Book Review

Krista Lawlor


J. L. Austin (1911–1960) is probably best known as a respecter 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).

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, $\text{TA}$. (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, $\text{SA}$. When one makes a knowledge claim, one expresses an *Austinian* proposition, $<\text{SA}, \text{TA}>$—that $\text{SA}$ is of the type $\text{TA}$ (57), where $\text{TA}$ 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 $\text{SA}$ 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 sentences—on which, more presently.

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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). 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.