

M W. Rowe, *J.L. Austin: Philosopher and Intelligence Officer*, Oxford University Press, 2023, 660 pages, Hardback. \$38.95, ISBN: 978-0-19-870758-5.

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J. L. Austin was a towering figure in 20th century analytic philosophy. He also played a major role in developing and popularising the ‘ordinary language method’, which dominated post-war philosophy in the English-speaking world. Notably, however, unlike certain other major figures whom Austin might justly be ranked alongside—Bertrand Russell, for example, or Ludwig Wittgenstein, or Frank Ramsey—there has until now been no major biographical work focused on Austin’s life and legacy. Until now: for with his marvellous new book, M. W. Rowe has written what will surely become the definitive biographical resource for those interested in Austin and his philosophical work. The book provides a comprehensive overview of Austin’s life, from his early years and pre-war life as an academic in Oxford (in part 1), to his exceptional role as an MI6 intelligence officer during WWII (in part 2), to his later years as a leading philosophical figure both in Oxford and as a visiting professor in the USA (in part 3). Overall, it constitutes a fascinating intellectual and philosophical biography of Austin, which elaborates his key philosophical ideas in illuminating detail, as well as critically engaging with them. It is not only a major work of history, but also an important philosophical resource in its own right, which will prove crucial to anyone with an interest in Austin and in the surrounding philosophical figures and ideas with whom and with which Austin engaged.

Rowe paints a vivid picture of philosophical life in Oxford more generally during Austin's career, and offers valuable insights and details about a range of key Oxonian figures, including for example Strawson, Ryle, Anscombe, and Ayer. Interesting connections are also drawn between Austin's ideas and those of leading figures at Cambridge, perhaps most notably those of the later Wittgenstein.

Military historians may be especially interested in the second part of the book, which presents in detail (and for the first time) the facts regarding Austin's remarkable role as an intelligence officer during WWII and in relation to D-Day in particular. Philosophers will be especially interested in the first and third parts, which explore in detail on Austin's philosophical contributions.

It is an interesting fact that Austin's philosophical legacy and influence on contemporary thought is not commensurate with the enormous influence he exerted during his own lifetime. This can likely be explained in part by the manner in which Austin exerted his influence, namely by means of in-person discussions in seminars and other meetings and not primarily means of published work, of which Austin in fact produced precious little (cf. Martin 2007). Another part of the explanation, however, must surely concern the decline of the 'ordinary language method' that Austin championed, and propagated during the post-war years.

Following the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy, as ushered in primarily by Wittgenstein at Cambridge and Austin at Oxford, there has in more recent years been something of a 'metaphysical U-turn' (as van Cleve 2018 appositely puts it), away from words and concepts and 'back to the things themselves'. Ordinary language philosophy, including Austin's own distinctive brand of it, has therefore fallen out of favour. It is thus well worth looking back and examining its shortcomings, as

well as looking out for things to praise. One of the (many) notable philosophical contributions that Rowe makes is his advancement of that evaluative task.

At the heart of Austin's linguistic method is the idea that by paying closer attention to ordinary language, by understanding in detail the manifold, and often subtle ways in which our words are used, and what our words actually mean, we can make new and definite progress with the traditional problems that philosophers have long been occupied with. Of course, philosophers have been concerned to understand reality, not just the words we use to describe it. But Austin's idea is that the way to reach a philosophical understanding of things is to look at the words we use to describe them. Thus in the following passage Austin explains:

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. (quoted on p. 415).

How successful is (or was) this method? Opinions differ. P. F. Strawson, for instance, himself a practitioner (at least to some extent) of the linguistic method, speaks highly of it in a 1960 article written for the *Times Literary Supplement*, claiming that it produced 'brilliant and often amusing results', and arguing that even now, in the 'post-linguistic thaw', it must 'continue to play a great part in philosophy' (Strawson 1960/2011: 71). By contrast with Strawson, Rowe is more critical in his appraisal. And this, I think, is as it should be. Rowe makes several compelling criticisms of Austin's linguistic method, and I will mention just a few of them.

The first is that the new linguistic philosophy was inapplicable to certain key areas of philosophical inquiry, and thus had the unfortunate tendency to side-line several important sub-branches of the subject. As Rowe points out, when Austin was asked about the scope of the new method, i.e., about which of the traditional philosophical problems it was meant to solve, he tended to answer ‘*Roughly*, all of them’ (p. 415). But this attitude is hard to defend. Rowe gives the helpful example of political philosophy. While the linguistic method could of course ‘clarify the meanings of ‘rights’, ‘justice’, ‘fairness’, ‘democracy’ and so forth...it was not capable of addressing more substantive questions—such as what form democracy should take, or in what circumstances, if any, political violence can be justified’ (p. 421). Rowe also notes how even Isaiah Berlin, a towering figure in political philosophy, retreated from the philosophical scene in Oxford, largely because he could not apply the linguistic method to his own concerns.

A second criticism is that the linguistic method had a tendency towards myopia and triviality. Here there are two related concerns. One is that the linguistic method tended to neglect historically important philosophical problems, which it apparently viewed as ultimately far too grandiose, and ultimately in need of dissolution by linguistic analysis rather than genuine philosophical solution. The other is that the linguistic method tended to focus on issues and questions that seemed altogether trivial, especially in comparison to the original aims of philosophy (the discipline that, after all, was once described by Kant as the ‘Queen of the Sciences’).

Interestingly, the first point seems to have been noted by at least certain contemporaries of Austin, who were outsiders to the Oxford scene. One of these was Professor Bland Blanshard, who gave a paper at the Oxford philosophical society

in 1959 criticising the new linguistic trends in modern philosophy. (Bertrand Russell, of course, is another famous example.) The problem with the new method, as Blanshard saw it was that it lead to the chasing 'of mice, not tigers'. As Rowe explains, Austin was often concerned to 'flatten' his philosophical opponents, and was often at his 'most severe' precisely at Philosophical Society meetings (p. 485). On this occasion, Austin apparently challenged Blanshard to 'release a tiger and show us how to hunt it' (p. 486). There then followed 'five excruciating minutes' focused on the topic of free will, during which Blanshard 'foundered, backtracked, hesitated, and corrected himself before guttering out' *ibid*). Austin then remarked in a 'stage whisper': 'You won't catch mice that way' (*ibid*).

Humiliating as the meeting might have been for Blanshard, it is hard, in retrospect, not to agree that he was very much on the right track. Here it is worth comparing Austin's own contribution to the free will and moral responsibility debate (in articles like 'Ifs and Cans', or 'A Plea for Excuses'), which, while full of genuine insights, do rather little to advance the key metaphysical question as to whether or not the will is free, and what this means for whether we have moral responsibility. (A perhaps unfair summary remark might be: Austin's linguistic method proved superb for catching mice, but unfortunately left the tigers roaming free.)

A further anecdote Rowe shares with his readers serves to substantiate the other part of the concern, namely the tendency towards triviality. Speaking about the members of Austin's famous 'Saturday morning sessions', Rowe writes:

Even at the time, there was concern amongst the group's members that some of the examples being discussed were too trivial and remote from traditional philosophy to be fruitful. One such was when Austin began to investigate the concept of pleasure

by considering the sentence 'I have the pleasure to announce...' Afterwards, Hampshire said to Grice that this was a little like beginning to examine the concept of faith by examining the expression, 'Yours faithfully'. (p. 429)

According to Rowe, 'Austin tended to defend his apparently trivial topics and examples by arguing that what we considered important was often the result of long-standing philosophical prejudice, and what whether a topic or example was important was not something which could be determined prior to its thorough examination' (ibid). Austin apparently was also wont to remark, when asked about the importance of the topics he chose to focus on, that 'Importance isn't important; truth is' (p. 415). But it is hard to be impressed with either of these defences. Time spent articulating trivialities is time wasted, even if those trivialities are truths.

When speaking critically of Austin's linguistic method, it is of interest to point out that Austin was arguably at his philosophical best precisely when departing from that method and engaging in what, rather tendentiously, I would call philosophy proper. My own feeling, for instance, is that some of Austin's main contributions include his devastating criticisms of traditional arguments for sense-data in *Sense and Sensibilia*, as well his correspondence theory of truth (of which Rowe is, in my opinion, unfairly dismissive). Yet these contributions depend in no substantive way on the ordinary language method. Austin's defence of the correspondence theory of truth, in particular, looks like an exercise precisely in the kind of traditional philosophical theory-building that Austin formally claimed to oppose.

Another interesting facet of the book concerns Rowe's appraisal of Austin's character. Rowe emphasises that Austin's character was two-sided, if not Janus-faced. He could be charming, kind, and attentive, especially towards his own

students. But he could also be unkind, abrasive, and derisive, not to mention dictatorial in his de facto role as leader of the new linguistic movement and of the philosophy department at Oxford. His dictatorial side also manifested as dogmatism in his philosophical work, which at least twice left Austin looking somewhat foolish. For instance, Rowe shares an amusing anecdote involving an exchange between Austin and Frank Cioffi at an Oxford seminar on perception (p. 450). There's also the infamous tale of Austin's exchange encounter with Morgenbesser at Columbia. During lecture, Austin announced that in English a double positive cannot be used to convey a negative. Morgenbesser drawled out his response: 'Yeah, yeah' (p. 517).

But Austin's more severe and dogmatic side had a less amusing aspect. It generated a culture at Oxford that viewed philosophy more as a combat sport than a cooperative endeavour, a form of intellectual jousting, where undermining your opponent often seemed to be the central goal. Something of this persisted even during my own time at Oxford as a graduate, though I am glad to say that even then it was already on its way out. One of the many things Rowe can be praised for is that he does not shy away from painting in detail even of some of the more unsavoury elements of Austin's character, nor pointing out some of the various problematic aspects of his legacy and leadership.

Undoubtedly, Rowe has written a superb historical and intellectual biography of Austin. It is a marvellous achievement, and everyone should read the book.

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