

AYER APPARENT

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Alfred Jules ("Freddie") Ayer (1910–89) is in the curious position of being a well-known, "public" philosopher, whose reputation rests almost entirely upon one book, his first, a book now seen as so flawed that it is used as a stalking-horse for undergraduate philosophy students. "Naming another book by Ayer" would make a plausible parlour game, despite the fact that he published a further nineteen after his sparkling debut, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936). The infamous opening sentence sets the tone of this brash and iconoclastic text: "The traditional disputes of philosophers are, for the most part, as unwarranted as they are unfruitful." With its bold assertions, its *Tractarian* overtones, (yet without the prefatory *Tractarian* qualifier) and its youthful contempt for past philosophies, *Language, Truth and Logic* signalled at the time the arrival of a philosophy fit for the modern world.

Or so it seemed. It was somehow too sweeping, too provocative, too easy and elegant: a little like Ayer himself, as Rogers' biography suggests. Many felt that Ayer was merely a reporter, relaying the thoughts of Moritz Schlick, Friedrich Waissman, and other members of the Vienna Circle. It is true that with his graceful prose and his refusal to genuflect to the past, Ayer threw logical positivism into the philosophical limelight. Yet he was not merely a philosophers' messenger-boy, for he added to the doctrines of the Circle a certain eccentricity and waywardness—as if he wished to push the theories to their most extreme. This tendency to argue in many ways clearly untenable doctrines, such as extreme verificationism, was what gave *Language, Truth and Logic* its power, but also left Ayer open to quite logical and obvious criticism. Ayer and the positivists followed in Russell's footsteps in their rejection of Idealism and their focus on the relation of language to the world; but rather than examine the ontological implications of certain propositions (as in Russell's Theory of Descriptions), they turned their attention to the

whole metalinguistic system of philosophical, ethical and “subjective” discourses. Ayer simply side-steps ontological problems, focusing instead on the coherence of the propositions metaphysics contains:

... one cannot overthrow a system of transcendent metaphysics merely by criticising the way in which it comes into being. What is required is rather a criticism of the nature of the actual statements which comprise it.<sup>1</sup>

There was certainly an opportunity in the Oxford of the late 1920s and early '30s for philosophical innovation, if not revolution. Figures such as H. A. Prichard and H. W. B. Joseph rejected both Idealism and Russell's atomism; and although H. H. Price had studied under Moore, Russell and Broad, there was a sense in which Oxford philosophy did not know where it going. It was, as Rogers says, “much easier to say what they [Oxford philosophers] were against rather than what they were for” (p. 67). While many of the Cambridge philosophers were mathematicians or scientists, the Oxford realists were trained in classics. It was only Price and Gilbert Ryle who knew anything of Cambridge philosophy; and in 1932, Ayer's final undergraduate year, Ryle had published “Systematically Misleading Expressions”, a paper that draws both on Russell's treatment of definite descriptions and anticipates later developments in “ordinary language” philosophy. Ayer did not come across Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* until 1931 (which shows just how insular Oxford philosophy had become), but its effect did less to alter his opinions, as to confirm the opinions he already held. This confident assertion characterizes Ayer's philosophy throughout his career. By the time he left Oxford he was its “most ardent Wittgensteinian”, though he felt the closing, more mystical, parts of the *Tractatus* were “humbug”.

Ayer's empiricism was consistent and at times radical. Even as an undergraduate he had written in the flyleaf of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, “In order to discover what he means, he studies the phenomena by which his proposition is verified” (p. 69). Once again, his meetings with the Vienna Circle only served to confirm what were already emergent views. What surprised and delighted him about the Circle, however, was that its philosophy was “inescapably political”. It represented a force for clarifying and supporting the ideas of science, and for keeping Romanticism at bay. Yet it did not merely seek to relive Russell and Frege's revolution, for it saw, particularly in the work of Russell (and even in Wittgenstein), the remnants of metaphysics. In order to banish metaphysics completely, however, certain aspects of logic had to be modified, most significantly the whole role of the principle of

bivalence. What comes to dominate is the concept of “meaninglessness”, not merely of truth or falsity. The idea of meaninglessness enabled Ayer to cut enormous swathes through centuries of metaphysics, and not to waste time discussing the intricacies of metaphysical arguments. Metaphysical assertions—propositions that were neither analytic nor empirically testable—could be shown to be literally meaningless in a trice. As H. H. Price said of the young philosopher, he was a “a young man in a hurry”. “Never”, as Rogers says, “had philosophy been so fast, so neat” (p. 118).

Unlike the early Wittgenstein, Ayer was not worried that his work after all might be ineffectual. Not for Ayer the *Tractarian* qualifier of “how little is achieved when [these] problems are solved.” Instead, he brassily responds to Elizabeth Pakenham's enquiry as to what would be next after *Language, Truth and Logic* with a resounding, “There's no next. Philosophy has come to an end. Finished” (p. 123). Philosophy of course was not finished, and the publication of Ayer's stunning debut work brought a flurry of criticisms and responses. In particular, his ethical philosophy came under spectacularly vicious assault, worthy of any made on Russell. E. W. F. Tomlin felt that the ethics of *Language, Truth and Logic* represented “the most puerile piece of casuistry that a philosopher has ever put forward in the name of reason” (p. 125). Indeed, contemporary reviews of the book were rather muted, only Susan Stebbing and Ernest Nagel praising it highly. Russell was generally enthusiastic while never fully subscribing to the positivist manifesto. In his review of the first edition in 1936 he complained of Ayer's “refusal to discuss the problem of meaning”, while of the second edition in 1946 he argued that physics was genuine empirical knowledge that was not, by Ayer's criteria, verifiable.<sup>2</sup> More recent commentators have dismissed it out of hand: Bryan Magee, for example, has called the logical positivists' method “a ready-to-hand instrument of intellectual terrorism”.<sup>3</sup>

At this point the reader may be forgiven for wondering where Ayer's success was to be found. *Language, Truth and Logic* had a relatively short, yet dazzling, lifespan, in terms of its genuine impact on philosophy. Already by the end of the Second World War, it was seen as rather “old hat”. Oxford “ordinary language philosophy”, itself developed from logical positivism in its linguistic focus, had begun to take hold. Possibly the book's most immediate effects were within ethics, rather than analytical philosophy. Despite initial hostility towards them, Ayer's uncompromizing ethical theories virtually consigned Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) to history. Ayer had demolished

<sup>2</sup> “Philosophy and Grammar”, *Papers* 10: 332, and “Review of A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*”, *Papers* 11: 171.

<sup>3</sup> *Confessions of a Philosopher* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997), p. 25.

<sup>1</sup> *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd ed. (London: Gollancz, 1946), p. 34.

Moore's position on ethics that "good" was a simple, undefinable quality. Offering a radically subjectivist ethics, Ayer argued that judgments of value simply express the speaker's approval or disapproval.

*Language, Truth and Logic* had somehow secured Ayer's reputation, and threw him headlong into his first round of both social and philosophical high living. Cyril Connolly once remarked that there were two Freddie Ayers, the Oxford Philosopher and a London twin who loved to drink and dance. Yet it was not the case that Ayer was some kind of split personality. His increasingly public role as a philosopher enabled him to live a society life. Paradoxically, he often denied in public that philosophy could ever have much of a public role. His public persona made him a stark contrast with J. L. Austin, whom Ayer first met in 1933. Austin, described by Ved Mehta as "half-whippet, half-osprey", was to be a future sparring-partner, and in his private, monogamous and moral outlook was everything Ayer was not.

A key moment in Ayer's life was his appointment as Professor of Philosophy at UCL (University College, London) in 1946. When he arrived the College had one principal lecturer, S. V. Keeling, a "beret-wearing, Francophile, Christian-Hegelian pacifist". Ayer proceeded to build up the department, employing Stuart Hampshire and then a succession of his own students. In contrast to the Oxford philosophers, followers of Ryle and Austin, who were public school educated, "Freddie's boys" were "predominantly grammar school."<sup>4</sup> The meetings of the UCL Philosophical Society attracted an impressive group of speakers: Max Black, Alice Ambrose, W. V. O. Quine, Nelson Goodman and Hilary Putnam. Others, too, from different disciplines also fell under Ayer's spell, with Jonathan Miller from University College Hospital attending, as well as the biologist Lewis Wolpert. Ayer founded the Metalogical Society in 1949, comprising Hampshire and the UCL philosophers, UCL scientists, amateurs such as Rupert Crawshay-Williams (author of *Russell Remembered*, 1970) and occasionally Popper, Tarski and Russell. Certainly he mixed with the right kind of people.

In the 1950s Ayer's philosophical output increased with the publication of *Philosophical Essays* (1954), *The Problem of Knowledge* (1956) and a number of papers on negation, individuals and ontology. It is at this point that Ayer's position in the development of philosophy hangs in the balance. His early work was an extreme version of (logically) positivistic views themselves derived in part from Russell's logical atomism. It represented an austere scientism and rejected the claims made by idealism and metaphysics by

<sup>4</sup> Secondary schools in England were either "Secondary Modern", "Grammar" or "Public", in general. State educated children went to either of the first two, while the affluent middle and upper classes went to "public" schools, which, paradoxically, were fee-paying.

means of a demonstration of the incoherence of their claims to knowledge. In part, the refutation of metaphysical claims was achieved through the analysis of their language. Following Russell, Ayer and the logical positivists realized that part, but not all, of the problem was linguistic. However, for Ayer, the Oxford ordinary language philosophers—particularly Austin—took the linguistic aspect too far. But this tendency to isolate linguistic problems at the expense of more general, some would say genuine, philosophical problems, had been evident even in the early work of Moore and Russell, and naturally developed through Ayer and the ordinary language philosophers. Like Russell, Ayer was part of something he did not wholly agree with. The history of analytic philosophy is in part a history of the rise of linguistics.

As the 1950s ended and ordinary language philosophy gathered momentum, another significant event in the history of philosophy took place: the publication of the English translation of Popper's *Logic der Forschung* (as *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, 1959). Though Ayer considered Popper a positivist convert, it was quite clear that this was not the case. Indeed, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* had, as early as 1934 when it was first published, included a devastating critique of positivism. In a neat piece of deconstruction, Popper demonstrated that the logical positivists' pronouncements on the meaninglessness of metaphysical statements must, by their own criteria, be meaningless. Popper famously concluded that nothing was completely verifiable and that all discussion must make use of undefined terms. Ayer, it seems, had built his philosophical castle on sand.

In the 1970s Ayer was involved in a heated debate with Saul Kripke on the nature of essentialism. Ayer clearly took a personal dislike to Kripke, particularly his manners, and could not understand why the young maverick was being talked about in the same breath as Quine, Tarski and Peirce. One is reminded of Russell's reaction to the work of the Oxford philosophers of the 1950s in his outright dismissal of Kripke's claims. However, unlike Russell, Ayer produced a full-length article, "Identity and Reference", in response. Replying to Kripke's 1972 paper "Naming and Necessity", Ayer calls the work "perverse", "disingenuous" and "absurd". Such a theory, that necessity adheres not to the way we define things, but to the things themselves, strikes at the very heart of Ayer's philosophy, and indeed at some of Russell's work. The philosophical world has tended to agree with Kripke since.

In many ways Ayer seems to have followed in Russell's footsteps, particularly in the role of public intellectual. As with Russell during the First World War, there are periods, most notably the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s, when Ayer's life was dominated by politics, not philosophy. He was an active left-winger and friend of Labour politicians; he conducted vehement attacks upon religion; he regularly appeared on radio and television in his later years; and

he was a notorious womanizer. This last fact is worth commenting upon, for Russell has often been attacked for his philandering. Yet Ayer outdid Russell by a long way. It is said that for the most part Ayer did not deceive his lovers, that they always knew about other women in his life. But this is largely true of Russell: perhaps the greatest deception was of himself. Freddie Ayer escapes too much criticism because he looked and acted the dandy, an image hardly appropriate to “enchantingly ugly” Bertie Russell. Like Russell, Ayer was utterly impractical, and like both Russell and Wittgenstein, relaxed not with “high culture” but with low-brow entertainment: cinema, detective novels, dancing and sport. Ayer, too, suffered from a lack of sensitivity to both art and serious music. Unlike, Russell, however, he wrote very few letters of a highly personal nature. His was not a Victorian sensibility, and his letters are those of someone who would clearly rather use the telephone. As for his writing, it shares the easy elegance of Russell’s, but lacks the wit. Ayer too apparently made very few corrections to his works, but like Russell thought hard about a problem and then wrote freely until the project was completed.

In contrast to Russell, however, Ayer’s philosophy is not much discussed these days, though *Language, Truth and Logic* still sells well (as I suggested earlier, it is likely to be selling to undergraduate philosophy students). Some commentators, notably Colin McGinn, now find Ayer’s philosophy to be wrong in virtually every respect. *Language, Truth and Logic* is seen as a mere period piece, epitomizing philosophy’s most insular, reductive and trivial phase. The later books seem to have hardly survived at all, even perhaps his best, *The Problem of Knowledge* (1956). Ayer’s reputation now rests on his bringing the findings of the Vienna Circle to a wider audience; but the heyday of logical positivism was a long time ago, and most of its theories discredited. Thus what is left of Ayer is virtually nothing, an empty philosophy, a curiously shallow man. His friend Isaiah Berlin wrote that he “never had an original idea in his life.” The entry in Dennett’s satirical *Philosopher’s Lexicon* reads: “*ayer* ... To oversimplify elegantly in the direction of a past generation.”<sup>5</sup> His philosophy is like his character: insubstantial, somehow lacking substance or an inner life, just “one damn thing after another” as he liked to characterize the world. His later works certainly read like a series of thoughts, many of them interesting, strung together without any idea of a coherent whole or guiding impulse. Where Russell had always wished to create a grand synthesis of disciplines, yet ended his career having left many dazzling fragments (the colossal *Principia Mathematica*, 1910–13, notwithstanding), Ayer

seemed content with merely stringing the fragments together. Few now would agree with Peter Strawson that Ayer’s contribution to the theory of knowledge exceeded Russell’s “in clarity, order and coherence”. Yet probably most would not go as far as the conservative philosopher Roger Scruton in believing that Ayer’s philosophy represented an attempt to destroy “the conception in which the wisdom of humanity reposes” (p. 357). Between the two positions, Ayer’s philosophy lies virtually ignored.

In some key respects Ayer’s philosophy changed little during his quite lengthy career. The works that follow *Language, Truth and Logic*—*The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (1940) and *The Problem of Knowledge* (1956)—are more or less modifications of the original thesis, rather than new developments. Perhaps we should not be surprised by this, for few philosophers perform a *volte face* in the manner of Wittgenstein or Russell. He did write about more than positivism—there are books on Wittgenstein (1985), Voltaire (1986) and Thomas Paine (1988)—but his positivistic views remained intact, if less radical, until the very end. Here again there are similarities with Russell’s career (his defence of the Theory of Descriptions), although Russell, it must be remembered, was never afraid to change his mind about a topic, philosophical or other.

Any biography of a modern philosopher these days automatically has to stand comparison with Ray Monk’s studies of Wittgenstein and Russell, not only in terms of the quality and depth of the writing, but also the quality of the subject. In these respects Ben Rogers’s life of A. J. Ayer is a rather lesser being, despite its readable prose, empathetic engagement with the subject and some sparkling moments in Ayer’s life. Rogers’s biography is much more readable than Ayer’s autobiographical works, *Part of My Life* (1977) and *More of My Life* (1984). In these books there is a notable absence of emotion and vitality, particularly when compared with Russell’s autobiography (especially the first volume) and its heady mixture of idealism, romanticism and irony. Indeed, a sense of some generalized “absence” seems to pervade Ayer’s life, something noted by his many lovers and quite a few friends. This absence is hard to pin down, but it has to do, I think, with a lack of an inner life. Unlike Russell or Wittgenstein, who, especially in the case of Russell, though capable of considerable self-deception, nevertheless had a deep and often tragic inner sense, Ayer seems to have had almost no sense of self or of a “buried life”, to use Matthew Arnold’s phrase. He was, as he admitted to one of his lovers, Celia Paget, a “hollow man”. He used to refer to himself, in his thoughts, not in the first person, but in the third—not “I will do this”, but “Freddie will do this.” There is a sense that his life was all outward. Katharine Tait has said of her father, “[H]is greatness was all in his public life,

<sup>5</sup> 8th ed. (online at <http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk/lexicon>).

that's for sure."<sup>6</sup> Certainly it is Ayer's public life that engages here.

Rogers is better on the latter stages of Ayer's life than he is on Ayer as a young man writing *Language, Truth and Logic*. He seems to warm to his subject as the social whirl gathers momentum. We are given some useful insights into intellectual life particularly in the middle part of the century, and the book builds to a nice climax, despite the time devoted to the "London" Freddie of his retirement. Some commentators, including A. N. Wilson, feel that it is inappropriate to spend so much time on his later, social years. Inappropriate or not, they nevertheless provide much entertainment, as we see an engaging yet unspectacular academic philosopher enjoying the high life. Yet Ayer did not entirely submit to his late-continuing hedonism, and was extremely productive, if not original, in his later years. The many works of the 1980s, ending with *Thomas Paine* (1988), are dealt with in a somewhat perfunctory level by Rogers, but in his defence it could be said that the books themselves are rather perfunctory. Still, Rogers at least keeps apace with the developments of Ayer's philosophy, and like Monk attempts to weave more technical, if rather brief, discussions into the commentary on his lively social life, though there is no real attempt to assimilate this material into an understanding of Ayer the man. Rogers has written a pleasing biography, even if it obvious that the social side gets the better of both the biographer and the philosopher.

There are a number of interesting parallels with Russell, but also, alas, some very curious references to him. At one point Rogers tells us that Russell "shared Bloomsbury's suspicion of Jews ... and one had a sense that he always remained slightly wary of Ayer" (p. 215). Russell made a couple of remarks early on in his career about the Jewish character, but he regretted them and apologized for them later in his life. To imply that he was somehow generally anti-Semitic and that this made him wary of Ayer is simply not true. Perhaps the most curious of all the references to Russell, who comes across as a rather shadowy figure, rather disappointingly drawn and discussed, is one concerned with his writing of a reference for Ayer's application for Wykeham Professor of Logic at Oxford. Rogers calls his written reference "commendatory, if typically laconic" (p. 258). Over the years I have seen and heard Russell called a number of things, but I must admit that "laconic" is a new one to me.

Perhaps the most bound-to-be-repeated story about Ayer concerns an incident in New York, at a party given by underwear designer Fernando Sanchez. A woman rushed to where Ayer and some models were gathered,

saying that a woman was being assaulted in another room. Ayer went to investigate and found Mike Tyson forcing himself upon a young model, Naomi Campbell. When Ayer asked Tyson to desist, he snarled, "Do you know who the fuck I am? I'm the heavyweight champion of the world." Ayer then replied, "And I am the former Wykeham Professor of Logic. We are both pre-eminent in our field: I suggest we talk about this like rational men." Naomi Campbell, meanwhile, slipped away. Rogers suggests that to complete the narrative true to Ayer's life and character, we might rewrite the story with the former Professor and Campbell then becoming lovers.

Freddie Ayer loved to play games, and he loved to win. He loved to win at philosophy, too, always being prepared for a verbal contest in which he usually shone. He was a charming, energetic and attractive man, though somewhat cold and shallow. What remains of his philosophy, however, is of doubtful interest. In a recent review Colin McGinn suggests that to most philosophers now his empiricism, conventionalism about logical truths and sense-datum theory of perception, the core of his work, are not even "remotely on the right track" (*T.L.S.*, 25 June 1999, p. 3). As a figure in the history of philosophy he is undoubtedly important and interesting, though this praise in itself may be damning. Ten years after his death Ayer's work is virtually ignored. Whether this stimulating biography and the passing of time will help to revive his philosophical fortunes remains to be seen.

<sup>6</sup> D. Blakeway, producer, "Bertrand Russell", 2-part tv film in *Reputations* series (BBC, 1997).