Naturalising Austin

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Abstract In this paper I will try to defend a quasi-naturalistic interpretation of J.L. Austin's work. I will rely on P. Kitcher's 1992 paper "The Naturalists Return" to compile four general criteria by which a philosopher can be called a *naturalist*. Then I will turn to Austin's work and examine whether he meets these criteria. I will try to claim that versions of such naturalistic elements can be found in his work.

1 Introduction

In this paper I will try to defend a quasi-naturalistic interpretation of J.L. Austin's work. A hundred years after his birth, Austin is still discussed in many contexts today, including philosophy of language,[1] epistemology,[2] women's studies,[3] etc. The background of this paper however, is the on-going metaphilosophical discussion about the proper methods and aims of epistemology. In many of today's philosophical writings, there is an implicit or explicit debate about whether

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[1]See for example Rothenberg 2006; De Gaynesford 2009.

[2]See for example: Putnam 2001.

[3]See Butler 1997.

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philosophy should go on using the armchair method of evoking a priori or conceptual intuitions, or whether it could employ empirical or experimental methods. [4] Or to put it put in other words, a debate between the *standard* or *traditional analytic philosophy* versus (different varieties of) *naturalism*. Within this dispute, J.L. Austin is mostly supposed to co-side with the *traditional analytics* rather than the *naturalists*, even though this interpretation is not always explicit. In this paper, I would like to shed doubt to this traditional analytic interpretation of his work and suggest that he is closer to the naturalistic movement than often realised.

However, defending a naturalistic interpretation of J.L. Austin will be a difficult task for many reasons. The distinction between *traditional analytics* and *naturalists* is indeed problematic. Moreover, it is very hard to offer a clear definition of the term *naturalism*, especially nowadays when there are so many species of naturalism and everybody claims to be a naturalist of some sort.

This is why I will turn to Kitcher's 1992 paper, "The Naturalists Return", and collect from it four general criteria by which a philosopher can be called a *naturalist*. According to Kitcher, contemporary naturalism emerges as a reaction to standard analytic philosophy. His criteria can be considered common to most kinds of philosophical naturalism, and can be used in order to provide some short of distinction between naturalism and traditional analysis.

Here though lies the second difficulty: J.L. Austin is not considered to be a naturalist by these very criteria. In fact, P. Kitcher himself considers Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia*[5] as belonging to the opposing philosophical frontier (Kitcher 1992, p. 57), the so-called *analytics*. I will try to overturn this interpretation of Austin or at least offer an alternative way of reading him.

1.1 Traditional Analytics Versus Naturalists

The distinction between (*traditional or standard*) *analytics*[6] and *naturalists* is problematic. Both terms are rather vague. Moreover, naturalism came of within the wider analytic movement, and is considered by many as an evolution of analytic philosophy.[7] Nowadays however, the term *(traditional or standard) analytic philosophy* is often used in order to emphasise the use of *a priori* conceptual analysis of epistemological problems.[8] It is differentiated from versions of naturalism, because naturalism is considered more open to employing empirical methodologies or using scientific data for epistemological purposes like *experimental philosophers* do.

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[4] See for example: DePaul and Ramsey 1998; Bishop and Trout 2005; Alexander and Weinberg 2007; Knobe and Nichols 2008a; Hacker 2009; Jackson 1998; Stroud 2000.

[5] Thereafter SS.

[6] For the sake of economy of language I will thereafter call them analytics (just like Kitcher does).

[7] Analytic philosophy has never been a uniform tradition. However, many identify it as a *sui generis* conceptual investigation of some short (Rorty 1967; Hacker 2008, 2009; Jackson 1982, 1998; Cohen 1986; Dummett 1993; Stroud 2000). Others, especially today, identify it with naturalism (Kim 2003; Leiter 2004). All endeavours to strictly define *analytic philosophy* however have serious flows, as Glock (2008) shows. Glock rather tries to analyse the term in terms of family resemblances (overlapping similarities in method, style and doctrines) and historical-genetic analyses (a sequence of individuals and schools).

[8] See: Churchland 1986 and Bishop and Trout 2005; Alexander and Weinberg 2007; Knobe and Nichols 2008b.

Experimental philosophy is an emerging field of philosophical inquiry within the analytic tradition. They have taken up Quine's suggestion for philosophy as a branch of empirical psychology and they supplement conceptual investigation with empirical data, gathered through surveys and questionnaires. They collect laypersons' intuitions, hold them against the intuitions of armchair philosophers and inform research on philosophical questions. The use of empirical data is explicitly opposed to the methodology of *traditional analytic philosophy* that relies mainly on *a priori* justification and armchair conceptual inquiry. Experimental philosophers rely on previous criticisms of *analytic philosophers*.[9] Nowadays, they widely use the term *standard/ traditional analysis* to refer to *armchair or a priori conceptions of philosophy* within the analytic tradition.[10]

Thus, in today's philosophical jargon, (*traditional) analytics* are often distinguished from *naturalists*: Roughly, the former see philosophy as logico-linguistic analysis or an a priori investigation of the concepts we employ. The later think of it as a branch of highly theoretical science.

However, even this purely methodological contrast is rather vague. This is why I will rather turn to Kitcher. He gives four epistemological criteria for what it is to be a naturalist, as opposed to standard analytic: (1) Naturalists rely on scientific research. (2) There do not accept any a priori epistemological principles. (3) Darwinism accompanies many types of philosophical naturalism. (4) As a result of the above ideas, epistemology sees itself as a research of our existing reasoning skills.

I will thus take the above four criteria to encapsulate the naturalists' stand on epistemological questions. Those cues are common to most versions of naturalism. They provide the epistemological basis for the naturalists' style and method. And even though they imply a difference in style, they are more concrete than experimentalists' purely methodological criteria of identifying traditional analytics. Moreover, they came before experimental philosophy's reading of the history of analytic philosophy. They thus provide a safer ground of what it is to be naturalist. And on top of that, Kitcher himself puts J.L. Austin explicitly on the side of *traditional analytics*, using these very cues.

1.2 The Traditional Reading of Austin

I should note that I am not going to discuss whether Austin is right in his conception of epistemology; nor will I debate the arguments posed by him or others. My only point will be that Austin is much closer to epistemic naturalism than often believed.

Austin is indeed, even though implicitly sometimes, considered a pure analytic who follows "the linguistic turn". All major histories of analytic philosophy include him, taking for granted his affiliation with logico-linguistic analysis. And even though many have underlined Austin's peculiarities in style, methods or his views toward science, they all consider him as a mainstream analytic who uses linguistic analyses to reach to conclusions about scepticism, other minds, or any other problem

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[9] See for example Churchland 1986 and Bishop and Trout 2005.
[10] See for example Alexander and Weinberg 2007 and Knobe and Nichols 2008a.

he approaches.[11] He is taken in, historically and methodologically, closer to G. Frege or L. Wittgenstein conception of philosophy as a priori analysis, rather than, say, W.V. Quine's proposal of epistemology as a branch of psychology.

Sense and Sensibilia (Austin 1962) is Austin's most influential epistemological work. In this he discusses philosophical scepticism. His method is clear-cut logico-linguistic analysis. He provides long discussions of the proper use of terms like *true, veridical, material object* etc., in order to show that philosophical scepticism (and sense datum theory's attempt to address it) literally *does not make any sense.* The same method is used in other writings as well; all of his *Philosophical Papers* (Austin 1979) catalogue the use of phrases like *what do you mean by x* to discuss *meaning* (Austin 1940), or *excuse, mistakenly, accidentally* to discuss *free will* (Austin 1956a & b), etc. He uses an a priori analysis of language and ordinary usage to provide solutions or sometimes dissolutions to philosophical problems; and this is why he is considered an analytic. Kitcher, too, reads him as a typical analytic philosopher. However, some of his views and suggestions are not always in line with the so-called *analytic* conception of epistemology as an *a priori* analysis of our epistemic concepts. In the next sections, I will try to explain more about those two different conceptions of epistemology and try to show that an alternative reading of Austin is possible.

First, I will summarise and explain those four basic ideas that most naturalists accept (and most analytics reject). Then I will turn to Austin and examine whether one can find these ideas in his writings. I will try to claim that versions of such naturalistic views can be found in his work.

2 The Naturalists' Return

According to Kitcher, the naturalistic movement occurs as a reaction to G. Frege, as well as B. Russell and early L. Wittgenstein, and their conception of epistemology. More specifically, 20th century naturalism rises against the Fregian idea that one can solve traditional epistemological problems by logical or linguistic analysis (Kitcher 1992, pp. 54–57). Frege resists the interference of psychology and biology into epistemology. He pursues epistemological questions, such as *what is knowledge,* in an apsychologistic way: the analysis of the concept of *knowledge* alone can address such questions. Epistemological issues then should be pursued by *a priori* philosophical reflection, *i.e.* logical analysis. J.L. Austin is in fact considered to be part of this movement: in SS, he rejects scepticism by arguing that sceptical doubt *does not make sense.* (Kitcher 1992, p. 57).[12]

Later Wittgenstein (1958; 1977), Strawson (1985), Jackson (1998), Hacker (2008; 2009), and others too evoke *what makes sense to say* in order to address philosophical problems, such as scepticism or the mind-body problem. They do not provide strict logical analyses; instead they analyse ordinary language pronouncements. Yet, they

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[11] See Rorty 1967; also Stroud 1984; Cohen 1986; Hacker 1996; Stroll 2000; Hanfling 2000; Soames 2003; Glock 2008.

[12] B. Stroud argues the same (1984, pp. 38–82). Yet Stroud does not read Austin solely as a linguistic analyst. Austin rather provides practical (everyday life) reasons against scepticism.

still see philosophy as a purely conceptual, a priori investigation. They are all then, Austin included, considered to renew the Fregian tradition.[13]

Naturalists return as a reaction to this *analytic* conception of epistemology. They argue that natural sciences, such as psychology or biology, can help when one addresses problems about knowledge. Moreover, they see natural sciences as good specimens (or even prototypes) of human knowledge and want to offer an insight of how such knowledge has occurred. The common ground which most naturalists share can be summarised as their negative reaction to the analytic way of doing philosophy. Following Kitcher, we can collect four general criteria, or cues, by which to identify philosophical naturalism:

2.1 Traditional analyses of *knowledge* as *justified true belief* are undermined; this is mostly a result of Gettier's counterexamples to this definition of *knowledge* (Gettier 1963). Naturalists no longer pursue epistemological issues only through the analyses of the logical connections between propositions. Rather, they discuss about the reliability of beliefs or about the proper methods of justification and they take psychological research on cognition and perception into account. Psychology thus re-enters epistemological debates. Epistemology is now concerned with the proper psychological or perceptual states of the agent. It becomes evident then, that *knowledge* is no longer taken in as an absolute and incorrigible state. Knowledge is corrigible and depends on the way people perceive and understand the world at a certain historical time (Kitcher 1992, pp. 59–69).

2.2 There are no a priori epistemological principles (Kitcher 1992, pp. 69–74). Quine (1951) and Kuhn (1962) are the pioneers of such a view. Quine rejected the analytic- synthetic distinction. He thus undermined the idea that philosophy has some special weight on analysing concepts, while science provides synthetic knowledge on how the world works. Quine claims furthermore that epistemology will blend in with psychology. Meanwhile, Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* puts philosophers in front of the following dilemma: they can either go on suggesting that they alone have access to some a priori principles of justification and truth (and thus that scientists lack such skills), or they should abandon the idea that one can grasp methodological principles a priori. They should rather study, together with scientists, how science evolves; and they should try to figure out some justification criteria. Naturalists, following Quine and Kuhn, claim there are no a priori methodological norms; epistemology has no kind on authority when addressing questions about knowledge. After all, science is the most coherent sentiment of knowledge humans have; epistemology should study it and follow its method.

2.3 Darwinism too enters epistemological debates (Kitcher 1992, pp. 69–74). The *argument from evolution* enters sociology, psychology and it also accompanies many (although not all)[14] current types of philosophical naturalism. According to this argument, our cognitive system is the result of a long evolutionary process. As such, it is reliable, though corrigible. If our representations weren't

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[13] See Rorty 1967; Hacker 1996; Stroll 2000; Hanfling 2000; Soames 2003.
[14] Kitcher for example has criticised the argument from evolution as used in sociology and philosophy. See Kitcher 1987 and 1992, pp. 91–92.

reliable we wouldn't have survived. Yet, our cognitive capacities are designed for a certain physical species in a certain physical world. They have certain limitations and are thus corrigible.

2.4 As a result of the above ideas, epistemology should not try to provide a corpus of true beliefs and/or ideal methodological principles, but rather to examine and refine our existing reasoning skills (Kitcher 1992, pp. 74–83).

These views are in line with each other. We find them in most naturalistic approaches in epistemology and we can use them as a guide in order to identify a philosophical naturalist. In the next chapter, I will argue that in Austin's work one can find (versions of) all four naturalistic cues.

3 Re-Reading Austin

3.1 Knowledge

Naturalists claim that when one talks about knowledge, they should take into account the findings of psychology, neurobiology, etc. They also take natural sciences as prototypes of reliable pieces of knowledge. They resist logico-linguistic analyses of knowledge as providing us with some ultimate standards of what *knowledge* is. In fact, they resist the whole idea that there are any absolute epistemic principles.

Austin is interpreted as a traditional analytic philosopher who shares the view that philosophy should only provide linguistic analysis. After all, he does supply long analyses of phrases throughout his work. He explores what *appears, seems, vague* and *real* means,[15] he comments on the proper use of *meaning* [16] to name only a few examples. Moreover, in his writings he never uses scientific data to support his claims.

However, he never claims that his suggestions provide us with high standards of knowledge. Quite on the contrary, he insists that knowing always depends on the circumstances. As he says:

… what kind of sentence is uttered as providing evidence for what depends …
on the circumstances of particular cases … (SS, p. 111).

Different contexts then require different criteria of knowledge. Plain persons in ordinary contexts are aware of these standards. For example, if one says, "I live in Oxford", she knows whether she is truthful or not. The other party may feel the need to verify her statement (SS, p. 118); and he might think some reasonable way to do it: a visit will probably be enough. Accordingly, if you tell me "there is a telephone in the next room", I know what to do in order to see if what you are saying is true: I can go and make a call (SS, p. 119). In all everyday circumstances then, we have a reliable way of verifying things and thus *knowing*.

On most occasions then, when people believe they know something, they are reliable. This does not mean that they are incorrigible. According to Austin "the

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[15] See SS, pp. 33–43 (for an analysis of *real*), pp. 62–77 (*appears/seems*), pp. 125–127 (*vague*).

[16] See "The Meaning of a Word" in Austin's *Philosophical Papers* (thereafter PP), pp. 55–75.

pursuit of the incorrigible is one of the most venerable bugbears in the history of philosophy" (SS, p. 104). Incorrigibility is a bogus principle posed by philosophers in their pursuit of absolute knowledge.[17] Austin seems to criticise all similar philosophical endeavours of finding ultimate epistemic criteria throughout his work.

Most importantly, he explicitly denies that one can provide an account of *knowledge* just by analysing the relation between propositions. For example, he writes:

> It is at best wholly artificial to represent these expectations in the guise of *statements entailed by* "That is a pig". And for this reason, it is at best wholly artificial to speak as if verifying that some animal is a pig consists in *checking up on the statements entailed by* "That is a pig". (SS, p. 121. Italics are mine.)

His primary target in the quote above, as well as in all SS, is *sense-datum theory*, as provided by Ayer (1940). However, his objection applies to any general theory of knowledge, which comes from the study some supposed hidden structure of language or the analysis of relation between propositions.

> And this means that the general doctrine about knowledge … is *radically* and *in principle* misconceived. For even if we were to make the very risky and gratuitous assumption that what some particular person knows at some particular place and time could systematically be sorted out into an arrangement of foundations and [linguistic] super-structure, it would be a mistake in principle to suppose that the same thing could be done for knowledge *in general*… (SS, pp. 123–124, Austin's italics.)

Again, he attacks sense-datum theories. Yet his remarks also dispute the whole idea that analysing language will provide us with some general epistemic norms. He reminds us that the vast variety of things we do with words. He wants to help us resist any general account or definition of philosophically interesting terms, such as *knowledge* or *meaning*. In all his work he challenges the philosophical urge to oversimplify and suggest there can be some universal and all-purpose analyses of any term.[18]

Austin does not bring science in yet; but, when he talks about knowledge, he denies that logico-linguistic analyses can provide us with ultimate epistemic principles. Moreover, he takes ordinary people to be reliable in their capacity to know. Reliability of course does not entail incorrigibility. Austin laughs at the very notion of incorrigibility. He partially shares some of the naturalistic commitments already. And even stronger naturalistic cues are yet to come.

3.2 The Synthetic–Analytic Distinction and the Continuity of Science and Philosophy

The view that philosophy is discontinuous with the sciences is a milestone for analytics. And it is grounded on the analytic–synthetic distinction.[19] According to naturalists however, there are no *a priori or analytic* epistemological principles (Kitcher 1992, pp. 69–74). Philosophy has no special authority, nor is it autonomous

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[17] See also J. Duran 2002. Duran derives an anti-foundationalist argument out of Austin's comments in SS.
[18] See for example his paper "The Meaning of a Word" in PP, pp. 55–74.
[19] See for example Hacker 1996, pp. 193–195 and passim.

from the sciences. In fact, it is more related with the sciences than Frege and other analytics believed. For some naturalists, such as Quine, epistemology is (or should be) a part of empirical psychology. Such an idea is supported by his dismissal of the analytic–synthetic distinction.

Now, Austin claims philosophy is the source of many sciences. In his 1956b paper, "Ifs and Cans" (PP, pp. 205–232) he concludes:

> In the history of human inquiry philosophy has the place of an initial central sun …
> from time to time it throws off some portion of itself to take station as a science …
> This happened long ago at the birth of mathematics and again at the birth of
> physics … (PP, p. 232.)

So far, Austin's view is rather neutral; even traditional analytics could claim that philosophy gave birth to many natural sciences, as long as their role today is kept apart: [20] philosophy clarifies our logical/ analytic/ *a priori*/ conceptual dispositions and norms, and science provides us with synthetic/ *a posteriori*/ contingent knowledge on how the world works. Yet, Austin goes on:

> … only in the last century we have witnessed the same process once again … in
> the birth of the science of mathematical logic … Is it not possible that the next
> century may see the birth, through the joined labours of philosophers, gram-
> marians and numerous other students of language, of a true and comprehensive
> *science of language*? Then we shall have rid ourselves of one more part of
> philosophy … in the only way we ever get rid of philosophy, by kicking it
> upstairs. (PP, pp. 232, Austin's italics.)

Now Austin claims that yet again another part of philosophy may transform itself into a *science of language*. And here he talks about philosophy of language, the very branch that gives as the tools to analyse concepts. Again, analytics might agree that parts of philosophy can be transformed into science; that this is an on going process; they might only insist that one can draw a line between science and philosophy at any certain historical time; or that one can draw a line between the analytic and the synthetic *use* of an utterance.[21] One may even emphasise the fact that Austin talks as if philosophy and science are in different levels: after all, he does talk about *kicking* parts of philosophy *upstairs*. However, I think Austin here implies that some questions, which we now consider philosophical, can be answered by some special science. Science and philosophy then are not all that far apart.

Such an interpretation becomes more plausible when one considers what Austin says about the analytic and synthetic. In his 1940 paper "The meaning of a word" (PP, pp. 55–76), he debates the definition of an analytic sentence: "x is y" is *analytic* if y is part of the meaning of x. Austin denies that this is a helpful definition. In fact, he denies that one can give any adequate definition of *analytic* or *synthetic*. Thus he rejects the idea that one can classify *any* sentence as true or false *based solely on its meaning* (PP, pp. 62–69):

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[20] This is I think what Hanfling (2000, p. 204) implies, when he tries to justify this quote.
[21] This is, for example, how Hacker (1996, pp. 212–213) goes around Quine's criticism of the analytic–synthetic distinction.

Constantly we ask the question, 'Is *y* the meaning, or *part* of the meaning, or *contained* in the meaning, of *x*?— or is it *not*?' A favourite way of putting the question is to ask, 'Is the judgement "*x* is *y*" analytic or synthetic?' Clearly, we suppose, *y must* be *either* a part of the meaning of *x, or* not any part of it. And, if *y is* a part of the meaning of *x*, to say '*x* is not *y*' will be self-contradictory: while if it is *not* a part of the meaning of *x*, to say '*x* is not *y*' will present no difficulty —such a state of affairs will be readily 'conceivable'. This seems to be the merest common sense. And no doubt it *would* be the merest common sense *if* 'meanings' were things in some ordinary sense, which contained parts in some ordinary sense. But they are *not*. (PP, p. 61, Austin's italics.)

According to him, the phrase "part of the meaning of the word x" is completely undefined (PP, p. 63). Thus, the definition of *analytic* is bogus. The *analytic–synthetic distinction* is a philosophical jargon and has no clear use. Furthermore, according to Austin, when using this distinction:

We are using an old working- model, which fails to fit the facts that really wish to talk about. (PP, p. 63, Austin's italics.)

We can always produce some rough examples of analytic or synthetic propositions, Austin claims. Yet, we cannot give a general definition of *analytic* and *synthetic*. Neither can we justify the dogma that every sentence is *either* analytic *or* synthetic (PP, p. 63).

For one thing, there are many ways to be absurd or vague or to fail to make sense without contradicting. Saying, "the cat is on the mat but I don't believe it" is a clear example. Moreover, there are many examples of sentences that we cannot easily put either under *analytic* or under *synthetic.* For example, consider the sentence *this x exists*. Now, is existence "part of the meaning of *this*"? In a way it is and in a way it isn't. According to Austin, it is just trivial to say *this noise exists* and just absurd to say *this noise does not exist*. So is this sentence analytic or synthetic? According to Austin, we cannot put it under either category. In fact, trying to fit *any* such sentence into the analytic–synthetic distinction is just as absurd. A sentence is sensible or insensible to utter depending on its use in context (PP, pp. 64–65); all other ways of classifying and evaluating sentences are bogus.

What's more, any change in the world or in the way we conceive things will change what makes sense to say and what not. Consider Austin's example:

Suppose you live in harmony and friendship for four years with a cat: and then it delivers a philippic. We ask ourselves, perhaps, 'is it a real cat? Or is it not a real cat?' 'Either it is or it is not but we can't be sure which' Now, actually, that is not so: neither 'it is a real cat' nor 'it is not a real cat' fits the facts semantically… (PP, p. 67.)

In such cases, the old working model breaks down entirely and one needs to find alternative ways to talk about the world. The analytic–synthetic distinction again cannot help. New or extra-ordinary circumstances modify language as well. And once again our philosophical preconceptions will fail to fit the facts semantically.

The idea that philosophy is discontinuous with science holds the analytic view of epistemology as a logico-linguistic analysis. And it is supported by the analytic–

synthetic distinction. Yet, according to Austin, the analytic–synthetic dichotomy is one more philosophical oversimplification. Neither term can be adequately defined. Thus, we can always produce examples of sentences, which cannot easily go under either *analytic* or *synthetic*. Moreover, we can manage to fail making sense for many reasons; being contradictory is only one of them. So far, Austin underlies the significance of the context, social and linguistic. The circumstances of an utterance make a sentence meaningful or not. And any utterance, even of the form *x is y*, is much more complex to assess than simply to say whether it is analytic or synthetic. And on top of that, things change. We sometimes find ourselves in front of new situations or new pieces of knowledge. Then again, we need new terminology to meet the new data.

Austin clearly has trouble with the analytic–synthetic distinction. Although Austin does not provide extensive arguments in order to break the distinction, it is clear that he finds it problematic and unhelpful. In a way, it seems he anticipated Quine's criticism of the analytic–synthetic dichotomy.

His views about the analytic and the synthetic throw new light on his conception of philosophy. In his quotes above, Austin pictures philosophy as continuous with the sciences. Science can help addressing so-called philosophical questions. Philosophy of language is a clear example of a field that can be transformed into a *science of language*. Perhaps epistemology could also turn into a science of knowledge then; it may be that part of empirical psychology Quine suggests.

So, Austin is not comfortable with the analytic–synthetic distinction and he pictures philosophy as continuous with the sciences. This is the second naturalistic cue that we find in Austin's work.

3.3 The Argument From Evolution

Many naturalists use an evolutionary argument in order to defend our cognitive powers. Austin produces a linguistic version of such an argument. In all his work he emphasises the significance of ordinary language: our common linguistic distinctions give us the tools to understand the world around us (PP, p. 181). They are adequate *because* they have evolved through time and have survived. In 1956a, Austin writes:

> … 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 … (PP, pp. 181–182.)

> These concepts will have evolved over a long time: that is, they will have faced the test of practical use, of continual hard cases better than their vanished rivals. (PP, p. 274.)

Austin in the quotes above talks about *the long test of the survival of the fittest,* about *evolution* and *vanished rivals*. The terms that Austin chooses clearly come from Darwin's theory of evolution. Using the same tools that Darwin used to explain the evolution of the species, Austin describes the evolution of language.

The survival test assures us that ordinary language distinctions can represent the world.[22]

Many of today's naturalistic epistemologists use versions of the evolutionary argument as well, to justify our reasoning skills.[23] They propose that our cognitive systems, sometimes including our linguistic capacities and usage, are the product of evolution. And as such, they represent the world sufficiently. For we would not have survived if our representations were completely wrong. Of course they are fallible, yet reliable.

According to Austin we understand the world using language. The fact that our ordinary linguistic distinctions have survived this evolutionary process gives us some assurance of the reliability of its distinctions. If they weren't reliable, they wouldn't have survived. This, of course, does not imply that they are incorrigible. "Ordinary language breaks down in extraordinary cases", says Austin (PP, p. 67); extraordinary circumstances can always come from new data or from new quests of mankind.

> … yet this is likely enough to be not the best way of arranging things if our interests are more extensive or intellectual than the ordinary. And again, that experience has been derived only from the sources available to ordinary men throughout most of civilized history: it has not been fed from the resources of the microscope and its successors. And it must be added too, that superstition and error and fantasy of all kinds do become incorporated in ordinary language and even sometimes stand up to the survival test (only, when they do, why should we not detect it?). Certainly, then, ordinary language is *not* the last word: in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded. Only remember, it *is* the *first* word. (PP, p. 184, Austin's italics.)

Our common stock of phrases can give us a minimum guarantee that we represent the world adequately. It does not promise us that we are infallible. After all, evolution is still in progress. But the survival test is an assurance that our representations are not entirely misguided. If our distinctions were all wrong, they would not have survived; if we didn't make adequate distinction, we probably would not have managed it either.

One can find versions of the evolutionary argument today in many naturalistic perspectives like Millikan's (1984), Dennett's (1991) or Kornblith's (2002). In 1956, Austin too provides an early linguistic version of the argument from evolution. This is the third naturalistic cue we meet in Austin's work.

3.4 Description Rather Than Prescription

Austin claims he merely describes ordinary language. This is in line with his overall view that linguistic usage can help us represent the world adequately. He has no

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[22] Graham (1977, pp. 36–46) first emphasised that Austin uses a linguistic version of the argument from evolution. In 1981 Graham (1981, pp. 144–145) confronts Furberg (1979, pp. 465–473), who denies that Austin's arguments are Darwinistic.

[23] See for example Millikan 1984; Dennett 1991; Kornblith 2002. For "A Field Guide to Recent Species of Naturalism", see Rosenberg 1996. Needless to say, there is still huge debate on the (many different) philosophical uses and versions of the evolutionary argument. See for example Buller 2005.

higher ambitions: he does not wish to give us a set of absolute epistemic principles by which to test our beliefs; and he offers no strict criteria by which to measure our methods. In fact, he does not believe one can find any such principles. Such a project is *philosophical*, and in Austin's context, this means that it is bogus.

Rather than sitting on our armchairs and fabricating principles then, we should go out and examine our common stock of words (PP, pp. 182–183). We will find out more about our cognition by examining our current ways of understanding. Scientific methodology will help. With this in mind, Austin proposes his "laboratory philosophy". This is a term used by Urmson (1967); for Urmson informs us that Austin had suggested a semi-scientific way to study language. His laboratory team would include native language speakers from different parts of the world (Britain, USA, Australia). They would focus on a topic, gather all relevant expressions and study them, suggesting examples, distinctions, etc. Such a method would have a double goal: (1) detect the philosophical errors of the past and (2) help us examine how we, the plain people, understand that very topic. This is very similar with what Austin himself does in many of his *Philosophical Papers*, like "A Plea for Excuses", or "Ifs and Cans". Hence, he proposes a future *science of language* and he insists on actual "field work in philosophy" (PP, p. 183).

Today, *experimental philosophers* have put Austin' idea in practice. They perform experiments in order to discover what the folk would say in a given circumstance. They design questionnaires describing some hypothetical story. Using this story as a stimulator, they ask common folk about *knowledge, free will, intentional action*, etc. Experimental philosophers use such studies to draw two different kinds of conclusions: (1) detect the philosophical errors of the past; and (2) help us examine how we, the plain people, understand that very topic.[24] They also criticise, implicitly or explicitly, the armchair method of philosophers. And Austin is indeed mentioned as a precursor of experimental philosophy (Alexander and Weinberg 2007, p. 18).

Austin proposes a scientific methodology for philosophy; today, experimentalists practice it. Such a methodological proposal only makes sense if one sees philosophy as the study of our current cognitive skills. Austin does not look for ideal epistemic principles; he rather aims at the examination and refinement of our current reasoning practices. This is the fourth naturalistic cue that we meet in Austin's work.

4 Conclusion

J. L. Austin is a capricious writer. His work is full of sarcasm, humour and wit. He does not always follow the principles of clarity and strong argumentation many of his fellow philosophers propose. Thus, he is difficult to read. I think there is one more reason why his work is so complicated and even frustrating when one comes across it for the first time: Austin did not entirely comply with any of the philosophical camps that were slowly beginning to shape in his time: he is not a hard-core *analytic* and he is not yet a *naturalist*.

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[24] Both aims are suggested in "An Experimental Philosophy Manifesto" (Knobe and Nichols 2008b). For examples of (1) see Nichols et al. 2003; Weinberg et al. 2001. For examples of (2) see some recent papers on the free will debate: Nahmias 2006; Nichols and Knobe 2007; Nahmias et al. 2008.

I think it is wrong to interpret him as *clearly* belonging to the traditional analytic philosophy. This interpretation however, is the dominant one, even though implicit sometimes. After all, Austin is not discussed much today. But he is quietly considered as belonging to the traditional analytic frontier that identifies philosophy with logico-linguistic analysis. Here I have proposed that one can also find many naturalistic cues in his writings.

Although he comments on language use, he never offers any strict logico-linguistic analyses of epistemic terms; he moreover implies that this is not a feasible project. He thinks that philosophers, in their urge to give general principles of use, turn epistemic terms (such as *knowledge* and *meaning*) into meaningless phrases. Contrariwise, the only way to illuminate our cognitive capacity is to see how we practice it in real life contexts. Our knowledge claims are in principle corrigible and depend on the way people perceive and understand the world at certain circumstances.

The context is then the measure of whether an utterance makes sense. Philosophical distinctions, such as the distinction between the *analytic* and the *synthetic*, are oversimplifications and can rarely do justice to the facts. We cannot adequately define either term, nor can be classify all sentences as belonging to one of these categories. Moreover, things change and we need to modify our conceptions accordingly. The analytic–synthetic distinction is neither useful nor important.

Besides, we already have a sufficient way to represent the world by using our common stock of words. Our terms have evolved through time and have survived the test of the fittest. They can give us a much clearer view of the world than "any that you or I are likely to think up in our armchairs of an afternoon—the most favoured alternative method" (PP, p. 182). Austin puts forward a linguistic version of the argument from evolution. He even uses it to attack the *a priori* introspective method of philosophy as posed by the analytics.

To this armchair method he contrasts a quasi-scientific way of doing philosophy. He proposes to examine with detail the distinctions we use; they are the tools by which we understand the world and we must record and study them. Instead of sitting on our armchairs and invent bogus principles, we are encouraged to go out in the field and examine our current ways of understanding.

This is a summary of Austin's conception of epistemology. And it is very close to epistemic naturalism. Here, I have not tried to debate Austin's views; nor did I discuss the analytic–naturalistic altercation and take sides. My only point was to show that an alternative reading of Austin's work is possible. And, even though the term *naturalism* is itself a rather vague philosophical term, I tried to suggest that one can find some safe naturalistic elements in Austin's writings.

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