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# Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

## Austin, John Langshaw

(1911–1960)

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### **John Langshaw Austin (1911–1960)**

by Ramsey & Muspratt, 1951

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**Austin, John Langshaw** (1911–1960), philosopher, was born in Lancaster on 26 March 1911, the second son of the five children of Geoffrey Langshaw Austin (1884–1971), architect, and his wife, Mary Bowes-Wilson (1883–1948). After the First World War his parents moved to St Andrews, where his father became secretary of St Leonard's School. In 1924 Austin went to Shrewsbury with a scholarship in classics. He was awarded a classical scholarship at

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Balliol College, Oxford, in 1929 to read *literae humaniores*. In 1931 he won the Gaisford prize for Greek prose and achieved a first class in classical moderations. The Greats course introduced him to serious philosophical studies, and gave him a lasting interest in Aristotle. Two years later he obtained a first in finals. His training as a classical scholar and linguist was an important influence upon his later philosophical work, both in respect of his fascination with the intricacies and subtleties of language and in respect of his demand for detailed attention to and precision in the description of the use of words. Of his teachers it was H. A. Prichard who, according to Isaiah Berlin (Berlin, 2), most impressed him. He seemed to Austin to be the most rigorous and minute thinker in Oxford. Prichard's preoccupation with the analysis of promising may have been the origin of Austin's later interest in speech acts. In 1933 he was elected to a fellowship by examination at All Souls. He remained there only two years, being elected to a tutorial fellowship at Magdalen College in 1935.

It was at All Souls that Austin met Isaiah Berlin, with whom in the pre-war years he enjoyed numerous philosophical conversations. In 1936 they held a joint class for a term at All Souls on C. I. Lewis's *Mind and the World Order*, the first seminar on a contemporary philosopher held in Oxford. Many testified to the force and fertility of Austin's performance at this class. Berlin later described it as the best class he had ever attended. Austin was 'slow, formidable, and relentless' and 'dealt firmly with criticism and opposition of the intelligent and stupid alike, and, in the course of this, left the genuine philosophers in our class not crushed or frustrated, but stimulated and indeed excited' (Berlin, 8). In Berlin's view, this marked the true beginning of Austin's career as an independent thinker. In the spring of 1937, at Austin's suggestion, Berlin organized a discussion group that met weekly during term in Berlin's rooms at All Souls. Other members of the group were A. J. Ayer, D. G. C. MacNabb, A. D. Woozley, S. N. Hampshire, and D. MacKinnon. Discussions continued until the summer of 1939, ranging over the subjects of perception, a priori truth, counterfactuals, and personal identity. This little group was one of the two sources of post-war Oxford analysis. Austin's opposition to phenomenism dates from this time, as does his conviction that many large-scale philosophical theories (such as phenomenism) are muddles consequent upon the neglect of linguistic distinctions readily available to us if we but pay careful attention to the use of ordinary language. He was deeply suspicious of the philosophical jargon of the logical positivists and of received philosophical dichotomies (such as verifiable/meaningless). The group was not in the least doctrinaire, but Austin and Ayer typically clashed. Nevertheless, Berlin later wrote:

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the intellectual freshness and force, both of Austin and of Ayer, were such that although they were in a state of almost continuous collision—Ayer like an irresistible missile, Austin like an immovable obstacle—the result was not stalemate, but the most interesting, free, and lively discussions of philosophy that I have ever known.

ibid., 16

Before the war Austin lectured primarily on Aristotle and Leibniz. He published only one paper, 'Are there a priori concepts?' (1939), which was largely destructive. His reputation as a powerful, original thinker and fierce critic was already well established in Oxford, even though he had not yet found his own voice.

During the war Austin served in the intelligence corps. He was the prime mover in the intelligence-gathering for the invasion of Normandy, and it was said of him that 'he more than anyone else was responsible for the life-saving accuracy of the D-day intelligence' (Warnock, John Langshaw Austin, 351). From 1944 he served in Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, reaching the rank of lieutenant-colonel. In 1945 he was appointed OBE, received the Croix de Guerre, and was made an officer of the Legion of Merit.

In 1941 Austin married Jean Coutts (b. 1918), daughter of the late C. R. V. Coutts, actuary. His wife later took up a career in philosophy, and was a fellow of St Hilda's College, Oxford, from 1964 until 1986. They had four children: two sons, Charles and Richard, and two daughters, Harriet and Lucy. Austin, reserved and formal in public life, was very much a family man. His American pupil George Pitcher later wrote: 'The Austins ... constituted, for me, one ideal of what a family can be'.

After the war the philosophical scene in Oxford was transformed. Led by Ryle, the younger generation rapidly turned Oxford into the world centre for analytic philosophy. In this process Austin played a role second only to Ryle's. He rapidly found his own distinctive voice and direction. His 'Other minds' (1946) bears his hallmark: a discriminating eye for linguistic detail, a sensitive ear for the subtleties of linguistic usage, and a scintillating, sometimes caustic, wit. He published very little: a mere seven papers, all invited for special occasions (*Philosophical Papers*, ed. G. J. Warnock and J. O. Urmson; 3rd edn, enlarged, 1979), an edition of H. W. B. Joseph's lectures on Leibniz (1949), and a translation of Frege's *Grundlagen der Arithmetik* (1950). In 1952 he was elected to the White's chair in moral philosophy at Corpus Christi College. His outstanding administrative skills were at the service of the university. He was junior proctor in 1949–50 and was appointed a delegate of the Oxford University Press in 1952, serving as chairman of its finance committee from 1957 until his death. He was president of the Aristotelian Society in 1956–7, and was elected FBA in 1958.

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During his lifetime Austin's influence made itself felt largely through his teaching, not only in lectures and tutorials, but even more through his famous 'Saturday morning meetings', organized for the benefit of contemporary and junior non-professorial members of the subfaculty of philosophy. Austin

regarded discussion not only as the best but as an indispensable instrument of progress in philosophy; and though he was utterly without pomp or pretension his intellectual power, serene lucidity, and astringent wit conferred on him a natural authority in any gathering of philosophers. He believed that by such co-operative discussion, conducted with sufficient care for detail, step-by-step progress could be made and recordable solutions of philosophical problems reached.

*DNB*

Among those who attended these meetings over the years were M. Dick, H. P. Grice, S. N. Hampshire, R. M. Hare, H. L. A. Hart, P. H. Nowell Smith, G. Paul, D. F. Pears, P. F. Strawson, J. O. Urmson, G. J. Warnock, and A. D. Woozley. The texts discussed included Aristotle's *Ethics*, Frege's *Foundations of Arithmetic*, Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*, Merleau Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. General topics examined included rules of games (with an eye on questions about meaning and rules for the use of words) in preparation for which each member of the group was given a book of rules to study, and aesthetics, for which an illustrated handbook of industrial design was scrutinized in order to find out what people actually say in aesthetic appraisal, when the topic is not so august as to inhibit good sense. Time was spent on investigating dispositional concepts apropos Ryle's *Concept of Mind*, and differences were sought between 'disposition', 'trait', 'characteristic', 'habit', 'inclination', 'susceptibility', and 'propensity'. This co-operative work was informed by the belief that within a given domain of discourse, ordinary language, by contrast with philosophical language, contains all the distinctions mankind has hitherto found useful to draw, and that these distinctions are likely to be useful. Moreover, through inattention, philosophers commonly misuse the instruments of ordinary language, and consequently generate confusion. Hence clarification of these distinctions in any given domain is likely to shed light on philosophical problems and doctrines.

Although Austin is often thought of as a paradigmatic 'linguistic philosopher', he did not believe that the problems of philosophy are problems about language, or that all the problems of philosophy arise out of the misuse of ordinary language. He did not eschew introduction of technical terminology, as long as there is a genuine need for it and it is introduced clearly. He did not claim that ordinary language has the last word, but only that it may have the first word within a domain in which numerous distinctions are to be expected, such as that of excuses, as opposed, say, to time. Nor did he claim

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that the methods he pursued in his own chosen subjects were the only suitable methods for philosophy. On the contrary: one of his talks on method was entitled 'Something about one way of possibly doing one part of philosophy'.

Austin's main contributions to his subject lie in three areas: perception, action, and the theory of speech acts. In 1947 he began lecturing on perception, and continued to do so intermittently until his death. These lectures, reconstructed from Austin's notes by G. J. Warnock, were published with the title of *Sense and Sensibilia* in 1962. His general target was the phenomenalist doctrine that the argument from illusion shows that we never perceive, or directly perceive, material objects but only sense data, ideas, impressions, or *sensa*. The main exemplification of the offending doctrine which he chose was A. J. Ayer's *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (1940). He held this doctrine to be a scholastic or philosophical view, attributable to an obsession with a few words, 'the uses of which are over-simplified, not really understood or carefully studied or correctly described', and to 'an obsession with a few half-studied facts' (*Sense and Sensibilia*, 3). Among the words are 'material object', 'illusion', 'deception', 'real' and its cognate 'reality', 'seems', 'looks', 'appears'. Among the 'half studied facts' are the phenomena of sticks immersed in water, mirages, and reflections. Austin showed how mistaken philosophical conclusions are reached through the misuse of these terms and through the misdescription of such phenomena. The crude dichotomy of objects of perception—either material objects or sense data—and its cousin—either direct or indirect perception—are, again, deeply misleading. And, as always, both members of each pair are equally questionable and in need of critical scrutiny. Not everything we perceive is a material object (shadows, voices, rainbows), and when it is not, it does not follow that what we perceive is a sense datum, let alone that it is not real (a rainbow is not 'unreal', and a 'real' rainbow may be contrasted with a painted one, not with an unreal one). It is mistaken to suppose that we perceive material things indirectly, by the reception of sense data. To see something indirectly may amount to seeing it through a periscope, but is not a matter of 'directly perceiving' a sense impression. That something is not real does not show that it is mere appearance. 'Real' is a word which takes its significance from what it is contrasted with, such as fake, artificial, bogus, toy, synthetic, and so on, none of which implies anything unreal. 'Looks', 'seems', and 'appears' are not synonyms, but have subtly differentiated roles, which Austin carefully described. *Sense and Sensibilia* helped to put an end, at least for a generation, to the extravagances of phenomenism and representationalism.

Austin's contribution to the theory of action was made in two seminal articles: 'A plea for excuses' (1956) and 'Ifs and cans' (1956), and a short posthumously published paper, 'Three ways of spilling ink'. These generated fertile debate on responsibility and freedom, detailed work on the variety of conditionals, and systematic attention to the concepts of ability and possibility in relation to human action.

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Austin's most influential work was his theory of speech acts outlined in lectures entitled 'Words and deeds', first given at Oxford in 1952 and delivered as the William James lectures (published as *How to do Things with Words*) at Harvard in 1955. Edited by J. O. Urmson, they were published in 1962 (revised edn by J. O. Urmson and M. Sbisà, 1975). Here he distinguished between the kinds of acts one performs in uttering a sentence: the phonetic act of making certain noises, the phatic act of uttering certain grammatically well-structured words, the locutionary act of using a sentence with a given sense and reference, the illocutionary act performed *in* performing the locutionary act, for example stating, promising, describing, thanking, and the perlocutionary act which one may succeed in performing *by* performing the illocutionary act, for example deterring, inciting, persuading, misleading. Utterances may be further classified according to their illocutionary force into *verdictives*, such as estimating, convicting, *exercitives*, such as appointing, ordering, *commissives*, such as promising, guaranteeing, *behabitives*, such as apologizing, congratulating, and *expositives*, such as replying, conceding. The elaborate typology was intended as a preliminary step in the development of a comprehensive theory of speech acts. Indeed, Austin probably thought of his 'almost botanical' classifications of locution-types much less as contributions to philosophy than as elements of a future *Principia Grammatica*' (G. Ryle, *Collected Papers*, 1971, 1.273). Nevertheless, he thought that his 'botanizing' would *also* yield a philosophical harvest. He declared that it would enable one 'to play Old Harry with two fetishes', namely the true/false fetish and the fact/value fetish, and so, yet again, to undermine oversimplified and unreflective philosophical dichotomies. This, sadly, he did not live long enough to do. Austin's work on speech acts stimulated extensive philosophical debate, and many of his distinctions became and remained part of the stock-in-trade of philosophy of language. It was equally influential among theoretical linguists.

Austin was, his friend Herbert Hart recounted:

often reserved in manner and on occasions formidable. But he had great natural courtesy, gaiety, and charm, and much manifest benevolence, especially for his pupils. His intellectual daring, power, and wit made his company a constant source of pleasure as well as of instruction.

*DNB*

He died of cancer on 8 February 1960 at his home, Walnut Tree House, Old Marston, Oxford. His wife survived him.

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## Archives

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## Sound

BL NSA, performance recordings

## Likenesses

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Ramsey & Muspratt, photograph, 1951, British Academy, London [see illus.]

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# Wealth at Death

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£15,049 0s. 5d.: probate, 6 May 1960, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

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