Where's the disagreement? The significance of the ordinary in Austin and Ayer

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

J. L. Austin is commonly known as an 'ordinary language philosopher'. Ordinary language philosophy, in turn, is generally known as a philosophy of language which employs everyday language as a standard of correctness – an arbiter between meaningful speech and nonsense. By means of a return to the somewhat heated debate between Austin and A. J. Ayer, this paper challenges this picture. I argue that if there is one philosophical tradition that encourages us to turn 'ordinary language' into a problem for philosophy, it is ordinary language philosophy. There is no simple instruction of the form 'If you are philosophically troubled, then turn to ordinary language and you will see the true sense' coming out of Austin's work (rightly construed).

1. Introduction

'Ordinary language philosophy' is still surprisingly often described as a form (an outdated form) of philosophy of language according to which our everyday language functions as a standard of correctness – an arbiter between meaningful speech and philosophical rubbish. It has been accused of treating the ordinary as untouchable – as if 'the ordinary' constituted a foundational segmentation of language, in which philosophical problems are absent and linguistic sense unproblematic.

Already in 1953 Bertrand Russell fired his well-known attack on it in 'The Cult of Common Usage'. Here, he claims that ordinary language philosophy should be rejected '[b]ecause it is insincere … it makes philosophy trivial … it makes almost inevitable the perpetuation among philosophers of the muddle-headedness they have taken over from common sense' (Russell, 2009: 109). W. V. O. Quine makes a similar diagnosis, arguing that there are philosophers who treat ordinary language as 'sacrosanct'. Quine's way of solving a philosophical problem is to dispense with usages of language that creates philosophical problems and replace them with more precise (supposedly so) expressions. This practice is commonly known as 'explication' and it is the Quinean way of showing that a particular philosophical problem is 'purely verbal'. Although Quine likes the idea of showing how problems in philosophy often are purely verbal, he loathes the idea of ordinary language philosophy. 'In steadfast laymanship they deplore them [explications] as departures from ordinary usage, failing to appreciate that it is precisely by showing how to circumvent the problematic parts of ordinary usage that we show the problems to be purely verbal' (Quine, 1960: 261).

Unlike his supposed philosophical sibling 'the logical positivist', the ordinary language philosopher appears to suggests no alternative language, which supposedly means (so it is often argued anyway) that such a philosopher must be a linguistic conservative whose *only* argument is that all uses of language that are not ordinary are deviant and (therefore!) not proper

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language, if not entirely meaningless. The core of this kind of accusation is that the ordinary language philosopher simply accepts everyday language, employs that meaning normatively as a standard of correctness, and does not appear to think that ordinary language too is full of faults, of dubious metaphysical assumptions. This view is discernable also in Jacques Derrida's philosophy: '"everyday language" is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system' (Derrida, 1981: 19). The step from philosophical conservatism to general naiveté is easily bridged. This is how Herbert Marcuse's well-known and influential bridge looks:

> Austin's contemptuous treatment of the alternative to the common use of words, and his defamation of what 'we think up in our armchairs of an afternoon,'; Wittgenstein's assurance that 'philosophy leaves everything as it is'— such statements exhibits, to my mind, academic sado-masochism, self-humiliation, and self-denunciation of the intellectual whose labor does not issue in scientific, technical or like achievements (Marcuse, 1964: 173).

And so, a philosophy rooted in the ordinary becomes both unphilosophical and dangerous. If this was true it wouldn't be hard to see that the marginalization of ordinary language philosophy is quite justified.

It is probably true that these kinds of criticism at times have been rightfully directed against some self-confessed ordinary language philosophers. Be that as it may, I aim to show that we go wrong if we approach J. L Austin's philosophy in light of the image of it that is discernable in the above mentioned reactions. In what follows, I will not attempt to sort out how the above mentioned philosophers differ in relation to Austin's version of ordinary language philosophy. They serve here only to make clear that the image of ordinary language philosophy as a form of philosophy relying on everyday language to supply clear and philosophically unproblematic sense that is supposed to be employed normatively in philosophy, is a widespread image. *That image*, however, is one that I aim to contest.

By means of a return to the somewhat heated debate between Austin and A. J. Ayer, I will show that one of the main strengths of Austin's work – and one of the main lessons we should learn from this tradition of thought – is that the ordinary is *not* a philosophically neutral zone and that our everyday lives in language are far more complex, nuanced, rich, opaque, than philosophers often are prone to think. As will become clear from Ayer's response to it accounted for below, *Sense and Sensibilia* may appear a rather odd text, perhaps specifically in tone.[1] I, however, will try to show that there is a sense in which it is exemplary. Part of its oddness is precisely that Austin does not enter the debate in the expected ways, but forces us to ask why the debate has taken the shape it has. This is not, I think, an 'oddness' that concerns only *Sense and Sensibilia*, but constitutes a central feature of the spirit of ordinary language philosophy in general (rightly construed, of course). And even though this paper is restricted to a reading of *Sense and Sensibilia*, the lines of thought highlighted here should be seen as clearing the path to more fruitful reflections on the everyday and ordinary language.[2] At its most general level, I think that *Sense and Sensibilia* can help us see that if there is *one* philosophical tradition that encourages us to turn 'ordinary language' into a *problem* for philosophy – that struggles to make us see how immensely complex the everyday is – it is ordinary language philosophy. And so, there is no simple instruction of the form 'If you are philosophically troubled, then turn to ordinary language and you will see the true sense' coming out of Austin's work (rightly construed, of course).

2. What Ayer heard Austin say

I will begin by accounting for Ayer's response to Austin's criticism. The aim is to bring into view how the remarks of an ordinary language philosopher are *heard* from the perspective of someone who is convinced that the image I just sketched of ordinary language philosophy is correct, and clarify what Austin's criticism looks like if approached in the light of this flourishing image. Needless to say, Ayer felt more or less completely unaffected by Austin's criticism.

Ayer thinks of Austin's criticism as beside the point and unfair. 'Though he says that he chose these books for their merits rather than their deficiencies, he sets about my book in a rather scornful way. It may even be questioned whether he is scrupulously fair' (Ayer, 1967: 117). Ayer is right about this much at least: an ordinary language philosopher of Austin's kind does not enter into dialog in the way that he is expected to do by an opponent of Ayer's bent. So one may say that there is a sense in which Ayer's sentiments are rightfully called for: Austin does not want to play his game.

Ayer's theory of sense-data builds on what is known as 'the argument from illusion'. Its basic structure is this: The 'plain man' generally, in our ordinary everyday life, believes that he perceives material things – such as chairs, cigarettes, coffee cups, and tables. But we are *at times* deceived by our senses which means that it is *not always* true that we perceive material things when we think we do so. Nevertheless, if I think I see a material thing when there is nothing there or if I perceive a thing wrongly, my perception still had some kind of content that I judged. Typical examples here are hallucinations, mistaking a wax-figure at Madame Tussaud's for a real person, cases when perceptions make things appear different than they are (large

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[1] One clear example here is G. Warnock, who edited (well, one may almost say 'wrote') *Sense and Sensibilia*. Even though Warnock knew the work through and through, and thinks that the book is 'perfectly clear, and in some sense not difficult', he still feels the need to come clean and admit that *Sense and Sensibilia* is a 'strange' text that will give rise to many questions such as: '[W]hat it is for? What does it do?' in Warnock (1989): 12).

[2] I think of my reading of *Sense and Sensibilia* as an addition to the contemporary reevaluation of Ordinary Language Philosophy that we can see expressed in e.g. Baz (2012), Conant (2011), Crary (2007), Laugier (2013) and Travis (2004) – all in various ways influenced by Stanley Cavell's groundbreaking efforts to display the depths and seriousness involved in Austin's (and Wittgenstein's) work.