Austin on Conceptual Polarity and Sensation Deception Metaphors

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11.1 Austin’s methodology

J. L. Austin, in his 1947–1959 lectures, published as Sense and Sensibilia (1962), is concerned to expose ways in which language use can mislead us into making assumptions and drawing inferences in support of otherwise indefensible philosophical conclusions. Independently of his critique of once-fashionable sense-data theories, especially in H.H. Price’s Perception (1932), A.J. Ayer’s The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge (1940), and G.J. Warnock’s Berkeley (1953), Austin’s treatment of commonly adopted language reflecting attitudes toward the content and epistemic status of immediate sensation offers valuable insights into the exact role of experience in empirical knowledge.

It is for this reason worthwhile to critically examine Austin’s characteristic method of linguistic philosophical analysis where it is most powerfully at work. In Sense and Sensibilia, lecture II, section 5, Austin patiently works through a variety of metaphors from ordinary speech that have influenced philosophical thinking about the alleged possibility of being doxastically and epistemically deceived in exercising the senses. If we cannot be literally deceived in acts of perception, then there is no argument from the fact of deceptive perception or perceptual deceivability for an ontic difference between percepts and perceived objects. That counter-argument alone would not prove phenomenalism or sense-data theory false, although it should exert significant pressure on the theory to defend itself against the Cartesian objection that percepts are better or worse representations of mind-independent perceived objects, as the possibility of judgment’s being deceived about them might be thought to show.
What Austin finds objectionable in the division between the mind’s perceptual representations of an external reality and the projected state of the world itself is not merely the standardly mentioned difficulty that we who would need to make such judgments are never in a position to compare the condition of a mind-independent reality with the mind’s perceptual representations of the external world. The problem Austin highlights is rather the widespread unexamined philosophical reliance on the possibility of perception’s being literally deceived as grounds for attributing justificatory priority, or greater, even incorrigible certainty, of percepts, ideas, sense-data, or sense-perceptions, over the fallible perception of sensible things, on the supposedly maximally secure epistemic foundations of which some theories of perception have proposed to build the strongest possible experiential theory of knowledge.

Austin concludes that uses of deception cognates in speaking literally of perception are lexically unwarranted. Such applications of the terminology he argues can only be metaphorical, and philosophy takes a ruinous turn when it shifts, however unknowingly, from metaphorical to literal attributions of deception to the facts of perception. The objection, even supposing it to be adequately supported by Austin’s linguistic philosophical analysis, would not invalidate all types of phenomenalism in the philosophy of mind and epistemology. Austin has other things to say about sense-data theory elsewhere in his lectures, and not every word of Sense and Sensibilia is meant to take aim against every form of phenomenalism. Phenomenalism that denies the non-identity of, or ontic distance between, percept or perceptual content and perceived object seems exempt from the particular criticism offered in the passages singled out from Austin’s lecture II, section 5.

Radical reductive phenomenalists like George Berkeley maintain that perceived objects are congeries of ideas. Berkeley in his first philosophical writings revisited later in his career was interested in how the mind perceives distance and three-dimensionality from curved retinal world-representational images. Sense-data theorists who are not also radical phenomenalists are free to consider how the brain constructs its ongoing cinematic representation of the world experienced by a conscious subject over any course of time. They may try to deflect questions about the correctness or otherwise of the mind’s representations of the world by such independent arguments as that we cannot speak of positive correspondences between percepts and perceived objects if our only contact with perceived objects is in and through the medium of our percepts. Austin and radical reductive phenomenalism of Berkeleyan stamp, though not all forms of sense-data theory, are largely