

OBITUARY OF SIR ALFRED AYER (1910–1989)

From the age of 25 when he published *Language, Truth and Logic*, until his death in June 1989, Sir Alfred Ayer was a major figure in analytical philosophy throughout the world. His influence was due not only to his writing, but also to his teaching; for as well as being a literary stylist of great lucidity and verve, he was also a brilliant, if exacting teacher. Those who were taught by him will always value both the acuteness of the mind with which they were in contact and the care with which that mind firmed up the thoughts they were merely gesturing at. They will also remember the kindness and geniality Ayer always showed to past pupils, even to those whose philosophical bent was quite different to his own.

Language, Truth and Logic will undoubtedly remain a classic text, as lucid, succinct and exciting an exposition of a philosophical position as could be imagined. Perhaps because the exposition was so lucid, the book might be seen to have ushered in the demise of the very project it sought to establish. Certainly *Language, Truth and Logic* was the last work of Ayer, or of anybody else, in which it was permissible without further ado to base a philosophy on the principle of verification, because of the obviously problematic status of that principle. In reply to the charge that the principle, being neither analytic nor synthetic, was therefore self-defeating, Ayer was initially inclined to respond that the principle was offered only as a prescription. Even if, on its own terms, such a prescription could be seen as meaningful, this still left an uncertainty as to why anyone might be induced to swallow it, as Ayer himself came to recognise. In his later years, he was inclined to characterise the principle of verification as analytic, in that there is a necessary connection between the sense of a proposition and its truth-conditions. This in itself would not give us the verification principle, though, unless, as Ayer believed to the end that we should, we root the truth conditions themselves in our sense-experience.

Indeed, despite his later doubts about parts of *Language, Truth and Logic*, and more extravagant and widely publicized claims to the effect that he later believed it to be 'all false', Ayer remained convinced to the end of his life that what he called the orientation of the book was correct. It would be possible to see the long sequence of books and papers from *The Foundations*

of *Empirical Knowledge* in 1940 right up to *The Central Questions of Philosophy* in 1973 as a series of increasingly refined attempts to develop an epistemology and metaphysics based on sense-experience as that from which we inevitably start in our journey through the world, and that to which we must always refer – at peril of talking what Ayer would always have regarded as nonsense.

If he no longer sought to base his empiricism on a theory of meaning, and if, at a fairly early stage he abandoned the hope of showing that statements about physical objects could be reduced without residue to statements about sensations, and eventually abandoned phenomenalism altogether in favour of realism about the physical world, Ayer never abandoned or ceased to argue for his conviction that sense-qualia can and must found all our knowledge and that the world is in some way constructed from sense-qualia. His fundamental arguments for this view were always epistemological, to the effect that any statement we like to make about the physical world could be false, whatever was true of our sensory states (about which alone we had the right to be sure). But despite the stress on epistemology in his writings, he was prepared to work out the metaphysical implications of his empiricism, as, for example in Chapter V of *The Central Questions of Philosophy*, where he defends what he calls a sophisticated realism, which is yet based in sense-experience. He attempts to show how the common-sense conception of the physical world can be seen as a theory erected on the basis of our (or my) experiences of qualia, a theory which then ‘absorbs its origins’, as he put it, by distinguishing within the theory between that which is public and external to us and that which is mere private experience. This passage is both fascinating and unjustly neglected.

Whatever doubts remain about the success of the construction, about whether it could ever really generate one public world from its presumably solipsistic origins without tacitly assuming the existence of the public world it is supposed to be justifying, the fact that Ayer was prepared to undertake such a construction at all is powerful evidence in favour of seeing him as the direct descendant of the British Empiricists and of Bertrand Russell, and to that extent somewhat out of sorts with the fashionable philosophical trends of his time. For despite his gregariousness, social and academic, Ayer was never exactly fashionable as a philosopher. As is well known, he had little time for ordinary language philosophy. But nor was he entranced by the later philosophies of language and mind which have dominated recent Anglo-American philosophy, and it must be said that practitioners in these fields might have learned a lot from his astringent empiricism. He was also quite

unsympathetic to later Wittgensteinian thought, recognising correctly that Wittgenstein's private language argument posed a threat (though not in his view a very serious threat) to his whole philosophical approach.

While it is no criticism of Ayer to say that he was often unfashionable as a philosopher, it is possible to detect something of a tension between his philosophy and his personal convictions, a tension which could be said to reflect adversely on the philosophy of which he was so able an exponent. In *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer espoused the emotive theory of ethics, a theory he remained wedded to until the end. The obvious problem with this theory is that it provides a quite inadequate grounding for our ethical convictions. In his life, though, Ayer was a man of strong convictions, convictions he often expressed in public, and of which he gave further evidence in his recent books on Voltaire and Tom Paine. I do not believe that in his castigation of those he found to be obscurantist in morality and politics, Ayer really thought that all he was doing was expressing his emotions: he believed his opponents to be wrong, humanly and objectively speaking. But he had, in what might be seen as the needlessly austere starting point of his philosophy in the private sensorium of some as-yet unknown individual, deprived himself of the ability to appeal as a fundamental datum to that wider human world in which we live and move and have our being, and on the basis of which we can legitimately see our moral feelings as more than simple emotions.

If all this sounds reminiscent of the predicament Hume found himself in before he played backgammon with his fellows, it is not a comparison Ayer would have disliked; nor is it demeaning to Hume to mention Ayer in this context. In one aspect of his thinking, though, Ayer was not a follower of Hume, and was arguably truer to his philosophical standpoint than Hume was to his. For Ayer, unlike Hume, was no lover of traditional thought; but why should he have been if, in some sense, each individual constructs the (his -?) physical world out of his own resources?

I saw Freddie Ayer quite frequently in his last years. It saddens me greatly that I cannot continue to discuss these and other matters with him; on the other hand, I feel the more grateful for the conversation I did have with him.

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