Perhaps we should say that there is no such thing as meta-philosophy. 'What is philosophy?' is itself a philosophic question. To talk about the nature of philosophy, its end (with its double-entendre), or its worth (or lack thereof), is, if this talk has any depth at all, to engage in philosophical discussion and argument. And while an obsession here can keep us from doing what may be—if philosophy has a point or some intrinsic worth—fruitful work in philosophy, Wittgenstein's obsession with such 'meta-philosophical questions' was neither irrational nor pointless and it surely did not keep him from doing probing philosophical work.¹ Some have said that meta-philosophical interests are a sign of a wanning interest in philosophy, but while this has never been true for me, I do remain ambivalent about philosophy and caught up in doubts about what (if anything) we can achieve in philosophy and about the worth of our achievement. (Recall Marx's famous remark in the German Ideology: "Philosophy and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another as masturbation and sexual love.") A. R. Manser in his interesting inaugural lecture "The End of Philosophy: Marx and Wittgenstein" hit just the right note when he remarked:

. . . whatever else philosophy may be, it certainly involves constant questioning of all that is normally taken for granted, whether it be the existence of the external world or the value of a present-day university education. However, if philosophy confined itself to challenging others' ideas, to dealing with problems that arose in other disciplines, it would be an arrogant subject, which indeed it often seems to be to those on the outside. It also, and necessarily if it is to be really questioning, finds its own existence its greatest problem. The mark of modern philosophy, and of any worthy of the name, is self-doubt.²

¹It is rather fashionable now to ignore this meta-philosophical side of Wittgenstein. Yet on any 'naïve' first reading of the Philosophical Investigations it is one of the first things to strike one. K. T. Fann succinctly and accurately stresses this side of Wittgenstein in his "Wittgenstein and Bourgeois Philosophy", Radical Philosophy 8 (Summer, 1974), pp. 24-7.
This calling itself into question is, of course, a vast project and I try here to catch only a corner of it. I try, after its programmatic demise, to show both something of importance which remains in proceeding by philosophizing from ordinary language and what its principal limitations are. I then take a new tack by examining a methodological turn taken by a way of philosophizing and looking at philosophy much under the influence of Quine.

I

The Stalinist phase of ordinary language philosophy has long since passed; 'ordinary language' is no longer the rallying cry it once was. In spite of his extensive influence, few philosophers continue to follow Austin's stringent and rather rigid methodological restrictions and directives. What has lived on in the thought and practice of many philosophers is the belief that ordinary language—any natural language—contains important and indeed refined conceptual distinctions which it is essential for philosophers to perspicuously display and indeed in their practice not to run rough-shod over by ignoring through adopting and/or perpetuating crude philosophical distinctions—reason and passion, analytic and synthetic, descriptive and evaluative, cognitive and non-cognitive—which ignore the subtle and refined concepts which are to be found at work in ordinary language in everyday life.

Against this very widespread and, I believe, important conviction philosophers of a Marxist persuasion (Gramsci and Althusser for example) have claimed that such an appeal to ordinary language is a very serious blunder, for ordinary language with those subtle and ramified conceptual distinctions in effect "expresses and enforces ideologies which systematically conceal the realities they refer to".3

Modern Anglo-American moral philosophy has been much concerned with ordinary language. Indeed many have thought this is an important source of its at least putative aridity. I will try to unsnarl something of what is at issue here and, of the difficulties generated by the issues in question. It is well to see initially that we are on the thoroughly contested and perenially perplexing ground concerning what philosophy is, what it can do and what point—if any—such an activity has. I want to proceed initially from some brief remarks Bernard Williams made about J. L. Austin's philosophical method and

They are important in their own right and relate significantly to some Marxist and radical criticisms which I will consider later.

Williams notes that if we examine Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* we will notice, at quite distinct levels, three different general aims being pursued. The first and most obvious, and by far the least important, is to establish that a number of key arguments used by A. J. Ayer in defense of phenomenalism will not work. Williams believes that these criticisms are for the most part "very effective"; others have thought that they were not and that Austin was indeed flogging a strawman and hardly coming to grips in any careful fashion with Ayer's arguments. It is not at all my purpose to try to adjudicate this here. Rather, no matter what we say about this, it seems to me that Williams is clearly right in claiming that this could not be Austin's central aim. *Sense and Sensibilia* were lectures of Austin's edited and published after his death. He repeatedly gave them at Oxford and it is difficult to believe that a philosopher of his stature would in lectures year after year be content simply to give a hostile review to a twenty year old book.

A second and wider aim, Williams remarks, could be to undermine phenomenalism or sense-data theory of which Ayer's book was an important statement. That is to say, we could look on Austin's purpose as showing that it was not the case that there are certain 'private objects' called sense-data which "we perceive in a way more direct or immediate than we perceive tables, chairs and so forth". But if this is how we are to take Austin here, *Sense and Sensibilia* was remarkably unsuccessful, for it quite explicitly leaves out of consideration a key argument used by both Ayer and Price in arguing for sense data and in addition ignores very central issues raised by Moore which could well lead one to argue for sense data. Again, given Austin's very considerable philosophical acumen and his fierce integrity, it is very unlikely that he would have remained satisfied with such an incomplete performance if this had been his central aim in *Sense and Sensibilia*. Rather it is, I think, wise to follow Williams' hunch here and view Austin's concern with sense-datum theorists as only incidental.

What we should do is move to a third level and look for a quite different aim in *Sense and Sensibilia*, Williams states this

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5Ibid., p. 115.
third presumptive aim as follows: Austin wished to illustrate with his examination of Ayer's arguments for sense-data, how philosopher's—in this case an important one—"tend to obliterate important distinctions, to ignore the diversity of the facts and to take little notice of how our language actually works". To show this it is sufficient to examine some reasonably important philosophical arguments. Austin proceeds to do this by showing how Ayer's arguments fail because Ayer (a) ignores a considerable variety of relevant situations and (b) because he neglects or misunderstands many subtle distinctions in ordinary language. Ayer fails to command a clear view of how the expressions in question are used and in what contexts they are used; he fails to keep in hand distinctions between many different linguistic expressions and different uses of the same expression which apply quite differently in different situations. When these things are kept in hand and clearly noted, Ayer's arguments will be seen to collapse. (In this respect Austin's approach was very much like that of the later Wittgenstein.)

However, even assuming this approach is successful in showing how certain philosophical arguments went astray, how is it that—since Austin did not have a completely therapeutic ideal—linguistic observation is of use in establishing philosophical theses? Here Williams argues Austin pursued what in effect is a Baconian ideal and was in fact remarkably unsuccessful. Indeed he could in reality have hardly been anything else, for he had set himself an impossible task. This task—following out the lines of his Baconian ideal—was to patiently assemble distinctions in ordinary use and then cautiously and very tentatively elicit from them a theory. But, as Williams has remarked, and MacIntyre has as well, the "trouble about this is, that if taken literally, it is just impossible. There is no classification without a purpose—in theoretical matters, without a theory or a problem. Without some pre-existing notion of what one wants the distinctions for, their number is entirely indeterminate; one can go on making as many as one likes". It is such an unachievable and in reality impractical Baconian commitment that gives force to the radical claim that British philosophy is anti-theoretical. Austin certainly is not 'British philosophy' and indeed this criticism of Austin has come from within establishment philosophy, but he is a very central figure in Anglo-American philosophy.

*ibid.*

†ibid., p. 116.
Let us look at the matter of appealing to ordinary language and at Austin’s utilization of it from another angle. Aside from being a potent device for exposing hasty and indeed confused philosophical theses, showing them to be either utter or partial muddles, Austin also found a rationale—a rationale which Williams believes is actually a rationalization—for this close scrutiny of ordinary uses in what Williams calls, tongue-in-cheek, Austin’s Wisdom of the Ages thesis. This is a much stronger version of what I said at the outset was an important element which survived the demise of ordinary language philosophy. The Wisdom of the Ages thesis is the claim that “our ordinary speech contains a battery of distinctions that men have found useful through the centuries, and which have stood the test of time, and that these are likely to be sounder than any which a theorist can—at least when in a hurry—think up”.

We have, Austin claims, good prima facie grounds for believing that the distinctions built into our ordinary language are very good; it is perhaps possible to improve on them but at present at least it is foolish to undertake that, for we are not yet in a position to do so. It is first necessary to see with some tolerable clarity what these distinctions are. But, at present, we are not within a country mile of achieving that.

Williams is justified in claiming, I believe, that true or false, the Wisdom of the Ages thesis is conservative. It may not, as it was first thought, be linguistically conservative, but it is conservative and it is not philosophically neutral, for it presupposes without argument that philosophical attempts to show that people are mistaken about some fundamental features of the world are themselves quite mistaken. (Here, for all his very important differences with logical empiricism, Austin’s account and logical empiricism share a fundamental assumption.) Austin’s approach has, as well, two further conservative features: (1) its Baconian methodology would, if this methodology were followed, make philosophical investigation literally interminable and (2) we have from Austin what in reality is a total innovation stopper in his insistence that before we can be justified in even trying out some tentative conceptual innovation in philosophy, we must first have examined in depth our ordinary stock of uses. That is to say, if this latter methodological injunction were followed, it would make it the case

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that we would in practice never be justified in making even the most tentative conceptual innovations. Moreover, as Williams remarks, if these Baconian counsels had been followed, it is doubtful, if we would ever have had in ordinary language those very subtle distinctions, which Austin regards as so important. It may very well be that in the past those despised theorists may have initiated many of these very distinctions which Austin, rightly, so very much prizes. Indeed any kind of claim one way or the other here is such that for it we would need some rather extensive historical evidence—evidence which we do not have. But the shoe is surely on Austin's foot, for without it we are not justified in proclaiming as confidently as Austin does.

Austin has the commendable desire to give us plain truth undistorted by ideology, questionable profundity or elusive obscurity. Yet, as we have learned from Popper, human thought is not advanced by just accumulating as many accurately expressed truths as possible. In his prohibition of innovation, of taking chances, of boldly speculating and perhaps in the process talking nonsense, Austin and Austinian method are conservative and indeed harmfully so. Indeed free wheeling speculation with little concern for what it makes sense to say can get out of hand, as it has sometimes on the Continent and with British Absolute Idealists, but such rigidities as Austin stressed out of his fear of blather are stultifying.

However, behind the Wisdom of the Ages thesis, there is the milder claim I initially stated. That is to say, what we can take away, among other things, from the study of Austin—and from Moore, Wittgenstein, and Ryle as well—is that (a) our natural languages contain refined and important conceptual distinctions which it is crucial to have clearly before our minds before we rush off to make grand or even not so grand philosophical claims and (b) that indeed some philosophical perplexities can be resolved or better dissolved by carefully attending to those distinctions. If some philosopher claims that in making moral utterances we are only expressing or evoking emotions or that we only see our own brains or that no inductions can ever be justified, such an ordinary language technique is very much to the point and it does not commit one to conservatism or to the general claim that ordinary language is all right as it is and that the only legitimate philosophical task is to perspicuously display it. (This last restriction was Wittgenstein's, not Austin's.)
It is even of use in more interesting philosophical cases in moral philosophy. If someone tries to define or characterize good in terms of interests and in turn says that to talk about interests is to talk about what people want and attach importance to, then an attempt to get reasonably clear about the use and context of use of 'good', 'wants', 'interests', 'needs', 'prefers' and the like is going to be an important first step in assessing such a claim, though this does not mean, as far as I can see, that we must set out a complicated logical geography of these terms displaying all their logical interrelations. But we need here to attend to the standard employment of the terms involved (and their relatives).

Sometimes we need to do no more than to assemble enough such reminders to ascertain the intelligibility or the truth of a bald philosophical thesis, e.g. the thesis that for something to be extrinsically good is for it to have a capacity to satisfy our wants and for something to be intrinsically good is for it to be wanted for its own sake. (Another such example would be the bald claim that to act rationally is to act as a prudent maximizer; such that all those acts and only those acts, which, on the available evidence, promise to maximise an agent's expectable utility are for him the rational thing to do.) Yet while such an attention to ordinary language may often be effective against a crude ideal language philosopher or a certain kind of reductionist, it by no means is always decisive. Yet, as Austin recognized, and as many have come to recognize, it is at least often an important first move. In our care to avoid the conservatism, ideology and anti-theoretical posture of ordinary language philosophy we should not lose sight of this important insight.

II

This rather bland but (I hope) sensible response will not seem nearly strong enough in some quarters. Sean Sayers concludes a meta-philosophical discussion of "Ordinary Language Philosophy and Radical Philosophy" with the following declaration: "... ordinary language philosophy is an essentially conservative style of thought: it is incompatible with any genuine radicalism. It is anti-theoretical and anti-philosophical".16

I think it is an evasion to respond, as people responded years ago to a similar broadside by Gellner, that there is no such

thing as ordinary language philosophy. Certainly there are important differences between Ryle, Hare, Austin, Malcolm, Strawson, Hart, Foot, Cavell and Grice, to mention only some of the many people philosophizing roughly in that manner, i.e. from ordinary language. But certainly when one stands back, say from the perspective of a Quine, Carnap or a Merleau-Ponty, one can see important common assumptions and even more importantly a common philosophical posture. The utilization of an appeal to ordinary language—to what we would say when—is one very crucial common 'philosophical policy' (if that is the right word).

It certainly seems to me right to challenge the claim that most philosophical errors are due to mistaken conceptions of language. Some are, and some important ones at that, and Strawson, Ryle, Austin and Wittgenstein have shown great penetration in exposing them. But if one works through the philosophical problems discussed and reasoned out in Henry Sidgwick's A Method of Ethics or John Rawl's A Theory of Justice, one will find only a few problems that will be resolved or even profitably treated by such an approach.

It is fair enough to say, with certain caveats I shall bring out below, as Sayers does, that "... philosophy is a theoretical enterprize which cannot be conducted merely by reporting ordinary usage", though a sense of historical accuracy prompts me to remark, whoever thought that it could: Austin, Hare, Malcolm, Strawson, Ryle? They use ordinary language but they argue and argue carefully as well. The appeal to ordinary usage is only one element in their complicated and varied manner of philosophizing. But Sayers makes a cutting point when he remarks that "ordinary language philosophers invariably do not merely 'report ordinary usage', 'assemble reminders' etc., but in the process also suggest a certain general view about how things are". A similar thing about substantive matters obtains in moral philosophy in such severely meta-ethical treatises as the major works of Stevenson, Hare and Nowell-Smith. Surely what is to be done is to be explicit about such matters and to argue for these substantive points in as systematic and as rigorous a way as possible.

However we should also see, as Bernard Harrison reminds Sayers in a response, that part of the force of the appeal to ordinary language is against forms of reductionism (much of

11Ibid.
12Ibid., p. 37.
the work of Hobbes and Ayer, for example). Against "reductionist philosophical schematics", it is important to remind ourselves "of the real complexity of the conceptual distinctions which we draw without thinking about it in everyday life". This element is prominent in the work of Wittgenstein and has to some been a source of annoyance in the work of Cavell, Rhees and Winch. Yet, it is extremely useful against reductionist accounts of philosophical concepts. It shows that there are certain things that reductionist accounts do not capture and that it is essential to capture them in order to understand such concepts as power, community, love, good, obligation, justice, rationality or law, to cite only a few of the more obvious examples.

It would certainly appear to be true that some ordinary language philosophers are too content with just assembling such reminders against reductionistic and oversimplified metaphysical accounts and do not recognize, as Harrison recognizes, that one "needs in addition a theory which exhibits the epistemological bases of the distinctions in question". (Cavell and Rhees are paradigms.)

However, one must proceed much more carefully than Sayers does regarding the claim that such an account must anti-theoretical, anti-scientific and anti-intellectual. It is all well and good to call for a philosophical theory, but one first needs to have some reasonably clear sense of what a philosophical theory would look like. Contemporary philosophy, and particularly what has been called ordinary language philosophy, has developed powerful arguments to show that the theories of traditional speculative philosophy are all pseudo-theories. We have some understanding of what it is to have a theory in empirical science and in logic and mathematics and even in meta-mathematics. But we lack a clear sense of what it is to have a philosophical theory. Wittgenstein has (to put it minimally) given us reason to think that often at least what has paraded as grand metaphysical theories, which will reveal to us the nature, of 'ultimate reality', have turned out to be houses of cards.

It is not at all a matter of being dogmatic on this point and

15Bernard Harrison, op. cit., p. 38.
denying that there can be philosophical theories which reveal and systematically display substantive philosophical truths. Rather there can be, as F. C. Copleston shows, scepticism about whether a study of the history of the subject with its clash of doctrines shows anything like that. There can be, as well, a sense that the conceptions ‘philosophical theory’ and ‘philosophical truth’ are so problematic that it is not clear that anyone knows what he or she is asserting or denying when he or she claims to be making such an assertion or denial.

Lastly, and very minimally, there can be the kind of healthy scepticism that Michael Dummett brings to the fore in his discussion of Gellner. Gellner, like Sayers and many present day radical philosophers, attacked linguistic philosophy for limiting philosophy to a second-order activity. The sole task of philosophy, on such an account, was to give a correct or at least perspicacious account of the workings of our concepts so as to clear up the confusions that have arisen when we come to reflect on our concepts. Gellner’s complaint was that such a limitation “excludes the possibility of a philosopher enunciating any substantive truths”. But what we want from philosophers in addition to conceptual analyses, Gellner goes on to remark, is just such substantive truths systematically accounted for and explained in a comprehensive philosophical theory. Instead of responding, as many linguistic philosophers might, by saying that what those people—the unspecified ‘we’—want from philosophy is something that cannot be had, such an exacting philosopher as Dummett, writing in 1960, simply and sensibly remarks:

I think that most Oxford philosophers would not be dogmatic on this point (thereby eliciting Gellner’s accusations of evasiveness). They would not reject the possibility that philosophy could arrive at substantive truths: they would merely say that they do not see how this is to be done, and add that, while much past philosophy makes clear sense, understood as elucidation of concepts, they have not found a single convincing example of a philosophical demonstration of a substantive truth.17

Certain philosophical theologians thought they could demonstrate the existence of God. But it is, of course, highly problematical whether any philosophical theologian from Anselm to Plantiga has succeeded in that task. However, it need not, perhaps, be demonstration or proof that is required. It might well be enough by some movement of plausible reasoning to give plausible grounds for believing that substantive truths of the order of the existence of God or the correctness of central state materialism have been attained. That is to say, it would be enough to show that it is more reasonable to believe that God exists or that central state materialism is true, then it is to deny these things or to doubt that it is the case that God exists or central state materialism is true.

One of the things that it is interesting to note is that in two closely reasoned books in the domains of moral and social philosophy John Rawls and David Richards are both maintaining that they have given us at least plausible reasons for believing that even in these very problematical domains there are substantive truths—in some not very clearly specified sense of 'truth'—to be attained. But should we count them as substantive 'philosophical truths'?

It is unclear whether, as carefully articulated as these accounts are, they will not turn out, as have so many efforts in the past, to be a house of cards or whether, against the dominant scepticism of our time in and over morals, we have good grounds for believing some substantive results have been attained or at least some guide posts have been erected, which would lead to such an attainment. If for no other reason, it is because such an issue is at issue that these accounts need a careful examination.

III

In thinking about the work of Rawls in particular, it is important to keep in mind that he has been deeply influenced on foundational matters by his colleague Quine. In particular this means that he does not attach philosophic significance to the distinction (putative distinction) between the analytic and synthetic and he does not regard it as his proper philosophical

task to give an analysis or an explication of moral and political concepts. Making no sharp distinction—indeed regarding such a distinction as artificial—between, on the one hand, the analytical task of the explication of concepts and, on the other, an examination of substantive matters, let alone regarding it as the only proper philosophical task to do the former, Rawls makes substantive claims, builds his account on contingent matters of fact, appeals to scientific theories and takes it as his task—and the task of moral philosophy—to give an explanation of our moral capacities, including our capacities to make and defend our considered judgements of rightness and wrongness and goodness and badness. Where he gives explanations, ‘explanation’, Rawls contends, has the same sense that it has in science, the methodological approach is the same and Rawls, preferred explanations are open, he claims, to tests of a similar sort to what we have in the empirical sciences or linguistics. At least this is his rather surprising official programme.20 (Often what a philosopher actually does is not what he sets out to do or even what he thinks he is doing. It is not only with the work of artists that self-deception runs high.)

Quine with his wholistic approach is well-known for refusing to make a sharp division between science and philosophy and for stressing that there is no domain or approach that is distinctively philosophical. This seems to be Rawls' belief as well and it means that he will approach the problems of moral philosophy—indeed even define the problems and scope of moral philosophy—rather differently than his predecessors did.

Many philosophers, less relativistic than Quine, but influenced by his approach and in agreement with the attitudes I have just articulated, take it as a working goal that philosophy need not carry on as a matter of warring or mutually disinterested schools or postures with essentially contested approaches, but should in unity with science, and indeed as part of a ‘scientific conception of the world’, theoretically elaborate such a conception of the world. A ruling assumption here is that there are no clearly demarcated divisions—let alone methodological barriers—between scientific and philosophical activities.

With such an approach (J. J. C. Smart and David Armstrong

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are good examples) there is the confident belief—a belief challenged by Kuhn and Feyerbend—that in science we have clear progress and the accumulation, systematization and sophistication of knowledge. Indeed we have in science, as Armstrong puts it, a ‘Book of Knowledge’. That, in looking at the matter historically, there should be an invidious contrast made here between philosophy and science is perfectly natural. Yet we should recognize, as well, that in philosophy, though at a slower and more vacillating rate, we also have had progress, and that, as Armstrong confidently expresses it, with the really extraordinary increase in philosophical talent over the last thirty years, philosophy may well be on the way to a ‘break through’ such as occurred in science at the beginning of the Seventeenth Century.21

This last remark, also put forth earlier in our century by pragmatists, will strike many, as it strikes me, as a little fanciful and indeed Armstrong puts it forth hesitantly. The important thing for us to fasten onto is not this last remark, but the general claim that there can be a scientific philosophy, a system of thought using rigorous argument (in many domains mathematical logic) and not sharply separating itself off from science by any rigid dichotomies, such as the analytic/synthetic or the a priori/empirical, which can attain definite and cumulative knowledge. Whether this can be achieved, as Rawls and Richards believe it can, in the domains of moral and political thought—a place where one might least expect it—is something that deserves a careful but also a most sceptical consideration. Indeed such a belief should have a sceptical reception in any area of philosophy. But recent work in philosophy makes it imperative that we soberly reconsider it. It is indeed a long way from the turn taken by early linguistic philosophy which sought to make philosophy something quite distinct from science, even when, as with the logical empiricists, philosophy is regarded as the handmaiden of science. Philosophers such as Quine and Sellars, Armstrong and Smart, and Rawls and Richards, practicing such a ‘scientific philosophy’, have both linguistic philosophy (particularly as practiced by Wittgenstein and Ryle) and traditional philosophy very much in opposition to their methodological conception of their task. Yet the rigor, systematic nature and boldness of their work command attention and respect. Moreover, and closer to our

concerns, reflection on it and its methodological commitments, brings us back to our beginning, namely to the at least seemingly intractable puzzlement about the nature, scope and end of philosophy.

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