Philosophers in Depth

Series Editor: Constantine Sandis

Philosophers in Depth is a series of themed edited collections focusing on particular aspects of the thought of major figures from the history of philosophy. The volumes showcase a combination of newly commissioned and previously published work with the aim of deepening our understanding of the topics covered. Each book stands alone, but taken together the series will amount to a vast collection of critical essays covering the history of philosophy, exploring issues that are central to the ideas of individual philosophers. This project was launched with the financial support of the Institute for Historical and Cultural Research at Oxford Brookes University, for which we are very grateful.

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Introduction

Brian Garvey

Language is at the heart of all of J.L. Austin’s philosophical work, being both a subject of inquiry for him, and a methodological tool of central importance. He was one of the leading figures of the Oxford school of philosophers of the mid-twentieth century, who put the investigation of language in all its various uses at the centre of their philosophical inquiries. Like his contemporary Wittgenstein at Cambridge, Austin challenged the widespread assumption that asserting propositions was the core function of language, and investigated in depth the many other things that people are doing when they use words. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argued that superficial similarities in the form of sentences make philosophers blind to the variety of different things that sentences are used to do:

> It is like looking into the cabin of a locomotive. We see handles all looking more or less alike. (Naturally, since they are all supposed to be handled.) But one is the handle of a crank which can be moved continuously (it regulates the opening of a valve); another is the handle of a switch, which has only two effective positions, it is either off or on; a third is the handle of a brake-lever, the harder one pulls on it, the harder it brakes; a fourth, the handle of a pump: it has an effect only so long as it is moved to and fro. (Wittgenstein 1953: §12)

Austin, though wary of Wittgenstein – as John R. Searle tells us in his contribution to the present volume – had a similar insight, which he developed in *How to Do Things with Words* and elsewhere. What they both emphasized was the sheer variety of ways that words are used and how that boded ill for any prospect of a unitary account of those properties of sentences, ‘truth’, ‘meaning’, and so forth. For both, it makes no sense to ask what – for example – ‘meanings’ are in general. Wittgenstein’s lever-metaphor makes clear his aversion to this kind of quest for general accounts, and Austin expresses a similar aversion in his paper ‘The Meaning of a Word’:

> Suppose that I ask: ‘What is the point of doing so-and-so?’ For example, I ask Old Father William ‘What is the point of standing on
one’s head?’ He replies in the way we know. Then I follow this up with ‘What is the point of balancing an eel on the end of one’s nose?’ And he explains. Now suppose I ask as my third question ‘What is the point of doing anything – not anything in particular, but just anything?’ Old Father William would no doubt kick me downstairs without the option. But lesser men, raising this same question, would very likely commit suicide or join the Church. (Luckily, in the case of ‘What is the meaning of a word?’ the effects are less serious, amounting only to the writing of books.) (Austin 1979: 59)

I do not intend to offer a point-by-point comparison of Wittgenstein and Austin here, but one of the ways in which they differ is that, whereas Wittgenstein is inclined to simply emphasize how varied the uses of sentences are, Austin goes some way towards creating a systematic taxonomy of types of speech-acts. That is not to say that he would have positively endorsed Searle’s view that there is a finite and fixed number of types, still less that he would have endorsed the particular taxonomy that Searle proposed (Searle 1969). He certainly thought that the variety of different types of speech-act was very great. In ‘How to Talk: Some Simple Ways’, he says:

Names for speech-acts are more numerous, more specialized, more ambiguous and more significant than is ordinarily allowed for...Here of course we have been concerned with only a few speech-acts of a single family, but naturally there are whole other families besides. (Austin 1979: 150)

But Austin did give us new technical terms for types of speech-acts, and at least the beginnings of accounts of how it is that sentences have the powers that they have.¹

As well as his philosophical work on language, Austin also had a meta-philosophical commitment to the importance of paying close attention to language in doing philosophy about any subject. The meta-philosophical outlook that can be broadly said to characterize the work of Wittgenstein, Ryle, Austin, and others has come to be labelled ‘ordinary language philosophy’. In some ways this is an unsatisfactory term, but as with many other unsatisfactory terms we are probably stuck with it. Some highly prominent philosophers at the time took a very dim view of the whole approach, and their grounds for taking that dim view are, I think, instructive about misunderstandings that are easy to make about what the methodological commitments of Austin et al. are.
Bertrand Russell attacked what he described as ‘the most influential school of philosophy in Britain at the present day [i.e 1953]’, and he clearly had Austin, among others, in mind when he said:

The doctrine, as I understand it, consists in maintaining that the language of daily life, with words used in their ordinary meanings, suffices for philosophy, which has no need of technical terms or of changes in the signification of common terms. (Russell 1953: 303)

One misunderstanding that appears to be embodied in this is that ‘ordinary language’ means the language of ‘the man on the street’, as opposed to the technical, specialist language that many disciplines have. However, Ryle, in a paper called ‘Ordinary Language’, made it clear that the ‘ordinary’ use of a linguistic expression may well be a highly specialized use in some highly specialized field. In this respect, words can be like pieces of equipment:

We can contrast the stock or standard use of a fish-knife or sphygmomanometer with some non-regulation use of it. The stock use of a fish-knife is to cut up fish with; but it might be used for cutting up seed-potatoes or as a heliograph. A sphygmomanometer might, for all I know, be used for checking tyre-pressures; but this is not its standard use. Whether an implement or instrument is a common or specialist one, there remains the distinction between its stock use and non-stock uses of it. If a term is a highly technical term, most people will not know its stock use or, a fortiori, any non-stock uses of it either. (Ryle 1953: 168)

Moreover, Austin himself invented new technical terms for use in philosophy (as for that matter did Wittgenstein and Ryle), which seems incompatible with believing that philosophy has no need for them. Russell seems to have seriously misunderstood their stance.

A second easy misunderstanding to make – also evident in the above quotation from Russell – is that ‘ordinary language philosophers’ method consists of treating ‘ordinary language’ as somehow infallible or unimpeachable, at least for philosophical purposes. There are, true enough, some things that Austin says that make it sound as though he ascribes some kind of unimpeachable authority to ‘ordinary language’

Philosophers often seem to think that they can just ‘assign’ any meaning whatever to any word; and so, no doubt, in an absolutely
trivial sense, they can (like Humpty-Dumpty) ... [B]ut most words are *in fact* used in a particular way already, and this fact can’t be just disregarded. (For example, some meanings that have been assigned to ‘know’ and ‘certain’ have made it seem outrageous that we should use these terms as we actually do; but what this shows is that the meanings assigned by some philosophers are *wrong*.) (Austin 1962: 62–63)

But at other points he makes clear that he does not take ordinary language to be an unimpeachable authority. He offers arguments for the philosophical *usefulness* of paying close attention to ordinary language, and those arguments clearly imply that such close attention is potentially very useful, rather than that ordinary language is unimpeachable.

Certainly, when we have discovered how a word is in fact used, that may not be the end of the matter; there is certainly no reason why, in general, things should be left exactly as we find them; we may wish to tidy the situation up a bit, revise the map here and there, draw the boundaries and distinctions rather differently. But still, it is advisable always to bear in mind (a) that the distinctions embodied in our vast and, for the most part, relatively ancient stock of ordinary words are neither few nor always very obvious, and almost never just arbitrary; (b) that in any case, before indulging in any tampering on our own account, we need to find out what it is that we have to deal with; and (c) that tampering with words in what we take to be one little corner of the field is always *liable* to have unforeseen repercussions in the adjoining territory. (Austin 1962: 63)

One of the arguments in the foregoing is that ordinary language makes distinctions that philosophers have a habit of ignoring. Austin is far from being the first philosopher to point out that philosophical perplexities can often be resolved by making distinctions. It was an important tool in Aristotle’s toolbox, for example. But drawing attention to the usefulness of the already-existing resource of ordinary language in making distinctions may be one of the most distinctive contributions that Austin made to philosophical methodology.

In sum, Austin thought that we should at least *begin* our philosophical inquiries into any subject with a careful survey of the ordinary linguistic usages around that subject. But, as he put it in ‘A Plea for Excuses’:
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. (Austin 1979: 185)

As Searle points out in the present volume, in addition to his technical contributions, one of Austin’s most important contributions to philosophy was a call to his colleagues to slow down, and in particular to take the time to be careful with one’s language: ‘words are our tools, and, as a minimum we should use clean tools’ (Austin 1979: 181).

**Overview of this book**

The chapters are preceded by the text of a short speech by J.L. Austin’s sister, Ann Lendrum, which affectionately remembers Austin and provides some interesting biographical insight.

John R. Searle’s chapter deals with his recollections of Austin from his own time as a student at Oxford. He worked with Austin closely, and his own work on speech-acts (1969) arises out of the work that Austin began. The stories that Searle provides in this chapter give us a sense of what Austin was like and of the impression he made on those who met him. There is more than just biographical interest to this because Austin’s influence as a philosopher was in many ways disseminated through people’s personal encounters with him – for example, through the discussion groups with which he was involved at Oxford. In addition, Searle tells us why he thinks Austin remains important today, despite the relative neglect which ‘ordinary language philosophy’ currently suffers. Any reader who is not convinced that Austin’s work is still of relevance today would do well to read Searle’s chapter.

After Searle’s contribution, the remaining chapters in the present volume fall into three sections. The first section consists of papers dealing with Austin’s speech-act theory. In her contribution, Marina Sbisà aims to elucidate Austin’s crucially important categories of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts by locating them in relation to an overall theory of actions which can be found in *How to Do Things with Words* as well as in a number of his papers. For Sbisà, many criticisms of Austin’s distinctions among speech-acts arise because the critics, perhaps tacitly, hold different theories of actions in general.

Next, Charles Lassiter deals with a problem that arises in connection with Austin’s account of perlocutionary acts: the perlocutionary force of such acts appears to be defined by Austin in terms of the effect it has on
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someone – the perlocutionary force of asking someone to pass the salt is that they pass the salt. The problem with this is that, prima facie, it is not clear whether Austin understands this force as constituted by the actual effect a speech-act has or by its intended effect. Austin does not want to include every effect an action has – such as, trivially, moving the molecules of air immediately in front of one’s mouth, or less trivially, upsetting someone unintentionally, or starting a fight, etc. – as part of its perlocutionary force. And conversely, something may count as part of the perlocutionary force of a speech-act even if it fails to occur: the perlocutionary force of ‘pass the salt’ remains the same even if the other person ignores you. One might conclude from this that one is supposed to count all and only intended effects, whether they actually occur or not. However, Austin explicitly blocks this, saying that unintended effects can count. Consequently, there appears to be no characteristic that makes something part of the perlocutionary force: it can include unintended effects that happen as well as intended effects that do not. Lassiter proposes a solution using J.J. Gibson’s concept of social affordances. Because of the social relations and conventions that we live and breathe in, there are responses to speech-acts that sociolinguistically competent agents can be assumed to normally have. Consequently, the perlocutionary force of a speech-act can be understood not in terms of either the intentions of the speaker or the actual effects the act has, but it terms of the effects it is likely to have, given the affordances that are in place because of these social conditions. Lassiter, further, uses this idea to elucidate some other aspects of speech-act theory.

Joe Friggieri addresses different ways in which a speech-act can be said to be ‘etiolated’ – that is, because of certain distinctive (but perfectly familiar) circumstances, it doesn’t have the force it normally would. Examples of such etiolating circumstances include telling a joke or acting in a play. A group of actors could go through all the motions of making a bet, or getting married, but because they are in a play they would not then be bound to honour the bet, or married. Friggieri points out that Austin only touched on these types of cases in passing. He argues that in these passing remarks Austin hinted at a more comprehensive account of the many uses of language that he did not develop. This more comprehensive account could include uses of language in jokes, plays, fiction and so forth, and could be of relevance to problems such as the paradox of fiction (why are we affected emotionally by stories about people who do not exist?) and the ontological status of persons and events in fiction. Friggieri’s is one of a number of chapters in the present volume that demonstrate the potential fruitfulness of Austin’s ideas by
showing how they can be developed and applied to questions that he
didn’t himself address or only remarked on in passing.

Tom Grimwood and Paul Miller discuss the influence of Austin’s
speech-act theory in the social sciences, focussing in particular on the
approach to the study of ordinary conversations developed by Harvey
Sacks (‘Conversation Analysis’). They argue that the influence has been
largely one-way, with philosophers, even those few who are directly
influenced by Austin, paying very little attention to these social science
developments. As Siobhan Chapman also argues in a later chapter, one
might expect Austin and those of a similar philosophical bent to be
willling to do more hands-on empirical work into how ordinary people
from all walks of life actually speak. But instead, Austin and other ‘ordi-
nary language’ philosophers drew their linguistic data from their own
linguistic intuitions in imaginary scenarios, often highly unrealistic
ones – from ‘what one would say if’ rather than ‘what people actually
say when’. This, they believe, has impoverished philosophers’ views
on the variety of speech-acts there are. As a case-study to illustrate this
impoverishment, they discuss the role of silence in conversations. On
many occasions, not speaking can actively contribute to a conversation.
Such occasions have been actively studied by conversation analysts but
largely neglected by philosophers.

The papers in the second part of this volume all aim to clarify Austin’s
contribution to philosophical methodology. Hanno Birken-Bertsch’s
contribution provides a considered account of what that Austin’s
conception of philosophical method was. He quotes the widely known
account of Austin’s method given by J.O. Urmson (1967a), which
he does not dispute as such, but argues is importantly incomplete.
Urmson’s account describes how the linguistic data that are needed for
philosophical inquiry are procured but, according to Birken-Bertsch,
fail to describe what is supposed to be done with that data and thus
fails to describe the actual philosophical part of an inquiry. In order to
understand this, he argues, it helps to understand Austin’s work against
the background of a prominent feature of earlier twentieth century
philosophers’ work, for example that of Husserl, Russell, and Ayer: the
claim that philosophy should be scientific. Austin wanted philosophy to
be scientific too, but his conception of science was in important ways
different from, at any rate, those of Russell and Ayer. In brief, Russell
and Ayer were willing to use as their linguistic data highly idealized
exemplars of the uses of words and sentences, whereas Austin thought
that the data should encompass the whole variety of their uses. When
we see the linguistic work as providing the data for philosophy, rather
than as itself constituting philosophy, some of the best-known accusations against ‘ordinary language philosophy’, such as Ernest Gellner’s (1959) that it is purely destructive and that it is only about words, lose much of their force.

A challenge to Austin’s methodological stance comes from his contemporary Arne Naess, as recounted here in the chapter by Siobhan Chapman. In many ways, Austin and Naess had similar or at least parallel philosophical developments. Both were for a while impressed by logical positivism’s apparent quest for clarity, and both subsequently turned away from it and in particular from its project to create an ideal language. For both, philosophical inquiry into – for example – truth must not be divorced from how the word ‘truth’ is ordinarily used. An inquiry that starts by trying to purge the word of its everyday connotations will be simply beside the point. Both, also, go to great lengths to draw our attention to the sheer variety of different ways that words such as ‘true’ or ‘real’ are used. But, as Chapman shows, from there on they diverge widely on questions of methodology. For Austin, determining what the ordinary uses of a word are cannot be a matter of, as Stanley Cavell once put it, ‘counting noses’ (Cavell 1958: 175). For Austin, there is a strong element of introspection in the process of discovering the normal uses of words, a process he called ‘linguistic phenomenology’ (see Locatelli, this volume), although he does also endorse the use of sources such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*. However, for Naess, determining the normal use of words is essentially a sociological matter: extensive empirical research has to be carried out on the ways that people – the widest possible variety of people – actually use words. Moreover, such research should as far as possible be non-judgemental: no way that people actually use words can be called ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’. For Austin, by contrast, there are correct and incorrect uses, and there are (at least it is implied) people who are more qualified than others to know what the correct ones are – the committee of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example. Both Austin and Naess have often been cited as inspirational figures behind the school known as *corpus linguistics* because of their rejection of idealized views of language and their willingness to enter into the complexities of actual usage. However, on Chapman’s account, Naess appears much closer to the spirit of that movement than Austin. Moreover, Naess, with his non-judgemental stance towards different kinds of speakers, can be thought to have distanced himself more decisively from the logical positivists and their ‘ideal language’.

More positive evaluations of Austin’s method come from Eugen Fischer and Roberta Locatelli. Fischer responds to the often-made criticism that
the current rules of ordinary language do not determine the bounds of sense. He argues that the method of ‘ordinary language’ analysis remains philosophically valuable, especially in light of the currently growing movement of ‘experimental philosophy’. Experimental philosophers aim to discover the intuitions that people who are not professional philosophers have regarding philosophically significant concepts, such as knowledge or free will. In some ways this is similar to Austin’s project of asking how words are used in non-philosophical contexts. However, experimental philosophy differs from Austin’s project, among other ways, in that the former uses the methods of empirical social science. In that respect experimental philosophy is more akin to Arne Naess’ approach. However, neither Austin nor experimental philosophers treat the results of such findings as authoritative or final on what it is acceptable to say on a topic. Rather, both take such data as a starting-point – but a necessary one – for philosophical discussion. The ensuing philosophical discussion may end up in a rejection of ordinary non-philosophical speech. Fischer argues that Austin provided methodological tools that could be of great use to experimental philosophers, for example, by identifying common fallacies.

Roberta Locatelli provides an in-depth reading of Austin’s linguistic phenomenology. She argues that it is more than a polemical or therapeutic tool, but a way of drawing attention to features of perception and fine-tuning our understanding of perception. For example, Austin’s discussion in Sense and Sensibilia of the differences between illusion, delusion and hallucination are not just either lexicographical explorations, or censures of what philosophers have said about those things, or even both. Locatelli argues that they give access to a sort of non-introspective intersubjective phenomenology, which may be the foundation of sensible philosophical interrogations and a genuine progress in knowledge. On this basis, she argues, we can follow Austin and use the ways we talk about experience to enhance our understanding of experience itself. In this respect, Austin’s project in Sense and Sensibilia can be understood as a contribution to phenomenology in the sense of the twentieth-school of European philosophy, even if neither he nor the phenomenologists would have seen it that way. Locatelli argues, in addition, that the positive insights into experience that emerge from Austin’s linguistic phenomenology suggest an original way of conceiving what ‘naive realism’ is, and of defending it against scepticism.

The third section of the present volume is entitled ‘Language, Perception and Mind’. Two out of the four papers in this section take a critical look at Austin’s most extended application of his methodological
principles – the attack on sense-datum theory that comprises *Sense and Sensibilia* (Austin 1962). The other two, by Kevin Reuter and Harry Lesser, apply some of Austin’s ideas to other issues about mind – introspection and emotion respectively.

In the first chapter in this section, Paul F. Snowdon takes us through the text of *Sense and Sensibilia* and is highly critical of its arguments. He wonders why Austin has chosen A.J. Ayer’s *Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (1940) as the principal focus of his attack on sense-datum theory. Austin says that he has done so because Ayer’s arguments – together with those of H.H. Price (1932) and Geoffrey Warnock (1953) – are the ‘best available expositions of the approved reasons for holding theories that are at least as old as Heraclitus’ (Austin 1962: 1). Snowdon wonders whether this remark is ‘a joke’, and finds it hard to believe that anyone would think that Ayer et al.’s presentations of the argument from illusion were better than, for example Berkeley’s. Hence, he argues, even if Austin’s attack on Ayer was successful, that would in no way show that the theory of sense-data was problematic – only that some philosophers have given poor arguments for it. Moreover, Snowdon thinks that Austin’s arguments against Ayer are a mixed bag: in some instances Ayer deserves the criticisms that Austin levels against him, but in others not. Moreover still, Snowdon thinks that some of the general claims that Austin makes in the course of his arguments are extremely inadequately defended – for example, Austin’s claim that philosophers’ habitual uses of the word ‘real’ are problematic.

By contrast with Snowdon’s start-to-finish walk through *Sense and Sensibilia*, Dale Jacquette, in the next chapter, focuses his attention on one section of one chapter (II.5). That section is a very important one in Austin’s book as a whole, however, and Jacquette’s attention to it is every bit as critical as Snowdon’s is to the book as a whole. In the section that Jacquette considers, Austin takes issue with the idea that the senses can be said to ‘deceive’ us, which is often a central part of the articulation of the argument from illusion and of sense-datum theory. The senses, Austin holds, cannot be said to deceive us, because they are ‘dumb’ – they *say* nothing. Jacquette argues that Austin, perhaps ironically given his views on language, is here failing to appreciate the variety of perfectly ordinary and acceptable ways in which the word ‘deceive’ is used. There is nothing unusual or untoward in saying that my eyes sometimes deceive me, or for that matter in saying that they *tell* me things. Such uses of ‘deceive’ (and ‘tell’) do not require *intentional* deception (or intentional telling) at all. Moreover, the fact that such uses of deceive do not imply intention
Kevin Reuter’s paper takes some ideas raised by Austin in *Sense and Sensibilia* and develops them with a view to improving our understanding of introspection. As Reuter points out, recent discussions of introspection of sensory states tend to account for it either in terms of introspective attention or in terms of attending to the appearance of something rather than how it really is. Reuter argues that, either way, we need to distinguish between descriptions of appearance that are introspective and ones that are not, and he believes that some of Austin’s remarks in *Sense and Sensibilia* give a useful clue as to how to do this. Austin argues that, in at least a great many cases, appearances are perfectly publicly accessible things: that is, when we say that something appears so-and-so, we are not describing inaccessible inner events but are describing things that other people can see too – and our descriptions are thus in principle publicly challengeable. For example, if I say that a certain sponge looks like a rock, I am describing its appearance as opposed to what it really is, but I expect other people to be able to see that it looks like a rock, and I could in principle be overruled if other people are able to point out ways in which it doesn’t. Reuter argues then that some, but only some, descriptions of how things appear are in principle open to public challenge in this way. For example, a mirage of an oasis can be understood as being caused by distortion of light-rays or by the disordered senses of someone dying of thirst. In both cases, the appearance is different from the reality, but in the first case that appearance is publicly accessible, and a report that it is a case of that kind is publicly challengeable. In the second case, the appearance is not publicly accessible and a report in those terms is not publicly challengeable. Hence, for Reuter, intentions matter in determining whether something counts as introspection: if I report how something appears to me in a way that I intend to be publicly challengeable, then I am not describing an introspected experience; but if I do not, I am.

Finally, Harry Lesser applies Austin’s methodological principles to understanding the nature of emotions. Austin argued that if a philosophical issue is in an area where there already exists a rich pre-philosophical vocabulary, we should begin by understanding this vocabulary, what it puts together and what it separates, and in general what, according to ordinary discourse, it is true to say under what circumstances. Applying this principle to the emotions, where there certainly does exist such a rich pre-philosophical vocabulary, Lesser argues that we should think of
ascriptions of emotion as interpretations of actions rather than as descriptions of feelings. Thus, ordinary language does not support either feeling theories of emotions or behaviourist theories.

Even if we are swayed by Snowdon’s negative assessment of Sense and Sensibilia as a whole, both Reuter’s and Lesser’s papers demonstrate the continued applicability of many of Austin’s ideas, methodological and otherwise, in new fields. A number of other contributors to this book – for example Friggieri and Fischer – have shown how ideas that Austin threw out, sometimes only in brief asides, can be developed and yield useful insights for recent philosophical concerns. Jacquette (this volume) remarks:

Almost every passage chosen for discussion from Austin’s lectures is comparably insightful with respect to understanding his unique, signature, virtually inimitable method of critically considering samplings and idealizations of colloquial language to determine the scope and limits of their permissible philosophical applications.

Even if we do not think that ordinary language delimits the scope of permissible philosophical applications, and even if we accept, with Birken-Bertsch, that the study of ordinary language was only intended by Austin as a starting point, we can still find insights, suggestions of theories and of critiques of theories, on virtually every page. There is no doubt that the history of philosophy is a worthwhile field of study, and that Austin himself was a fascinating figure in that history. But it is also worth being reminded that, just as Searle says in his chapter, Austin remains worthy of study as a source of philosophical insight and not only for historical reasons.

Notes

1. I am compelled to say ‘the beginnings of’, because, apart from the – fairly small number of – papers he published in his lifetime, the body of writings left to us by Austin is provisional and incomplete, and would almost certainly not have been published in the form in which they now exist had he lived longer.
2. Cavell says: ‘in general, to tell what is and isn’t English, and to tell whether what is said is properly used, the native speaker can rely on his own nose.’ (ibid.).
This is the text of a speech given by J.L. Austin’s sister, Ann Lendrum, at the conference dinner of the J.L. Austin Centenary Conference at Lancaster University on 5 April 2011.

First I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak on this very special occasion of the centenary of my brother’s birth in 1911. He still lives so vividly in my memory that it is hard to believe that his death was over 50 years ago. I should like to thank the University and Brian Garvey in particular for so opportunely arranging this occasion.

My brother was the second son of G.L. Austin, who was an architect in his father’s firm of Austin and Paley – a prestigious firm responsible for most of the churches and civic buildings in Lancaster.

The Austins were a family of five: three boys and two girls. Three of the oldest, including my brother, were born at 4 Hillside, Lancaster – the house which on Thursday is to have a centenary plaque unveiled. By 1920 the family had moved to ‘Fairlight’ on the desirable Haverbreaks estate in Lancaster. Later this house was bought by the University of Lancaster and renamed ‘Emmanuel House’. It was used for visiting professors and the like. I was the only one of the family born there, in 1920. My brother and the three older siblings initially shared a governess in Lancaster with the Helme family who lived just across the road from us. She was called Elsie Shaw. My brother never forgot her excellent introduction to ‘learning’ and unfailingly gave her credit for many years afterwards for the soundness of his educational grounding.

In 1921 the whole family moved to St Andrews in Scotland where our father had been appointed as secretary to the council of the famous girls’ Public School of St Leonards. From 1921 onwards for 50 years ‘Kilrule’ in St Andrews was the family home. It was a large four-storied Victorian house right on the seafront and only a stone’s throw from the famous Royal and Ancient Golf Club. My brother, now 10, continued his education at a small private boys’ prep school just along the road, appropriately run by Mr Lemaitre.
From there he won a scholarship to Shrewsbury School where his elder brother was already a pupil. He was soon to join his two-year older brother’s class, which could have caused problems – but if it did I never heard about them!

I was nine years younger than my brother and he had an enormous influence on my life, devoting a large amount of time to his young sister. He was always a kind and gentle mentor and a wonderfully amusing companion. There was inevitably lots of teasing, but it was never cruel, and his razor sharp wit was quite without malice.

He was undoubtedly a ‘polymath’, but I prefer to use the simpler term ‘all rounder’. Polymath conjures a vision of pomp and bombast which could not have been less like my brother. In addition to Greek and Latin, he spoke fluent French and German, and had a good working knowledge of Russian, Spanish and Italian.

He was a superb draughtsman and could draw anything you wanted – but particularly figures. He played first violin in a small local musical group. He was a good average sportsman, excelling at ‘Fives’ for which he got a Half-Blue at Oxford. I personally benefited from some intensive cricket coaching!

From Shrewsbury he won a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, and thereafter was elected a Fellow of All Souls College. It was there he developed a firm friendship with Isaiah Berlin. The latter kept a large cardboard cut-out of an Austin car on his mantelpiece with an inscription below: ‘Watch out or Austin will overtake ya.’ They both thoroughly enjoyed the philosophical debates which took place on Saturday mornings at All Souls during term time.

The outbreak of World War II in 1939 found him as a don at Magdalen College, but in July 1940 he was called up, and in November 1940 drafted into the Intelligence Corps. Obviously nobody had the least idea what his job entailed because, of course, the Official Secrets Act was in force. However, a few years ago my nephew arranged for us to visit one of the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) who had worked closely with him for much of the war. She described how she had been one of a team of five in the Combined Intelligence section. This team, consisting of my brother as leader, plus two fellow officers and two ATS typists, were forever changing their office for security reasons – each new location more cramped than the one before. Added to that, the office was thick with smoke as all of them except my brother were chain smokers. She was lyrical in her praise of my brother and let slip that the rest of them would have done absolutely anything for him. The little team had two basic tasks: to produce weekly intelligence digests, called
‘Martian Reports’, outlining German troop dispositions and defences; and to produce a handy but detailed guidebook outlining the human and physical geography of the invasion area. My brother called the latter ‘Invade Mecum’, which was a clever double take of a booklet given to all new boys at Shrewsbury School – ‘Vade Mecum’ – which they had to carry with them on all occasions.

‘Invade Mecum’, which was distributed to platoon commanders and above, ensured that the invading troops had a very accurate guide to local administrative structures and terrain while the intelligence contained in the ‘Martian Reports’ ensured that the location of every German regiment, battery, gun range, etc., was known to the invaders. Between them, the two documents probably saved many thousands of Allied lives.

In the crucial work up to D-Day, my brother’s team – now hugely expanded in numbers – worked closely with Eisenhower’s staff at SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force). A month or so before D-Day, the team was split in two: my brother remained in charge, but his section concentrated on the disposition of enemy troops, while the other, under his deputy Major Beattie, dealt with the disposition of beach obstacles. Until the last moments before the invasion, they were still processing incoming intelligence, and it was a thoroughly nerve-wracking time for the whole team. By the end of the war, my brother had been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and was present when the German Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Colonel General Jodl, surrendered unconditionally at Reims in May 1945. The Americans awarded my brother the Legion of Merit (given only for exceptionally meritorious conduct), the French the Croix de Guerre, and the British the OBE (Military).

After the war he returned to Magdalen and in 1952 was appointed White’s Professor of Philosophy at Corpus Christi at the young age of 41. In the 50s he travelled twice to the States, firstly to Harvard and later to Berkeley. He enjoyed these visits so much that he was sorely tempted to move permanently to America, but the complications of moving abroad when his four children were still being educated over here proved too much of an obstacle. He was very relaxed in America and was, I think, glad to escape for a bit from the internecine academic strife which prevailed at that time in Britain. This, I know, he found very upsetting – it was so against his own nature, which was unassuming, friendly and non-aggressive.

He returned from America in early 1959 and by early December was diagnosed with lung cancer. By February 1960, just a few weeks short of
his 49th birthday, he was dead – a legend in his own time and a much loved brother and father.

Sadly, one of the last things he said to me before he died was: ‘You know Ann, I think I should have devoted such talents as I have to something more practical than philosophy.’

I am no philosopher, but I really do believe that my brother was one of the great thinkers of the twentieth century. This conference in honour of the centenary of his birth in Lancaster surely reflects the ongoing legacy of his contribution to the development of thought – even 50 years after his death.

Long may he be remembered.