

Mark William Rowe. *J. L. Austin: Philosopher and D-Day Intelligence Officer.* Oxford University Press 2023. 660 pp. \$38.95 USD (Hardcover 9780198707585); \$15.00 USD (eBook 9780191017223).

This is the first full-length intellectual and critical biography of J.L. Austin (1911-1960). Its main aim is to reconstruct not just Austin's influential philosophical career, but also his contribution to the war effort. It's a smashing success.

Though sold as a "trade" book – it contains lots of photos, something not usually found in an academic text from Oxford – all the requisite rich scholarly apparatus is nonetheless present. There is an exceedingly thorough bibliography, an excellent index of people, and a detailed table of contents. The author draws impressively on letters, military records, minutes of meetings, and other archival material. Rowe also makes excellent use of published reminiscences by colleagues (e.g., from Isaiah Berlin and Thomas Nagel) and he did plenty of personal interviews.

The monumental tome is divided into three parts. The first and the last are mostly about Austin *qua* philosopher. Part I: Pre-War starts all the way back in the early 18th century, cataloguing some of Austin's salient ancestors, and tracing his childhood and early philosophical development. Part III: Post War describes Austin's heyday in the 1950s in America and at Oxford. It concludes with his untimely death at 48 from lung cancer. Part II: War, containing a dozen chapters, focuses on Austin's role in military intelligence. Philosophers had been aware that Austin did such work, but Rowe uncovers the astonishing details, including Austin's invaluable research in preparation for the D-Day invasion and his unmatched skill interpreting aerial photographs. Rowe sums up this aspect as follows:

"In the Second World War [Austin's] contribution was outstanding. It is likely he spotted the German move into North Africa; he supplied incredibly accurate Intelligence to the Western Desert Force and the 8th Army; there is good evidence to suggest he was one of the first to recognize the 'ski-sites' in France as V1 sites; he built up his coastal Intelligence section from an inefficient four or five in 1942 to a vital and mightily efficient three hundred or more in 1944; his Intelligence analyses made the choice of D-Day beaches inevitable; he saved tens of thousands of lives on D-Day itself and the campaign which followed; and he guided the Allied armies in Europe until the instruments of surrender were signed" (612).

One could equally sum up his contributions this way: Austin was awarded an OBE, a Croix de



Guerre and a US Legion of Merit for this service!

Being so lengthy, albeit appropriately so, I can only describe four especially admirable features of the book's philosophical contents.

First, it uncovers Austin's largely unheralded intellectual influences, both early and late: Socrates and Aristotle; Leibniz; Cook Wilson (a renowned Oxford Realist and critic of British Idealism); American Pragmatism, including especially C.I. Lewis; and the later Wittgenstein. (Myself, I'm a bit suspicious of the last one. It has been suggested to me that Rowe is a mite too uncritical of the later Wittgenstein; and, because of that starting point, is insufficiently patient with Austin. That might be right. I'll revisit the issue below.) I have also long wondered whether Austin was influenced by Thomas Reid, whose work so anticipates themes from Austin. Unfortunately, Rowe doesn't directly address the question. The closest he comes is this pointed observation: "Wittgenstein was a product of Central European Romanticism, while Austin was a product of the English and Scottish Enlightenment" (557). Reid, of course, was very central to the latter.

Second, the book rightly details the enormous impact that Austin's war service had upon his conception of philosophical methodology/practice. Especially post-1945, Austin thought that philosophers should take a team approach just as engineering firms and intelligence agencies do (413): divide a philosophical problem into manageable sub-parts, assign those parts to appropriate squad members, have them work diligently on what may seem, in isolation, to be unrewarding puzzles, and report back with results. His famous Saturday Morning meetings at Oxford put this approach into practice.

Third, Rowe makes clear that Austin "helped to create a hybrid of philosophy and linguistics" (614). In particular, Austin was by no means an anti-theory or anti-empirical philosopher (as one might take Wittgenstein to be), as his book *How To Do Things With Words* (1962) makes especially clear. The new hybrid's slogan might be Austin's quip that "importance isn't important; truth is" (415).

Fourth and finally, Rowe does an extraordinary job of explaining and evaluating Austin's philosophical positions. Let me illustrate with his perfectly judicious concluding paragraph on the topic of Austin's book-length confrontation with A.J. Ayer and sense data:

"How should *Sense and Sensibilia* be assessed overall? It is undoubtedly funny, mordant, and readable, and its attack on the argument from illusion has been deservedly influential. But although it severely damaged the sense-datum theory, which in certain places in the

1930s and 1940s was the orthodoxy, it did not succeed in killing off the theory altogether. Three minor reasons for failure are Austin's tendency to engage in linguistic analysis for its own sake, some unnecessary dogmatism, and occasional conspicuous unfairness to his opponents. The main reason, however, is that he largely avoids looking at the more profound reasons for believing in sense-data – arguments prompted by scepticism and science – which are often the real reasons why his opponents hold the views they do" (454).

No review of *J.L. Austin* would be complete without mentioning some of the fun, gossipy, personal trivia which Rowe reveals. J.L. Austin and Jane Austen, despite the different spellings of their surnames, do indeed share ancestors. The former's education in Classics left him unprepared to engage with Logical Positivism, and he lamented his lack of scientific and mathematical education. In fact, Austin tried to address the lacunae by teaching himself advanced mathematics and mathematical logic. His family and close friends referred to the distant, distinguished don using his childhood nickname, 'Dommie', while everyone else just called him 'Austin'. His wife Jean Austin (née Coutts), a gifted thinker in her own right, roomed at various points with Philippa Foot, Iris Murdoch and G.E. Moore. Moreover, Mrs. Austin regularly lunched with Elizabeth Anscombe, even though Anscombe and Austin later came to loathe one another. Relatedly, Austin considered Wittgenstein to be something of a charlatan (411). UC-Berkeley tried mightily to recruit Austin in 1959 – being unable to, they took his advice and hired protégé John Searle instead. Hilary Putnam and Paul Benacerraf helped convince Austin of the usefulness of theoretical linguistics; and Austin also had numerous conversations with the young Noam Chomsky (including about "sound symbolism" (575)). Finally, Harvard's Department of Philosophy has made available a recording of Austin [lecturing in Sweden in 1959](#).

Let me say a laudatory word about the appropriate audience for the book, before turning to a mild philosophical grumble. *J.L. Austin* can certainly be read profitably by Analytic philosophers and military historians. A philosopher unfamiliar with 20th century Analytic philosophy could also usefully read the book. Concerning its middle third, I found the discussion of Austin's wartime contributions a bit dense at times: Part II is compellingly rich in history, but perhaps of less relevance to a problems-oriented philosopher. Regardless, a non-historian and a militarily naive person can get the gist, just as I did. What's more, Rowe introduces every single figure and piece of technical jargon with a helpful footnote (e.g., his explanation of truth-functional connectives on p. 143 is admirably succinct, clear and accurate). Thus, even the intellectually curious general public,

who might pick up a book by Malcolm Gladwell, Yuval Noah Harari, or Steven Pinker, will be able to enjoy not only the book's overarching military and philosophical narratives, but many of its details.

I only have space to mention one linguistico-philosophical criticism. It's about sentence primacy and so is especially close to my heart. While explaining Frege's notorious Context Principle, according to which "only in the context of a sentence does a word have a meaning" (406), Rowe writes, "It's quite easy to think we often use single words rather than sentences in speech – 'Dog!', for instance – but this overlooks the fact that this use of 'dog' is actually an abbreviated sentence..." (406) But *is* that a fact? I think it's not. As I argued in my *Words and Thoughts*, work in empirical linguistics strongly suggests that such a use of 'Dog!' is "abbreviation/ellipsis" only in the very unhelpful sense that a person who really did use the bare word could instead have opted for a sentence, while conveying the same proposition. Ironically, both Austin in "Performative Utterances" and Strawson in "On Referring" note in passing that a plain-old word or phrase (e.g., 'Bull', 'First prize') can be used to perform a full-blown speech act. In my view, the issue about sub-sentential speech acts is one place, among a few, in which Austin had it right and Rowe gets it wrong.

To conclude, this is a terrific and massively impressive work. It reminds me of Ray Monk's landmark biography of Wittgenstein: exceedingly well-written in general, remarkably accessible for the non-specialist, and told with masses of carefully researched and entertaining detail. The text is an extremely well-judged and exhaustively detailed (potentially *exhaustingly* detailed for some readers) treatment of Austin's philosophical and military contributions. It's by no means a hagiography, but it's nonetheless mostly fair: there were less than half a dozen spots where I found myself agreeing with Austin and disagreeing with Rowe's critiques of him.

I recommend *J.L. Austin* in the highest possible terms.

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