

*J. L. Austin: Philosopher and D-Day Intelligence Officer*, by M. W. Rowe. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. 660+xx.

M. W. Rowe's outstanding book is the first full-dress biography of the philosopher J. L. (John Langshaw) Austin, who died in 1960 aged 48. During his comparatively short life, Austin made significant and widely-known contributions to philosophy, dominating post-war philosophy at Oxford—then philosophy's epicentre—as White's Professor of Moral Philosophy, and was just beginning to spread his influence into the United States, especially via Harvard and Berkeley. As Rowe details, he made at least equally significant—but predictably less widely-known—contributions to World War II military intelligence. According to another high-ranking intelligence officer, Bill Williams, “[Austin] more than anybody was responsible for the life-saving accuracy of the D Day Intelligence.” (327; unattributed references are to Rowe 2023.) Rowe's book provides illuminating and integrated, near exhaustive treatments of three facets of Austin's exceptional career, each occupying roughly a third of the text: Austin's philosophical development and contributions; his exceptional military career; and his largely familial personal life.

Austin was a private man who published little. Much of his philosophical influence arose through personal interactions, especially during teaching and discussion. To uncover Austin's life, Rowe assembles an extraordinary body of evidence, including colleagues published reminiscences, interviews with friends and colleagues, letters to, from, and about Austin, military records, minutes of meetings, and a wide variety of secondary sources, and ably builds his narrative on its basis. The level of detail is often staggering, for example in chapters on Austin's family history and schooling (chapters 1–3) and throughout the chapters on Austin's wartime activities (chapters 8–20), and yet Rowe provides the reader with a sure-footed and engaging path through the intricacies. Reading the book provides one with a clear sense of Austin's life and work and their place in the surrounding sweep of history.

Austin specialists and interested bystanders are likely to be aware that Austin contributed to World War II intelligence operations. However, Rowe's book does all interested parties the welcome service of providing the first complete assembly, explanation, and evaluation of the details of Austin's role (chapters 9–20). Perhaps most striking here is the combined depth and breadth of Austin's involvement. As the various British intelligence operations expanded through the course of the war, Austin's involvement became increasingly high-level and managerial and yet, throughout, he retained a keen

sense, and control, of specifics, with especial proficiency at interpreting aerial photographs. Rowe's investigations show, in often minute detail, how Austin's own labours, and those of his ever-growing teams, contributed significantly to the successes of Britain's North African campaigns, its locating and disabling of Germany's V-weapons, and, most critically, its joint preparations, with the United States, for the D-Day landings. Naturally, there were occasional slips, and Rowe's evaluations of Austin's military activities are careful and judicious; the overall picture that emerges shows Austin exhibiting exceptional acumen, at all levels of activity.

Turning now from intelligence operations to philosophy, readers who are broadly familiar with Austin's work will nonetheless learn from Rowe's patient and accessible expositions as well as from his detailed accounts of various phases in Austin's philosophical development, all placed securely in their contexts.

Austin was most famously a leading exponent of what came to be known as Ordinary Language Philosophy, an approach which seeks to make progress through careful attention to fine nuances of language and its use in context. Austin's 1946 essay, 'Other Minds,' on our thought and talk about knowledge, and his 1950s lectures attacking the claim that we never really, or directly, see material objects—published posthumously (1962)—were the most important fruits of this approach, although both also exploit considerations that aren't straightforwardly linguistic. The approach figured widely in Austin's work and in that of other Oxford philosophers during this period, including Gilbert Ryle's and P. F. Strawson's. Indeed, the approach dominated post-War Oxford philosophy until around the end of Austin's life, with ripples extending into the United States, through the works of Stanley Cavell and others. The approach even attained wider cultural resonance, through Susan Sontag's 1964 *Parisian Review* piece, 'Notes on "Camp"' (532–3).

A further important application was Austin's work on speech acts—for example, acts of telling, promising, naming, warning, or persuading. Here, Austin's work took a distinctively theoretical turn as he attempted to classify various things we do with words. The most important categories were what Austin called *locutionary acts* (roughly, intentionally uttering sentences with their specific meanings), *illocutionary acts* (acts like telling or warning which are performed *in* uttering sentences, hence latin *il*), and *perlocutionary acts* (acts like persuading or scaring, which are performed *by* uttering sentences, hence latin *per*). Austin sought to illuminate speech acts by considering various ways in which they can succeed or fail. Importantly, success or failure goes beyond truth or falsity—evaluations most closely associated with stating, the primary focus of prior philosophical work—and includes the sorts of *abuses* and *misfires* associated with insincerity (a form of abuse) or inadequacy of stage-setting (a

basis of misfires). The culmination of this work, in lectures published posthumously as *How to Do Things with Words*, has had a deep and lasting effect on philosophy and adjacent disciplines, especially linguistics and sociology (chapter 29).

Austin's advocacy of the Ordinary Language approach plausibly reflects the persisting influence of John Cook Wilson (79–81), a philosophical predecessor of Austin's at Oxford, as well as Austin's deep and comprehensive engagement with the works of Plato and Aristotle (112–130; 125–8). Plato and Aristotle both attached great importance to ordinary language and the commonplace attitudes we use it to express. Moreover, the approach calls on the specific sets of skills that Austin, and other Oxford philosophers, honed through careful engagement with ancient texts. (Rowe suggests that the title of Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* was a play on that of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (444); a non-exclusive alternative it that it mirrors Aristotle's same-titled work.) Austin's early engagement with Leibniz plausibly figures here too (see, e.g., Wiggins 2001: 12 fn14), although Rowe plays down his influence (chapters 7–8). Rowe also helpfully draws attention to Austin's early reading of C. I. Lewis's *Mind and the World Order* and his consequent interest in American Pragmatism, which championed the centrality of action to human psychology and knowledge (118–124).

With less plausibility, Rowe attributes a significant role in Austin's development to Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), despite consistent denials by Austin and his closest colleagues, and based largely on some similarities between one of Austin's early essays and a manuscript reporting some of Wittgenstein's work that was circulating at Oxford during the same period (published later as Wittgenstein 1969) (145–150). One compromise position would be to allow that Austin had read Wittgenstein's manuscript, and even engaged with it, but to deny that this engagement made a significant difference to Austin's own, already-formed positive views. As well as prioritising earlier influences, including that of American Pragmatism as background to *both* thinkers' work, and the denials of those in a good position to know, this compromise position would also align with Austin's unfair dismissals of Wittgenstein's work as unoriginal (145).

By contrast with his contributions to military intelligence and philosophy, Austin's personal life was unexceptional. He admitted that he lacked “middle distances” (169) in personal relationships. His close family called him ‘Dommie,’ following a young sibling's mispronunciation of ‘John.’ (24) Almost everyone else knew him only, and barely, as ‘Austin’ (“...in America, many of the graduates and younger faculty members in Austin's circle called him ‘John’, but when some of them later came to stay in Oxford, Austin made clear that this practice could not continue.” (523)). His family and a very small number of close

friends found him warm and occasionally silly. Others found him distant, even cold, and he could be prickly. Austin's renowned wittiness sustains a handful of anecdotes; conspiring with his flinty professionalism (611), it also resulted in occasional animosities. However, the overall story of his personal life is pleasingly drab. He was a shy man, most at home at home. He loved his wife and family deeply. Professional colleagues respected him, with P. F. Strawson describing him as "one of the kindest men in the university" (484) and the head porter of Austin's Oxford college as "the real thing: a real gentleman and a genuine scholar" (610); but for the most part, professional colleagues liked him only "timidly" (611).

The split between Austin's public and private personas is indicated well by the response of Austin's sisters to reading an obituary by one of Austin's Oxford colleagues: "We didn't know this man at all." (611) The reader of Rowe's exceptional biography cannot say quite the same.

#### *References*

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GUY LONGWORTH  
University of Warwick, UK  
[g.h.longworth@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:g.h.longworth@warwick.ac.uk)