



SOME NOTES FOR A HISTORICALLY SITUATED REINTERPRETATION OF ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY

ALESSANDRO RAMÓN MOSCARÍTOLO PALACIO*

doi: 10.11144/Javeriana.uph43-86.nolp

ABSTRACT

This paper is the first part of a reinterpretation of ordinary language philosophy—as it was originally developed in post-Second World War Oxford—against the historical background that accords it its true significance. I will focus on the philosophical legacy of J. L. Austin, the most prominent figure of this movement. Austin has often been treated as an illustrious but *passé* figure; yet this state of affairs is the result of a failure to read Austin's work in a historically informed manner. I show that J. L. Austin's philosophy is part of a movement founded in late-19th-century Oxford. This proposal challenges the established view, according to which ordinary language philosophy is peculiar to the post-Second-World-War scene. It also challenges the widespread prejudice that conceives of ordinary language philosophy as an offshoot of the later Wittgenstein's philosophy. This proposal paves the way for fruitful applications of Austin's work to contemporary concerns.

Keywords: J. L. Austin; J. Cook Wilson; history of analytic philosophy; G. Ryle; P. F. Strawson

* Marist University, New York, United States of America.

E-mail: alessandro.moscaritolopalacio@marist.edu

How to cite this article: Moscarítólo Palacio, A. R. (2026). Some Notes for a Historically Situated Reinterpretation of Ordinary Language Philosophy. *Universitas Philosophica*, 43(86), 151-182. ISSN 0120-5232, ISSN en línea 2346-2426. doi: 10.11144/Javeriana.uph43-86.nolp

ANOTACIONES PARA UNA REINTERPRETACIÓN HISTÓRICAMENTE SITUADA DE LA FILOSOFÍA DEL LENGUAJE ORDINARIO

RESUMEN

Este artículo es la primera parte de una reinterpretación de la filosofía del lenguaje ordinario (en su versión original, desarrollada en Oxford tras la segunda guerra mundial) a la luz de su situación histórica. Me concentro en el legado de la figura más destacada de este movimiento, J. L. Austin. A falta de una lectura de su filosofía situada históricamente, con frecuencia se considera a Austin poco más que una ilustre figura del pasado. Sostengo que la filosofía de Austin es parte de un movimiento fundado en Oxford a finales del siglo XIX, refutando así la extendida idea de que la filosofía del lenguaje ordinario se originó después de la segunda guerra mundial; también refuto el prejuicio de acuerdo con el cual la filosofía del lenguaje ordinario es una extensión de la filosofía del Wittgenstein tardío. Esta propuesta prepara el terreno para futuras aplicaciones de las ideas de Austin a temas contemporáneos.

Palabras clave: J. L. Austin; J. Cook Wilson; historia de la filosofía analítica; G. Ryle; P. F. Strawson.

1. Introduction

ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY (OLP) is a short-lived movement originally developed in post-Second-World-War Oxford and led by J. L. Austin. Shortly after Austin's untimely demise in 1960, Burton Dreben (1960) wrote that "in the death of Austin, the entire philosophical community has suffered an irreparable loss of catastrophic proportions." Judging, however, from the semi-oblivion into which Austin quickly fell in the years following his death, Dreben's opinion has not commanded widespread assent.¹ Not long after Austin's death, Sir Geoffrey Warnock—one of Austin's literary executors and a regular attendee at Austin's legendary Saturday Morning seminars—hinted at one possible cause of this state of affairs: "like Wittgenstein, Austin was a genius, but Wittgenstein fitted the popular picture of a genius. Austin, unfortunately, did not" (Mehta, 1961).

Setting aside Warnock's suggestion for the time being, the main assumption that informs my general approach to Austin is that his work has been underappreciated because it has not been read in a historically informed manner. Indeed, few historically situated readings of Austin's philosophical writings are available, and most are sketchy; this lacuna is consistent with the fact that the first, and only, *personal* biography of Austin—M. V. Rowe's *J. L. Austin: Philosopher and D-Day Intelligence Officer*—was published merely three years ago (Rowe, 2023). The general conclusion which most of these historically situated readings of Austin's writings arrive at is that Austin's philosophy (and post-Second-World-War

1 Ernest Gellner's *Words and Things. A Critical Account of Linguistic Philosophy and a Study in Ideology*—published a few months before Austin's death—is a particularly acrimonious critique of post-Second-World-War Oxford philosophy, especially of Austin's. After Austin's death, Gellner admitted that Austin was indeed his main target: "out of the bunch of Oxford philosophers," Gellner acknowledged, "I suppose I have the strongest aversion to Austin, who in some ways typified the things I dislike about them most" (as cited in Mehta, 1963, p. 35). Gilbert Ryle, then-editor of *Mind* and one of the leading figures of post-Second-World-War Oxford philosophy, refused to publish a review of Gellner's book. Bertrand Russell, who wrote a laudatory introduction to Gellner's book, denounced this decision in the opinion section of *The Times*. The ensuing public spat lasted many weeks (Hacker, 1996, pp. 230-31).

Oxford philosophy more generally) marked a radical break with all previous Oxford traditions (Berlin, 1973; Fann, ed., 2011; Hacker, 1996, pp. 148ff; Grice, 1987, pp. 387ff; Gustafsson, 2011, pp. 8ff). More recently, it has been argued that Austin was decisively influenced by Wittgenstein's later philosophy—a view which aligns with the widespread prejudice amongst scholars other than historians of philosophy about the origins of Austin's philosophy (Harris & Unnsteinsson, 2018). The main goal of this paper is to show that both readings are incorrect. More precisely, I aim to show that Austin's philosophy is part of a philosophical movement founded by John Cook Wilson—the once-influential leader of an anti-idealist revolt that took place at Oxford at the turn of the 20th century—and championed by H. A. Prichard, Cook Wilson's most prominent student and Austin's teacher. To this end, I argue, in section 2, that Austin inherited his method of ordinary language analysis from Cook Wilson. In section 3, I show that Austin applied this method to achieve the same goals Cook Wilson had pursued in early-20th-century Oxford. In section 4, I maintain that Austin's conception of knowledge is essentially indistinguishable from that held by Cook Wilson.

2. Cook Wilson and Austin: Attention to ordinary usage as a route to the common-sense view

JOHN COOK WILSON has largely fallen into oblivion.² Charles Travis's (2005, 2021) engagement with Cook Wilson's work is a rare exception. But as late as the 1950s, when Austin became the leading figure of Oxford philosophy, some historians still regarded Cook Wilson as being “too influential to be ignored” (Passmore, 1967, p. 240; Hacker, 1996, p. 150).³ Their resistance to ignore him was justified: Cook Wilson, a major intellectual force in late-19th- and early-20th-century Oxford, had greatly influenced figures such as H. A. Prichard and

2 John Cook Wilson was born in 1849 in Nottingham, England. He pursued degrees in Mathematics and Classical studies at Balliol College, Oxford. Fellow and lecturer at Oriel College since 1874, he became Wykeham Professor of Logic in 1889, and he remained at that post until his death in 1915 (Ball, 1915; Farquharson, 1926a; Hall 1915; Joseph, 1916; Prichard, 1919).

3 Gilbert Ryle, a senior member of Oxford ordinary language philosophy, described himself as a Cook-Wilsonian (Hacker, 1996, p. 90).

H. W. B. Joseph, who themselves greatly influenced subsequent generations of Oxford philosophers, including Austin and his epigones (Berlin, 1973, p. 3; Farquharson, 1921/1926a, pp. xiii, xxix, xlv-xlvi; Hacker, 1996, pp. 88-89, 156; Prichard, 1919, p. 300).

To understand Cook Wilson's role in the development of Oxford's ordinary language philosophy (OLP) generally, and Austin's philosophy in particular, we should first have a broad sense of what OLP is. Some attempts have been made to characterize *contemporary re-interpretations* of ordinary language philosophy (Hansen, 2014; Porter & Hansen 2023). By contrast, giving a precise characterization of OLP—the short-lived movement that flourished at Oxford after the Second World War—is all but impossible.⁴ Still, a feature fairly obviously discernible in the work of the most prominent Oxford ordinary language philosophers is the method of ordinary usage elucidation, sometimes called “linguistic analysis”: this is a method whereby subtleties of difference in ordinary idiom are identified and classified (Grice, 1987/1989, p. 376). Indeed, Austin's unmatched talent for discerning these subtleties is commonly viewed as the hallmark of his work: he is widely regarded as the *Doctor Subtilis* of post-Second-World-War Oxford philosophy (Hacker, 1996, pp 158-159).

Now, why should one make use of this peculiar method in the first place? Austin (1979a) tackles this worry in “A Plea for Excuses”, his celebrated 1956 Presidential Address to the Aristotelian Society. The following passage contains the most explicit answer Austin ever gave to the worry in question:

Our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters,

4 Although the label “ordinary language philosophy” had become common by the 1950s, it was not used by Austin or the other leading ordinary language philosophers, such as Ryle or Strawson (Hacker, 1996, pp. 308-309, n. 38). More interestingly, there was great diversity in the “matter and manner of philosophizing” amongst these philosophers (Hacker, 1996, pp. 148-158). Relatedly, the views on philosophical method held by many of these philosophers were “fragmentary in the extreme” (Grice, 1989, pp. 377-378).

than any that you or I are likely to think up in our armchairs one afternoon—the most favoured alternative method (Austin, 1979a, p. 182).

By examining ordinary usage, Austin tells us, one can unearth certain philosophically relevant beliefs held by laypeople and specialists alike. A similar answer is implicit in Austin's ensuing discussion about the method's applicability conditions. One of these conditions is that "we should prefer a field which is not too much trodden into bogs or tracks by traditional philosophy, for in that case even 'ordinary' language will have become infected with the jargon of extinct theories"; by zeroing in on these fields, "at last we should be able to unfreeze discoveries" (Austin, 1979a, pp. 182-183). The discoveries in question are, naturally, certain beliefs held by laypeople and specialists alike, the beliefs encapsulated by the relevant ordinary usage. Indeed, "A Plea for Excuses" focuses on ordinary expressions of excuse precisely to make explicit our actual beliefs about the relevant subject-matter:

Excuses form an admirable topic; we can discuss at least clumsiness, or absence of mind, or inconsiderateness, even spontaneousness, without remembering what Kant thought, and so progress by degrees even to discussing deliberation without for once remembering Aristotle, or self-control without Plato (Austin, 1979a, p. 183).

This method certainly raises multiple worries. We shall presently focus on one of these worries, namely, whether Austin developed the method in question independently. Admittedly, Austin never cited any predecessors or influences on matters of method. We should not, however, read too much into this fact: like other prominent early- and mid-20th-century Oxford philosophers, Austin systematically failed to cite *any* of the positive influences on any area of his work.⁵

That Austin's teacher, H. A. Prichard, was the living philosopher who exerted the greatest influence on Austin is beyond dispute (Berlin, 1973, p. 2; Gustafsson, 2011, p. 8; Hacker, 1996, pp. 88-89, 95; Hampshire, 1960/2011, pp. 43-44;

5 Cook Wilson, too, failed to cite the work of the philosophers who influenced him. Indeed, most of the citations one finds in Cook Wilson's (1926) posthumously published *Statement and Inference*—his only lasting contribution to philosophy aside from his works in classical studies—were added by the editor of this volume.

Warnock, 1963/2011, pp. 5ff). By 1929—the year Austin joined Oxford as an undergraduate student—Prichard had already established himself as the standard-bearer of Cook Wilson's philosophy, a position he proudly held until his death in 1947 (Gustafsson, 2011, pp. 8-11; Hacker, 1996, pp. 88-89; Carritt, 1948; Price, 1947).

Some sources also mention G. E. Moore, already a venerable Cambridge don in the 1930s, as a figure Austin admired (Hampshire, 1960/2011, p. 44; Gustafsson, 2011, p. 8; Urmson, 1960/2011 p. 32; Warnock, 1973, pp. 6-7). These testimonies are consistent with, among other things, an uncharacteristic admission which Austin is said to have made: “some like Witters [i.e., Wittgenstein]”—he is reported to have remarked orally—, “but Moore is *my* man” (Grice, 1989, p. 381).⁶

Despite widespread prejudice to the contrary, especially among scholars other than historians of philosophy, the first part of this remark is unsurprising: as a matter of historical fact, Austin was certainly *not* influenced, or attracted, by Wittgenstein's work (Berlin, 1973, pp. 11, 15; Hacker, 1996, pp. 88, 95, 151; Warnock, 2011, p. 11). However, it has been recently suggested that Austin's views on language were influenced by those held by the later Wittgenstein (Harris & Unnsteinsson, 2018). One main argument supporting this contention is that “Wittgenstein's influence on Austin was, at least in part, indirect and either unconscious to or repressed by Austin” (p. 4). The other main argument is that “at least some of Wittgenstein's influence was direct and consciously acknowledged by Austin” (p. 4). Both of these arguments, however, stand in stark contrast with multiple historical facts. In what follows, I shall discuss those facts.

What did Austin take from, or admire in, Moore? Reliable acquaintances of Austin's maintain that he admired Moore's general philosophical temperament, but not his specific philosophical views (Berlin, 1973, pp. 2-3; Gustafsson, 2011, p. 9; Ryle, 1971, p. 273; Warnock, 1989, pp. 6-7).⁷ But Paul Grice, who

6 Sir Peter Strawson, who—together with Paul Grice—regularly took part in Austin's legendary ‘Saturday morning’ seminars, reported this remark as well. Unlike Grice, Strawson did so only orally (Hacker, 1996, p. 172, n. 106).

7 More specifically, Austin admired Moore's vehement opposition to deceptive rhetoric, as well as Moore's insistence that in order to make progress in philosophy, “*many* questions would have to be raised, *many* facts surveyed, *many* arguments deployed step by step and narrowly criticized:

originally reported the oral remark in question, qualifies this picture somewhat. Grice (1989) argues that Austin (whom he knew well) did admire one specific view advanced by Moore, namely, Moore's well-known vindication of common sense.

Grice's contention is consistent with Austin's motives for examining ordinary usage (stated in the passage from "A Plea for Excuses" quoted above). And it is consistent, more specifically, with Austin's actual procedure in two of his most celebrated works, *Sense and Sensibilia* and "Other Minds". The most fundamental error of method which sense-datum theorists of perception make, Austin maintains from the outset of *Sense and Sensibilia*, is that they cavalierly dismiss the plain person's view.⁸ For Austin, by contrast, the saving truth lies (to a certain extent) in the ordinary person's view, since it is more accurate—as far as basic facts about perception are concerned—than the account of perception contrived by armchair theorists.⁹ Furthermore, in "Other Minds" Austin (1946/1979b) maintains that the philosophical thesis that we can't really know other people's mental states stems from the same error of method—the "original sin by which the philosopher casts himself out from the garden of the world we live in" (p. 90).

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" (Warnock, 1973, p. 7, emphasis in original).

- 8 Austin's first critical move in *Sense and Sensibilia* is a thinly veiled attack against A. J. Ayer's oversimplified account of the plain person's view of perception. Referring to the opening pages of Ayer's (1940) book, *Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, Austin observes (with his characteristic wit) that "in these paragraphs, we already seem to see the plain man, here under the implausible aspect of Ayer himself, dribbling briskly into position in front of his own goal, and squaring up to encompass his own destruction" (Austin, 1962, p. 6). A few pages later, Austin takes Ayer to task for "quietly undermining" the plain person's view, by suggesting that the plain person is "naïve" (p. 9).
- 9 Austin (1962) makes this assertion after observing that phenomenalism is "a typically *scholastic* view, attributable, first, to an obsession with a few particular words, the uses of which are oversimplified, not really understood or carefully studied or correctly described; and second, to an obsession with a few half-studied 'facts'" (p. 3, emphasis in original). Austin adds that the plain person is aware of nuances and complexities which these philosophers overlook: "The facts of perception [...] as noted by common mortals, are much more diverse and complicated than has been allowed for [by phenomenalist philosophers]" (p. 3).

Grice (1989) suggests, however, that to properly reconstruct Austin's intellectual development we should look less to his contemporaneous heroes, including Moore, and more to those from the past. More specifically, we should look to Aristotle and his epigones (in whose work Austin was well-versed), for they too systematically appealed to *ta legomena* (τὰ λεγόμενα), "what is said" by the Wise and before them by the Many, in order to bring certain beliefs into relief. Unlike his Greek intellectual ancestors, however, Austin is not interested in the beliefs which a specific group or society holds. He is interested, rather, in the beliefs which yesterday's and today's laypeople hold, and treats ordinary usage as "a key to unlock the storehouse of Common Sense" (Grice, 1989, pp. 382). This is why, in Grice's view, Austin had good reasons to admire Moore *qua* champion of 'Common Sense'. But, Grice quite plausibly adds, Austin could not have been influenced by Moore's poorly executed approach to the subject.¹⁰

Grice's suggestion steers us in the right direction: to know how Austin became Austin, we should stop looking to Moore. We should instead look to philosophers from the past.

Enter forgotten John Cook Wilson. For not only was he the influential teacher of Austin's teacher. Not only was he widely known as the *Doctor Subtilis* of his generation, just as Austin was of his.¹¹ Not only did he stand out in early-20th-century Oxford for living up to his creed that "it is repugnant to create a technical term out of all relation to ordinary language" (Cook Wilson, 1926e, p. 713; Farquharson, 1925/1926b, p. 874; Prichard, 1919, p. 301). Not only was he a proverbially famous Aristotle scholar (Cook Wilson, 1926e, p. 299, n. a; Passmore, 1967, p. 242). Not only was his method significantly influenced by the *Logic* of Hermann Lotze—a favourite book of Cook Wilson's—in which

10 Moore's actual argument for Common Sense is, as Grice (1989) puts it, "the kind of thing which Austin was more than capable of tearing to shreds had he encountered it in somebody else" (p. 381).

11 His students maintain that Cook Wilson had an "acute appreciation of differences of all kinds" (Prichard, 1919, p. 305). Relatedly, they report that Cook Wilson had "an almost excessive devotion to detail [...] in small things as well as great" (Farquharson, 1926a, p. lxiii; Prichard, 1919, p. 299). German classical philologist Franz Susemihl, who in his *Aristotelis Politica* discusses Cook Wilson's contributions to Aristotle scholarship and calls him a "very acute man", also accused Cook Wilson of "excessive subtlety"—a "just" accusation, Farquharson adds, for "his industry was at times that of a spider rather than the bee" (Farquharson, 1926a, p. xlv).

a spirited defence is made of the role of ordinary usage in philosophy (Lotze, 1884, p. 170). In addition to all these hardly trivial facts, when faced with the question of why one should heed ordinary usage in philosophy, Cook Wilson (1926e) gave an answer that rings out today as quite familiar and, precisely on this account, quite surprising as well:

The authority of language is too often forgotten in philosophy, with serious results. Distinctions made or applied in ordinary language are more likely to be right than wrong. Developed, as they have been, in what may be called the natural course of thinking, under the influence of experience and in the apprehension of particular truths, whether of everyday life or science, they are not due to any preconceived theory. On the other hand, the actual fact is that a philosophical distinction is *prima facie* more likely to be wrong than what is called a popular distinction, because it is based on a philosophic theory which may be wrong in its ultimate principles (p. 874).

These remarks, called by Cook Wilson's literary executor "a digression on the worth to the philosopher of normal linguistic usage" (Farquharson, in Cook Wilson, 1926e, p. 299, editor's note), were made as part of the logic lectures which Cook Wilson gave at Oxford for many years. A few months before his death in 1915, Cook Wilson himself had revised for publication the specific lectures containing these remarks (Cook Wilson 1926e, p. 299, n. a; Farquharson, 1926b, p. 885). Similar remarks are often found throughout the remainder of his lectures and correspondence, a selection of which was posthumously published in 1926 as *Statement and Inference*, Cook Wilson's only lasting contribution to philosophy beyond multiple influential publications in Aristotle and Plato scholarship.

These remarks are, of course, already quite familiar to us: they are essentially indistinguishable from the plea for ordinary usage which Austin (1979a) makes in his 1956 Address. This fact strongly suggests that Austin was acquainted with Cook Wilson's work, despite never citing it.¹² It also makes the idea animating

12 Cook Wilson's remarks are inconspicuously tucked into the final pages of volume II of *Statement and Inference* and—to the best of my knowledge—had gone unnoticed up until now.

this paper (namely, that Austin was strongly influenced by this obscure figure) suddenly strike us as being less far-fetched.

The testimony of Cook Wilson's literary executor, student, and lifelong friend, A. S. L. Farquharson, bolsters this impression:

His [Cook Wilson's] conviction of the value of the unsophisticated distinctions which underlie popular usage led to those linguistic inquiries which are among the most remarkable in his work: the patient analysis of grammatical forms and the elucidation of the implications which are contained in ordinary speech (Farquharson, 1926b, p. 875).

This testimony is extensively confirmed by Cook Wilson's actual practice. From his attack on the idealist metaphysics of relations to his critique of idealist epistemology's reliance on the notion of judgment, Cook Wilson systematically drew on evidence from ordinary usage, both in his logic lectures and in his work more generally (Cook Wilson, 1926e, pp. 60-113). By way of illustration, let us look at one instance of this general approach. Cook Wilson's (1904/1926) "Letter in Criticism of a Paper on Primary and Secondary Qualities", his second full-blown realist writing, is particularly well-suited to our purposes: the main topic of this text, perception, is one which played a consequential role in Cook Wilson's intellectual life, including his realist reaction (Farquharson, 1926b, p. 882).¹³ More interestingly, this Letter is essentially a critique of sense-datum theories of perception, just as Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* is.¹⁴

Cook Wilson opens his critique of phenomenalism by engaging in "a most patient examination of the meaning and justification in the particular instance" of two "regular trap words", namely, 'real' and 'apparent' (Cook Wilson, 1926a, p. 785). Cook Wilson is particularly interested in situations in which these words are used to characterize different kinds of perceptual experience. It is hardly a coincidence that Austin, too, draws on an examination of 'real' in

13 One of his main motives for rejecting sense-datum accounts of perception is, Cook Wilson himself observes, that they "lead to an uncompromising subjective solipsistic idealism" (Cook Wilson, 1926a, p. 785).

14 Cook Wilson's (1926a) letter, a reply to G. F. Stout, was originally intended as a critical assessment of a paper in which Stout laid out his theory of primary and secondary qualities.

essentially identical contexts. In one sense, Austin (1962) notes, ‘real’ is “an absolutely *normal* word [...] already firmly established, and very frequently used, in the ordinary language we use every day”, but in another sense, it is “*not* a normal word, but highly exceptional”, for it is “responsible for a great deal of perplexity” (pp. 62-64, emphasis in original).

One of the kinds of perceptual experience which Cook Wilson examines is the experience of perceiving spatial extensions. According to the sense-datum theory of perception Cook Wilson assails, in perceiving an object we always perceive its ‘apparent’ extension, not the ‘real’ one: in e.g., seeing an object, we always see its ‘apparent’ size, not the ‘real’ one. Now Cook Wilson insists time and again that, whenever philosophers make use of a word drawn from ordinary language, it “ought to retain what is essential in its meaning there” (Cook Wilson, 1926e, p. 92). And ‘real’, as it occurs in ‘real size’ and cognate expressions, as well as ‘apparent’, as it occurs in ‘apparent size’ and cognate expressions, are ordinarily used to mark (at least) the following two types of contrast:

- (1) a contrast between an object’s actual size and our mere estimates of its size, or
- (2) a contrast between an object’s actual size and the changes in size it appears to experience as our eyes get closer or farther away from it (Cook Wilson, 1926a, pp. 785-790).

Cook Wilson then shows that sense-datum theorists do not retain what is essential to the ordinary meaning of ‘real’, as it occurs in ‘real size’ (and cognate expressions), and ‘apparent’, as it occurs in ‘apparent size’ (and cognate expressions): ordinarily, neither of these words has the implication which sense-datum theorists attach to them, namely, that we can only perceive subjective simulacra of the extensions (or sizes) of objects. More specifically, regarding contrast (1) above, it is precisely because we can normally perceive the real extensions (or sizes) of objects that we ordinarily distinguish these cases from those in which we are not in a position to do so. And regarding contrast (2), what we normally believe, and mean to express, in these cases, is that we are seeing things in perspective, which of course is “no mere appearance, it is really an objective fact—it appears but it is also real—a reality here, as reality, appears” (Cook Wilson, 1926a, p. 793). By “explain[ing] the true meaning which corresponds to this

misleading language” and “show[ing] how sorely such language needs analysis and how important it is that it should be undertaken” (p. 794), Cook Wilson takes himself to have paved the way for his contention that sense-datum theories of perception distort the relevant facts (pp. 794ff).

What is Cook Wilson’s deep motive for invoking ordinary linguistic usage here? Borrowing Grice’s characterization of Austin’s agenda, we can say that Cook Wilson, too, regards ordinary linguistic usage as “the key to unlock the storehouse of Common Sense” (Grice, 1989, p. 382). As Austin did decades later against his main target, A. J. Ayer, Cook Wilson opens his critique of sense-datum theories of perception by admonishing his main target, G. F. Stout, for taking the ordinary person to be so naïve as to hold a ‘flagrantly absurd’ view of basic facts of perception. Cook Wilson (1926a) immediately adds that:

I think it is important to notice that we have not to deal with the plain man here as opposed to the philosopher. We are all ‘plain men’ in this sense. It represents the operation of our ordinary unreflective consciousness: and it is because we who are reflective and philosophic have this consciousness that we are able to deal with it. The only course we can take is to ask the plain man what he means. As philosophers we interrogate ourselves as plain men (pp. 765-766).

For Cook Wilson, actual life is the starting point of sound philosophizing. When philosophers ignore it, they very often end up distorting the relevant facts.

3. Cook Wilson and Austin: Philosophy as ‘phenomenological therapy’

BOTH COOK WILSON AND AUSTIN dig into ordinary usage, then, to unearth philosophically significant beliefs held by actual cognitive and linguistic agents. This activity, however, is not an end in its own right. For Austin, this endeavour is merely a means, imperfect though it may be, to better grasp the facts which bear on specific philosophical questions:

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 (Austin, 1956, p. 182).

Here, too, Cook Wilson had led the way. In his logic lectures, he used to warn his Oxford students that

[a] philosophical distinction is *prima facie* more likely to be wrong than what is called a popular distinction [...] This is so far from being appreciated that the reverse opinion is held and there is a tendency to regard the linguistic distinction as the less trustworthy because it is popular and not due to reflective thought. The truth is the other way. Reflective thought tends to be too abstract, while the experience which has developed the popular distinctions recorded in language is always in contact with particular facts (Cook Wilson, 1926e, pp. 874-875).

Now, for Austin, grasping the relevant particular facts is not an end in its own right, either. Austin typically doesn't look at the facts to theorize about them; he looks at the facts to show that certain philosophical problems and questions (as well as the theories that purport to address them) are actually spurious. His approach to the topic of perception is a case in point. The only proper business of philosophy in this area, Austin (1962) maintains, is to "rid" us of the "illusions" created by the sense-datum theorist, to unpick "a mass of seductive (mainly verbal) fallacies [...] an operation which leaves us, in a sense, just where we began" (pp. 4-5). Indeed, Austin (1962, p. 4) maintains that it is scientists, not philosophers, who are to lay out a positive theory of perception.

Austin certainly did not have to reinvent the wheel here: Cook Wilson had both taught and practiced this therapeutic approach several decades before Austin did. And, under Cook Wilson's influence, Austin's teacher—H. A. Prichard—as well as other prominent figures of early-20th-century Oxford, came to adopt it (Hacker, 1996, pp. 88ff; Price, 1947; Carritt, 1948). Not only did Cook Wilson take pride in saying that in philosophy "the utmost gain one has seems to be that one has found out what will not do" (as cited in Prichard, 1919, p. 300). He also strictly abided by this idea: Cook Wilson was eminently

a critic, not a positive theorist.¹⁵ And just as with Austin, and hardly out of coincidence, Cook Wilson's approach to perception is a clear case in point: Cook Wilson thought the idea of a philosophical theory of perception "preposterous" (Farquharson, 1926b, p. 882).

Although it almost goes without saying at this point, Austin's language-centred critical method was effectively nothing new under Oxford's sun. Several decades before Austin entered the scene, Cook Wilson had already approached virtually all philosophical problems as, in his own words, "muddles of language"—as false problems stemming from philosophers' falling into what he used to call "snares of verbal expression" and "trap words", which in turn lead to what he used to call "fallacies of language", "verbal mistakes", or "verbal confusions", and ultimately to "meaningless statements" (Cook Wilson, 1926a, pp. 782-783, 785; Cook Wilson, 1904/1926c, p. cx; Prichard, 1919, pp. 299, 301).

Finally, it is clear that the method which became the hallmark of Austin's philosophy, the procedure sometimes called "ordinary language analysis", had actually seen the light of day at Oxford at least two decades before Austin began his studies there, through Cook Wilson's lectures and writings. To address linguistic muddles, Cook Wilson systematically made use of what he himself dubbed an "analysis of (the meaning of) forms of expression", one which involved "a most patient examination of their meaning and justification in the particular instance" (Cook Wilson 1926a, p. 785).¹⁶ And of course, to justify the use of a word in a particular philosophical instance, Cook Wilson repeatedly and explicitly insisted that philosophers must first bring the word in question

15 Prichard (1919) says of his teacher that "his most obvious strength lay in criticism", and that his relatively few writings were "not constructive" (pp. 299-300). In his 1921 Memoir of Cook Wilson, Farquharson extensively attests to what he calls the predominantly "destructive" character of his late teacher's philosophical practice: above all, Cook Wilson was a "bladder pricker", capable of sorting mistakes into general types which he characterized exhaustively (Farquharson, 1926a, pp. xvi-vii, xxxv-vi). See also Joseph, 1916.

16 See also Cook Wilson 1904b, p. 794; Cook Wilson 1904c, p. cx. Prichard (1919) describes his teacher's approach in virtually identical terms: the sort of verbal fallacies Cook Wilson targets typically result from "the use of abstract terms without inquiring into their meaning in a given context or testing them by examples" (p. 303).

back to the use it actually has in everyday life. The following passage faithfully encapsulates what Cook Wilson systematically says and does in this regard:

Of course [sic] it is true that language is elastic and that not only are certain artificial forms introduced for technical purposes [...] but also linguistic forms get away from their original meaning otherwise.

But now I must in this reference hope to gain assent to a point which is to me of the last importance. It is the business of the student of logic to determine the *normal* use of an idiom or a linguistic expression. Everything depends upon that. If this is once done, one gets a hold over [...] derived and extended meanings. It not only gives the key to fallacies which come from the confusion of different meanings under one form of expression: but it prevents certain mistakes in the logician himself. This is not sufficiently appreciated by very able logicians: they do not humble themselves sufficiently to the banauasia of grammar and pay for it (Cook Wilson, 1903/1926b, pp. 747-748, emphasis in original).

Indeed, the mistakes Cook Wilson aims to prevent by looking at ordinary usage are not only fallacies of equivocation. They are also, and primarily, the mistakes of oversimplifying, distorting, and outright falsifying the relevant facts. That this view also became characteristically Austinian is hardly worth mentioning at this point. More interestingly, Austin takes up Cook Wilson's words virtually verbatim. In the course of criticizing a specific ordinary "trap word", namely 'direct' and its cognates (as these words occur in sense-datum theories of perception), Austin observes that

philosophers, it is said, 'are not, for the most part, prepared to admit that such objects as pens or cigarettes are ever directly perceived'. Now of course what brings us up short here is the word 'directly'—a great favourite among philosophers, but actually one of the less conspicuous snakes in the linguistic grass. We have here, in fact, a typical case of a word, which already has a very special use, being gradually stretched, without caution or definition or any limit, until it becomes, first perhaps obscurely metaphorical, but ultimately meaningless. One can't abuse ordinary usage without paying for it (Austin 1962, p. 15).

Cook Wilson systematically deployed this approach to advance his pioneering realist revolt against the then-dominant idealism of his teacher, T. H. Green,

as well as that of fellow Oxonians F. H. Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet (Cook Wilson, 1926a, p. 770; Farquharson, 1926a, p. xxvii; Prichard, 1919, pp. 303-305). This reaction, which Cook Wilson made official in 1904 after developing it *in foro interno* for many years, failed to sway old-guard Oxford away from idealism. But thanks to his ascendancy among Oxford youth, Cook Wilson did succeed in sowing the seeds of realism in the minds of subsequent generations of Oxford philosophers (Marion, 2000, pp. 490-508).

Perhaps the most peculiar, but also prolific, fruit of Cook Wilson's realist turn is the view that epistemology as a whole is a non-starter. Philosophers generally, and idealist theorists in particular, had assumed until then that *some* general account of knowledge must be possible. But Cook Wilson, along with his most prominent students and the latter's students, assail this assumption: with Cook Wilson, Prichard, and Joseph proudly leading the vanguard, and Austin joining them somewhat self-consciously from the rear guard, all of them maintain that knowing *in general* is indefinable or inexplicable. In a seminal letter that Cook Wilson wrote to Prichard in January 1904—the first full-blown realist writing he bequeathed to posterity—Cook Wilson (1926d) puts it thus:

Most fallacies in the theory of knowledge are reduced to the primary one of trying to *explain* the nature of knowing or apprehending. We cannot *construct knowing*—the act of apprehending—out of any elements. I remember quite early in my philosophic reflection having an instinctive aversion to the very expression '*theory* of knowledge'. I felt the words themselves suggested a fallacy (p. 803, emphasis in original).

Aside from Prichard and Joseph, other prominent Oxford figures who (at some point or other) espoused this view are G. F. Stout, Gilbert Ryle, and William Kneale (Passmore, 1967, p. 242, n. 3). And, as I will show in section 4, this view informed Austin's approach to knowledge as well.

Influenced by Lotze's view that certain questions "have no point or lead to an answer different from that which they expect", Cook Wilson (1926e) finds the very question 'what is knowledge?' to be an instance of the "fallacy of asking an unreal question", i.e., a question "which is such in verbal form only and to which no real questioning in thought can correspond" (Cook Wilson 1926e, p. 39;

Lotze, 1884, p. 18).¹⁷ This characteristic Cook-Wilsonian approach to many traditional philosophical questions is one which would become characteristically Austinian as well. Austin (1940/1979c) maintains that many philosophical questions are “pseudo-questions” that commit the “fallacy of asking about ‘nothing-in-particular’” (pp. 57-59).

Cook Wilson also deployed ordinary language analysis in mathematics (including mathematical logic) and classical studies, his greatest intellectual passions.¹⁸ His painstaking work in the former field, mostly critical in scope, was especially aimed against two developments he virulently assailed, namely, non-Euclidean geometry and the new mathematical logic, particularly Russell’s (Cook Wilson, 1926e, pp. xxxix, cix–cx; Passmore, 1967, pp. 241-242; Prichard, 1919, p. 299).¹⁹ Not only were these efforts—and the extraordinary wrath animating them—obviously misguided, but they are bound to have tarnished Cook Wilson’s reputation among subsequent generations of Oxford philosophers, who were not averse to the views Cook Wilson disparaged.²⁰ In the latter field, by contrast, he was quite successful: Cook Wilson’s fame at Oxford and beyond, especially prior to his appointment to the Wykeham Professorship in Logic in

17 It is Cook Wilson’s literary executor—as opposed to Cook Wilson himself—who attests to Lotze’s influence on Cook Wilson in this field (Farquharson in Cook Wilson, 1926e, p. 39, n. a).

18 Cook Wilson’s first published book was his *Aristotelian Studies I: On the Structure of the Seventh Book of Aristotle’s Metaphysics* (Cook Wilson, 1879). In 1889, he published his second and third books: his long celebrated and influential study on Plato’s *Timaeus* (Cook Wilson, 1889a; last reprint: 2007) and *On an Evolutionist Theory of Axioms* (Cook Wilson, 1889b). By contrast, Cook Wilson’s work in epistemology and logic was published posthumously.

19 Cook Wilson treated Russell’s logic with undisguised contempt. In a letter written in November 1904, he speaks of the “rather foolish fallacy of B. Russell’s about a class being a member of itself”, adding that “these things provoke me for, though they depend on fallacies of mere language which I am obliged to think very childish, they are insidious if people aren’t accustomed to analyze forms of expression—and so many, even logicians, are not [...] it drives me wild that these mere muddles of language which annoyed Plato and Aristotle so much in the petty and trivially clever debates of their day, should reappear at [all], after all philosophy has done, and actually be mistaken for something the least worth having (Cook Wilson, 1926e, pp. cix–cx).

20 Under Austin’s aegis, many post-Second-World-War Oxford philosophers made efforts to become conversant with mathematical logic, as the letters exchanged by Austin and Burton Dreben in the 1950s attest (Burton Dreben’s archives, Harvard University).

1889, stems largely from his reputation as an authority in Aristotle and Plato (Farquharson 1926a, p. xlv; Prichard, 1919, pp. 299-301).²¹ Cook Wilson's literary executor (who, again, was a classical scholar) reports that Cook Wilson

laid stress on preserving a feeling for natural usage, on the force of the actual context and on the tendency to inequality and iteration of writers absorbed in their subject-matter. In his lectures he recurred again and again to the unconscious evidence of natural speech and would press convincingly the folly of looking even in Aristotle for dead terminology or isolated dogma (Farquharson, 1926a, p. xxxii).

Save (perhaps) for the topic, this description perfectly fits Austin as well. Let us consider Austin's description of his own approach to sense-datum theories of perception. Phenomenalism, Austin warns,

is a typically scholastic view, attributable [...] to an obsession with a few particular words, the uses of which are over-simplified, not really understood or carefully studied or correctly described [...] (I say 'scholastic', but I might just as well have said 'philosophical'; over-simplification, schematization, and constant obsessive repetition of the same small range of jejune 'examples' are not only not peculiar to this case, but far too common to be dismissed as an occasional weakness of philosophers). The fact is, as I shall try to make clear, that our ordinary words are much subtler in their uses, and mark many more distinctions, than philosophers have realized [...] It is essential, here as elsewhere, to abandon old habits of *Gleichschaltung*, the deeply ingrained worship of tidy-looking dichotomies (Austin, 1962, p. 3).

21 Most of Cook Wilson's publications in his lifetime were in classical studies (Cook Wilson, 1926e, pp. lxvi–lxviii). Some of the most reputed late-19th- and early-20th-century Oxford and Cambridge scholars recognized Cook Wilson's outstanding talent in this field. In the preface to his edition of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Ingram Bywater (1840–1914; Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford) notes that Cook Wilson is “a man full of Aristotle” (‘Ἀριστοτελικώτατον’) (Bywater, 1890, p. vii). Bernard Bosanquet (1848–1923, classical scholar who was one the most influential British idealist philosophers) drew upon Cook Wilson's expertise to complete his edition of Plato's *Parmenides*. W. D. Ross drew upon Cook Wilson's expertise to complete his edition of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. James Adam (1860–1907, distinguished Cambridge classical scholar and reputed editor of Plato's dialogues) drew upon Cook Wilson's help to complete his edition of Plato's *Republic* (Plato [1902] 2010, *The Republic*, edited by J. Adam, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. ix–x).

Austin is indeed an unswerving critic of *a priori* dichotomies. And here, too, Cook Wilson had led the way. As part of his extensive critique of *a priori* divisions of any subject-matter into tidy-looking but oversimplifying categories, Cook Wilson observes that

in dichotomy there is apparently a general principle of division into *two*: and one applicable to all matter. This is an illusion. If we divide X into A and not-A, the negative (mere) designation is indeterminate, cannot determine a class. There's nothing to prevent the negative not-A from having sometimes several true classes corresponding to it, which are co-ordinate with A, so that the division of X into A and not-A should really be, e.g., into A and B and C (Cook Wilson, 1926e, p. 721).

The same sort of worries clearly informs Austin's rejection of the dichotomy between sense-data and material objects, a dichotomy whose purpose is precisely to neatly separate 'A', the one 'privileged' class of things we are supposed to really, or directly, perceive, from 'not-A', the class of things we supposedly can't really, or directly, perceive. But this *a priori* separation oversimplifies the actual facts, as Austin argues along Cook-Wilsonian lines:

I am *not*, then, going to maintain that we ought to be 'realists', to embrace, that is, the theory that we *do* perceive material things (or objects). This doctrine would be no less scholastic and erroneous than its antithesis [...] One of the most important points to grasp is that these two terms, 'sense-data' and 'material things', live by taking in each other's washing—what is spurious is not one term of the pair, but the antithesis itself. There is no *one* kind of thing that we perceive, but many *different* kinds, the number being reducible if at all by scientific investigation and not by philosophy: pens are in many ways though not in all ways unlike rainbows, which are in many ways though not in all ways unlike after-images, which in turn are in many ways but not in all ways unlike pictures on the cinema-screen—and so on, without assignable limit (Austin, 1962, pp. 3-4, emphasis in original).

One main goal of Austin's philosophizing is, then, to bring into relief certain subtle but fatal errors pervading the positive theories he examines. This agenda, we have shown, is effectively the continuation of Cook Wilson's. Now Austin was not instinctively opposed to positive theorizing generally. As *How to Do*

Things with Words attests, for Austin (1962/1975) it is indeed possible to construct adequate positive philosophical theories, but only if they take the form of a patient bottom-up *description* of the relevant subject-matter—an account which may well end in the purely descriptive stage, that is, without leading to the formulation of general principles. Often, Austin observes, no such principles can be found. A particularly interesting example involves the notion of ‘reality’:

There are no criteria to be laid down *in general* for distinguishing the real from the not real. How this is to be done must depend on *what* it is with respect to which the problem arises in particular circumstances (Austin, 1962, p. 76, emphasis in original).

Cook Wilson had preached and practiced this minimalist view of positive theorizing since at least the turn of the 20th century. Prichard’s description of his teacher’s—and indeed his own—approach to (positive) theorizing captures Austin’s as well, and it is hardly out of coincidence:

The first principle of Cook Wilson’s philosophy is that there is no first principle [...] He was never tired of insisting on the impossibility of general criteria; there was and could be no criterion of knowledge, no criterion of beauty, no criterion of morality [...] The key to special problems lay in consideration of their special subject matter (Prichard, 1919, p. 305).

It is also plain that many of Austin’s positive accounts, especially his minute anatomizing of the ordinary usage of certain expressions and his classifications of the traits of specific utterance-types, were not ends in themselves. They were intended to serve a destructive purpose (Austin, 1979b, 1979a, 1962, and 1975 provide particularly clear examples). Here too, Cook Wilson, both directly and through Prichard, was available to Austin as a role model: a merely instrumental view of positive theorizing is easily recognizable throughout *Statement and Inference*, and its direct influence is clearly recognizable in Prichard’s epistemology, as well as in Prichard’s peculiar ethical views.²²

22 Prichard (1919) tells us that, for his teacher, “doubtless general preliminary inquiries of a logical or metaphysical nature were often necessary, but these were required to clear away obstacles likely to bar the way to proper appreciation of the problem” (pp. 305-306). As for Prichard himself, not only did he fully embrace this approach (and its consequences) in epistemology (Prichard, 1950, p. 124),

A clear example of Austin's views on positive theorizing and the function of ordinary usage can be found in *How to Do Things with Words*, his *magnum opus* in the philosophy of language. Indeed, Austin's celebrated dichotomy between constative utterances and performative utterances has long been regarded as the foundation of a positive account of language: so it has seemed to the countless philosophers and scholars from other disciplines who have focused on it to develop their own positive accounts of linguistic or non-linguistic phenomena. The constative utterance/performative utterance distinction is defined by Austin as a dichotomy between utterances whose role is to state something—and are therefore truth-evaluable—and utterances whose role is to do something, and hence are not truth-evaluable but felicity-evaluable, i.e. evaluable in terms of their success to bring about a certain action (Austin, 1975, p. 47).

In reality, however, Austin abandons this dichotomy, and he does so partly on the basis of his minute anatomizing of ordinary usage. It is quite revealing here that Austin abandons this dichotomy after having devoted six long chapters—almost two-thirds of *How to Do Things with Words*—to justifying it. More specifically, after devoting three long chapters to isolating a list of “pure explicit performative” verbs (Austin, 1975, p. 83), i.e., a subset of English verbs whose occurrence in an utterance would be both a necessary and a sufficient condition to classify the utterance in question as a performative utterance, Austin concludes that no clear-cut criteria to isolate such ordinary verbs can be found. It is precisely immediately after arriving at this conclusion that Austin admits that his own dichotomy fares no better than the statement/non-sense dichotomy which it was supposed to supersede: both dichotomies are oversimplifying theoretical abstractions that are not really grounded in actual linguistic practices (Austin, 1975, p. 91).

but he also applied it elsewhere—the most interesting example being his view that an overarching account of duty is impossible, which gave rise to his fairly influential brand of ethical intuitionism (Prichard, 1912).

4. Cook Wilson and Austin on knowing

ONE PARTICULARLY ILLUSTRATIVE INSTANCE of the minimalist view of positive theorizing just discussed is Cook Wilson's analysis of the idea of thinking, a topic he regarded as "the only serious business of logic proper" (Cook Wilson, 1926e, pp. 32-33; Passmore, 1967, p. 240; Prichard, 1919, p. 310).²³ No adequate overarching account of thinking is possible, Cook Wilson adamantly maintains: the only adequate account possible here takes the form of a mere *description* of the *sui generis* relations among particular forms of thinking (knowing, believing, and so on). Contrary to what idealists (and theorists of other persuasions) have held, these forms of thinking don't share any common trait over and above the trivial property of being mental activities (Cook Wilson, 1926e, pp. 97ff; Prichard, 1919, p. 311). Similarly, no overarching account of knowledge is possible: one can, at most, aim to describe the *sui generis* traits exhibited by actual instances of knowing, mathematics being the clearest such instance (Cook Wilson, 1926d, p. 803; Passmore, 1967, pp. 241-242; Prichard, 1919, pp. 302, 306-307). Prichard (1909, 1950), too, would adamantly defend these views throughout his career.

Austin holds these views as well, albeit more discreetly than Cook Wilson and Prichard do. Failure to appreciate this fact has led to distorted readings of Austin's contributions to epistemology. I shall now bring to the fore Austin's forgotten ties to Cook Wilson in this field.

Austin addresses the question 'what is knowledge?' by describing the usage of expressions of the form 'I know (that S is P)', 'I believe (that S is P)', 'I am sure (that S is P)', and 'S is P'. The description provided by Austin shows, to start with, that actual cognitive agents don't really take knowing to be a species of believing. It is because we so operate that we ordinarily treat assertions of the form 'I know that S is P' as being incompatible with assertions of the form 'I believe that S is P'—since only the former are inconsistent with assertions of the form 'I may

23 As was customary in late-19th-century Oxford, Cook Wilson conceived of logic as a combination of traditional, formal logic and epistemology (Farquharson, 1926b, pp. 878-879).

be wrong'.²⁴ Austin is *prima facie* correct here: outside of philosophical circles, if a speaker were to assert, for instance, 'I know that a life-threatening epidemic broke out in Chicago', their audience would normally be baffled if the speaker were to immediately add 'and I believe so'.

Austin's description of the usage of the ordinary phrases listed above also shows that we, actual cognitive agents, do not really take knowing to be a species of mere evidence-based thinking. Ordinarily, Austin observes, if I merely have evidence that A is B, I fall short of being in a position to say that I know that A is B. Conversely, if I know that A is B, such a mental state is not regarded as one based (merely) on evidence:

The situation in which I would properly be said to have *evidence* for the statement that some animal is a pig is that, for example, in which the beast itself is not actually on view, but I can see plenty of pig-like marks on the ground outside its retreat. If I find a few buckets of pig-food, that's a bit more evidence, and the noises and the smell may provide better evidence still. But if the animal then emerges and stands there plainly in view, there is no longer any question of collecting evidence; its coming into view doesn't provide me with more *evidence* that it's a pig, I can now just *see* that it's a pig, the question is settled. And of course, I might, in different circumstances, have just seen this in the first place, and not had to bother with collecting evidence at all. Again, if I actually see one man shoot another, I may *give* evidence, as an eye-witness, to those less favourably placed; but I don't *have* evidence for my own statement that the shooting took place, I actually *saw* it (Austin 1962, pp. 115-116, emphasis in original).²⁵

Once again, Austin is *prima facie* right here. In actual life,

24 "You are prohibited from saying 'I know it is so, but I may be wrong,' just as you are prohibited from saying 'I promise I will, but I may fail'. If you are aware that you may be mistaken, you ought not to say you know, just as, if you are aware you may break your word, you have no business to promise" (Austin, 1979b, p. 98).

25 Austin also discusses this matter in "Other Minds", although he focuses there not on 'evidence' but on 'signs' and 'symptoms' of a given state of affairs, particularly of someone else's feelings (Austin, 1979b, pp. 105-114).

(1) 'I know that A tested positive for the coronavirus'

is not treated as equivalent to

(2) 'I have evidence that A tested positive for the coronavirus'.

More generally, Austin maintains that we do not take knowing to be a species of any genus comprising believing, being (quite) sure, and similar thinking activities (if such a genus exists at all):

When I say 'S is P', I imply at least that I believe it; and, if I have been strictly brought up, that I am (quite) sure of it: when I say 'I shall do A', I imply at least that I hope to do it, and, if I have been strictly brought up that I (fully) intend to [...]

But now when I say 'I promise', a new plunge is taken: I have not merely announced my intention, but, by using this formula (performing this ritual), I have bound myself to others, and staked my reputation, in a new way. Similarly, saying 'I know' is taking a new plunge. But it is *not* saying 'I have performed a specially striking feat of cognition, superior, in the same scale as believing and being sure, even to being merely quite sure: for there *is* nothing in that scale superior to being quite sure. Just as promising is not something superior, in the same scale as hoping and intending, even to merely fully intending: for there *is* nothing in that scale superior to fully intending (Austin, 1979b, p. 99, emphasis in original).

Albeit without much fanfare, Austin is clearly suggesting here that knowing is *sui generis*: because he takes knowing to be of a unique genus (one different from the genus to which believing, being sure, and so on belong), he finds it necessary to draw upon an activity of a genus unrelated to thinking in order to bring into sharper relief—but certainly not to explain—some traits of knowing.

Not only is Austin's general approach aligned with Cook Wilson's (and Prichard's), but his more detailed views had also been advanced by Cook Wilson several decades before Austin entered the scene. For one, Cook Wilson rejects the idea that believing is the genus of which all forms of thinking are species. He does so on the grounds that (what he takes to be) the main form of thinking, knowing, is not a species of believing:

It is vain to seek such a common quality in belief, on the ground that the man who knows that A is B and the man who has the opinion both believe that A *is* B. Belief is not knowledge, and the man who knows does not believe at all what he knows; he knows it. We might as well say at once that knowledge is a kind of opinion as that it is a kind of belief (Cook Wilson, 1926e, p. 100, emphasis in original).

If I believe that A is B, Cook Wilson observes, then I don't yet know it. But if I come to know that A is B, then I don't believe it anymore. For Cook Wilson, knowing that A is B is not a special manner of believing that A is B; knowing that A is B is simply knowing that A is B.

Could evidence-based believing (as opposed to believing *simpliciter*) be the genus of which all forms of thinking (including knowing) are species? Certainly not, Cook Wilson argues. If one has evidence that A is B, then one knows not that A is B, but something quite different, namely, that A *may* or *may not* be B:

In knowing, we can have nothing to do with the so-called 'greater strength' of the evidence on which the opinion is grounded; simply because we know that this 'greater strength' of evidence of A's being B is compatible with A's not being B after all (Cook Wilson, 1926e, p. 100).

Moreover, Cook Wilson (1926e) adds, ordinary usage shows that we, actual cognitive agents, in fact distinguish beliefs from opinions by virtue of the 'plunges' we take in each case:

We find in ordinary language another term, belief, akin to opinion yet distinguished from it, so that sometimes a man would actually prefer the term belief to opinion [sic]. When this is done it would be felt that the uncertainty which seems to be associated with opinion has caused us to avoid that word. This again implies some (say) 'superior' certainty about belief. This fact we cannot afford to neglect. Such distinctions in language are never unimportant (p. 101).

But these plunges, Cook Wilson (1926e) adds, are *sui generis*:

Corresponding to these different degrees of practical importance in our decisions in the case of different opinions and beliefs, there is a varying degree of feeling of confidence. This is *sui generis*; and we have really been getting at

the recognition of its true positive character by distinguishing it from that with which it might be confounded (p. 102).

Naturally, the plunge one takes in knowing is *sui generis* as well:

Such confidence is not an attitude that we take towards knowledge. It is a matter of knowledge that the angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal. We constantly apply it in practice, yet we should never say that one who did so acted with ‘great confidence in the truth’ of this proposition. To a high degree of such confidence, where it naturally exists, is attached the word belief, and language here, as not infrequently, is true to distinctions which have value in our consciousness. It is not opinion, it is not knowledge, it is not properly even judgment (p. 102).

Austin’s views on knowledge are, then, a *de facto* continuation of those adumbrated by Cook Wilson and championed by Prichard. The value of this finding, I think, is twofold. Not only does it dispel the widespread misunderstanding that Austin broke with old-guard Oxford: also, and more importantly, it helps dispel the misunderstanding that Austin gestured at a theory of knowledge in “Other Minds” (McMyler, 2011; Lawlor, 2019; Longworth, 2019).

Despite the extensive historical, philosophical, and textual evidence provided thus far, it might be objected that we cannot fully rule out the possibility that Austin developed his method and substantive philosophical views independently. After all, as I have highlighted from the outset, Austin never explicitly acknowledged Cook Wilson’s influence, and that can be seen as leaving open the possibility that Austin’s philosophical and metaphilosophical views are in reality informed by realist views that were in vogue at Oxford in the late 1920s and early 1930s, not by an engagement with Cook Wilson’s ideas.²⁶

This worry can be put to rest, though. To start with, as a matter of historical fact, realism was not in vogue at Oxford at the time Austin began his studies (Hacker, 1996, p. 89; Kneale 1996, p. v). Secondly, and equally relevantly, Prichard was the only Oxford figure that commanded attention by Oxford youth around the time Austin began his studies. Gilbert Ryle’s authoritative

26 I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

testimony proves relevant and illuminating here, for (as I pointed out above) not only was he a leading figure of OLP (chosen in 1945 for the prestigious Waynflete Chair in Philosophy, one of the only three professorships existing at Oxford at that time), but he was Austin's senior by merely a few years and a junior faculty member at the time Austin began his undergraduate studies. More specifically, Ryle provides a revealing description of the philosophical scene during Austin's early years at Oxford:

During my time as an undergraduate and during my first few years as a teacher, the philosophical kettle in Oxford was barely lukewarm. I think it would have been stone cold but for Prichard, who had a perverse consistency that made our hackles rise as nothing else did at the time (as cited in Hacker, 1996, p. 89).

It is extremely unlikely, therefore, that Austin acquired Cook Wilson's philosophical and metaphilosophical ideas independently. Not only was the sort of realism Austin came to embrace not popular at Oxford during his early Oxford years, but his own teacher, a very influential figure among Oxford youth, was widely recognized as the main (if not the only) defender of Cook Wilson's orthodoxy (Carritt, 1948, p. 147; Price, 1947).

Why, then, did Austin fail to explicitly recognize Cook Wilson's influence? A historically situated reading of Austin's work readily yields an answer. By the time Austin became a rising star at Oxford, Cook Wilson's overall reputation was tarnished as a result of his disparaging views on non-Euclidean geometry and mathematical logic.

Had Austin explicitly acknowledged Cook Wilson's influence, his standing as a rising Oxford luminary would likely have been compromised by association. Yet, as we have established here, the fact that a philosophical intellect of Austin's caliber became a *de facto* Cook Wilsonian serves as a compelling testament to the enduring significance of Cook Wilson's method and his views in fields such as epistemology.

References

- Austin, J. L. (1962). *Sense and Sensibilia*. Oxford University Press.
- Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford University Press.
- Austin, J. L. (1979a). A Plea for Excuses. In *Philosophical Papers* (pp. 175-204). Oxford University Press.
- Austin, J. L. (1979b). Other Minds. In *Philosophical Papers* (pp. 76-116). Oxford University Press.
- Austin, J. L. (1979c). The Meaning of a Word. In *Philosophical Papers* (pp. 55-75). Oxford University Press.
- Ayer, A. J. (1940). *Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*. MacMillan.
- Ball, S. (1915). John Cook Wilson. *The Oriel Record*, 11, 248.
- Berlin, I., (1973). Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy. In I. Berlin (ed.), *Essays on J. L. Austin* (pp. 1-30). Oxford University Press.
- Bywater, I. (1890). Praefatio. In Aristotelis, *Ethica Nicomachea* (I. Bywater, ed) (pp. v-vii). Oxford University Press.
- Carritt, E. F. (1948). 'Professor H.A. Prichard. Personal Recollections'. *Mind*, (57), 146-148.
- Cook Wilson, J. (1879). *Aristotelian Studies I: On the Structure of the Seventh Book of the Nicomachean Ethics*. Clarendon Press.
- Cook Wilson, J. (1889a). *On the Interpretation of Plato's Timaeus: Critical Studies with a Special Reference to a Recent Edition*. David Nutt.
- Cook Wilson, J. (1889b). *On an Evolutionist Theory of Axioms*. Blackwell.
- Cook Wilson, J. (1926a). Letter in Criticism of a Paper on Primary and Secondary Qualities. In *Statement and Inference* (A. S. L. Farquharson, ed.) (pp. 764-800). Oxford University Press.
- Cook Wilson, J. (1926b). Letter to Bernard Bosanquet, August 1903. In *Statement and Inference* (A. S. L. Farquharson, ed.) (pp. 747-748). Oxford University Press.
- Cook Wilson, J. (1926c). Letter to Bernard Bosanquet, November 13, 1904. In *Statement and Inference* (A. S. L. Farquharson, ed.) (pp. 109-110). Oxford University Press.

- Cook Wilson, J. (1926d). Letter to H. A. Prichard, January 6, 1904. In *Statement and Inference* (A. S. L. Farquharson, ed.) (pp. 801-808). Oxford University Press.
- Cook Wilson, J. (1926e). *Statement and Inference* (A. S. L. Farquharson, ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Dreben, B. (1960). Letter to Mrs. Jean Austin, February 17, 1960 (Burton Dreben's archives, Harvard University).
- Fann, K. T., ed., (2011). *Symposium on J. L. Austin*. Routledge.
- Farquharson, A. S. L. (1926a). Memoir. In Cook Wilson, J., *Statement and Inference* (A. S. L. Farquharson, ed.) (pp. xii-lxiv). Oxford University Press.
- Farquharson, A. S. L. (1926b). Postscript. In Cook Wilson, J., *Statement and Inference* (A. S. L. Farquharson, ed.) (pp. 870-884). Oxford University Press.
- Grice, P. (1989). Retrospective Epilogue. In *Studies in the Ways of Words* (pp. 339-384). Harvard University Press.
- Gustafsson, M. (2011). Introduction. In M. Gustafsson and R. Sørli (eds.), *The Philosophy of J. L. Austin*. (pp. 1-31). Oxford University Press.
- Hacker, P. M. S. (1996). *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy*. Blackwell.
- Hall, F. H. (1915). Peace and Fresh Service to that Imperious Spirit. *The Oriel Record*, (11), 245.
- Hansen, N. (2014). Contemporary Ordinary Language Philosophy. *Philosophy Compass*, (9), 556-569. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12152>
- Hampshire, S. (2011). J. L. Austin, 1911-1960. In K. T. Fann (ed.), *Symposium on J. L. Austin*. pp. (33-46). Routledge.
- Harris, D. & Unnsteinsson, E. (2018). Wittgenstein's Influence on Austin's Philosophy of Language. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 26(2), 371-395.
- Joseph, H. W. B. (1916). John Cook Wilson. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, (7), 1-11.
- Kneale, M. (1996). Introduction. In *The Collected Works of Henry H. Price* (pp. 5-8). Thoemmes Press.
- Lawlor, K. (2019). Austin on Perception, Knowledge, and Meaning. In S. Tsohadzidis (ed.), *Interpreting J. L. Austin* (pp. 165-185). Cambridge University Press.

- Longworth, G. (2019). Enough is Enough: Austin on Knowing. In S. Tsohadtzidis (ed.), *Interpreting J. L. Austin* (pp. 186-205). Cambridge University Press.
- Lotze, H. (1884). *Logic*. Oxford University Press.
- Marion, M. (2000). Oxford Realism: Knowledge and Perception II. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 8(3), 485-519. <https://doi.org/10.1080/096087800442156>
- McMyler, B. (2011). Believing what the Man Says about his own Feelings. In M. Gustafsson and R. Sørli (eds.), *The Philosophy of J. L. Austin* (pp. 114-145). Oxford University Press.
- Mehta, V. (1961, dec. 9). A Battle against the Bewitchment of Our Intelligence. *The New Yorker*, 59.
- Mehta, V. (1963). *Fly and the Fly-Bottle*. Columbia University Press.
- Passmore, J. (1967). *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*. Basic Books.
- Porter, J. D. & Hansen, N. (2023). A Quantitative History of Ordinary Language Philosophy. *Synthese*, 201(6), 225, 1-36. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-023-04187-2>
- Price, H. H. (1947). Harold Arthur Prichard, 1871-1947. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, (33), 330-350.
- Prichard, H. A. (1909). *Kant's Theory of Knowledge*. Oxford University Press.
- Prichard, H. A. (1912). Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake? *Mind*, (21), 21-37.
- Prichard, H. A. (1919). Professor John Cook Wilson. *Mind*, (28), 297-318.
- Prichard, H. A. (1950). *Knowledge and Perception. Essays and Lectures*. Oxford University Press.
- Rowe, W. (2023). *J. L. Austin: Philosopher and D-Day Intelligence Officer*. Oxford University Press.
- Ryle, G. (1971). Review of "Symposium on J. L. Austin". In *Collected Papers. Vol. 1: Critical Essays* (pp. 272-275). Hutchinson.
- Travis, C. (2005). A Sense of Occasion. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, (55), 286-314. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0031-8094.2005.00399.x>
- Travis, C., (2021), A Work in the Fields of the True. *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, (98), 561-583. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18756735-00000149>
- Urmson, J. O. (2011). Austin's Philosophy. In K. T. Fann, K. T. (ed.), *Symposium on J. L. Austin* (pp. 22-46). Routledge.

- Warnock, G. J. (1963). John Langshaw Austin, A Biographical Sketch. In K. T. Fann, K. T. (ed.), *Symposium on J. L. Austin* (pp. 3-21). Routledge.
- Warnock, G. J. (1973). Saturday Mornings. In I. Berlin (ed.), *Essays on J. L. Austin* (pp. 31-45). Oxford University Press.
- Warnock, G. J. (1989). *J. L. Austin*. Routledge.