

*Austin's Way with Skepticism: An Essay on Philosophical Method*, by Mark Kaplan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 192.

1. Kaplan's aim in this admirable book is to argue for the continuing significance of J. L. Austin's work in (or on) epistemology. He attempts to recover, and defend, both Austin's philosophical method and epistemological doctrines that emerged from Austin's attempts to apply it. Recovery is a matter of interpretation, and so questions arise concerning Kaplan's claims about what Austin said, or, more delicately, would have said. Further questions concern the assessment of the emergent methods and doctrine: do they warrant our attention? I'll begin by outlining Kaplan's argument (§2), before pursuing some questions (§§3–5).

2. Kaplan's main focus is Austin's way with arguments for scepticism: a view on which we know far less than we ordinarily (take ourselves to) take ourselves to know. Chapter 1 develops Stroud's (1984) argument for scepticism and brings it into contact with Austin's thoughts about method. The target is an instance of the Argument from Ignorance (with Descartes playing the unlikely role of an arbitrary individual):

Descartes doesn't know he is not dreaming.

If Descartes doesn't know he's not dreaming, he doesn't know he's sitting by the fire with a piece of paper in his hands.

Therefore, Descartes doesn't know he's sitting by the fire with a piece of paper in his hands. (64; unattributed page references are to Kaplan's book.)

Kaplan's Austin's response comprises two thoughts. The first is that the sceptic's position is underwritten by generalisation from a tiny portion of our thought and talk about knowledge. Generalising in that way flouts the principle of total evidence. And when measured against the totality of that thought and talk, the sceptic's position can be seen to be dramatically revisionary. The second thought is that the totality of our thought and talk about knowledge works pretty well. Taking seriously the sceptic's proposals about knowledge—Kaplan's requirement of fidelity—would lead to a new practice. Replacing our extant practice with the sceptic's would be worthwhile only to the extent that the sceptic's practice worked better than the old, and the sceptic has done nothing to show that that is likely.

If that is right, then a defence of scepticism would need to insulate the sceptic's claims from those elements of our practice with which they seem to conflict. The most plausible way would be by arguing that our practice is shaped by concerns other than, or additional to, the truth about what we know. Hypotheses about knowledge carry consequences for our practice only in conjunction with auxiliary hypotheses connecting the facts about knowledge with what we think and say given the practical exigencies of ordinary life. The sceptic can avoid the seeming conflict between their claims and ordinary practice by rejecting auxiliary hypotheses that sponsor conflict and adopting hypotheses that allow that our seeming willingness to attribute knowledge widely to ourselves and conspecifics is compatible with the falsity of most such attributions. (For example, the sceptic might replace natural auxiliary hypotheses, to the effect that our practice is driven by a combination of knowledge of the facts about knowledge together with a concern to attribute knowledge in accord with those facts, with alternatives, to the effect that we are ignorant of the facts about knowledge or that we attribute knowledge with ends other than truth.) Kaplan doesn't frame the issue in these terms, but when so-construed, the response developed in Chapter 3 is that the sceptic hasn't motivated the adoption of auxiliary hypotheses able to sustain their position, for the only arguments they have provided for adopting their unusual views rely on assuming those auxiliary hypotheses, and so provide them with no independent support. A variant sceptical attack aims to show that there is no set of auxiliary hypotheses able to make coherent our extant practice of knowledge attribution. Kaplan's response is that there

may be no *simple* such set, but that we are not entitled to assume that an account able to capture our practice will not be complicated (58–63).

The argument considered so far undermines the motivation for scepticism without explaining what has gone wrong with the sceptic's argument. Chapter 2 fills that gap by explaining what Kaplan thinks would have been Austin's response to the Argument from Ignorance. According to Kaplan, Austin's likely response would have been to reject the second premise, so that even if Descartes doesn't know he's not dreaming, he can know he's sitting by the fire with a piece of paper in his hands. We'll consider the response further in the following section.

In addition to developing Austin's likely response to the Argument from Ignorance, Chapter 2 engages more generally with the question whether Austin was opposed to theorising in epistemology. Austin was clearly opposed to at least some forms of theorising:

...there *could* be no *general* answer to the questions what is evidence for what, what is certain, what is doubtful, what needs or does not need evidence, can or can't be verified. If the Theory of Knowledge consists in finding grounds for such an answer, there is no such thing. (Austin 1962: 124)

Whether he was opposed to all forms depends on how we are to understand the bounds of theorising. Without attempting to supply principled bounds, Kaplan suggests that Austin was willing to make positive epistemological claims and that some of those claims were general. Austin's animus, Kaplan suggests, was not to theorising *per se*, but to theorising that unduly prioritises simplicity over the principle of total evidence (58–63). Kaplan thus sees Austin as heir to Kant's proposal, that the varieties of entities are not to be diminished rashly (Kant 1781/1787: A656/B684). A further idea that Kaplan doesn't explore is that Austin may have inclined towards a form of epistemological particularism, on which our epistemological practice rests not on adherence to a codifiable set of principles, but on our sensitivity to relevant particularities of our circumstances (but see 59–60).

Chapters 4 and 5 develop the idea that Austin's methodological prescriptions can support epistemological theorising by applying them to the Preface Paradox and Gettier's argument that justified true belief is compatible with ignorance.

**3.** Kaplan focuses on Austin's essay, "Other Minds". Amongst the difficulties that essay presents is that it covers a number of topics at once. One topic is conditions on someone's knowing; another is conditions on justified, blameless, or excusable, claims that someone knows (44–46, 55–56). The topics are clearly connected, and a full treatment would deal with both. Ultimately, we'd like an account not only of knowledge, but also of first- and other-personal attributions of knowledge. But the topics are distinct, and failure to keep track of the distinctions can make for trouble.

Austin writes:

Surely, if what has been said so far is correct, then we are often right to say we *know* even in case where we turn out subsequently to have been mistaken—and indeed we seem always, or practically always, liable to be mistaken. (Austin 1946: 98)

Learning the conditions in which attributions of knowledge would be *true* would be revealing about the conditions in which we know. But that can't be what Austin means here by "right". For it can't be true that we know if what we claim to know, or our claim to know it, turns out to have been mistaken. So, Austin's topic here is conditions on justification, &c., rather than truth. Care is needed generally in establishing whether Austin intends to express conditions on knowing (or on the truth of what we claim in claiming to know) or rather conditions on (e.g.) justified claims to know.

Austin's carelessness provokes delicate interpretative questions. Consider:

Whenever I say I know, I am always liable to be taken to claim that, in a certain sense appropriate to the kind of statement (and to present intents and purposes), I am able to *prove* it. In the present, very common, type of case, 'proving' seems to mean stating what are the features of the current case which are enough to constitute it one which is correctly describable in the way we have described it, and not in any other way relevantly variant. Generally speaking, cases where I can 'prove' are cases where we use the 'because' formula; cases where we 'know but can't prove' are cases in which we take refuge in the 'from' or 'by' formula. (Austin 1946: 85–6)

Is the intended reference of "it" in the first sentence that which one claims to know—say, that this is a goldfinch—or is it rather the claim that one knows that this is a goldfinch? Kaplan takes the second option:

[Austin] clearly held that there are at least some occasions on which a person needs to be able to prove she knows that P if she is to count as knowing that P. But this is an eminently reasonable view. No one would count as knowing that the world was not created in seven days, or that cigarette smoking causes cancer, unless *someone* at *some* point was able to prove that she knew as much, where that person would not have counted as knowing had she *not* been able to prove it. (57)

On the face of it, the idea is that in order to meet necessary conditions on knowing P, on the occasions at issue, one must be able to prove that one knows P. This has the advantage of connecting conditions on knowing with conditions on correct self-attributions of knowledge. But if being able to prove that one knows P requires being able to prove that one meets all necessary conditions on knowing P, it appears to require being able to prove that one can prove that one knows P. That is, the condition seems regressive. Alternatively, perhaps Kaplan understands the ability to prove that one knows P as requiring no more than being able to prove P. That seems more reasonable. However, it allows that the target proof—by contrast with one's ability to provide it—does not speak to the question whether one knows. Crucially, any such proof would leave open questions concerning one's knowledge both of the premises of the proof and its conclusion. Connectedly, some of the facts to which one would appeal in order to begin closing those questions—for example, in trying to explain how one knows the premises or conclusion—would be bound not to figure in the proof itself. (See Austin 1946: 76–79.)

4. Neither Austin nor Kaplan think that knowing P always requires being able to prove P (56–57; Austin 1946: 85). On the assumption that a proof that P would have to appeal to known premises distinct from P, an invariable requirement of that sort would be regressive. However, if we allow proof by reiteration, neither need demur. With that condition on knowing in hand, let's return to the Argument from Ignorance.

Kaplan's interpretation takes off from Austin's comparison of two cases. The first is a case in which one offers a proof that this is a goldfinch from the distinct premise that it has a red head:

When I say I know it's a goldfinch 'Because it has a red head', that implies that all I have noted, or needed to note, about it is that its head is red (nothing special or peculiar about the shade, shape, &c. of the patch): so that I imply that there is no other small British bird that has any sort of red head except the goldfinch. (Austin 1946: 85)

(2) But that's not enough: plenty of other birds have red heads. What you say doesn't prove it. For all you know, it may be woodpecker....

It is in the case of objection (2) that you would be more inclined to say right out ‘Then you don’t know’. Because it doesn’t prove it, it’s not enough to prove it. (Austin 1946: 83–4)

In this case, one doesn’t know that this is a goldfinch because one hasn’t proved it, because the premise of one’s proof—that this is a bird with a red head—is not sufficient to exclude that it is a woodpecker, and so not a goldfinch.

The second case arises from a question about what would be enough to exclude relevant variance:

Enough is enough: it doesn’t mean everything. Enough means enough to show that (within reason, and for present intents and purposes) it ‘can’t’ be anything else, there is no room for an alternative, competing description of it. It does *not* mean, for example, enough to show that it isn’t a *stuffed* goldfinch. (Austin 1946: 84)

The difficulty here, as Kaplan sees it, is to explain Austin’s differential treatment of the two cases, for both give rise to versions of the Argument from Ignorance:

You don’t know the bird is not a woodpecker.  
If you don’t know the bird is not a woodpecker, you don’t know the bird is a goldfinch.  
Therefore, you don’t know the bird is a goldfinch.

You don’t know the bird is not a stuffed goldfinch.  
If you don’t know the bird is not a stuffed goldfinch, you don’t know the bird is a goldfinch.  
Therefore, you don’t know that the bird is a goldfinch. (64)

Austin seems to accept the woodpecker argument and to reject the stuffed goldfinch argument, and the question is, “How?”

There are two options. First, Austin might defend the first premise of the woodpecker argument and reject the first premise of the stuffed goldfinch argument. (Although Kaplan ultimately rejects this option, he spends time defending a version (67–70). As he notes, an analogous move appears to form part of Austin’s response to the dreaming argument considered earlier (64, fn.46).) Second, Austin might reject only the second premise of the stuffed goldfinch argument.

The second premises are underpinned by a closure principle:

If you know P, and you know that P entails Q, then you know Q.

By *modus tollens*, if you don’t know Q, then either you don’t know that P entails Q, or you don’t know P. Might Austin have been willing to deny that the subject of the stuffed goldfinch argument is bound to know that something’s being a goldfinch entails that it isn’t stuffed? One reason for thinking so is his generally negative attitude towards related entailment claims (Austin 1940: 67–69; 1946: 89; 1962: 119–123). Another reason is that grounds for accepting such entailments would be broadly inductive; and we might wonder whether such grounds can enable knowledge, or provide one with reasons for accepting the entailments that are able to outweigh one’s reasons for believing that this is a goldfinch. A third reason is that it is not *obviously* absurd to allow that a stuffed goldfinch is, nonetheless, a goldfinch. (However, it is plausible that Austin was a sufficiently faithful Aristotelian not to adopt that line. Compare Aristotle *De Anima* ii 1.)

Kaplan proposes, instead, that Austin would have rejected the closure principle (70–77). His proposal has four components. First, if saying that Austin knows that it’s a stuffed goldfinch would be saying something *false*, then Austin doesn’t know that it’s a goldfinch. (This treatment is on a par with that of the woodpecker argument.) However, second, there is a way in which it can be true that Austin doesn’t know that it’s a stuffed goldfinch, even though saying that he knows that it’s a stuffed goldfinch would *not* be saying something false. That is because, third, saying that Austin knows that it’s not a

stuffed goldfinch can be *neither* true nor false and, fourth, cases in which it is neither are cases in which Austin doesn't know that it's not a stuffed goldfinch.

Kaplan suggests that saying that Austin knows that it's not a stuffed goldfinch would not be saying something false because Austin meets the central necessary condition on knowing: Austin has "proof that is, as a matter of fact, proof that the bird is not stuffed" (71). He offers the following reason why it wouldn't be saying something true:

It doesn't seem quite right to say he knows it is not a stuffed goldfinch, because he has no proof that actually *speaks* to the matter of whether it is stuffed—that explains how, from the look of the bird, he can tell that it is not stuffed. Small wonder. From the look of the bird (from its having a red head), he can no more tell that it's not stuffed than he can tell that it's not a woodpecker. (72)

Crucial here is Kaplan's distinction between a proof that is, as a matter of fact, a proof that P and a proof that speaks positively to whether P. He takes possession of a proof that is, as a matter of fact, proof that P to be a necessary condition on its being true that one knows P. By contrast, he takes possession of a proof that speaks positively to whether P to be a sufficient condition for its being true that one knows P. And he takes those conditions to be exhaustive. It follows that there can be cases in which it is not true that one knows P, since one fails to meet the sufficient condition, and it is not false that one knows P, since one meets the necessary condition. That is, there is a gap between cases in which it is true that one knows P and cases in which it is false that one knows P occupied by cases in which one has a matter of fact proof that P but lacks a proof that speaks positively to whether P. Kaplan suggests that we cannot close the gap by treating possession of a proof that speaks positively to whether P as a necessary condition on knowing that P without opening the door to scepticism (72). Furthermore, there is evidence that Austin was willing to consider the possibility of such truth-value gaps in other cases (72–76; Austin 1940. Kaplan also considers an epistemicist treatment of the gap (75–77). However, in combination with our knowing an appropriate closure principle, that proposal might undermine our capacity to know that we know it's a goldfinch.)

5. Kaplan doesn't explain the operative distinction between possessing a matter of fact proof that P and possessing a proof that speaks positively to whether P. It is therefore difficult to assess his proposal or his grounds for rejecting the alternative, that one who knows that it's a goldfinch thereby knows that it's not stuffed. However, the following candidate reconstruction may help narrow the space of admissible solutions.

First, any proof must start from premises one simply knows, without deriving them from more basic premises one knows. Second, possession of a proof that speaks positively to whether P requires either possession of a trivial proof—so, for example, simple knowledge that P—or the ability to derive that P in a single step from what one simply knows. If one has a proof that does not speak to whether P, then one has a matter of fact proof that P. Knowing that P requires possession of a proof that speaks positively to whether P. The idea would be that we have simple knowledge of premises concerning the looks of things and lack simple knowledge either of things' kinds or of whether they are stuffed. And now Kaplan's argument that we have such a proof that this is a goldfinch but lack such a proof that it is not stuffed proceeds as follows. Since we lack simple knowledge either that this is a goldfinch or that it is not a stuffed, we possess a proof that speaks to the issue only if we can derive those claims in one step from what we do simply know. This is possible in the former case: we can prove that this is a goldfinch by appealing only to available facts about its looks—facts that are simply known. By contrast, it is not possible in the latter case: the only proof from available facts about its looks goes via the intermediate premise that it is a goldfinch.

Although the proposed reconstruction fits Kaplan's argument, it is otherwise unhappy. Insofar as the proposed restriction on what one knows has bite, it is bound to seem unduly restrictive. Alternatively, the restriction will have bite only if there are

limits both to what we can simply know and to what we can derive in one step from what we simply know. And the required limits would have to take a specific shape in order to sustain the distinction between the proof that it's a goldfinch and the proof that it isn't stuffed. It is not obvious that we should accept that there are appropriately shaped such limits. By contrast, it seems obvious that Austin would have denied that there are. (See again Austin 1962: 124, and surrounds.)

Should we accept that the only relevant premises that we can simply know concern thing's looks? One apparent ground for thinking so is that our ability to know that it's a goldfinch depends on our sensitivity to how it looks. However, that ground is only apparent. We saw, in section 3, that the total explanation of how we know P will appeal to factors that explain our possession of premises in a proof that P without themselves serving as premises in the proof. (See Austin 1946: 76–79.) Hence, the fact that knowing that it's a goldfinch depends on sensitivity to its looks may be due to the fact that one's proof that it's a goldfinch depends on premises that one possesses only in virtue of that sensitivity. It needn't be because premises about looks figure amongst those premises. As a corollary, since our sensitivity to looks needn't deliver premises about them, there is no immediate reason to think that it must give rise to knowledge about them, as opposed to other knowledge about their bearers.

Even if we accepted this restriction on what we can simply know, should we accept a consequent restriction on what we can derive in a single step? For present purposes, we can focus on a smaller question: is it possible to derive that this isn't a stuffed goldfinch from premises about its looks? It might be suggested that facts about looks are apt to support the derivation of claims about species but not about stuffing. A natural thought would be that we can tell apart the looks of different species of birds, while we can't tell that the look of a stuffed goldfinch is not that of a goldfinch. However, without the assumption that one can derive that P from the looks only if one can tell them apart from those associated with any case of not-P, the fact that one can't tell that the look of a stuffed goldfinch is not that of a goldfinch is not probative. And with the assumption, the fact that one can't tell that the look of a stuffed goldfinch is not that of a goldfinch would equally undermine one's ability to derive from the looks that this is a goldfinch. Furthermore, it is possible that although one cannot tell that the look of a stuffed goldfinch is not the look of a goldfinch, one can nonetheless tell that the look of a goldfinch is not the look of a stuffed goldfinch—just as one can tell that one is not very drunk even though, if one were very drunk, one might be unable to tell that one was not sober (Williams 1978: 309–313). In that case, one's knowledge of the looks might suffice for knowledge that this is stuffed, even though one would occasionally be misled by stuffed ringers.

It is not obvious that the proposal that knowing P requires proof that speaks positively to whether P can underpin Austin's differential treatment of knowledge that it's a goldfinch and knowledge that it isn't stuffed. Where does that leave Austin's claim that enough is enough (Austin 1946: 84)? One thought is that although one who can provide the required proof that it's a goldfinch must have the ability to prove that it isn't stuffed, they can nonetheless provide the former proof without providing the latter.

I hope to have indicated some ways in which Kaplan's fine book, as well as the work of Austin's that it helps us recover, repays careful attention.\*

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