BOOK REVIEW

Interpreting J.L. Austin: Critical Essays

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I found myself wistful as I finished this book. J.L. Austin lived a short life, wrote little, and, by all accounts, primarily developed his reputation while he was alive through teaching and working with other philosophers. The little that he did write attended to the world in a simple and straightforward way. This wasn't just a style; this was a method, or, better, a breakthrough. So my sadness came from a growing understanding of the depth of his insight and how much we may have benefited had he lived twice as long. What he did write continues 60 years later not only to influence contemporary debates; but also – and this is curious – to reveal itself

This volume covers the range of Austin's philosophical work. It's the range, more than the locales, that gets the most traction in finding the correct interpretations. Although he wrote little, and wrote in a plain style, his underlying goal was not always obvious. He often started from a different vantage point from what was otherwise found in the literature.

Most of the chapters in this volume address Austin's work in several places, but they each have a primary focus. The chapter by Marga Reimer is on his essays, 'Truth' and 'Unfair to Facts'. The chapters by Friederike Moltmann, Robert Fiengo, Maximilian de Gaynesford and Savas Tsohatzidis primarily address material from *How to do Things with Words*. The chapter by Sandra Laugier considers 'A Plea for Excuses'. The chapters by Robert Schwartz and Krista Lawlor engage *Sense and Sensibilia*. Finally, the chapters by Guy Longworth and Stephen Hetherington are on the essay, 'Other Minds'. As with most multi-author collections on a topic, the contributors write about that on which they are experts (quotation, law, poetry, epistemology, Frege etc.) and, for the most part, that works here – but this may be largely to the credit of Austin. How could so little ink spread so far across topics in philosophy? Rather than provide a summary of each chapter (the introduction does a remarkably good job of this), I would like to draw attention to several of the themes that get picked up at different points in the volume.

Contrasts: One of Austin's great insights, and the lens through which we can best understand his most important theses, is that a good deal of clarity can come from considering the contrast. When analysing a core philosophical concept – TRUTH, REALITY, SAYING, UPTAKE, CORRESPONDENCE, ACTION, BELIEF, PERCEPTION – what can reveal the most is thinking about a contrast to each of these states. Understanding being REAL in terms of not being something else (Schwartz 151); understanding BELIEF in terms of running out of reasons for doubting (Longworth 198); understanding ACTION in contrast with *not exactly doing something* (Laugier 131). This last contrast is made in interpreting the 'full radicalism' (Laugier 119) of Austin's philosophy of

language through his discussion of excuses ('A plea for excuses', 1958). Looking at excuses is interesting because it reveals the different ways in which we try to explain why we almost but not quite did something, why we came close to doing something but only in part. When someone says of me: *you performed an act*, I might say: *well,* 5 *kind of, but hear me out*. My response indicates that I believe I did something a bit different from the *act* of which I have been accused. The variety of excuses which we proffer points to the variety of acts we believe we perform. This suggests that providing a complete taxonomy of acts is not possible. It also has implications for how we think about the radical scope of linguistic agency. Laugier emphasizes Austin's claim 10 that 'our word is our bond' in its agential dimensions. When we speak – say, when we promise – we do not merely reveal our inner state of promising, we do the promising with the words (cf. Tsohatzidis on sincerity, 111–12). The promising words perform a promise and modify reality by introducing a promise into it. So what about a tepid promise ('I promise that I'll do my best to be there.')? This also creates a bond in the 15 world, but a look at our excuses makes clear that the vulnerabilities of human agency are vast (cf. Fiengo 67), as are the vulnerabilities of linguistic agency. That is, there is a vastness to the ways in which we *kind of, not exactly* do things. The speech act of *How to do Things with Words* was not to provide a taxonomy; it was to glimpse at how the world is shaped by all kinds of acts: firing a gun *and* issuing a haughty 20 indicative (cf. Fiengo 75). Thinking that there could be a delimited taxonomy is less of a moral failure than not recognizing the ethical implications of being a language user, but it fails in similar ways. I haven't done justice to Laugier's quite interesting argument here, but I hope to have encouraged the reader to study it carefully. Fiengo's essay is not on this topic, but at points it is complementary to these arguments in the 25 course of other quite interesting ends. Longworth, Schwartz and Lawlor also present accounts of Austin's 'method of relevant contrasts' (Lawlor 175) with respect to perceptual and epistemic states which can be fruitfully considered alongside what Austin says about doing things with words.

Camels: Austin called Truth a 'camel of a logical construction' (Reimer 32); by this 30 he may have meant that the abstract concept was hiding too much that didn't reflect how the concept is used in its full complexity. For example, in saying that such-and-such is true because it corresponds to the facts will depend upon the relevant facts in this circumstance and the degree of correspondence (Reimer 23). How many degrees of correspondence does Truth need? Well, more than truth. Reimer argues that there 35 will be cases in which saying something is true may be logically superfluous but still pragmatically potent (Reimer 29). Consider some implications of this important claim found elsewhere in this volume: when a speaker uses a sentence-type to make a statement, 'demonstrative conventions correlate each statement with an historic state of affairs' (Fiengo 71). What is made possible, in terms of illocution, depends 40 in part on how descriptive and demonstrative conventions interact. But this is not stable, of course; reality is always changing – whoever has the status to use an indicative under the assumption of obedience changes as all manner of acts change the world in which statements are made (Fiengo 75; cf. contemporary debates on maker's knowledge). Austin was far less confident than most of his interpreters about knowing 45 the illocutionary status of any given speech act, and in knowing the role of uptake in getting to mean (or speak? or maybe communicate?). The significance of uptake has

been given a lot of attention in recent debates, and rightfully so. Here, Gaynesford convincingly argues that Austin's view on uptake is much more 'guarded' than is usually understood (Gaynesford 89). Uptake, seemingly straightforward, is another camel hiding a lot beneath the surface.

Enough is enough: Throughout this volume, we get reminders of how Austin's pragmatic sensibility dominates. Truth is more-or-less (Reimer 23; Schwarz 154); perception is not always factive (Lawlor 177); you don't always get to mean what you say (Gaynesford 90); we need as many reasons for doubt as we need for belief (Longworth 198). Austin's 'enough' is not just a matter of hitting bedrock, holding up two hands, or yielding to hinge propositions. It's more a matter of having the right response for the circumstances. From these disparate topics one gets the sense that Austin was methodologically resistant to the sweeping nature of philosophical analysis. So much depends on what the circumstance calls for – in saying, uptake, perception, knowing, acting – and those circumstances also provide the limits. There's nothing to be gained (from the perspectives of accuracy or understanding) in trying to force this speech into that category or this doubt into that knowledge-claim.

There is a great deal more that should be said about this volume; I have only scratched the surface of the interesting arguments contained within. Perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that there is overlap and unity across Austin's thought, but it nevertheless may surprise the reader that there is still much more to learn about truth and performatives in reading what he wrote about the law and perception, and the other way around as well. Like many in his generation, Austin served in the intelligence services during the war and has been honoured for his significant contributions. Although I don't have the slightest idea what kind of work he did, it's easy to see that he must have been invaluable in understanding the complexity of intentions, actions, codes, symbols and patterns. In his philosophical work as well he just wanted us to be *sufficiently attentive to the world*. Giving this attention is always better than settling for a small theory, and was surely a hallmark of his thought.

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