

Common Sense and Ordinary Language: Wittgenstein and Austin

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Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and J.L. Austin (1911-60) expend tremendous intellectual energy to defuse skeptical problems. What relation do we find in their work between ‘ordinary language’ methods and the defense of common sense? Thinking through this question encourages fresh appreciation of Wittgenstein’s and Austin’s remarkable efforts on behalf of common sense against skeptical challenges.

1. Wittgenstein, Austin: Metaphilosophy and Ordinary Language

Is Wittgenstein an ‘ordinary language philosopher’? The question is vexed.¹ The difficulty of interpreting Wittgenstein’s texts is widely recognized, but the difficulty of classification owes as much to the ‘ordinary language philosophy’ side of the equation. What exactly is ‘ordinary language philosophy’? There is no simple answer. Rather than argue about the meaning of the term – not a very interesting or useful project here – I’ll take Austin as a paradigm ‘ordinary language philosopher’: his brief methodological remarks are the touchstone for other philosophers working in the same vein.

Because Austin’s methods are rooted in a metaphilosophical outlook, it is illuminating to start by comparing Austin and Wittgenstein’s attitudes toward philosophy and its problems, liabilities and prospects. When we make this comparison, we find Wittgenstein and Austin share many elements of their metaphilosophical outlook, and consequently they offer strikingly similar approaches to some perennial problems of philosophy.

The plan for the paper: We’ll start with Wittgenstein’s metaphilosophy, and then compare it to Austin’s (sections [2-3]). Next we’ll consider Austin’s methods, and see how they are rooted in his metaphilosophy. (section [4]) We’ll then briefly consider

¹ Avramides, “Wittgenstein and Ordinary Language Philosophy.”

Austin and Wittgenstein's responses to the philosophical 'problem of other minds' and, at somewhat greater length, their responses to the skeptical 'problem of the external world.' (sections [5-6]) With a perspective on metaphilosophical commitments, we'll better appreciate the role of ordinary language philosophy in defending common sense, as each of Austin and Wittgenstein defends it.

2. Wittgenstein and Austin: Metaphilosophy

Wittgenstein and Austin share important views about philosophical problems and how to approach them. They have their differences, too, at least on some interpretations, in their views about the final aim of philosophy.

Paul Horwich articulates Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy this way:

To a *very* first approximation, [Wittgenstein] came to think that the paradigm philosophical problems have the form:

How could there be such a thing as X?

—where X is some perfectly familiar, ordinarily unproblematic phenomenon, but where *a priori* considerations have been advanced whose import is that, despite appearances, X is in fact impossible....

However, according to Wittgenstein, philosophy is incapable of establishing such dramatic results: the arguments must somehow be wrong, and their initial plausibility must derive from some language-based confusion in our thinking about them. Consequently, our job is not to find out whether the phenomenon in question is possible, or to try to prove that it really is or really is not, or to discern, in light of the paradoxical considerations, what its true nature must be, but rather to remove the confusion that is responsible for the misguided philosophical argument. When this has been done, we will not be left with any positive theory or

new understanding. The net result will be simply that we have cured ourselves of a particular tendency to get mixed up.²

As Horwich notes, it's not that Wittgenstein thinks commonsense opinion is sacrosanct and never needs revision.³ Wittgenstein's point is rather the *defectiveness* of philosophical methods that yield such skeptical results as that there is no such thing free and blameworthy action, knowledge of other minds or of the world around us, no such thing as time, causation, or meaning. The philosopher's job is not to prove that the target phenomena (free will, other minds, the external world, meaning, time) really do exist, but to unravel the skeptical philosopher's arguments. This will not involve more argument, or a 'positive theory or new understanding'; nor will it involve brute insistence that these things do exist, and that we know as much (*pace* G.E. Moore – see section 6 below); rather it will involve discerning the picture or model that underlies the skeptical argument. Such misleading pictures or models arise from the philosopher's misapprehension of our language:

Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problems by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language. (PI 90)

A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably. (PI 115)

The philosopher should dissolve skeptical problems by showing how alternative models make sense of our ordinary ways of talking or thinking about the target phenomena. Then we will see the optional character of skeptical reasoning.

Austin's metaphilosophy shares a great deal with Wittgenstein's. While Austin gives no connected statement of what is wrong with traditional philosophy, he gives the

² Horwich, *Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy*, 4–6. Throughout this section, I draw on Horwich's characterization. For another take on Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy see Fogelin, *Taking Wittgenstein at His Word: A Textual Study*.

³ Baker, "Wittgenstein on Metaphysical/Everyday Use," 301.

gist: philosophers are prone to over-simplifying – they're too ready to generalize from small samples or to force questionable dichotomies. For example:

My general opinion about this [Sense Data] doctrine is that it is a typically scholastic view, attributable, first, to an obsession with a few particular words, the uses of which are over-simplified, not really understood or carefully studied or correctly described; and second, to an obsession with a few (and nearly always the same) half-studied 'facts'. (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; and that the facts of perception, as discovered by, for instance, psychologists but also as noted by common mortals, are much more diverse and complicated than has been allowed for. It is essential, here as elsewhere, to abandon old habits of Gleichschaltung, the deeply ingrained worship of tidy-looking dichotomies.⁴

Like Wittgenstein, Austin holds that tendencies to oversimplify and dichotomize lead philosophers to ill-posed questions and pseudo-problems. Austin agrees that the traditional philosopher's methods are scientific, in seeking to construct generalizations that will explain the complexity of observed phenomena in simple terms and that will deny our pre-theoretic opinions, while stubbornly ignoring recalcitrant data. Targeting logical positivist A.J. Ayer he writes:

For consider some questions about 'real' colour. Here there are many cases of a kind which Ayer, generalizing on the basis of one example, takes no account of.⁵

Like Wittgenstein, Austin holds that philosophical problems are often generated by the philosopher's tendency to be misled by superficial features of our language. For instance,

⁴ *Sense and Sensibilia* p.3. (see also p. 82).

⁵ Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, 82.

Austin's take on the 'problem of freedom' is that philosophers are misled by their own special use of 'free':

While it has been the tradition to present this [i.e. 'free'] as the 'positive' term requiring elucidation, there is little doubt that to say we acted 'freely' (*in the philosopher's use, which is only faintly related to the everyday use*) is to say only that we acted *not* unfreely, in one or another of the many heterogeneous ways of so acting (under duress, or what not).⁶

The philosopher's use of 'free' adds nothing to the characterization of an act beyond more specific ordinary characterizations. We do better as philosophers, Austin argues, to focus instead on the specific ordinary characterizations that do tell us something about our actions:

... we [philosophers] become obsessed with 'freedom' when discussing conduct. So long as we think that what has always and alone to be decided is whether a certain action was done freely or was not, we get nowhere; but so soon as we turn instead to the numerous other adverbs used in the same connexion ('accidentally', 'unwillingly', 'inadvertently', &c), things become easier, and we come to see that no concluding inference of the form 'Ergo, it was done freely (or not freely)' is required.⁷

Wittgenstein and Austin see traditional philosophy as rife with oversimplification that ignores recalcitrant facts, rife with disputes over ever-ramifying alternative theories that traditional philosophers have no rational criteria for preferring. ('Why should we prefer the positivist's language of 'sense data' at all?' Austin asks – knowing that no answer is forthcoming.)

3. Wittgenstein and Austin on constructive philosophy

Wittgenstein holds that philosophers should not persist in their traditional projects of attempting theoretical reductions of phenomena or resolving problems through positive

⁶ *Philosophical Papers*, p.128 (my emphasis).

⁷ *Ibid* p.98.

explanatory claims. Instead philosophy should be ‘therapeutic’ and seek to dissolve the pseudo-problems and ill-posed questions by showing them for what they are:

These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and in such a way as to make us recognize those workings; *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have already known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. (PI 109)

After philosophers have completed their therapeutic work, what is left is a clearer view of our ordinary practices just as they were, and an appreciation of the fact that our language is fine as it is, as are our pre-theoretic opinions:

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. . . . It leaves everything as it is’ (PI 124)

Interpreters disagree about whether Wittgenstein holds that philosophy properly ends with the resolution of philosophical problems. Some argue that Wittgenstein would prohibit all further philosophical theorizing, beyond the work it takes to dissolve traditional philosophical problems. Others argue that Wittgenstein’s metaphilosophical stance only prohibits *scientific* theorizing.⁸

Recently, interpreters of Austin have questioned the extent to which Austin shares Wittgenstein’s views about philosophy properly ending with the resolution of philosophical problems. As some read him, Austin shares with Wittgenstein the view that the final goal of philosophy is therapeutic.⁹ Others read Austin as holding that philosophy goes beyond the dissolution of traditional philosophical problems, and instead read him

⁸ See Horwich *ibid*, p.66 note 30.

⁹ Fischer, “Austin on Sense-Data: Ordinary Language Analysis as ‘Therapy.’”

as both demonstrating the form that a new philosophy should take¹⁰ and constructing some semantic tools to serve philosophers in this new work.¹¹

A strong case can be made that Austin believes the philosopher's job extends beyond the dissolution of pseudo-problems. Readers of *Sense and Sensibilia* will find Austin patiently dismantling sense data theory and sounding a therapeutic tone about its task:

‘unpicking, one by one, a mass of seductive (mainly verbal) fallacies, of exposing a wide variety of concealed motive – an operation which leaves us, in a sense, just where we began.’¹²

But readers will also find Austin calling on philosophers to take ordinary epistemic commitments more seriously. As we have seen, Austin holds that ‘common mortals’ are already quite good at noticing ‘the facts of perception.’ Common or folk epistemology takes in the diversity and complexity of our epistemic access to the world around us, marking important distinctions (for example between *looking* and *seeming* a certain way). The job of philosophers is to attend to our ordinary epistemic commitments as they inquire into perception. Similarly, readers of ‘A Plea for Excuses’ find not only the dissolution of the problem of freedom, which hinges on the problematic ‘philosophical’ use of the word ‘free’, but also a call to philosophers to work out a total account of action, and to investigate the relation of freedom and responsibility. And readers of ‘Other Minds’ find not only the dissolution of the problem of other minds, but also a call to philosophers to theorize about the nature of knowledge: in this text, Austin offers the first articulation of a relevant alternatives account of knowledge, an interesting position on the incorrigibility of perceptual knowledge, and an argument against knowledge as a mental state.

On Austin's view, the work of philosophers does not end when we have a clearer view of our ordinary practices. We look into the workings of our language not only to

¹⁰ Gustafsson and Sorli, *The Philosophy of J. L. Austin*; Garvey, *J. L. Austin on Language*; Tsohatzidis, *Interpreting J. L. Austin: Critical Essays*.

¹¹ Travis, *Occasion-Sensitivity*; Lawlor, “Austin on Perception, Knowledge and Meaning.”

¹² *Sense and Sensibilia*, p.5.

resolve philosophical problems, but also to investigate and theorize about the worldly phenomena of interest to us. Austin's 'ordinary language' methods are made to serve philosophers in their constructive tasks.

4. Ordinary language methods

What are Austin's methods? A familiar picture of Austin at work has him at his Saturday morning meetings with other Oxford philosophers, consulting the dictionary, and putting friends on the spot with tough questions (e.g. asking for the difference between playing golf *correctly* and playing it *properly*). He displays extraordinary attention to nuances of meaning, revealed in brilliantly imagined situations. What is the point of all this attention to 'what we should say, when'? Obviously, it's aimed at revealing subtle distinctions in the meanings of ordinary terms. Seeing only this much, some dismiss his work. C.D. Broad writes:

To imagine that a careful study of the usages, the implications, the suggestions, and the nuances of the ordinary speech of contemporary Englishmen could be a substitute for, or a valuable contribution towards, the solution of the philosophical problems of sense-perception, seems to me one of the strangest delusions which has ever flourished in academic circles.¹³

A more synoptic and generous understanding sees Austin methodically dissolving traditional skeptical problems and assembling positive theories of important human phenomena.

H.P. Grice, a sometime proponent of ordinary language philosophy, offers one such understanding, suggesting that Austin's methods are made for the purpose of unlocking the storehouse of commonsense belief, through conceptual analysis.¹⁴ First we botanize our language, surveying all the cases in which it is appropriate to deploy or withhold an expression; then we venture a general characterization of the types of case in

¹³ Broad, 'Philosophy and 'Common-Sense', cited in Pomeroy, Ralph, "Moore as an Ordinary-Language Philosopher."

¹⁴ Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, 171 ff.

which it is appropriate to apply a given expression and test it; this characterization is the foundation of an analysis of the concept expressed by the target expression.¹⁵

Grice sees one immediate challenge for the ordinary language philosopher. While most anyone might be brought to admit that we need to start philosophical inquiry with ordinary language, or admit that specialized inquiry in philosophy and other sciences starts with problems and questions stated in ordinary terms, the question is, why should specialized forms of inquiry continue to respect ordinary language?

In answer, Grice starts by observing that, while Austin shares with Moore the idea that common sense belief is valuable, Austin was more circumspect than Moore about the truth-value of particular claims made by particular individuals. Moore's personal belief 'Here is a hand' has no special epistemic status for being 'commonsensical.' Rather Austin holds that the 'common man' is an impersonal figure – one who embodies competent use of a shared public language, and who consequently deserves the philosopher's attention. Language encodes knowledge the human species has acquired over many trials:

...our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions 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, than any that you or I are likely to think up in our arm-chairs of an afternoon – the most favoured alternative method.¹⁶

Grice suggests Austin's position is similar to Aristotle's: the answer to the question why pay continued respect to ordinary language, is that epistemic progress is secured by a dialectical process. Dialectic is a progressive scrutiny of 'the ideas of the Many' with the

¹⁵ *Studies*, pp. 174, 376

¹⁶ *Philosophical Papers*, 130. See also *Sense and Sensibilia*, 63.

aim of discerning ‘the ideas of the Wise’, where progress is ensured only so long as inquiry keeps in touch with what is said by the Wise, and before them, by the Many.¹⁷

While Grice here offers an important defense of Austin’s methods, he is incorrect that Austin aims for *analyses* of concepts.¹⁸ What we aim for, Austin says, is to get clearer about what we mean by our talk so as to get clearer about phenomena:

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.* For this reason I think it might be better to use, for this way of doing philosophy, some less misleading name than those given above – for instance, ‘linguistic phenomenology’, only that is rather a mouthful.¹⁹

Consequently, Austin acknowledges that there are limits to the use of his method:

Using, then, such a method, it is plainly preferable to investigate a field where ordinary language is rich and subtle, as it is in the pressingly practical matter of Excuses, but certainly is not in the matter, say, of Time. At the same time 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 often have become infected with the jargon of extinct theories, and our own prejudices too, as the upholders or imbibers of theoretical views, will be too readily, and often insensibly, engaged.²⁰

Moreover, Austin emphasizes that we must recognize that language and concepts grow; sometimes our theoretical purposes require innovation:

... in the course of stressing that we must pay attention to the facts of actual language, what we can and cannot say, and precisely why, another and converse

¹⁷ Grice, *Studies* 379.

¹⁸ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, 8.

¹⁹ *Philosophical Papers*, 130 (my emphasis).

²⁰ *Ibid.* 130.

point takes shape. Although it will not do to force actual language to accord with some preconceived model: it equally will not do, having discovered the facts about 'ordinary usage' to rest content with that, as though there were nothing more to be discussed and discovered. There may be plenty that might happen and does happen which would need new and better language to describe it in.²¹

Since words only get their sense in the circumstances in which they are used, we need to pay attention to a wide range of circumstances for subtle differences in usage. More, we need to go beyond ordinary usage and consult other sources that draw helpful distinctions about our target phenomena – Austin identifies two such sources: the law and psychology.²²

Finally, philosophers also need to be quite clear about the way common commitments are expressed in natural language. This is just to say, philosophers need an account of natural language semantics. While Grice seems to think that we can learn the use of an expression and discover its *application conditions*, Austin insists that expressions *apply or fail to apply* to given cases only *in given circumstances*. 'Plea for Excuses' is quite clear about this; there we also find Austin motivating the choice of 'situation semantics' as the best approach to natural language semantics.²³ That the truth or falsity of what we say does not depend on sentence meaning alone, but is determined by sentence meaning in circumstances, is the heart of Austin's 'situation semantics.'²⁴

In sum, for Austin, philosophy doesn't end with dissolving pseudo-problems. Austin would have philosophers go beyond the dissolution of traditional philosophical problems and investigate the phenomena; the investigation begins by examining our commonsense philosophical commitments. The picture Austin has is that ordinary people are already philosophers, asking and answering interesting philosophical questions, for instance about the possibility of knowing the world through the senses, or about when to

²¹ *Ibid.*, 37. See also Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, 63.

²² *Ibid.* 134.

²³ For dissenting views about whether Austin aims to develop an account of the semantics of natural language see Baz, *When Words Are Called For: A Defense of Ordinary Language Philosophy*; Crary, "The Happy Truth: J. L. Austin's How to Do Things with Words."

²⁴ Recanati, *Literal Meaning*. Travis, *Occasion-Sensitivity*. Longworth, "John Langshaw Austin." Austin works out his semantic proposal in more detail in his paper 'Truth.' *Philosophical Papers*, 85-102.

take someone's word and when not, or about the relation between free action and responsibility. Over time, our language comes to encode important facts about such topics. Philosophers have a role in making our ordinary theoretical commitments on such matters explicit, and rationally reconstructing these commitments. To uncover these commitments, philosophers must attend to the ways ordinary people talk, and bear in mind the ways ordinary language can be deceptive.²⁵ For these reasons, they need a theory of natural language meaning.

5. The problem of other minds

When we compare Wittgenstein and Austin on the problem of other minds, we see their metaphilosophy in action, with some interesting differences in their use of ordinary language tools.

The problem of other minds starts with a seeming asymmetry between the way one knows one's own mind and the way one knows another person's mind. One knows one's own experiences immediately, without inference. One needn't observe one's own pain behavior to know one is in pain. But one doesn't know what another person experiences immediately; one has to see what state they're in, what impacts the world has on them, and perhaps ask them about what they're feeling, in order to gain knowledge. What explains this asymmetry in ways of knowing? A tempting answer: mental states or experiences, such as pain, are private, occurring in a 'private arena' the 'Cartesian Theater', with only one person in the audience, ever.

This picture or model explains the epistemic asymmetry we noted, but it also leads to puzzles and problems. If in fact your experiences are events hidden from me, how do I come to know what you experience? Your report 'I see red' could be about experiences others would call 'green' – how could we rule this out? Your report could even be systematically not about experiences at all: you might be a zombie – and again how could we rule this out?

²⁵ Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, 40–42.

Very roughly, Wittgenstein's resolution of the problem centers on this diagnosis: The mistake we fall into is to exaggerate the parallel between two kinds of language game – *expressions* of experiences ('I am in pain') and *observation reports* ('that is red'). We tend to extrapolate from the grammatical likeness here, and consequently add to Cartesian Theatre image the idea that 'I am in pain' is a report, or a description of a thing one is observing. And what a curious thing it must be then – something such that when one observes it, one's relation to it is immediate and provides one absolute certainty about its qualities. Once these thoughts settle, says Wittgenstein, we are firmly in the grip of the problem of other minds.

Wittgenstein suggests that the problem dissolves when we question the picture that guides our thinking. That picture rests on tendencies we have to exaggerate the likeness of distinct language games. Wittgenstein's prescription is for us to drop the picture of the Cartesian Theater, by reminding ourselves of other compelling facts – such as facts about the differences between the language games of making observation reports and giving expression to experiences. We learn how to make the observation report, 'that is red,' as children, when our adult teachers can see what we see. In contrast, we learn to say, 'I am in pain' as an alternative to whimpering or crying:

... words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain behaviour. (PI 244)

Once we let go the Cartesian Theater picture, and remind ourselves of such facts, we can imagine alternative accounts of the phenomena with which we started: one needn't observe one's own pain behavior in order to produce more of the same, saying 'I am in pain.' And when we see another shrieking and writhing, we do not need to make an inference from a connection we know best in our own case, but instead we might immediately form a belief that the other person is in pain. An innate tendency to be moved by seeing another person in pain to the conviction that they are in pain would just as well explain all the phenomena (including the asymmetry phenomena, as well as the

fact that our beliefs about others pains sometimes enjoy just as much certainty as beliefs in our own).²⁶

Compare Austin's approach to the problem. In his symposium contribution 'Other Minds,' Austin begins with a discussion of knowledge, doubt, relevant alternatives, and fallibilism. Throughout, he is on the lookout for the philosopher's typical missteps: 'If we say that I only get at the symptoms of his anger, that carries an important implication. But *is this the way we do talk?*'²⁷ Only in the last few pages does Austin turn to the problem of other minds, and he targets how the problem arises. He suggests that what starts as a question about believing a person's testimony becomes an altogether different question in the skeptic's hands. We start with a question, 'Why believe a person when they speak (about their mental states)?'

There are answers that we can give to this question [why believe the man?], which is here to be taken in the general sense of 'Why believe him ever?' not simply as 'Why believe him this time?'²⁸

And to such questions, Austin remarks, there will be straight-faced answers:

We may say that the man's statements on matters other than his own feelings have constantly been before us in the past, and have been regularly verified by our own observations...

But Austin notes

These answers are, however, dangerous and unhelpful. They are so obvious that they please nobody: while on the other hand they encourage the questioner to push his question to 'profounder' depths, encouraging us, in turn, to exaggerate these answers until they become distortions.

The question, pushed further, becomes a challenge to the very possibility of 'believing another man', in its ordinarily accepted sense, at all. What

²⁶ Horwich (*ibid.* p.189)

²⁷ *Philosophical Papers*, p.75.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p.82

‘justification’ is there for supposing that there is another mind communicating with you at all? How can you know what it would be like for another mind to feel anything, and so how can you understand it?

Our initial general question becomes a skeptical challenge: What ‘justification’ is there for supposing that others have minds at all? Austin replies:

This however, is distortion. It seems, rather, that believing in other person, in authority and testimony, is an essential part of the act of communicating, an act which we all constantly perform. It is as much an irreducible part of our experience as, say, giving promises, or playing competitive games, or even sensing coloured patches. We can state certain advantages of such performances, and we can elaborate rules of a kind for their ‘rational’ conduct (as the Law Courts and historians and psychologists work out the rules for accepting testimony.) But there is no ‘justification’ for our doing them as such.²⁹

Two ideas are suggested here: first, there is the idea, familiar to us from Wittgenstein, that justification comes to an end, and beyond justified beliefs lies a realm of action which is itself not subject to assessment in terms of justification. Some beliefs (believing another person) form an essential part of the actions ‘we all constantly perform’ and as such are not up for assessment in terms of justification. There are no reasoned grounds that make for the ‘justification’ for *believing another about what they experience*. We do not, and cannot, justify our doing so, but neither can we justify with reasoned grounds our practices of communicating, our playing competitive games, or using our senses to perceive the environment around us. Nonetheless, we can take responsibility for what we believe, in accord with our understanding of the rational conduct of such activities. (There are answers to the question ‘Why believe him ever?’)

Austin’s dissolution of the problem of other minds has striking similarities with Wittgenstein’s, for instance, in his rejection of ‘profounder’ questions that encourage us to answers that distort the facts as we ordinarily see them. Perhaps surprisingly, Austin does not go in for lengthy analysis of ordinary talk of experiences, pains and toothaches,

²⁹ *Ibid.* p.83.

on his way to a dissolution of the problem, as we might expect from an ordinary language philosopher, but instead he appeals to the idea that some practices are simply part of our lives. Austin here sounds more like Wittgenstein in those parts of his work where he emphasizes the practices that underwrite our language. On the other hand, Wittgenstein's own approach to the problem of other minds sounds more like that of a paradigm ordinary language philosopher, resting as it does on careful attention to features of our experience-talk and observation-talk.

6. 'Our knowledge of the external world'

How do we know about the world around us? Idealists doubt that there are objects independent of our minds, and skeptics, while accepting that there may be such objects, doubt that there is any knowledge to be had about them.

In both Austin's and Wittgenstein's writings we find the strands of *several* compelling responses to the problem of our knowledge of the external world. (Wittgenstein tackles this problem in late notes collected as *On Certainty*; Austin's approach must be extracted from his work on knowledge in 'Other Minds,' and *Sense and Sensibilia*.)

To bring focus to our discussion, it's helpful to contrast Austin and Wittgenstein as against G.E. Moore on the problem of the external world.

G.E. Moore strikes back at skeptical and idealist doubts by affirming what he takes to be common sense. In 'Defence of Common Sense' published in 1925, Moore gives a 'list of truisms' he knows to be true:

There exists at present a living human body, which is *my* body. This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since, though not without undergoing changes; it was, for instance, much smaller when it was born, and for some time afterwards, than it is now. Ever since it was born, it has been either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth; and, at every moment since it was born, there have also existed many other things, having

shape and size in three dimensions (in the same familiar sense in which it has),
from which it has been *at various distances* ...³⁰

Moorean certainties have several interesting features: they are universally accepted (The ‘beliefs of Common Sense’ Moore says, are those ‘commonly entertained by mankind’,³¹ and cannot be denied without some kind of inconsistency. Wittgenstein alternatively suggests that to deny them would seem mad.); they cannot be proved but are known with certainty. (Wittgenstein alternatively suggests that knowledge and certainty are different things, although at some places he suggests knowledge and certainty have similar features.³²)

The Moorean certainty ‘Here is a hand’ becomes a central premise in Moore’s later argument in ‘Proof of an External World’ published in 1939; in this argument, he goes one better and attempts to refute idealism by formulating a proof of the existence of objects to be met with in space – that is, of a world external to our minds. His proof begins with a demonstration, in which Moore holds up his hands and makes a gesture with one:

1. Here is one hand

then Moore repeats the gesture with his other hand:

2. Here is another hand

And he concludes:

3. Two human hands exist.

Since human hands are objects to be met with in space, or ‘external objects’ it follows from the fact that two such objects exist that

4. External objects exist.

³⁰ Moore, “A Defence of Common Sense.” Moore’s identification of truisms of common sense echoes Thomas Reid, whom he admired. Jensen, “Reid and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Language.”

³¹ *Ibid.* 43.

³² Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, [308, 8, 357, 386, 415]. White, “Common Sense: Moore and Wittgenstein,” 314–18.

Moore anticipates resistance to his proof and seeks to preempt it, noting that the premises are known to be true (although he cannot prove them in turn), the conclusion follows, and that we often accept such proofs.³³ If someone were asked to prove there were three typographic errors on a page, he could point them out one by one and thereby prove the claim.

Moore's work captured Wittgenstein's attention, and it occupied him both in his *Philosophical Investigations* and at great length in the notes he made shortly before his death, later published as *On Certainty*.³⁴ Austin's attitude toward Moore's defense of our knowledge of the external world is harder to trace, but clearly he worked within a discussion whose terms were set by Moore.

Moore's Proof fails, Wittgenstein is sure. But he is equally sure that following on from Moore's attempt, we can diagnose what goes wrong in skeptic's thinking.

Beyond this point, there is dispute about his aims in *On Certainty*. As we have seen, some hold that Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical stance restricts the aims of philosophy to 'therapy' or dissolving problems. Consequently, any positive theorizing about the nature of knowledge in *On Certainty* is felt by some to be a lamentable departure from his metaphilosophical commitments.³⁵ Others find many resources within the pages of *On Certainty* for thinking afresh about knowledge, with several suggestive lines of response to skepticism, provoked by Moore's attempt. Crispin Wright explores one such line, very roughly summarized this way: Moore's proof fails because whatever evidence Moore uses to support premise (1) only supports it if the conclusion (4) is already reasonably believed: an experience as of a hand before one supports the belief that here is a hand, but only 'conditional on the prior reasonableness of accepting' the conclusion.³⁶ Without reasonably accepting the conclusion, the experience as of a hand is consistent with any number of alternatives to (1), such as that one is dreaming a hand or

³³ Moore, "Proof of an External World."

³⁴ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. PI §§ 324-26 and §§466-86. My exposition here owes much to Child, *Wittgenstein*.

³⁵ Fogelin, "Wittgenstein's Critique of Philosophy."

³⁶ Wright, "Facts and Certainty," 58. What we have here is a failure of closure of evidential support, as Wright notes on p.59.

seeing an illusion of a hand. For this reason, Moore's proof begs the question and cannot be dialectically effective against the skeptic.³⁷ Moreover, we see how difficult the skeptical challenge really is – without support for (4) of the kind Moore tries to give, we're left to wonder how experiences count in favor of ordinary beliefs. In the end, then, Moore's proof has the effect of putting a fine point on skeptical argument – how after all do we know premises such as (1)?³⁸

One might turn the tables on the skeptic here, Wright suggests, if we follow a suggestion in *On Certainty* and defend the conclusion (4) by other means. Then we'll be in a position to say how our perceptual experiences support ordinary beliefs of the sort that are Moore's premises. One possibility is to hold that propositions such as (4) are not fact-stating propositions at all. Then 'where non-fact-stating 'propositions' are concerned, the lack of evidential warrant for accepting them need be no criticism of our doing so.'³⁹ Another possibility, which Wright pursues in subsequent work,⁴⁰ is instead to hold that while (4) may have truth conditions, and so be apt for fact-stating, our epistemic relation to (4) is not that of knowing or being justified in believing it; rather, we are entitled to accept it, because it is necessary for inquiry. Entitlement is 'a kind of rational warrant' not dependent on evidence.⁴¹ Here Wright follows suggestions in *On Certainty* in such passages as these:

341. ...the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

342. That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are indeed not doubted.

³⁷ Pryor, "What's Wrong with Moore's Argument?"

³⁸ Wright, "Scepticism, Certainty, Moore and Wittgenstein," 79–80.

³⁹ Wright, "Facts and Certainty," 79–80.

⁴⁰ Wright, "On Epistemic Entitlement (II): Welfare State Epistemology."

⁴¹ Wright, "Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)?," 167.

343. But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just can't investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.

The idea is that (4) is a 'hinge proposition'; we cannot aspire to investigate it, but rather are entitled to accept it as a requirement of inquiry.

Wright's explorations here have generated a line of research known as 'hinge epistemology.'⁴² A difficult question for hinge epistemology is why it marks any advance in the defense of common sense – why is it better than skepticism?⁴³ If we allow that hinge propositions are not knowable or justifiably believed, then isn't that simply to concede victory to the skeptic?

Michael Williams suggests a different reading of Wittgenstein's dissolution of Cartesian Skepticism.⁴⁴ Williams observes that the hinge epistemologist offers us a 'framework reading' of *On Certainty*: the simple answer to the problem of the external world is that skeptical doubt is illegitimate, in transgressing one or another rule of our ordinary epistemic practices. But Williams notes that while the framework reading gives a direct answer to skeptic, Wittgenstein is not content to leave things there; true to his metaphilosophy, he also wants a diagnosis of *why* the skeptic succumbs to the illusion of doubt. Williams reads Wittgenstein as devoting the first 65 sections of *On Certainty* to wrestling with this question. Then, finally, it is in §90 that we find Wittgenstein's ultimate diagnosis:

90. 'I know' has a primitive meaning similar to and related to 'I see' ('wissen', 'videre'). And 'I knew he was in the room, but he wasn't in the room' is like 'I saw him in the room, but he wasn't there'. 'I know' is meant to express a relation, not between me and the sense of a proposition (like 'I believe') but between me and a fact. So that *the fact is taken into my consciousness*. (Here is the reason why one wants to say that nothing that goes on in the outer world is really known, but

⁴² Coliva and Moyal-Sharrock, *Hinge Epistemology*.

⁴³ Hinge epistemologists are quite aware of this problem. Wright, "Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)," 203 ff.

⁴⁴ Williams, "Wittgenstein's Refutation of Idealism."

only what happens in the domain of what are called sense-data.) This would give us a picture of knowing as the perception of an outer event through visual rays which project it as it is into the eye and the consciousness. Only then the question at once arises whether one can be certain of the projection. And this picture does indeed show how our imagination presents knowledge, but not what lies at the bottom of this presentation.

The reason the skeptic thinks that ‘there are physical objects’ is a hypothesis is because the skeptic is in the grip of a picture: a ‘picture of knowing as the perception of an outer event through visual rays which project it as it is into the eye and the consciousness.’ What creates this picture is in the first place our commitment to the idea that knowledge is a factive mental state. While the factivity of knowledge is innocent enough, the idea that knowledge is a mental state is dangerous. When we accept it, we face the question, how can my consciousness stand in a relation to a fact? And then the following answer tempts us: the fact in question must be a sense-datum. This answer encapsulates the picture of knowing as ‘projection into the eye of consciousness,’ and it sets us off on a skeptical path. We find it natural to accept the picture of knowing as apprehending sense data, from which we only infer the existence of physical objects.

On Williams’s reading, we find Wittgenstein’s metaphilosophy at the forefront of his response to skepticism: the so-called problem of the external world rests on an illusion – the illusion of the intelligibility of skeptical doubt – which is removed once we see the optionality of the picture that helped to sustain the illusion.

Austin, like Wittgenstein, offers us a variety of tantalizing responses to the skeptic. One Austinian response directly targets the philosophers’ tendency to over-generalize and dichotomize: for instance, sense data theorists collapse the various objects of perception into a single category, ‘material objects’, as opposed to ‘sense data’, and allege that statements about the such objects must in general rest epistemically on statements about sense data. Austin questions such dichotomies, and he rejects the idea that statements as types fall into epistemologically interesting dependence relations.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *Sense and Sensibilia*, 111ff.

A different line of response in ‘Other Minds’ focuses on the ordinary rules for using the term ‘I doubt’ – an approach very similar to Wittgenstein’s. Here Austin might be read as offering the simple framework answer canvassed above: namely, the skeptic has broken the rules of doubting, as revealed by attention to our ordinary linguistic practices. Our practices with ‘doubt’ and ‘know’ follow particular rules, and the skeptic flouts them, leaving us to wonder at the intelligibility of Cartesian doubts.

Yet another direct anti-skeptical position can also be found in Austin’s ‘Other Minds.’ Here Austin spends a lot of energy on what knowledge is, and his ruminations give birth to the Relevant Alternatives Theory of knowledge. A simple Relevant Alternatives response to Cartesian skepticism targets hyperbolic skeptical hypotheses as simply not relevant.⁴⁶ Still further development of Austin’s response to contemporary formulations of the skeptical problem make use of Austinian views about semantics of knowledge ascription.⁴⁷

Finally, Austin also suggests a still more aggressively anti-skeptical answer: not only can we have ordinary knowledge, and ignore skeptical hypotheses as irrelevant, we can actually know the hyperbolic skeptical hypotheses are false.⁴⁸ That is to say, we can know that we are not globally deceived, Brains-in-Vat’s, or dreaming everything. This interpretation puts Austin in company with Moore, defending our ordinary usage as a direct guide to what is knowable.

7. Conclusion

Austin and Wittgenstein make mighty efforts to find a way out of the maze of traditional philosophical problems, and they consistently attend to ordinary usage as a guide. As we have seen, their similar methods and metaphilosophical inclinations are consistent with an array of approaches to particular skeptical problems.

⁴⁶ Kaplan, “To What Must an Epistemology Be True?”

⁴⁷ Lawlor, Krista, *Assurance: An Austinian View of Knowledge and Knowledge Claims*; “Austin on Perception, Knowledge and Meaning”; “Ordinary Language Philosophy Needs Situation Semantics (or, Why Grice Needs Austin).”

⁴⁸ Leite, “Austin, Dreams, and Scepticism.”

Wittgenstein and Austin may differ over the aim of philosophical inquiry – whether the aim is seeing that ordinary language is fine as it is, or whether it is to further our philosophical understanding of human social, ethical and epistemic life. For Austin, anyway, clearly ordinary language *isn't* always fine as it is – the philosopher will find it in need of some clarification, some ‘tidying up’, and even revision, when the aim of understanding the phenomena requires it. Contrary to many critics, for Austin understanding ordinary language is not an endpoint, but a starting point in our understanding of phenomena. In contrast, at least sometimes, Wittgenstein suggests that ordinary language is fine as it is, and that our goal as philosophers is to show how this is so. As we have seen, some hold a strict line here and say that that Wittgenstein’s metaphilosophical stance restricts the aims of philosophy to dissolving philosophical problems, while others suggest that Wittgenstein’s metaphilosophical prohibition on theory only extends to scientific theorizing. Setting aside this thorny debate, it may safely be said that for both Austin and Wittgenstein, ordinary language methods play a central role in both the dissolution of problems and in disciplining philosophical work. Ordinary language methods are crucial for the defense of common sense.

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