

Sense and Sensibilia

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Modern academic philosophers may be a breed apart, combining awesome sophistication with startling naivety. Maybe this is the legacy of G.E.Moore, combining common sense with awesome pedantry. The book in question is not really a book in the sense of being the more or less exact reproduction of a sequence of characters put down by a author (or a combination of such), but a reconstruction based on scattered notes and remembrances of lectures given over the years. Maybe in this sense it does not differ too much from the classical philosophical texts which have been handed down to us from antiquity¹. Austin did not publish much preferring to instruct the young rather than address his community of peers. This was still possibly in academic life until the early 60's. And by the time it was not, Austin was already dead, making a quick and unexpected exit not yet 49.

The book (or rather the lecture series) is a refutation of views held by Ayer on perception. As usual when it comes to disputes between modern academic philosophers, the differences seem minute, but are made to look momentous, and explicated by a pedantic attention to words and shades of meaning which tend to the uninitiated to become rather tedious. But is is all academic anyway.

Of what mortal sin is Ayer guilty of? It is not quite clear, at least not from a cursory reading, but Ayers seems to mean that we do not perceive the world directly- das Ding an sich of Kant, but instead we take in sense-data. A crucial observation being that there is no difference between a veridical sensation and an illusory, or even a delusional one. What does Ayer really mean? Before we can discuss whether it is true or not we need to make sense of it. The careful philosopher, especially if he is focused on language and its subtleties, reminds me of Achilles trying to catch the turtle. The naive on-looker may think that he will have no problem, after all his mind is sharp and swift, and there is only a matter of time before he will have caught his prey. But before he gets anywhere he needs to establish some basic fact, and before he can do that he needs to attend to a preliminary fact, and so on *ad infinitum* this seems to be the curse of the philosopher, the only remedy to which being the plunge into common sense (thus combining exasperating sophistication with surprising naivety). It is true that we may not see the material thing, but only partake of its visual appearance, but what else could we expect? We may not see things directly, but if we cannot see things directly at all, the qualifier 'directly' is redundant. When does it make sense? It makes sense when we say we see a face directly as opposed to seeing it in a mirror, but of course this is not the sense of which Ayer is thinking. We express thoughts by language, but if the language is confused and meaningless can we infer that there really is any thought present at all, Austin seems to mean. What does this notion of sense-data involve at all? What does it clarify? Is what Ayer is proposing some

¹ Are the dialogues of Plato really in the form he wrote them down, or are they too later transcriptions of oral lectures? Maybe close textual analysis may decide the question.

kind of pointless tautology, equivalent to we not seeing material things but only taking in their visual appearance. Such quibbles may exasperate the outsider, because after all Austin is not taking issue with Ayer on an important and classical philosophical problem, he is simply trying to show that Ayer is not doing anything at all, leaving the interesting problem aside. What is Austin's view on it? We are not given much guidance. Ayer is a fool, that seems to be the interesting issue. This may make sense to Ayer and Austin going at each other at high-table drinking claret and smoking pipes.

The interesting thing in the lectures is not so much the quarrel with Ayer, on which it is ostensibly centered, but on the subtleties of language, which is Austin's main concern. He takes issue against Ayer and other philosophers who seem to think that language is formal, that we can redefine our terms at our discretion and use it in novel ways to suit our purposes. To Austin this is arrogance and indicative of an offensive disregard of truth, to claim that everything is true if we wish it. Austin takes language seriously and nothing to be tampered with thoughtlessly. Language is in fact as much of a part of our heritage as our bodies, having developed independently. Austin does not exploit this metaphor, but it could be useful anyway to develop it. We may marvel at the intricacy of our body, how the different organs work and interact. This is indeed the major concern of medicine to try and explain the functions of what is ours but yet so largely out of our control. In the same way we have been given language with all its subtleties, and we should do well to leave it alone, not to try to fashion it to our purposes. Language is in a way wiser than us, and not anything we can control as little as the inner workings of our body and their relation to our physical health. Just as men of medicine learn about the workings of the body, we should keep close watch on our instinctive use of language and try to discern meanings by careful operation rather than fix them by fiat. This indeed, I guess, can serve as a summary of Austin and the entire school of analytic philosophy centered in Oxford, focused on language as a phenomenon, rather than metaphysical speculation. Language not in the sense of the linguist, who is interested in its various manifestations, but language as to its deeper universal structure, its potentials and its limitations. Of course there is a certain paradox in all of this, because the only tool to study language is language itself (just as logic is studied by logic).

What Austin writes on language is clever if not profound, it is sharp but not systematic. It is pursued somehow haphazardly, when a philosophical controversy suddenly points to some special feature of language, then it is to be looked under the microscope and shown to reveal far more subtlety than one would originally have thought. Such random insights make for entertaining reading.

One important thing is that we do not learn and understand words via dictionary definitions² but through usage. Thus the proper way of learning the meaning of a word is to observe how it is used, and in as many different contexts as possible, because different words may indeed be synonymous in most contexts but differ crucially in an exceptional one, and as always it is the exceptional case which is illuminating³. Of course the method has a major weakness, it is subjective, or at least seems to be subjective, because the

² Any dictionary is bound to lead to circularity, something most people realize on unprompted reflection some time during their lives

³ takes such words such as 'looks', 'appears', 'seems', they may appear (look, seem?) synonymous,

ultimate judge for correct usage seems to be our gut reaction. The remarkable thing is though that our gut reaction seems to be deeper than our grammatical and also duplicable, people competent in a certain language tend to agree on meaning, if not always the formal points of usage. One of the applications of a careful study of language is to solve, or rather dispose of, philosophical puzzles, which are considered to be the result of spurious use of language.

What does Austin really have in mind? Take the example of the color yellow. If someone is presented with a yellow teacup, a yellow ball, a yellow house, a yellow sun, a yellow lemon, a man with a yellow skin, and asked what they have in common, he may or may not come up with the color yellow, but if he does or it is pointed out to him he will surely agree and recognize that yellow is an attribute common to all of them. But instead present him with a cricket bat, a cricket referee, cricket lawn, a cricket critic, a cricket paper, and ask him what all those things have in common, he would not be able to get the point if he expected that cricket would be a similar kind of word as yellow and he would not be able to detect in all of those objects a common attribute. This is clever, and of course also somewhat silly if taken too literally, the point that he is wanting to make should be obvious. Similarly we can ask what is meant by 'real' as opposed to genuine, proper, and all kinds of temporary synonyms. What is a real duck? It depends on what we expect. A duck which is not real, may of course be perfectly real if not as a duck. It might be an animal closely resembling a duck, and we need the word real to make the distinction, or it could be a decoy, or the picture of a real duck, but not by itself a real duck. And so on. Yet, real has a 'real' meaning, a meaning we need to express, although it is of course very subtle. But as always with language, our direct observation transcends our theories. We may very well come up with very reasonable rules concerning some feature of language only to recognize directly when those are being violated by examples we may have never seen before, but yet somehow 'remember'⁴. In a sense our relation to language is similar to our relation to perception in the material world, ultimately we trust our immediate impression. (Does this mean that the world we build up by perception is a kind of language? Just as we are not born speaking, we are not born seeing. We learn to interpret our perceptions and construct out of them meaningful entities similarly to how we learn to make meaningful sense of intrinsically meaningless combinations of sounds⁵).

Austin is sophisticated, but he is also somehow naive. He seems to take for granted that we perceive the world as 'it is' and any statement to the contrary is just a bit of sophistry involving redundant concepts such as 'sense-data'. Ayers insistence on verification of what our sense-data indicates to us, he finds pointless. The simplest fact, like seeing a pig, would in principle involve an indefinite number of checks, each of them similarly

and in many situations they may be used interchangeably. But are they? 'The hill looks steep', is a kind of general statement involving the judgment of your vision. 'The hill appears steep' often means that you are specifying a point of view, perhaps by standing just in front of it by the brook; and finally 'the hill seems steep' maybe the result not so much of a visual inspection as noting that you have to change gears as you climb it in your car.

⁴ c.f. Platos explanation as learning being some kind of remembering.

⁵ This seems to be Chomskys view, who explicitly compares the way we acquire language to the way we acquire the ability to make visual sense.

involving an indefinite number of verifications, and so another infinite regress. If so we can never be sure of anything, and if Austin sees a pig, that is it, it would be stupid to deny it. It is incorrigible, an irreducible datum, the kind of which make up our world, and whose systematic doubt would throw us into complete chaos. This is of course common sense, but do we need philosophers to preach common sense? Is it not the kind of sense which is common to us all, and independent of instruction? Austin is indeed naive when he actually contends that seeing is believing, especially when he does not seem to hold that merely hearing or smelling would have the same authority. (If he sees a pig he is convinced, there is no need to look for further evidence, the fact is clear. On the other hand if he would merely be hearing a pig, he may consent that there may be some latitude for doubt. Why is seeing so much more authoritative than other senses? What about blind people? And dogs? Certainly a dog would not believe anything until it can smell it.)

The truth of sentence does not make sense in isolation, it must be embedded in a context before we can judge it, and the context is of course always implicit, and never part of the sentence. Here of course Austin is right, and it is an elementary observation that does not seem always to be fully appreciated. Similarly with verification. As Popper teaches us the degree of verification depends on the situation. We can indeed go to arbitrary lengths, but how far we are prepared to go depends on the motivation brought about by the particular situation⁶. If someone asks me how many fingers I have on my left hand, Popper says, I would say five without taking it out of my pocket; but of course we can conceive of situations in which we would actually take it out and count. (Say if the life of a friend would depend on it, Popper proposes.). This pragmatic notion seems to have escaped Austin. A pity, philosophical pragmatism, as suggested by Peirce and Popper, is a very successful (some would say seductive) way of reconciling philosophical quests with common sense.

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⁶ This is very analogous to degrees of accuracy. We can never measure anything with absolute accuracy, the point is always to try for the accuracy which the situation demands. Absolute accuracy is a metaphysical concept never achieved in practice, but without this ideal metaphysical notion, our philosophy of practical accuracy outlined above would not make sense.