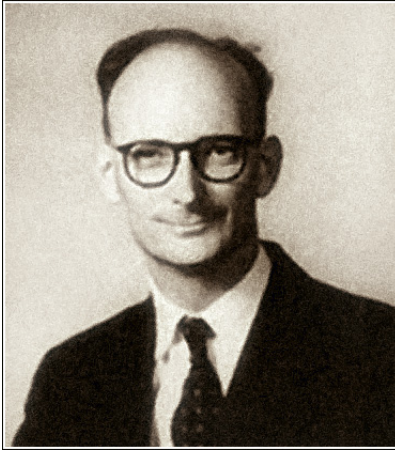# J. L. Austin

1   Philosophical Significance

J. L. Austin was the central figure of the ordinary language tradition. After
a stint working for MI6 during World War II (yes, really), he served as
a professor at Oxford. Primarily because of his presence, Oxford became
known as the locus of ordinary language philosophy in the middle of the 20th
century. Unlike Russell and Ayer, Austin thought that there was a great deal
of wisdom and subtlety in our ordinary ways of speaking. In particular, he
thought that many philosophical problems are generated when we forget (or
ignore) the nuanced ways that we ordinarily use certain words. His aim was
to dissolve (rather than "solve") philosophical problems by showing how they
arise from the misuse of words. In contemporary analytic philosophy, he is
mainly remembered for his theory of "speech acts," in which he emphasized
that we should stop trying to analyze the *meaning* of certain expressions,
but instead look at what those expressions are used to *do*. Regarding words
as tools in this manner, he thought, would give us a better understanding
of how they work.

2   Writing Style

As befits his philosophical position, Austin often tries to remind you how a
particular word is normally used. Sometimes he does this by presenting us

with a series of cases of the word appearing in everyday contexts. He also tries to point out the different sorts of situations that make us use words in slightly different ways. These details can seem trifling at first, but he thinks that if we keep them in mind, we can avoid getting into philosophical trouble. Austin also writes with a very dry sense of humor – *Sense and Sensibilia* is probably one of the funniest works of philosophy ever written.

3 Reading Questions

These reading questions are intended to help you focus when doing the reading. You are not required to write up answers; this is purely for your benefit. This class tests you on how well you understand the authors that we cover, and these questions are intended to help promote that understanding.

1) Does Austin endorse the thesis of realism, i.e. that we perceive material objects? Why or why not?

2) How does Austin problematize Ayer's expression, "material thing"?

3) What does Austin mean when he says that "talk of deception only *makes sense* against a background of general non-deception" (p. 11)?

4) Why does Austin say that there is something badly wrong with the question "Do we perceive things directly or not?"

5) What is Austin's point about our preference for the "cash-value" expression rather than the "indirect" metaphor?