dumb.

naive realist account, because nothing but the properties of the scene before us determine what we see. In mirages what we see is no less real than what we see in an optical illusion, like the Müller-Lyer illusion.⁹ Our experience is not illusory or false; it presents precisely what is there to be seen: light rays reflected by layers of air of different temperatures, which have the physical property of looking just like a pond. Certain experiences falling under the common-sense category of hallucination work more like illusions and display an appropriate relation with the external world and its properties.

Other cases are more complicated: it might happen that the man lost in the desert doesn't simply seem to see a pond, but also a few palms around the pond and a camel drinking at the edge. It is harder to find an external correlate of the camel and palms. However, it would be misleading (and totally arbitrary) to someone in this situation the same psychologic state of someone actually seeing real camels and palms. The perception of the refraction is penetrated by imagination and the desire to find some water. We have a perceptual phenomenon deformed by other mental attitudes, such as desires, beliefs, emotions and so on.

The same emotional and imaginative cooperation is present when, after looking at an horror movie, I see an uncanny figure at the window. I'm probably just seeing the shadow of a tree, but I could swear two eyes are staring at me.

In other cases we have a simple meta-cognitive error: not a perceptual element deformed by an imagination, but an imagination that I take for a perception because of some temporary or systematic disorder or inability.

If we explain hallucinations in this way, as the effect of the interaction of perception with other states, hallucinations doesn't seem any more to be a mysterious phenomenon that proves NR false.

Perception is a contact with mind-independent objects. This contact sometimes go astray because experience can cooperate with or can be deviated by other mental attitudes. In any case, the

⁹ See Travis (2004) and Brewer (2008) for a development of this Austinian intuition of how to account for illusions in naive realist terms.

mere existence of these hallucinatory phenomena isn't enough to prove NR false because what we have here is not simply an experience, but a combination of different mental states. Hence the same account cannot be applied to normal cases of perception.

Once again, we tend to forget these facts, because we are misled by our language: the word “hallucination” suggests a substantial uniformity among cases which have in fact little in common, but differ as to their phenomenology and their explanation. This doesn't mean that ordinary language is inadequate or wrong, but only that “fact is richer than diction” (1957: 195). Austin explains his stance on the matter as follows:

I am not denying that cases in which things go wrong could be lumped together under some single name. A single name might in itself be innocent enough, provided its use was not taken to imply either (a) that the cases were all alike, or (b) that they were all in certain ways alike. What matters is that the facts should not be pre-judged and (therefore) neglected. (1962: 14 footnote).

6.

One might insist that, after all, it is legitimate to run an argument in which perfect hallucinations are featured, even if they do go far beyond what we ordinarily call “hallucination”. Thus, premiss (2*) can be accepted. Even conceding that (which for Austin would be conceding already too much), Sense and Sensibilia contains a further element to stop the argument from hallucination. We read:

One may well wish at least to ask for the credentials of a curious general principle on which both Ayer and Price seem to rely, to the effect that, if two things are not 'generically the same', the same 'in nature', then they can't be alike, or even very nearly alike. If it were true, Ayer says, that from time to time we perceived things of two different kinds, then 'we should expect' them to be qualitatively different. But why on earth should we? [...] 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? Why should I? (1962: 50).

Austin suggests that, even if we accept, for the sake of argument, the previous premises, (5*) cannot be accepted: even if certain hallucinations might be indistinguishable from perceptions, nothing force us to think that both deserve the same account. Here Austin, coherently with the particular debate he is engaged with, says that they might have different objects of awareness; but it is possible to spell out this idea in a more modern way and say that they are of different fundamental kinds.¹⁰

This is, after all, a further consequence of the remarks made before about the variety of hallucinations and Austin's constant efforts to avoid over-generalizations. If we cannot suppose a unique structure common to all cases of hallucination, a fortiori we cannot assume that they share the same nature with normal perceptions.

Even if Austin's rejection of the argument from hallucination might be improved and completed, we can see that his reflection on perception is far from being merely verbal or local to Ayer's idiosyncrasies. If Austin always starts from linguistic remarks, those allow us to sharpen our perception of the phenomena studied. *Sense and Sensibilia* offers hence a clear example of how the method of linguistic phenomenology can fruitfully bring a useful contribution to substantial philosophical debates.

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¹⁰ This view is developed by current disjunctivists such as McDowell, Snowdon, Martin.

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