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JOHN LANGSHAW AUSTIN, O.B.E.

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1911-1960

JOHN LANGSHAW AUSTIN was born in Lancaster on 26 March 1911. His father, G. L. Austin, was at that time practising as an architect; but, after serving in the Army during the First World War, he did not return to that profession, and shortly after being demobilized he moved with his family—there were five children—to Scotland, where he became Secretary of St. Leonard's School, in St. Andrews. This was Austin's home until, from 1933 onwards, he came to live more or less permanently in Oxford.

In 1924 Austin went, with a scholarship in classics, to Shrewsbury, a school with which, in a phrase he used later, he soon established a *modus vivendi*. This phrase implies, perhaps, a not particularly warm affection for the place and time, and indeed he was emphatically not one of those for whom their old school and schooldays bulk large in reminiscence. But he thought well enough of Shrewsbury to raise the question, in 1955, of sending his own two sons there (though in the end he did not do so); and his own time in the school was in fact conspicuously successful. He was moderately fond of games, and was in due course captain of his House at fives; but chiefly, and even among those of his contemporaries who were more single-mindedly athletic in their interests, he was respected as something of an intellectual prodigy. In the opinion of Mr. D. S. Colman (later a Fellow of Queen's but at that time teaching at Shrewsbury) in his later years in the school Austin was already an accurate and sensitive scholar, particularly in Greek—'far above the usual level even of an able Sixth Form'; and if in character and temperament he was then (as indeed he was always) quite without eccentricity, appearing even to be 'a reasonably typical Salopian of the period', it could already be foreseen that he would achieve real academic distinction. As a House Monitor his authority, which he did not hesitate to exercise, was unquestioned, as was also the strict sense of justice by which it was directed; his juniors found him a little remote, but by no means ineffectual; and in any case they were (Mr. Paul Dehn reports) 'proud of him'. In 1929 he duly justified their pride and his own high promise by his election to a scholarship in classics at Balliol.

As an undergraduate at Oxford he was again predictably successful—academically, that is, for he neither made nor attempted to make any other sort of mark on the university's life at that time. He played some games, and greatly enjoyed acting with the Balliol Players; but his ambitions, and his distinction, were intellectual. In 1930 he was *prox. acc.* in the Ireland and Craven; and in 1931 he won the Gaisford Prize for Greek Prose, and was placed in the First Class in Classical Mods. It was at this time, when he began to read Greats, that he made his first serious acquaintance with philosophy; and it is important to notice that, like so many other English philosophers, he came to that subject already highly accomplished as a classical scholar and linguist. It cannot be doubted that the study of Aristotle, to which his training naturally attracted him, was an important particular influence on his later work, nor that, more generally, he owed in large measure to his classical education both his intense concern for linguistic accuracy and his perennial, even passionate, interest in the phenomenon of language itself. That this was his own training was, as he knew, significant for him; but he was very far from assuming, for that reason, that it was the best sort of training to have. It is possible that he himself would have preferred to be a scientist, and certain that he would have wished to know a great deal more about the sciences. Though his education was cast entirely in a traditional mould, his own views on education were not in the least traditional; his exacting habits of thought led him to question the value of the educational method by which he had acquired them, and he was sometimes inclined to think that he had wasted a great deal of time.

Among his tutors at Balliol, Austin was most deeply impressed by the most eccentric—C. G. Stone, the author of *The Social Contract of the Universe*. His affection and admiration for Stone were real and lasting; but it is surely impossible to find in this personal attachment any trace of philosophical influence. It seems to be the case that Austin as an undergraduate absorbed from the surrounding atmosphere—that he did not, at any rate, immediately and unthinkingly repudiate—some respect for the current orthodoxies of Idealism; but the teacher by whom, then and later, he was most sharply stimulated in philosophy—often, indeed, to disagreement—was Prichard, who was at that time (as Austin was to be later) White's Professor of Moral Philosophy. There was here an undoubted temperamental affinity. In reading Prichard's writings one may often feel him to have been at

sea in a subject of whose nature he had no clear conception; he was capable both of holding fast to some remarkable prejudices, and also of boldly espousing some most extraordinary and unpalatable doctrines. On the other hand (like Moore) he had no truck with rhetoric; he never hid difficulties beneath a smooth literary surface; in his lectures and classes, as in his writings, it was evident that work was going on. He stayed down to earth; and if he had no general conception of the nature of philosophical problems, exactly the same could have been said at any time of Austin himself.¹ If in Prichard's case and not in Austin's this strikes one as a disability, this is perhaps because Prichard was, in practice, much less critical and open-minded than he was in intention. Not everyone whose policy it is to do without dogma succeeds in doing so. On at least two occasions Austin argued with Prichard in an exchange of letters—in 1937 on the meaning of ἀγαθόν and εὐδαιμονία in Aristotle's *Ethics*, and just ten years later on the analysis of 'promising'. This last had long been a particular preoccupation of Prichard's; and his concern may well have contributed to the genesis of Austin's long and patient investigation of 'performative utterances', which dated (as Austin has recorded himself) from 1939.

In 1933, a few months after being placed in the First Class in Greats, Austin was elected, after examination, to a Fellowship at All Souls.

His philosophical interests and activities in these years before the second war were, in some ways, very different from those of the post-war years. His undergraduate essays, of which a few survive among his papers (and in which the marvellously neat and elegant handwriting is evidence of the immense pains he took), seem mostly to have been concerned not with the contemporary state of philosophical argument, but with the detailed and scholarly investigation of its history. This was a line which Austin followed for some years. He wrote out very fully, and must have delivered almost verbatim, richly detailed and learned lectures on certain books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He worked for some years—writing out, here again, immensely neat and copious notes—on the philosophy of Leibniz, about whom he also read a paper to the Philosophical Society. He wrestled

¹ I mean by this that, though Austin did have a general view as to how a problem comes to be dubbed 'philosophical', it was a central point in this view that philosophical problems cannot and must not be presumed to be of any single, well-defined kind: their general character must not be prejudged. This is further discussed below.

from time to time with the philosophy of Kant, and also of Plato, particularly in the *Theaetetus*. He lectured again after the war on Plato and Aristotle, but, I think, with a difference: in the later lectures scholarship was in the background; their primary aim was not to impart detailed knowledge about a text, but straightforwardly to expound its philosophical argument in the hope of extracting illumination from it. Though he remained, of course, deeply versed in the history of philosophy, and always valued the study of 'classical' texts as an educational discipline, he did not continue after the war the kind of scholarly work of which he did so much in the 30's. (His editing of H. W. B. Joseph's lectures on Leibniz (1949), and his translation of Frege's *Grundlagen* (1950), belong in a rather different category.) His first published paper, which appeared in 1939, though it does not deal directly with an historical question, contains about twenty explicit historical references. Such references, in his later writings, are rare.

It was during the 30's that, in this country, the philosophical scene was first enlivened by the dismissive *brusqueries* of Logical Positivism. What did Austin make of this? He was sympathetic to the general intention. He disliked and distrusted (in this following Prichard and Moore) the rhetoric, pretension, and obscurity that are apt to accompany metaphysical ambitions, and correspondingly approved the workshop, no-nonsense atmosphere of the Vienna Circle and its adherents. But he distrusted equally the positivistic addiction to quasi-scientific technical jargon; and though he believed that philosophical problems could in principle be definitively solved, he reacted instinctively (as well as for excellent reasons) against the production of alleged solutions with such staggering rapidity. Logical Positivism was itself, after all, just another ambitious philosophical theory, marked scarcely less, in Austin's view, for all its down-to-earth intentions, by mythology and obscurity than the theories it purported so confidently to demolish. It shared, as he thought, far too many of the defects of its intended victims.

He had not at this time—indeed, as was remarked above, he never had—any doctrine of his own as to the nature of philosophical problems in general. Nor had he, as perhaps he had later, any general views about philosophical method. His general belief, then as always—and this scarcely amounts to a doctrine—was that both the statements and alleged solutions of philosophical problems were characteristically *unclear*, and that this was owing partly of course to human frailty but chiefly to the

ambition to settle far too much far too quickly. He believed (like Moore) that, if progress was to be made, *many* questions would have to be raised, *many* facts surveyed, *many* arguments deployed step by step and narrowly criticized: questions ought to be distinguished and considered strictly one at a time, and no effort spared to make it *wholly* clear what question was being asked and *exactly* what answer was proposed to it. The effect, in discussion in the 30's, of this dogged resistance to haste has been described as 'powerfully negative', and so no doubt it was (if one remembers how philosophers are prone to go on); but conspicuously it was not dull, and, above all, not negligible. Austin spoke early with the unmistakable tone of natural authority.

In 1935 Austin left his research appointment at All Souls to become a Fellow and tutor at Magdalen. Though he was, as a tutor, exceedingly effective and skilful, I doubt whether it would be correct to say that he positively enjoyed teaching, at any rate within the limits imposed by the Greats curriculum. But he thought it an immensely important part of a philosopher's business, indeed a large part of the justification for his existence as such. It was not that he thought it mattered whether people in general held correct, or even any, philosophical opinions; what *was* vitally important was that as many as possible should acquire the habit of, and some skill in, clear and methodical thinking, and should be, as it were, immunized against the wilder kinds of confusion, myth-mongering, and intellectual trickery. This had with him the force of a moral and political conviction; like Dr. Johnson, he valued truthfulness almost with fanaticism; and he believed, with good reason, that even a brief acquaintance with the conscientious practice of his style of philosophy could have a lasting and salutary intellectual effect. But though his teaching was, deliberately, sharply astringent, he was always strikingly kind to and considerate of his pupils themselves—some of whom, to my knowledge, have found it hard to believe in the trepidation which Austin could arouse on occasion in his colleagues. He would temper the wind to the shorn (and unpretentious) lamb.

Austin married Jean Coutts in 1941. There were four children of the marriage, two daughters and two sons. For the rest of his life he found in his home and family a satisfaction and happiness which he found nowhere else, and I have no doubt that this devotion explains in large measure the impression of detachment, of remoteness even, which he sometimes made in other

settings. Sometimes, not always: he was naturally well mannered could entertain delightfully if the occasion required it, and besides had too many live interests to be easily bored. But in general the affabilities of club and college meant little to him; he did not need, or want, the distraction of many acquaintances.

By this time Austin was already in the Army; after a spell of preliminary training at Aldershot and Matlock in the summer of 1940, he had been commissioned in the Intelligence Corps and posted to the War Office in London. His first important employment was on the German Order of Battle, work which demanded exactly the kind of detailed accuracy which was, of course, immensely congenial to him. But in 1942 he took over the direction, at G.H.Q. Home Forces, of a small section which had recently been formed, to do the preliminary intelligence work for an invasion of Western Europe; and this was the field in which he became an unrivalled authority. His section, whose earlier days had been rather haphazard, was soon operating with method, rapidity, and a clear purpose. Though his standards were exacting, those under his command were enlivened by the confident sense of solid work getting done, of real progress being made. Professor A. J. Beattie, who served with Austin at this time, records that 'his superiors in rank very quickly learned that he was an outstanding authority on all branches of intelligence work, and they soon depended on his advice far more than would normally have been considered proper in any headquarters'.

In the following year Austin's section was vastly enlarged and transferred, under the name of the Theatre Intelligence Section, to 21st Army Group. Of this larger affair Austin as a Major—and later, when S.H.A.E.F. was formed, a Lt.-Col.—was of course not formally in command; but by this time his knowledge was so voluminous, his expertise so great, and his judgement so highly valued, that in practice he continued in charge of all the work. Before D-Day he had accumulated a vast quantity of information on the coast defences of northern France, on the base areas, supplies, formations, and transport system behind them, and indeed on every aspect of the German defence forces and civilian administration in that 'theatre'. Weekly, and later daily, reports were issued recording changes in the German dispositions; and a kind of guidebook was compiled for the use of the invading troops, in whose title—*Invade Mecum*—those who know Austin's writings will recognize his style. It has been said

of him that he directed this huge volume of work 'without ever getting into serious difficulty of any kind' and, more impressively, that 'he more than anybody was responsible for the life-saving accuracy of the D-Day Intelligence'.

Over the same period Austin was frequently called on for advice and help with the problem of the German V-weapons. This lay rather outside his sphere, and formally was the responsibility of the Air Ministry; but he was able to contribute to the identification of launching-sites and to the solution of the problem of their intended use.

In the summer of 1944 he moved with his section, first to Granville in Normandy, and afterwards to Versailles. At this time he was not dealing, as he had been, with day-to-day developments, but with strategic intelligence directed to operations some months ahead. This work was done with his accustomed meticulous thoroughness, but he seems to have found it, in the last stages of the war, increasingly uninteresting. At the very end of the war he took part in, and was fascinated by, the interrogation of prominent enemy prisoners; but he told Professor Beattie later that, 'if he were to become involved in another war', he would like to be employed on problems of supply. No doubt the unlimited intricacies of the logistics of warfare tempted him as a new field to conquer, a new maze to be mastered.

He left the Army in September 1945 with the rank of Lt.-Col., and the O.B.E. His work before D-Day was acknowledged by the French with the Croix de Guerre, and by the Americans with appointment as an Officer of the Legion of Merit. There is no doubt that he had rendered service of the highest value.

The university to which he returned was, at any rate in the field of philosophy, in a remarkable condition at that time—and, one may well feel, looking back, an enviable one. As the war went on it had been, of course, progressively depopulated: afterwards, as it seemed in a moment, it was crammed and overflowing. Undergraduates, of whom now several generations were pressing into residence simultaneously, were anything up to ten years above the usual age; most had been in the services; and one had the impression that a large proportion knew, with more maturity and independence of judgement than is usually to be looked for among undergraduates, that after the war years work was what they wanted. Politics were prevailingly left-wing, optimistic, progressive; there was a general, confident sense of many things to be done. Senior members also wore something of a new look. Many had returned, like Austin, from distinguished war service;

but also posts falling vacant in the previous six years had seldom been filled, so that there followed a sudden rush of new appointments. In philosophy there had not yet quite vanished the stimulating sense of an Old Guard opposition; but such pre-war 'radicals' as, conspicuously, Ryle and Ayer could now be regarded as advancing on what looked like a large and unmistakably 'winning' side, with such names—perhaps somewhat heterogeneously assembled—as Waismann, Berlin, Paul, Hampshire, Hart, Urmson, and soon many others, on its muster-roll. No doubt such quasi-belligerent categories look, retrospectively, slightly absurd, even undesirable; no doubt the sharp sense of philosophical black-and-white was naïve, the optimism unfounded; but the sense of new things going on, of new starts being made towards what seemed quite attainable goals, was strongly invigorating, and by no means confined to, though common among, undergraduates of the period.

This sense of philosophical vitality was not wholly due to the mere release of energies pent up by the war: it was in large part a matter of the state of the subject itself. Ryle, who had succeeded Collingwood as Waynflete Professor, was already making, in the work which led up to *The Concept of Mind*, what was perhaps the first systematic and really large-scale application of the new philosophical style to large traditional problems; and it was at this time also that the later work of Wittgenstein, long cloistrally prosecuted in Cambridge, came to be known in wider circles—and was, some may think, none the worse for a breath of fresh air. There really was, in the subject at that time, a good deal to be excited about.

Austin's place in this animated scene was one of high authority, and his presence there contributed substantially to its animation. He produced in the summer of 1946, in his contribution to the symposium 'Other Minds', perhaps still the most frequently cited of all his papers, and the first which bears unmistakably his characteristic imprint; henceforward it was certain that any paper of his would be an 'occasion', and his was an opinion that any of his colleagues was most anxious to have.¹ But Austin himself was little capable of zeal, and his critical

¹ Professor Berlin had at one time, on his mantelpiece in New College, a large card, roughly two feet by six inches, obtained presumably from some car-dealer and bearing the legend AUSTIN; he kept it 'as a reminder that there are acute critics at work': and shrewd undergraduates from other colleges who attended Austin's lectures could often bring their tutors to an anxious standstill with the simple formula 'But Mr. Austin says . . . '.

powers were too sharp to permit of any easy optimism. In 1947 he began, in his lectures, that demolition of currently fashionable doctrines on perception which came to be known under the title *Sense and Sensibilia*; and he did not join at any time in the general deference to Wittgenstein. The personal atmosphere surrounding Wittgenstein's work in philosophy strongly repelled him; and it is of course crucial also that Wittgenstein rejected, deliberately and on principle, exactly that ideal of finality, of definite, clearly and fully stated solutions, which Austin regarded as alone worth seriously striving for. That Wittgenstein influenced his views has been sometimes suggested, but is certainly untrue.

Austin's very general opinions about philosophy had not changed since before the war, nor did they change thereafter. He believed that what had descended to our time under the name of philosophy was the tangled residue of a formerly even vaster tangle; there had been, as it were, an original gaseous mass of undifferentiated problems from which, as certain kinds of questions and methods gradually became clear, planets broke away in the form of independent disciplines—mathematics, the physical sciences, formal logic, psychology, and so on.¹ If so, what remained in the domain and under the title of philosophy was at least highly unlikely to consist of any one kind of problems, and no single method was likely to be, quite generally, the key to progress. Problems, then, ought simply to be approached with no preconceptions, set out in the clearest possible light, and discussed in any way that might seem to be relevant and effective; the needed virtues were truthfulness, and above all industry and patience; the typically fatal philosophical failings were inaccuracy and over-simplification, and above all the impetuous proliferation of bogus 'solutions'.

This Austin had long believed, and always did believe; but he had formed, I think, since before the war two new views about philosophical procedure. The first and most notorious of these was that 'ordinary language' should not only, in the interests of clarity and common understanding, usually be employed by philosophers; it should also be, thoroughly and in detail, studied

¹ At Royaumont in 1958, a French questioner put to Austin the figurative inquiry 'Is philosophy an island, or a promontory?' Austin said in his answer: 'If I were looking for an image of this kind, I think I should say that it's more like the surface of the sun—a pretty fair mess.' See his 'Performative-Constative', and the ensuing discussion, in *Philosophy and Ordinary Language*, ed. C. E. Caton, University of Illinois Press, 1963.

by them. This view, which has aroused strong passions and been fantastically misinterpreted, cannot here be discussed at length, though I shall return to it briefly in a moment. (It is really quite simple.)

The other view, which has been rarely discussed largely because, I believe, it has never been taken seriously, may be guessed to have arisen directly from his war experience: it was that philosophy could be, and should be, a co-operative pursuit. It may be thought, perhaps, that it always has been; at any rate where, as in Oxford, many philosophers are gathered together, there has always been discussion, in every degree of formality. But Austin meant, and meant very seriously, much more than that. He had been faced in the war, we must remember, by vast and complicated problems, problems which might well, at first glance, have looked simply insoluble. However, they had been solved; and they had been solved by the patient, minutely detailed labour of scores, even hundreds, of trained investigators, and by the persistent, systematic co-ordination of their inquiries and their findings. The problems of philosophy are comparably vast and complicated; why then should they not be similarly attacked? If (as Austin had long believed) the road to large truths runs through the patient accumulation of incalculably many small truths, does it not seem that here—as, after all, with most research in the sciences—is work for many independent but co-ordinated brains? It is clear that Austin would have liked to have in philosophy an organized ‘section’, a disciplined team of investigators, very much on the model of his Theatre Intelligence Section of a few years before.

I believe I have never heard this notion discussed except as a mildly amusing private quirk of Austin’s; but I wonder how many of those who saw it in this light could have properly explained why it should not be taken seriously. No doubt Austin saw himself as such a section’s director; but was this mere vanity? Can it be doubted that he would have done such work extraordinarily well? No doubt in Oxford, where the demands of teaching are unusually heavy and there is (outside the scientific departments) no structure of authority, to form and keep such a team in being would be practically very difficult; but it would be absurdly conservative to take for granted that such practical difficulties could not be overcome. No doubt, again, it can be held that there are grave dangers to academic freedom in empowering any one individual to direct the work of others; but such power is often rightly given, and not always abused. The

only valid objection, plainly, to Austin's idea would be the contention that philosophy is not a subject of that kind; that it is, one might say, an art rather than a science; that there are no sufficiently definite, objective, impersonal problems to which many workers could usefully make their impersonal, partial, cumulative contributions. This may be so; but do we all know it to be so? Austin's idea (as Chesterton once said about Christianity) has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried: and many (he would have thought) who regarded his idea as merely quirkish themselves believed that philosophical problems were objectively soluble, but were unwilling to take seriously the implications of that opinion.

It is relevant to mention here Austin's 'Saturday mornings'—weekly meetings during term, held from time to time in various colleges, and normally lasting from two to three hours.¹ For I believe it could be said that, in the first years after the war, these meetings were a kind of pilot project for, or perhaps merely the closest practicable approximation to, the kind of systematic collaboration that Austin had in mind. Certainly they were, at first, quite strictly organized. Attendance (by invitation) was formally restricted to persons both junior to Austin and employed as whole-time tutorial Fellows, and informally (naturally enough) to persons judged likely to be in sympathy with the matters in hand. A field of inquiry—for example, in one term the concept of a *rule*—was systematically divided into areas, and each area assigned to some one of those present for investigation (there were about ten in all). Results were to be fairly formally reported, and records kept in writing. It is a high tribute to Austin's unique personal authority that, among colleagues of strong individuality, perhaps temperamentally individualistic, and certainly extremely hard-worked in other ways, such a project ever got started at all. The sense of purpose, of method, of work, was certainly invigorating; but the supererogatory labour involved was perhaps excessive; and it is not surprising that, before very long, certain rigours were relaxed. Though the meetings continued, they became progressively more informal, attendance at them more heterogeneous, their aim less sharply defined.²

¹ These were, for many people and for many years, the best of all philosophical occasions; they deserve both fuller discussion than they can be given here, and discussion also by someone whose experience of them goes further back than mine. I first attended, I believe, in the autumn of 1951.

² In discussion with Arne Naess at Berkeley in 1958, Austin appears to have spoken as if he still regarded some kind of systematic co-operation in

Very often the topic for a term's discussion would be the critical examination of some currently fashionable semi-technical term—the term 'disposition', for example, or 'symbol', or 'class'; for a time mathematical logic¹ came under scrutiny; sometimes a text would be discussed—Frege's *Grundlagen*, Aristotle's *Ethics*, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and (in the term before Austin's death) Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*. There was always evident in detail—and in fact on this the vitality of the meetings entirely depended—the extraordinary fertility and force of Austin's mind; but he had always in addition, I believe, one general aim—to get the topic, whatever it might be, pulled out of the rut. No one could well have been more free than Austin from the domination of *idées reçues*; but he rightly saw the routine repetition of current doctrines, the uncritical employment of fashionable jargon, as *the* major obstacle to progress in philosophy. Some critics have complained that in his writings he appears at times to be dealing directly with no standard, identifiable problem of philosophy; this is so, and was even more so in his philosophical talk; but it is by no means attributable to inadvertence. His point was that standard problems are approached by deeply rutted tracks; there are orthodox manœuvres which lead into accustomed morasses; there are familiar, well sign-posted highroads to well-populated dead ends. Hope lies in considering what has *not* yet been considered, in trying what has *not* yet been thought to be the right road—above all, in examining the small, neglected, preliminary details which, *because* they have been neglected, seem unfamiliar. It was for this sort of reason that, at his 'Saturday mornings', Austin characteristically sought to discuss what his colleagues had *not* spent the rest of the week discussing, and what sometimes

philosophy as not only desirable, but also practicable. However, the record of this discussion is neither perfectly clear nor certainly reliable. (It goes without saying that Austin was careful to distinguish the programme he had in mind from the kind of Gallup-poll, empirical team-work which Naess believed in, and which Austin regarded as, in principle, misguided.)

¹ A curious by-product of Austin's interest in logic was his card-game *CASE*, which he devised during 1951 and discussed (and played) with, among others, Mr. and Mrs. Burton Dreben. His idea, pursued with characteristic literalness and pertinacity, was primarily to test the merits of the frequently made suggestion that operations in formal logic are 'like moves in a game'; but he plainly took great pleasure also, for their own sakes, in the sheer ingenuities of his invention, and in the technical problem of drafting clear and comprehensive rules. The rules of games had been studied in detail at some of his earliest 'Saturday mornings'.

might seem so far off the beaten track as scarcely to be recognizable as philosophy.¹ That this policy could be, in his hands, uniquely stimulating is known to many from long personal experience.

Austin's practical abilities, already well proved in his war service, soon came to be employed also in university administration. He was Junior Proctor in the year 1949-50, and, in his field of special responsibility as such, initiated and carried through a major rationalization of the Statutes governing the conduct of examinations. As a member of the innumerable committees and Boards which Proctors must attend he is characteristically remembered for 'great care over detail', and the then Secretary of Faculties has said that 'once we got a proposal past Austin we could be pretty certain that it was watertight'. He was chairman of the Sub-faculty of Philosophy for two years from 1953, an active member also of the Faculty Board, and, later, of the Hebdomadal Council and the General Board of the Faculties. His standards in this often dreary work were exceptionally high; it seemed never to occur to him, as, alas, it does to many, to economize effort by giving formal approval to half-understood matters regarded as other people's business; he always knew what was going on, and had formed views about it. He could never have attended any meeting as a mere 'brute voter'. This of course meant hard work, even though, as was clear enough, he could grasp a case and weigh arguments with extraordinary speed.

But his hardest practical work of all—and also the most congenial to him—was done as one of the Delegates of the Press, the body with whom rests final responsibility for the conduct of the vast business of the University Press. In this capacity the present Secretary has said of him simply that he was 'the best Delegate I ever knew'; and he certainly interested himself in the business of the Press not only very ably, but far more extensively than is normally to be expected. As a Delegate from 1952—in which year he also became White's Professor—he was particularly interested, on the publication side, in school books and children's books; more expectedly perhaps, in the field of language and linguistics, particularly in the supplements to the *New English Dictionary*; and of course in philosophy, in which field he himself initiated the Press's new series of translations of

¹ It was for this good reason, and not from cantankerousness, that Austin once turned down a suggested topic on the ground that 'we would enjoy it too much'.

Aristotle. But besides this he was a frequent and valued visitor to the printing works and the mill, to the Press's London offices, and in due course also to the offices in New York. From 1957 he held the most important office of Chairman of the Delegates' Finance Committee, and in this capacity his practical judgment, clarity of mind, and endless readiness to take pains over details were conspicuously valuable.

It would be unprofitable, even if it were possible, here to attempt any kind of summary of Austin's contribution to philosophy. Some of his works now in print are unhappily, owing to his early death, not in the form that he would finally have given them; what more he might have done it is useless to conjecture; but what was already done forms a body of work of the highest quality and, one must expect, of lasting significance. That work speaks for itself; but one or two general comments may properly be made here, partly in the hope of counteracting what appear to be prevalent tendencies to misunderstanding.

There is, first of all, a question of emphasis. In much discussion of Austin's work that I have seen and heard there has been, I think, a certain implication that very general views about the nature of philosophy, very general doctrines of philosophical tactics and strategy, were what Austin chiefly wished to convey, his particular views on this problem or that being almost incidental. But this in fact is wholly the wrong way round. Austin's own view was that nothing but particular problems was seriously worth discussing at all. Generalities about philosophy, large questions of method—what he once called 'the cackle'—were interesting enough in their way, but were little more really than gossipy distractions from the serious business. The question he would himself have asked of any piece of philosophy is not 'What theory of the nature of philosophy is implicit in this?', or 'What principles of method are here applied?', but simply 'Does this advance discussion of the problem dealt with?' And this is the question he would wish his own readers to ask. It is true that he had, and occasionally (always with some reluctance) discussed, general policies and precepts which are at once characteristic, original, and highly intriguing; but he valued these only so far as they seemed to serve him well; and the pertinent question is not whether those general policies are, or are likely to prove, uniquely and universally effective (two claims which Austin would never have made), but whether, in the particular cases in which he pursued them, discussion of those cases was advanced thereby. It is of course possible that discussion of Austin's

highly individual methods of work, or of his very general opinions about philosophy, not merely gratifies the philosophical hankering for generality, but is actually more rewarding than discussion of his views on particular topics: this may be so: but let it at least be remembered that Austin did not himself think that it was so, and above all that he made for his methods no more ambitious claim than that, in his hands, they seemed to lead to certain definite advances in the treatment of the particular problems he chose to deal with.

Next, a word on that well-worn topic, 'ordinary language'; for here too there seems a danger of Austin's position being misunderstood. Two views in particular are often wrongly attributed to him: first, the view that philosophical problems in general are generated wholly by, or wholly consist in, confusion and misuse of language; and second, the view that 'ordinary language' is sacrosanct, immune from criticism and unsusceptible of supplementation or amendment. It is certain that Austin held neither of these views. He did not believe that there was any one answer at all to the question how philosophical problems arise, or to the question what *kind* of problems they are; he believed rather, as has been mentioned above, that philosophy was characteristically a mixed bag, some of whose contents were there precisely because their nature was as yet quite obscure. Again, thinking of 'ordinary language' as he did—as an instrument unselfconsciously evolved by speakers confronted with an immense and ever-changing variety of practical contingencies—he naturally recognized that it might in certain ways be confused or incoherent and even, for certain purposes, totally inadequate.

Those, then, are two doctrines about language which he did not hold, and in fact quite clearly repudiated more than once in his writings. But he was, of course, intensely and persistently interested in language. This was for two entirely different reasons.

The first was this. At least one of the principal tasks of the philosopher, in any field, is discrimination: at least one important element in clear understanding is consciousness of, and ability to make, distinctions. But we all learn to mark, as soon as we begin to learn anything, enormously many distinctions, in learning to speak our native language: we learn to mark both gross differences and some very fine *nuances* in learning when, and when not, to use its words and phrases. But it is, at the very least, highly unlikely that a natural language should be as it is, should

have evolved as it has, for no particular reasons; though of course there will be indefinitely many distinctions, some perhaps crucially important for special purposes, which in ordinary speech there has been no occasion to mark, yet where ordinary speech *does* make a verbal distinction it is at least highly probable that there is a distinction to be made, that the difference of expression corresponds to some difference in the cases. We need not assert dogmatically that this is always so or that, even when it is so, that fact is necessarily of interest; we need claim no special merit for our own native tongue; but at any rate we have in our language, as it were ready-made, an enormous stock of discriminations, and to take this stock seriously—to examine what it contains—seems, as a precept of method, to be merely good sense. If we want to know, as in philosophy we often do, whether some two cases are to be discriminated, we should at least begin by considering whether we speak of them in the same way, for if we do not, then *probably* they can be distinguished, and *probably* the distinction is of not negligible significance. Austin never claimed more than that this was, in philosophy, *one* good way to *begin*: and I do not see how this modest (though original) claim can be seriously disputed, once it has been correctly understood.

But language is of importance in philosophy not merely as a pointer to distinctions; very often it is itself the topic under investigation. Austin's argument here was that recent philosophical discussions of language, or of particular departments of language, have tended to be unsatisfactory and amateurish for the reason that they have usually been undertaken in an excessively piecemeal, provisional, hand-to-mouth style. There is a lot more to a language than 'the meaning' of its words and phrases; nor is it clear *what* more is meant to be comprised in the popular but over-accommodating notion of its 'use' or 'uses'. Philosophical talk about language urgently needed, Austin thought, a firmer theoretical foundation; and so, from (as it appears) an initial interest in promising, and the idea (soon judged to be inadequate) of the 'performative' utterance, he was led to embark (and he scarcely claimed to have done more) on a really *general* theory of what he called 'speech-acts'—of what kinds of things are done in speaking, of how they are done, and how they may go right or wrong. This was, of course, the programme of his William James Lectures of 1955, on which at the date of his death he was still at work; this programme brought him, as he knew, to the ill-defined frontier between philosophy

and linguistics; and it is probably on, or even across, this frontier that, if he had lived, he would most have wanted to go on working.

Austin's death in February 1960 left a terrible gap, all the more keenly felt for being quite unforeseen. His fine-drawn features—his face, as Shaw said of Voltaire's, was 'all intelligence'—had for some months looked rather worn and tired; but in the end he was scarcely known to be ill before it was clear that he was dying. No one, I believe, outside his family could have claimed to know him well; but of those who knew him even a little I know of no one in whom respect and admiration were not accompanied by affection also. Except in impersonal matters he was, one may guess, a shy man, wary of self-revelation and more than uninviting of self-revelation by others. He could not treat people irresponsibly, casually, with frivolity, and could not but prefer no personal relationship at all to the confusion and falsity of a personal involvement not taken seriously; the facile genialities which come so naturally to many must have repelled him, I believe, as basically untruthful. Thus he appeared to some as a remote and even a cold personality. His manifest integrity and sharp-edged intelligence could be very daunting, and he was surely without the dull and comfortable desire that the surface of life should at all times look smooth and easy. It was not only in philosophy that he was unable to practise, and little able to tolerate, evasions and pretences. That he was, and could not help being, a formidable person is true; but that he was cold is not. It is because his kindness, his affections, and for that matter his aversions, were so real that they could not, without falsity, have been indiscriminately displayed; and he was not capable of falsity.

Above all it should be remembered that, formidable though he often was, there was in him no stiffness or stuffiness, no pedantic rigour. In conversation he was capable of, one might almost say addicted to, the rashest flights of speculation and fantastic extravagance; he was always utterly without pomposity; his lectures and discussions, even when he was philosophically in deadly earnest, were continuously entertaining, and sometimes wildly funny. His way of speaking—rather dry and slow, very clear and with all edges, as it were, very sharply defined—was splendidly expressive of both the characteristic merits of his matter, and the characteristic wit of his style. It was also, on occasion, an effective polemical instrument; for he could, and sometimes did, reduce philosophical propositions

to helpless absurdity by simply reading them aloud.¹ He was very far from thinking that philosophy was a form of entertainment; but he believed that its practice was all the better for being agreeable, and he accepted with relish the ample targets which it offered him for ridicule. It seemed to him a short step from solemnity to pretentiousness and fraud, and he used his natural wit deliberately as a weapon against bogus profundities. In his hands philosophy seemed at once more serious, and more fun.

Austin visited Harvard as William James Lecturer in the spring term of 1955, and the University of California in the autumn of 1958. In both cases he made a most powerful impact on those who heard him; and in Berkeley, even before the semester he spent there, he was strongly solicited to take a permanent appointment. By this invitation he was certainly greatly tempted (though it is not true, as has been stated, that he had finally resolved to accept it). He was fascinated, I believe, by the whole phenomenon of America—by its size, by its populousness and resources, by the sense there of endless possibilities and a wide-open future. His temperament, as Professor Hampshire has said, was that of a radical reformer; there were many new things that he would have liked to do in new ways, and to secure the cooperation of others in doing; and it is clear that he felt that in America such things might be done—much more easily than in Oxford, where the system might be unkindly regarded as one of ossification tempered by anarchy. It seems too that he was personally in some ways more at ease in America—that he found in that atmosphere of uncomplicated, undesigning friendliness a greater clarity and freedom, and in himself (one may guess) less inclination to be on his guard. He was, though, very English; and perhaps it is not surprising that he found a final decision to leave England impossible to make.

In considering, finally and perhaps parochially, what philosophy in Oxford lost by his early death, what comes most to mind, I believe, is his authority. His abilities were outstanding; his work was important and continuously interesting; but above all his presence there had provided, so to speak, a centre of gravity. His was the initiative that one naturally hoped for. It was his opinion that one instinctively waited to hear. His, one

¹ His voice is recorded, most fortunately though not, alas, very well, on a tape made when he lectured at Gothenberg in October 1959, while he was visiting universities in Norway and Sweden. This tape is now in the possession of Mr. J. O. Urmson.

might almost say, were the standards that had to be satisfied. His death deprived philosophy in Oxford of one, perhaps the most conspicuous, of its most able practitioners; but in his death the subject lost also, and far more than proportionately, something of its own life.

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