

Krista Lawlor

Assurance: An Austinian View of Knowledge and Knowledge Claims. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 231. ISBN: 978-0-19-965789-6.

J. L. Austin (1911–1960) is probably best known as a respecifier of ordinary language and an early contributor to our understanding of the now-familiar phenomenon of speech acts. But Austin's interest in language went hand-in-hand with a concern to better understand the extra-linguistic side of things, with his linguistic and non-linguistic views meant to be mutually supporting. A case in point, and the subject of Krista Lawlor's rich and rewarding new book, are Austin's complementary views on knowledge, the function of the distinctive speech act of claiming to know a proposition, and the truth-conditional content of such claims. One of the big achievements of Lawlor's book is to mine Austin's works, bringing these various elements together and presenting them in a systematic manner. The other is to display the distinctiveness and power of the resulting view, applying it to perennial epistemological problems (most notably, skepticism) and relating it to currently much-discussed debates (centrally, about the semantics of knowledge attributions) and puzzles (disagreement, the lottery, and others). The result is a welcome contribution to contemporary epistemology, especially given the importance that linguistic considerations have recently assumed in the latter. Throughout, the discussion is clear and insightful and full of fresh thinking about familiar and important issues. I learned from it; other epistemologists will too.

The central thread running through the account on offer is *reasonableness*. Very briefly, what is distinctive about knowledge claims is that *know* is used to give an *assurance*: whereas in asserting that *p* one represents oneself as having adequate reasons for *p*, in claiming knowledge that *p* one represents oneself as having reasons that all others will find epistemically adequate, insofar as they are reasonable. With the latter qualification left implicit, as it usually is, we can speak of *knows* being used to provide “an *unlimited* guarantee,” or to indicate that one has “*conclusive* reasons” for thinking that *p*.

That's what we do with *knows*. And by doing it, we represent ourselves as having, and so as providing to the hearer, “exclusionary reason” to believe *p*, such that they can disregard any reason they might have to disbelieve *p* (18). An assurance, then, is an invitation or prompt to close off (or not to open) certain lines of inquiry; it “is a tool for helping each other get on with our business” (20).¹

1 Thanks largely to Edward Craig (1990), the *role* of ‘know(s)’ (or the corresponding concept) has gotten attention recently—see, e.g., several of the essays in Brown and Gerken (2012).

As to knowledge itself, it is what one represents oneself as having when one offers an assurance. For to know is to have conclusive reasons to believe that *p*—*provided*, that is, that one is considering only reasonable alternatives. So, “knowing *p* puts one in a position to give a sound assurance that *p*” (47). That is, an assurance is sound just when one knows. The more informative and distinctively Austinian claim, however, is that on its own a sentence of the form, ‘S knows that *p*’—indeed, any sentence taken in isolation—cannot be assessed for truth/falsity. The sentence’s “descriptive content” is associated with a situation type, TA. (Following Barwise and Etchemendy, Lawlor refers to this as “the Russellian proposition” (58).) A tokening of that sentence—a particular utterance (or statement)—is true/false only of some demonstrated situation, SA.² When one makes a knowledge claim, one expresses an *Austinian* proposition, < SA, TA>—that SA is of the type TA (57), where TA is something like “S has conclusive reasons [see above] to believe the true claim that *p*” (43, 61). Whether that Austinian proposition is true, of course, will depend on what the reasonable not-*p* alternatives in SA are. And, as “what counts as a reasonable alternative depends on the conversation” (60), Austin ends up endorsing a kind of contextualism about the semantics of knowledge sentences³—on which, more presently.

Such, in outline, are the main features of the Austinian view. Having laid these out (Chapters 1 and 2), Lawlor compares the account with other prominent contemporary theories of the semantics of knowledge attributions (Chapter 3). While some invariantist (non-contextualist) views get some brief attention, the main focus here is on showing that the Austin’s brand of contextualism is able to address a range of objections that have been leveled against more familiar contextualist views. The Austinian view is then applied (Chapter 4) to several principles and puzzles that are the center of much recent attention, including Vogel’s

Some writers have suggested theories thereof very much in the spirit of the assurance view—e.g., Kappel (2010), Kelp (2011), and Rysiew (2012).

- 2 As Austin (1962: 111) at one point puts it: “... if you just take a bunch of sentences ... impeccably formulated in some language or other, there can be no question of sorting them out into those that are true and those that are false; for ... the question of truth and falsehood does not turn only on what a sentence is, nor yet on what it means, but on, speaking very broadly, the circumstances in which it is uttered.” And again: “‘true’ and ‘false’... do not stand for anything simple at all; but only for a general dimension of being a right or proper thing to say as opposed to a wrong thing, in these circumstances, to this audience, for these purposes and with these intentions” (1975: 145).
- 3 So it is somewhat misleading to say, as Lawlor does at several points (e.g., 59, 62, 63), merely that the Austinian view affords context-sensitive *truth values* for knowledge claims—the truth values shift because the *contents* of the Austinian propositions vary.

paradox, the lottery, inductive knowledge, and closure; there is also some preliminary skirmishing here with skepticism. Chapter 5 sharpens the notion of reasonability, which is also at the heart of the Austinian response to radical skepticism (Chapter 6).

As should be obvious from even this brief review, Lawlor's book covers a lot of ground and touches on many central epistemological topics. It is no surprise, then, and hardly a weakness of the book, that it affords many opportunities to raise critical questions. Here, and partly by way of giving fuller sense of some of the book's central ideas, I'll confine myself to pushing on just a couple of points—one concerning the semantic approach, the other concerning the epistemological position.

As Lawlor is well aware, the Austinian idea that it is "*token utterances*, not *sentence-types*, [that] are assessed as true or false" (59, n. 12) is controversial. It is her view, however, that token (or utterance) semantics lets us resolve various puzzles (*ibid.*), and represents an improvement over extant theories—which, if true, gives us indirect reason to think that the approach is correct. For instance, as noted above, Lawlor argues that Austinian semantics is able to address various objections to more familiar contextualist views. On the latter, 'knows' itself is said to be the locus of the context-sensitivity of knowledge claims. On the Austinian view, the relevant context-sensitivity is the perfectly general context-sensitivity of utterance content, where the latter is thought to be semantically central.⁴ One of the main selling points of Austinian semantics, as Lawlor sees it, is that it combines invariantism about the meaning of *knows* with contextualism about the content of knowledge utterances (63, 104). This in turn allows us, she thinks, to combine the strengths of both traditional invariantist and contextualist views.

To illustrate the latter claim, consider one familiar objection to contextualism as it's standardly formulated—namely, that it has difficulty explaining apparent conflict between claims: Ben says "I know"; Dav says "What Ben says is false." These appear to conflict. But if Ben and Dav occupy different contexts—say, because Dav is considering a larger range of not-*p* alternatives—there is no incompatibility here after all: as standard contextualism has it, Ben expresses the proposition *that he has a true belief and satisfies epistemic standards c1*; Dav expresses the proposition *that it's not the case that Ben has a true belief and satisfies epistemic standards c2*. (This is pretty much the solution to skeptical puzzles that was initially advertised as the principal selling point of

4 As Lawlor notes (55, n. 4), prominent current defenders of this semantic view include Recanati (2004) and Travis (2005). A clear precedent for Lawlor's Austinian account of knowledge attributions specifically is Stainton (2010).

epistemic contextualism.) So why do we think there *is* a conflict here? Because we are somehow ignorant of shifts in context and/or to the relevant semantic context-sensitivity.⁵

The Austinian view helps here, Lawlor argues, because it has multiple propositions to work with. Thus, at the level of the Russellian propositions that are put into play by Ben's and Dav's utterances—<Knows, Ben, p>; <not:Knows, Ben, p>—there is indeed a contradiction. Whereas, the *Austinian* propositions they express—<<Knows, Ben, p> is true of S₁, >; <<not:Knows, Ben, p> is true of S₂>—are perfectly compatible. The former, invariantist fact explains the sense of conflict; the latter, contextualist datum explains the intuitive sense that the two speakers might both be right (92–93). Essentially the same is said of our sense that the skeptic disagrees with ordinary speakers: “the [Russellian] proposition the skeptic denies when he says ‘It’s not true that Descartes knows he is seated before the fire’ is the very same [Russellian] proposition we affirm when we say ‘It’s true that Descartes knows he is seated before the fire’” (106). So “the Austinian fares better than the [standard] Semantic Contextualist at capturing the fact that the skeptic is disagreeing with ordinary speakers” (105). Yet, because the speakers here refer to different situations (*ibid.*), the Austinian propositions expressed do not conflict.

But the explanation doesn't entirely persuade. First, because we are told that it is the *Austinian* proposition that is communicated and what we attend to (65–66)—in which case, perhaps, we should expect the sense of conflict in cases like those we are considering to be rather weaker than it is. Second, and more seriously, it's not clear how comfortably the above explanation fits with Austin's general semantic view. Austin holds that it is only a token utterance that is true or false; it is only as measured against a particular situation that the bare “descriptive content” of an utterance has a truth value. Given that, it is doubtful that Austin would be comfortable with regarding “Russellian propositions”—i.e., situation types, or descriptive contents of the utterances—as themselves true or false; they are true or false only *of situations*.⁶ But then it

5 As Lawlor notes (92), Keith DeRose has suggested that there's nothing problematic about the contextualist's adopting such an error theory, since all the going semantic theories, contextualist and invariantist alike, are going to posit some form of error on the part of ordinary speakers. Arguably, however, it is not the contextualist's positing of error *per se* that should trouble us; it is the specific type of error, and one moreover that threatens to erode the evidential basis for the view. See Rysiew (2011: sect. 4.3) for discussion.

6 “Suppose that we confront ‘France is hexagonal’ with the facts, in this case, I suppose, with France, is it true or false? Well, if you like, up to a point; of course I can see what you mean by saying that it is true for certain intents and purposes. It is good enough for a top-ranking general, perhaps, but not for a geographer... How can one answer this question, whether it is

is not clear whether the “Russellian propositions” put into play by Ben’s and Dav’s utterances, or by those of ordinary speakers and the skeptic, are such that they cannot both be true—i.e., that they are contradictory. One might wonder, then, whether we have made any advance over the standard contextualist explanation of apparent disagreements.

While it isn’t clearly over whether *either* the relevant Austinian or Russellian propositions themselves are true, there is still room for disagreement—with the skeptic, say—over such matters as to what counts as a reasonable alternative, and so which Austinian proposition we should be considering (106). (Though it would still need to be explained why we *think* we’re disagreeing over whether a given knowledge claim *per se* is true; it is not yet clear that “the Austinian semantics handles the data without needing to attribute error on the part of ordinary speakers about either the meaning of ‘knows’ or the conditions under which their knowledge claims are true” (116).)

This brings us back to *reasonableness*, the notion at the heart of the assurance view. A reasonable alternative is “an alternative to *p* that a reasonable person would want ruled out by reasons or evidence before judging that *S* knows *p*” (152). A reasonable person, in turn, is a person with (i) normal capacities (memory, inference, etc.) and (ii) normal world knowledge who is (iii) able to impartially evaluate the costs and benefits of belief and absence of belief, given (iv) the speaker’s interests in the question and reasonable expectations about the hearer’s interests in the question (156–161). Clearly, questions can be raised about these various conditions, and how they’re to be applied; and Lawlor does much to clarify the picture and how it might be employed with respect to various types of cases (162–188). One question on which Lawlor is deliberately neutral concerns whether the reasonable person standard is meant to transcend or be fixed within a given socio-cultural context. Whichever way this goes, Lawlor says, the general assurance framework will apply (174).

That seems right. And we shouldn’t expect, in Lawlor’s discussion or otherwise, for there to be no open-endedness to the notion of reasonableness. Even so, some substantive and debatable claims about reasonableness are arguably at work in Lawlor’s discussion—not least in explaining the Austinian response to radical skepticism. That response, an instance of the well-known relevant alternatives response, runs as follows: in ordinary circumstances, skeptical possibilities such as that (Q) I’m a BIV being prompted to have various (seemingly) sensory experiences are not reasonable alternatives to such mundane

true or false that France is hexagonal? It is just rough, and that is the right and final answer to the question of the relation of ‘France is hexagonal’ to France. It is a rough description; it is not a true or a false one” (Austin 1975: 143). See also n. 2 above.

propositions as that (P) I have hands; so an inability to eliminate them is no barrier to knowledge. In such circumstances, my sensory experience (E) provides adequate grounds for the relevant belief, without my having or needing grounds for thinking that (M) there are material things, for example. But when Descartes undertakes his meditations, e.g., wondering (i.a.) whether M, Q *is* a reasonable alternative to P: “Given Descartes’ goals and interests in his meditations, it would be irrational for him to proceed as if P were true, given the open possibility that Q” (211). For when *p* is a candidate for belief, not-*p* is a reasonable alternative, and it is irrational to act as if *p* on the basis of E if E does not eliminate not-*p* (211–212; cf. 126). Because of this, our grounds for P in ordinary circumstances do not “transmit” to M (or to not-Q): we do not know Moore-style propositions. The good news—and this where the skeptic errs—is that we don’t need such “extraordinary” knowledge to have knowledge of the ordinary sort (211–218).

But *is* Q a reasonable alternative to P, even in Descartes’s circumstances? That’s not clear. More to the point, it’s not clear whether the assurance framework itself, including the reasonable person standard, supports that verdict. As Lawlor notes, there *are* cases in which, when an M-style proposition is considered, not-M is not a reasonable alternative (212). Of course, Descartes (e.g.) does have some rather special interests; and, as he sees it, the stakes are pretty high. However, as Lawlor explains, the reasonable person standard sets limits on the extent to which either salience of error-possibilities (78–79, 159) or practical interests (157–159) affects the set of reasonable alternatives. Lawlor writes:

sometimes people want more than knowledge—they restlessly inquire, seeking a sense of certainty or freedom from anxiety that even knowledge does not produce for them. Understandable as this may be as a matter of human nature, in such cases one is not being epistemically reasonable. In these cases, we can be easily misled into thinking that higher stakes are a bar to knowledge when in fact what has really happened is we have a person who is not satisfied with knowledge. (162–163)

Finally, recall that the reasonable person is (i.a.) one who possesses “real world knowledge”; that we have such knowledge is, as Austin might say, an essential part of the act of assuring, an act which we all constantly perform.⁷ It is essential to the Cartesian project, however, to suspend commitment (however temporarily) to the existence of such knowledge. In this way, that project involves the abrogation of a presupposition of the relevant practice, and so isn’t obviously

⁷ See the well-known conclusion to “Other Minds” (Austin 1979: 115).

something that practice would, or should, license as reasonable. Perhaps, as Wittgenstein (1969: para. 210) puts it, “the reasonable man does *not have* certain doubts.” And perhaps this in turn suggests an explanation as to why a claim to *know* such things as M can seem wrong⁸—not necessarily because it is false, but because it is an assurance as to something about which there is no live question.

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8 See in particular Wittgenstein’s (1969) discomfort with Moore’s claiming to know M-style propositions. I am not sure he should be read as wanting to *deny* that Moore knows such things, exactly (see 216, n. 35).