



The Sunday Times

A. J. AYER

Alfred Jules Ayer 1910–1989

SIR ALFRED AYER, as A. J. or Freddie Ayer came to be known to some extent after 1970, was born on 29 October 1910. His father was Jules Ayer, a French-speaking Swiss from Neufchâtel, who had lived in England since coming here to join his mother at the age of seventeen. He worked for some years in Rothschild's Bank and as secretary to Alfred Rothschild, and died in 1928 at the time when A. J. Ayer was preparing to move from Eton to Oxford. He had married in 1909 Reine Citroën, who was of an Ashkenazi Jewish family from Holland. Her uncle André set up the car firm which bears the family name, and her father, David, was also in the car business and established the Minerva company. He rescued Jules from bankruptcy in 1912 and set him up in the timber business, where he seems to have prospered mildly. The grandfather appears to have been a larger presence in A. J. Ayer's early life than Jules.

Ayer was born in the family flat in St John's Wood and lived the solitary urban life of an only child of not very assimilated parents. In 1917 he was sent to a preparatory school at Eastbourne, which Ayer thought resembled the St Cyprians of George Orwell and Cyril Connolly, against which matches were played. He worked hard and was well taught, gaining the third classical scholarship to Eton in an examination he was sitting simply as a trial run for a later assault on Charterhouse. He recalls that he did not get on well with the other boys, attributing this in a clear-headed way to his 'unguarded tongue and propensity for showing off', characteristics which he continued to

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display, along with many more attractive ones, for the rest of his life. He also admits to boring his schoolfellows with his militant atheism, another lasting trait. All the same, he made some good friends and was well-regarded enough by his contemporaries to be elected to Pop, the Eton Society. He greatly disliked the Master in College, H. K. Marsden, but got on well with Dr Alington, the headmaster, Robert Birley and Richard Martineau. A very intense degree of specialisation in classics brought the reward of the top classical scholarship to Christ Church, Oxford, to which he went in 1929.

Despite the almost exclusively classical emphasis of his first twelve years of formal education, it left little direct imprint on him. At Oxford he did not take classical honour Mods. Instead of spending five terms on classics he took pass Mods. in one term, on a couple of books of Tacitus' *Annals* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the massive range of his publications between 1933 and his death in 1989 there is nothing whatever about ancient philosophy or an ancient philosopher, not even a book review. Plato and Aristotle do make a token appearance together in *Language, Truth and Logic* but then only in a parenthesis along with Kant, as part-time practitioners of 'philosophical analysis'. His mind seems to have been fully fixed and matured by his early twenties. His initial and, to a large extent, lasting preoccupation with the theory of knowledge never led him to reflect seriously on Plato's *Theaetetus* or *Protagoras*.

Ayer's involvement in philosophy seems to have come about suddenly and for no particular reason. It served no existing intellectual interest but appeared, rather, to fill a gap by providing some ideal material for his powerfully argumentative intelligence to work on. A master at Eton had run an informal class on the pre-Socratic philosophers. Before Ayer left school he had read Russell's *Sceptical Essays* (which contains very little philosophy proper) and had been led by a reverent mention of G. E. Moore in Clive Bell's *Art* to read *Principia Ethica*.

There was a certain narrowness to Ayer's mind which focused it sharply and contributed to its force. His lack of interest in ancient philosophy, which has just been mentioned, was part of a general indifference to the history of the subject. In practice he treated it as a contemporary phenomenon, or, at any rate, as a twentieth-century one. Hume and Mill he took seriously. The most ancient philosophers he wrote about at any length, C. S. Peirce and William James, died, respectively, in 1914 and 1910. There was no sense of temporal remoteness in his

approach to any of them. For the most part the philosophers whose work commanded his attention were active when he was: Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, Ramsey, Price, Carnap, C. I. Lewis, Quine, Goodman. Opponents, to the marginal extent in which he took explicit notice of them, were also contemporary: Broad, Ewing, Austin.

His interests were restricted in space as well as in time, being mainly confined to the English-speaking world and to the Vienna of the 1930s. His more or less perfect mastery of French did not induce him to study any French philosophers, apart from the special cases of Poincaré and Nicod, until an impulse of intellectual journalism prompted him at the end of the war to write articles on Sartre and Camus for Cyril Connolly's *Horizon*.

A further limitation, a little less conspicuous, was in the range of philosophical fields or topics on which he worked. Theory of knowledge was first and foremost, and, within it, the philosophy of perception in particular, but also our knowledge of the past and of other minds. Beside that he addressed himself at length to philosophical logic (the nature of necessity at first and later to reference, identity, truth, existence, negation, and the nature of individuals), the philosophy of mind (personal identity, the ownership of experiences), probability and induction, ethics (in a very generalised and schematic fashion), and the issue of the freedom of the will. He was not a practitioner of formal logic or, to any marked extent, of the philosophy of science, apart from essays on laws of nature and the direction of causation.

He had very little to say about the more concrete or human parts of philosophy: nothing on the philosophy of history, or of law, or of art, or of education. His only contribution to political philosophy until his very late book on Thomas Paine was a lecture on philosophy and politics which he delivered in 1965. Here he drew on memories of a course he had given in Oxford in the late 1930s, and set out a list of all the possible grounds of political obligation he could think of and found all but the utilitarian one wanting. He was a philosopher of religion only in the sense that a dynamiter is an architect.

These limitations are by no means peculiar to Ayer among philosophers of this century. There are, indeed, more extreme cases, although G. E. Moore is perhaps the only example of comparable eminence. Ayer is very different in this respect from his hero and model, the gloriously omniscient Bertrand Russell. Nevertheless, the fields he cultivated were the most philosophically fertile of his epoch, in part, no doubt,

because of his work in them, and the philosophers to whom he gave his attention were those who pre-eminently deserved it.

The Oxford in which he began his study of philosophy at the start of 1930 was at a low ebb philosophically. Ryle wrote, 'During my time as an undergraduate and during my first few years as a teacher, the philosophical kettle in Oxford was barely lukewarm. I think it would have been stone cold but for Prichard'. The other two professors besides Prichard were idealists: H. H. Joachim, a gifted and stylish thinker who had given up direct contribution to the subject, and J. A. Smith, a capable Aristotelian scholar but only barely a philosopher. Prichard, together with the redoubtable H. W. B. Joseph, kept up the tradition of Cook Wilsonian realism, a form of intensely critical philosophising from which, for the most part, only negative conclusions emerged, such as that knowledge and moral obligation are both indefinable and irreducible to anything else. On the whole there was no constructive work going on in philosophy, only the carefully critical examination of philosophy which already existed.

Two philosophers of a much more animated kind were, however, present and beginning to make themselves felt: H. H. Price and Gilbert Ryle. Both of them had been enlivened by the influence of the altogether more vigorous philosophical world of Cambridge. Price, in bold defiance of Prichardian orthodoxy, spent a year there and returned a convert to the analytic pluralism of the early Russell and Moore and, in particular, to the theory that sense-data are the immediate objects of perception. Ryle acquired from close study of Russell and the *Tractatus* the conviction that the logic of our thoughts is obscured by the grammar of the language in which we express them. At the time he was teaching Ayer he published his celebrated account of philosophy as 'the detection of the sources in linguistic idioms of misconstructions and absurd theories.'

From his close and regular contacts with Ryle, Ayer acquired a great deal. In doctrinal terms he picked up a resolute commitment to the identification of the senseless, of unmeaning, idle talk. He was encouraged to indulge the bent he shared with Ryle for the bold and uncompromising dismissal of positions with which he disagreed. Even more important, perhaps, was Ryle's introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and his suggestion that on finishing his degree, Ayer should go, not to Cambridge as he had planned, but to Vienna to study at first hand the activities of the Vienna Circle. From Price, more remotely and largely through the medium of the lectures which presented the contents of

Price's *Perception* (published in 1932), Ayer acquired his devout and persisting adherence to empiricism. Ayer's empiricism was a much more constricted one than Price's. Its emblem is the entry for 'experience' in *Language, Truth and Logic*, which reads 'see sense-experience'. The experience, which for Ayer is both the criterion of significance and the foundation of knowledge, does not extend to embrace moral or aesthetic, religious or mystical experience. Ayer would not have denied that there are states of mind which are properly so called; only that they have any cognitive import. He has so little to say about sensation's traditional partner—'reflection', introspection, self-consciousness—that a good case could be made for the view that he did not countenance it at all. In *Language, Truth and Logic* it is nowhere mentioned as such. Minds or selves are said to be 'reducible to sense-experiences' which hardly accommodates the thoughts, desires and emotions he casually attributes to them.

While still an undergraduate, Ayer read a paper to a society on the *Tractatus*, which he believed to have been the first public treatment of Wittgenstein in Oxford. This up-to-date enthusiasm nearly deprived him of his first in Lit.Hum. in 1932. The philosophy examiners marked him down with partisan disapproval. H. T. Wade-Gery, an ancient history examiner, seeing what was going on, marked him up. The narrow squeak did not worry his college, which had already appointed him to a special lectureship since they extended it for a third year and then, when that ended, to a research studentship on the strength of favourable opinions from Whitehead, Moore, and Price. Whitehead's was based on specimen chapters of *Language, Truth and Logic*, which was not yet published. Since he was not needed for teaching in 1932, he set off for Vienna with Renée Lees, whom he had just married.

He was generously welcomed by Schlick and the Vienna Circle, and sat in on their discussions. Back in Oxford in the summer of 1933 he gave a course of lectures on Wittgenstein and Carnap and settled down to the composition of *Language, Truth and Logic*, which was completed in 1935 and published by Gollancz in an attractive form the following year. In the years that remained before the war he did some teaching at Christ Church, regularly attended and contributed to the joint sessions of the Mind Association and Aristotelian Society each summer, took part in the foundation of *Analysis*, a platform for logical positivism in Britain, failed to secure permanent positions at his own college where he was edged out by Frank Pakenham (Lord Longford), and at Pembroke (where Collingwood's promotion to the chair of metaphysics had

created a vacancy), met Carnap and Popper, and served as chairman of the microscopic Soho labour party. Early in 1940 he was called up in the Welsh Guards, so that *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, on which he had been working since the completion of *Language, Truth and Logic*, could have its preface addressed from 'Brigade of Guards Depot, Caterham, Surrey' when it was published in April 1940.

The main contentions of *Language, Truth and Logic* are at once too well-known and too lucidly and forcefully set out in the book itself to need very elaborate exposition here. Metaphysics, conceived as a theory of a transcendental nature about what lies behind sense-experience is 'eliminated' by the application of the verification principle or, more precisely, by a very weak form of it which requires for the significance of a statement only that possible observations should be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood. Philosophy is an analytic undertaking, supplying definitions, not information about transcendent reality. Much of past philosophy is in fact analytic in character. The *a priori* propositions of logic and mathematics are necessarily true (or false) because of the linguistic conventions governing the terms which occur in them and are devoid of substantive content. Material objects are logical constructions out of sense-experience, as are selves or persons, but that does not imply that they are any less real than their elements. The elements themselves are neither mental nor physical. Propositions about the elements, that is to say reports of immediate experience, are not incorrigible since predication or classification of the given involves implicit comparison with what is not given. Probability is the degree of confidence it is rational to place in a belief, and rationality is defined in terms of procedures which have been found to be reliable. Truth, following Ramsey, is a logically superfluous signal of affirmation. Moral and religious utterances are both without literal significance, but for somewhat different reasons: religious ones because they are about the transcendent, moral ones because it is a fallacy to interpret them naturalistically and metaphysical to interpret them as referring to a transcendent realm of values. A brisk concluding chapter comes down on the side of empiricism against rationalism, of realism against idealism, and of pluralism against monism. In what is even by Ayer's standards an amazing feat of concision, the free will problem is solved in a few lines of a footnote.

The first thing to notice about the book is something that will ensure its place in the philosophical canon, at the expense of many more judicious and many more original books: its remarkable literary merit.

In its 60,000 words it covers a very broad range of philosophical problems, indeed pretty well the whole philosophical *table d'hôte* of its epoch, with considerable penetration, even if some carelessness, in superbly lucid prose, whose slightly glacial impersonality is mitigated by the book's bold and combative enthusiasm. In the sixty years since it was published, no philosophical book has combined its style, economy, and capacity to excite. It ranks for these qualities somewhere near Descartes' *Meditations* and Berkeley's *Principles*, and very close to Russell's *Problems of Philosophy*. What does differentiate these books from Ayer's is that they are original creations, where his is almost wholly derivative.

His 'elimination of metaphysics' is taken very largely from an essay by Carnap, with that phrase, in German, as its title. The identification of genuine philosophy with analysis was prefigured in the last chapter of Russell's *Our Knowledge of the External World* and was propounded in a strong, explicit form in various early writings of Carnap. The view that *a priori* propositions are analytic had, of course, been intimated by Hume and Leibniz, but had been unequivocally formulated in the *Tractatus* and, in a more straightforward fashion, by Schlick and Carnap in articles of 1930 and 1931. The idea that material things and persons are logical constructions out of elements which are neither material nor mental was adumbrated in Russell's *Our Knowledge of the External World* and *Analysis of Mind*, and elaborated in detail in Carnap's *Der Logische Aufbau der Welt*. Ayer's account of truth is a direct transcription from Ramsey. His provocative observation that since the statements that 'God exists' and 'God does not exist' are unverifiable both theism and atheism are meaningless is, a little surprisingly, credited to H. H. Price, who may well have thought it a *reductio ad absurdum* of Ayer's position. Ayer says of his emotive theory of ethics, 'I had in fact forgotten that a similar theory had been advanced as early as 1923 by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards'. That seems unlikely in view of the close verbal similarity between his 'we may define the meaning of the various ethical words in terms both of the different feelings they are ordinarily taken to express, and also the different responses they are calculated to provoke' and their "'(this) is good" serves only as an emotive sign expressing our attitude to *this* and perhaps evoking similar attitudes in other persons, or inciting them to action of one kind or another'. Of the book's main theses only its suggestive but sketchy remarks about probability, rationality and

induction and the view that no empirical belief is incorrigibly certain are clearly his own inventions.

Neither of them survived intact for long. The incorrigibility of reports of immediate experience was admitted in *Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* in 1940, and reinforced in the preface to the second edition of *Language, Truth and Logic* in 1946, and in an essay of 1950: 'Basic Propositions' (in *Philosophical Essays*). When he came back to probability—in two short pieces of 1957 and 1961 and at greater length in *Probability and Evidence* in 1972—it was from a wholly new direction, starting from a critique of the logical relation and frequency theories neither of which was mentioned in the earlier treatment.

Language, Truth and Logic received a great deal of attention as soon as it was published, much of it fairly hostile. Intellectual, or strictly philosophical, criticism was most effectively brought to bear on Ayer's verificationism. His version of it, weakened, in the light of Viennese experience, to accommodate scientific laws, turned out to accommodate anything. Restated in a complicated, recursive form in the second edition, it was shown by Alonzo Church still to be deficient. A more general objection was that it seemed to condemn itself to insignificance, since it is neither empirically confirmable nor analytic. Ayer's reply that it is analytic, a conventional proposal to define 'meaning' in a particular way, allowed those hostile to its implications to propose another convention, compatible with their preferences, as he rather exhaustively acknowledged. He did not come back to the subject until giving a brief and inconclusive survey of the controversy in 1973 in *Central Questions of Philosophy*. The theory that *a priori* and necessary truths are analytic was less damagingly criticised by defenders of synthetic necessary truth. In his second edition preface, Ayer effectively refuted the charge that his doctrine turned the necessary truths of logic and mathematics into empirical statements about the use of language. Before long, Quine's 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' in 1951 argued powerfully and influentially that there was no clear distinction between analytic and synthetic truths. Ayer did not return to the topic, apart from a slightly dispirited section on it in *Central Questions of Philosophy*.

Other controversial positions taken up in *Language, Truth and Logic* were abandoned or qualified in the second edition of the book in 1946, in a substantial preface. His original view about our knowledge of ourselves and of the minds of others was asymmetrical, along the lines

of Carnap's distinction between the 'autological' and the 'heterological' in his *Aufbau*. 'I am in pain' incorrigibly reports an introspection; 'you are in pain' is a more or less conjectural hypothesis about your actual and potential behaviour. It follows that 'I am in pain' said by me is compatible with 'you are not in pain' said by someone else at the same time about me, which is clearly absurd. The argument from analogy, which distinguishes an experience from the behaviour that manifests it, is tentatively reinstated. Drawing on Ryle's article 'Unverifiability-by-Me', Ayer argues that since it is only a contingent fact that an experience is part of the collection making up a particular person, it is not logically impossible that I should have had an experience which is in fact that of someone else. That was an idea he was to develop further.

His original conception of personal identity tied it conceptually to the identity of a person's body. A person is the totality of momentary complexes of experiences in each of which an organic sense-datum of a particular human body is an element. This seems gratuitous and implausible. Must I always have organic sensations when I am conscious, when, for example, I am preoccupied with a demanding intellectual problem? Although he continued to have a predilection for a bodily criterion of personal identity, he did not express it in its original form.

Another oddity that was bundled out of sight by the use of Ryle's suggestion was Ayer's initial adoption of C. I. Lewis's quaint theory concerning the meaning of statements about the past. The Lewis view, which Ayer took over, was that such statements are, despite appearances, really about the present and future experiences of our own which would, or could, empirically confirm them, such as future glimpses of documents. But, he came to think, it is only a contingent fact that I live when I do and not at some previous time. I could have witnessed the execution of Charles I and it is only a matter of fact that I did not.

Some of the shock effect of Ayer's version of the emotive theory of ethics was reduced by his amendment that moral judgements express attitudes, directed on to classes of actions, rather than immediate emotional reactions to individual actions. That made room for a measure of rational discussion in cases of conflicts of value. Is the approved or condemned action really of the favoured or unfavoured class? But, he held, disagreements about value, to the extent that they are rational, are always factual. Ultimate conflicts about values are not rationally resolvable.

A final watering down of the original audacity of *Language, Truth and Logic* concerned its reductivism, its conception of philosophical analysis as supplying logically equivalent translations of problematic statements into reports of immediate experience. He realised that this was a Utopian ideal. Material object statements are too 'vague' for the fit between them and any finite collection of sense-datum statements to be anything but loose. All the same, material objects statements have no content that cannot in principle be expressed in terms of sense-data.

Ayer's pre-war work in philosophy was completed in 1940 with *Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, just as he was called up, and published six months later. It is mainly concerned with developing the fairly sketchy exposition of his phenomenalism in ten pages of *Language, Truth and Logic*. For the next five years he was to publish practically nothing, only an admirably lucid and unhackneyed essay on the concept of freedom in Cyril Connolly's *Horizon*. In the book's preface he very properly acknowledges his debt to H. H. Price's *Perception*. Rightly seeing that Price's book was the most judicious, thorough, and illuminating discussion of the problem of our knowledge of the external world then available, he dissented from it on an issue of method and one large point of substance. Ayer took philosophical propositions to be linguistic conventions or proposals, not statements of fact, and he rejected Price's idea that a material thing consists, over and above a 'family' of sense-data, actual and possible, of a 'physical occupant' as well, a ghostly residue of old-fashioned substratum, introduced to carry out the causal responsibilities of an unobserved material thing, all of whose component sense-data would be non-actual. Three of the book's five chapters are about the perception of material things, one concerns the 'egocentric predicament', and another is on the subject of a number of problems about causation, only loosely related to the book's main topic.

The first chapter meticulously sets out the case for thinking that all that we directly perceive is sense-data, based on the facts of illusion and hallucination. It ends with the startling conclusion that the sense-datum theory is simply an alternative language which it is helpful to employ for epistemological purposes. It is, no doubt, a conceivable alternative to the language of appearing. Macbeth could report his question-provoking situation in the words 'there appears to be a dagger in front of me', rather than the words 'I am experiencing a dagger-shaped sense-datum'. (He would be more likely to secure understanding if he did.) Ayer's view that we could call the objects of direct perception 'material

things' if we made certain adjustments to our everyday assumptions would, if put into effect, have the ludicrous consequence that material things were private to particular observers, existed only momentarily (or, at most, discontinuously) and were of only one sensory kind (visual, tactual or whatever). Courteously criticised by Price (and, much later, less courteously by J. L. Austin), this idea soon vanished without trace.

This, however, was not essential to Ayer's main project, a phenomenistic account of the 'construction' of material things out of sense-data, that is, of things that are public, continuous, and of several sensory dimensions out of things that are not.

The second chapter is devoted to giving a detailed account of the nature of sense-data. Since they are by definition that about which we are immediately certain in perception, they cannot appear to have characteristics which they do not have, or have characteristics which they do not appear to have. Their essential function is to be the infallibly known basis of all empirical knowledge. The assumption that empirical knowledge needs such a basis is never considered. In the final chapter on phenomenalism a loose, non-translational version of the theory is outlined. Material things are constructible out of collections of sense-data that resemble each other, occur in similar contexts, are systematically reproducible, and vary in accordance with the movements of the perceiver.

The discussion of the 'egocentric predicament' anticipates the treatment of propositions about other people's experience and of the past in the second edition of *Language, Truth and Logic*. The idea that the necessary privacy of experience is a matter of linguistic convention which has alternatives is set out more plausibly than the parallel contention about the publicity and continuity of material things. The somewhat miscellaneous chapter about causality effectively criticises G. F. Stout's 'animistic' and H. W. B. Joseph's 'rationalistic' accounts of causation. The law of universal causation is defended against arguments from miracles, free will, and quantum mechanics, rather by sleight of hand in the third case. But Ayer holds that the law is not necessarily true; it is, rather, a 'heuristic maxim'.

The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge has most of the merits of its predecessor. If it is, perhaps inevitably, less exciting, it is much less sweeping and much more argumentatively scrupulous. That is not to say it was not open to the serious criticism which it received in due course as the main target of Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962). Ayer's somewhat indignant reply—'Has Austin Refuted the Sense-Datum

theory?’ — is surprisingly effective in showing most of Austin’s objections to be captious.

Ayer had a thoroughly enjoyable war, nearly all of it, not by his contrivance, well out of harm’s way. He joined the Welsh Guards in March 1940 and was commissioned in September of that year. He was soon redeployed to intelligence work, which seems a sensible decision by the authorities, and found himself interrogating German prisoners in London, using the linguistic skill acquired for the purpose of learning from the Vienna Circle. He went to New York on behalf of SOE and made visits to Accra, Algiers, Italy, and the south of France. The chapter devoted to this part of his war service in *Part of My Life*, the first, and better, of his two autobiographical volumes, is aptly called ‘More Cloak than Dagger’.

Early in the war, he and his first wife separated, although they remained quite close to one another. By then they had had two children. The separation enabled him to engage in what at one point he calls ‘an active social life’ and elsewhere, more bleakly, ‘nineteen years of casual affairs’.

At the end of the war, after early demobilisation, he took up the fellowship to which he had been elected at Wadham. This was not to last for long. He was invited to apply for the Grote chair at University College London and did so, not because he was attracted to that college or its philosophy department, but because he liked the idea of living in London. London was not to disappoint him, which was just as well since his department was in a seriously debilitated state. It was accommodated in what he described in conversation as ‘a couple of broom closets’. It had had no professor since 1944, when the eloquent John Macmurray had left, after sixteen years, to go to Edinburgh. There was a reader, a scholarly francophile, who used the return of peace as an opportunity for constant visits to the country he loved, and a Greek lady, with no discoverable academic qualifications, who had been Macmurray’s secretary and had somehow mutated into an assistant lecturer. There were some half-dozen undergraduates and no graduate students.

Ayer responded energetically and successfully to the challenge. Within a few years his department had become one of the liveliest in the country. He brought Stuart Hampshire on to the staff and, later, Richard Wollheim. The department was soon strong enough to supply itself with excellently qualified lecturers of its own production: J. F. Thomson, John Watling, P. B. Downing, and the somewhat mysterious

A. H. Basson (later known, after a visit to the Sudan, as Anthony Pike Cavendish). The department developed an intense *esprit de corps* and this expressed itself at meetings addressed by visiting philosophers who were subjected, particularly if they came from Oxford, to fierce argumentative assault. His colleagues largely confined themselves to Ayer's topics, which, if not all that numerous, were central and important, and wrote in versions of his spare, expeditious, rather impersonal style. There was no servility about this however; he was exposed to his own sort of criticism. The atmosphere of the department in Ayer's thirteen years there is well caught in a novel by Veronica Hull (a pseudonym): *The Monkey Puzzle*. Ayer's fiddlings with his cigarettes and his watch-chain as he argued away on his feet are memorably recorded.

The social scene to which he had access in London was interesting and varied. The most eminent and admired constituent of it was Bertrand Russell, with whom Ayer began a long friendship at this time. That was counterbalanced by excommunication on the part of Wittgenstein, who had previously seemed quite favourably disposed. He was able to spend a good deal of time with scientists, which gratified him as a proclaimed defender of science. Ayer now began a protracted career of what may be called academic travel. He became an inveterate conference member and a frequent visiting professor in the United States, beginning with a stay at New York University in 1948. Always ready and vigorous in discussion, it is understandable that he should expend a good deal of time and energy doing something he did very well, however meagre its lasting value.

He began to make himself known to a wider public when his ideas, particularly on morality and religion, were attacked publicly. C. E. M. Joad in the *New Statesman* brought against him the traditional Socratic charge of corrupting the young, contending that the emotive theory of ethics led to Fascism. *Time* magazine joined in the hunt, interviewing him in a malevolent fashion when he was in New York. Narrowly considered, the charge is unwarranted. Philosophers have combined adherence to the emotive theory not only with Christian belief, but also with virtuous Christian practice, without evident inconsistency. Ayer himself had moral failings—most obviously vanity and sexual licence—but he was also generous, honest, and public-spirited, a practising utilitarian, as was only fitting in a professor at UCL. But emotivism, in his version, at any rate, rather than more decorous ones,

does tend to suggest that morality is, in the end, a matter of arbitrary whim.

One public-spirited activity to which he gave a good deal of himself was the editing of two successful series of philosophical books. The more important of these was the Pelican series, mostly on individual philosophers, but some on general topics. Not all of them were good, but some were very good and very few were bad. The same judgement would be harder to support in the case of the International Library, published by Routledge, a resurrection of an earlier series, initiated by C. K. Ogden, under a similar title. From this time forward his enlarged reputation, with its marginally scandalous character, made him an effective public defender of various 'progressive' causes, notably that of removing the legal disabilities of homosexuals. His renown as a heterosexual amorist ruled out any suspicion of personal interest.

Ayer largely gave up philosophical activity—writing and publication, even reading and thought—during the war. He returned to the subject in 1945 most productively, perhaps invigorated by the pause. The first fruits of this were two substantial articles on the terminology of sense-data and on phenomenalism which sought to clear up some unfinished business left over from his earlier work on perception. Fresher and more interesting was his London inaugural lecture of 1947, 'Thinking and Meaning'. This is a bold piece of work and, for the most part, a new departure. It would seem that he had serious doubts about it afterwards, for he never arranged for, or perhaps even allowed, its republication. It does skate over some thin ice. It bears a very strong impress of the thinking at this time of his old tutor, Ryle; but that he was happy to admit, first of all by dedicating the lecture to him. It was to receive the privilege, unusual for an inaugural lecture, of article-length discussions soon after its publication by H. H. Price and J. D. Mabbott.

His procedure is to set up a theory of thinking with five constituents which are then subjected to a process of radical reduction or whittling down. There is, on this theory, the person who thinks; the instrument with which he thinks (his mind); the process of exercising this mind in thought, in various modes such as believing, wondering, doubting, and so on, this process being conceived as a series of mental acts; the medium in which the thought is carried on, that is to say words and images; and, finally, the object of thought, its meaning.

'In the first place', he writes, in a way which must have made his hearers sit up, 'I think that we can dispense with the mind'. What this

comes down to is that the mind is no more than a class of mental events. His substantial point under this head is that thought needs no instrument, thinking is not done *with* anything, in the way that one sees with one's eyes. The fate that befalls the mind here could also have engulfed the person on Ayer's principles. It would decompose into the family of actual and possible sense-data making up a particular human body and the collection of mental events closely associated with that body.

After this throat-clearing the main event begins. Thinking in its various modes is not a process composed of introspectively identifiable mental acts. It is not an accompaniment of the use of symbols, but it is that use itself, in so far as it is intelligent or in so far as the symbols are used meaningfully. To do something intelligently, to think what one is doing, as we ordinarily put it, is not to do and to think as well, it is to do something with certain dispositions—for example, to correct, amend or adjust what one is doing, rather than plunging mechanically onwards. That was a position to be developed very fully in Ryle's *Concept of Mind*. That approach, as Ryle saw, works well with knowledge, belief, doubt, and their like, but, as he also saw, applies less adequately to what he called 'pondering', working things out in one's head. Since Ayer had no objection to privacy, that was not a problem for him.

What did concern him was to discern what the meaningfulness of our use of symbols amounts to. His main negative point here is that meaningfulness is not explained by the idea of abstract 'objects of thought': concepts or universals in the case of terms, propositions in the case of sentences. These expressions are dummies, unexplanatory synonyms for what they are alleged to explain. To say what a symbol means is 'to give it an interpretation in terms of other symbols', but that will not quite do. In the end the symbols, if descriptive, have to be related to 'actual situations'. Objects of thought, in the sense of a subsistent realm of Platonic meanings, have been avoided, but contact with the actual, non-symbolic world has been preserved.

Ayer was clearly not satisfied, for very long at least, by the doctrine of 'Thinking and Meaning'. He came back to the topic in 1958 in an essay on meaning and intentionality, which came to no very definite conclusion. The dissatisfaction may explain why the inaugural was never reprinted in any anthology or any of his essay collections.

The main fruit of Ayer's thirteen years at UCL were the essays in *Philosophical Essays* (1954), most of those in *The Concept of a Person* (1963), and *The Problem of Knowledge* (1956). Five of the twelve items

in *Philosophical Essays* cover familiar epistemological ground in a familiar way, dotting *is* and crossing *ts*. He defends his view that sense-data must appear what they are and be what they appear, and the connected theory that basic propositions, those which report sense-data, are incorrigible. Various difficulties in phenomenalism are confronted, far from successfully as regards the exclusion of reference to material things in the antecedents of the phenomenalist's hypotheticals ('if I were in the next room . . .'). The partial reinstatement of the argument from analogy as an account of our knowledge of other minds is worked out more fully. In another essay the same underlying idea—that past events and the experiences of others are not logically unobservable since it is only a contingent fact that they are past or somebody else's—is used to give a reasonable interpretation of statements about the past.

There is a conciliatory essay on the analysis of moral judgements, in which their ultimately non-cognitive nature is still firmly maintained and there is a characteristically lucid and clear-headed exposition of the principle of utility and its implications. It is not of merely expository interest. Ayer's own ultimate moral commitment was to the principle of greatest happiness and, to a rather admirable extent, his conduct conformed to it. He was largely devoid of those impulses of envy, spite, or malice which impel human beings to make others miserable. A final essay in this ethical group takes up the question of freedom of the will. In the spirit of Hume he says that an act is free not if it is uncaused, but if it has the wrong sort of cause. He then lists a few types of cause generally held to be exculpating and leaves it at that, without trying to find any common feature in these causes which might explain why they are taken to exculpate (such as that agents acting under their pressure would not alter their conduct if faced by the threat of blame or punishment).

The most original part of this early post-war work is Ayer's first incursion into philosophical logic, in essays on individuals, the identity of indiscernibles, negation, and Quine's ontology. A leading theme in most of these is that all the descriptive or semantic work of language is carried out by predicates. Following Quine's generalised version of Russell's theory of descriptions, Ayer holds that everything we want to say could be said in a purely predicative language, although it would be intolerably inconvenient. Lumping all predicates together it does not occur to him that spatio-temporal predicates, unlike others, make essential reference to individuals. The essay on negation is neat and original.

Why, apart from accidental linguistic form, is 'blue' positive and 'not-blue' negative? Could we not have called the latter 'eulb' and the former 'not-eulb'? Objections are briskly disposed of and a suggestion in terms of a formally defined characteristic called 'specificity' is proposed. 'Eulb' is not unlike Goodman's 'grue': invulnerable to formal attempts to prove its improper or secondary nature.

The Concept of a Person and Other Essays (1963) contains the best version of Ayer's doctrine about the sufficiency of predicates: an essay on names and descriptions. Another, on truth, defends the correspondence theory, shorn of the representational or pictorial embellishment with which Russell, partly, and Wittgenstein, wholly, adorned it, against coherence and pragmatist accounts, and against the accusation of triviality. The possibility of a private language is combatively defended against Wittgenstein's prohibition and, in his British Academy lecture of 1959, Ayer surveys the topic of privacy in general, usefully distinguishing four varieties. The long title essay criticises Sir Peter Strawson's view that the concept of a person is primitive and argues persuasively that an incoherence Strawson claims to detect in the theory that experiences are to be identified by the body to which they are causally related can be overcome. Two 'notes on probability' anticipate more far-reaching discussions in *Probability and Evidence* (1972). 'What is a law of nature' distinguishes law-like from merely accidental generalisations in terms of the different attitudes those affirming general statements have to them. Roughly, and as a first approximation, I treat 'all A are B' as a law if there is no property such that the knowledge that some A thing had it would weaken my belief that that thing was B. He does not ask the question as to when it is reasonable to treat general statements in this way. The book ends with a lively essay on fatalism, determinism, and the predictability of human action, and begins with a programmatic inaugural for the Wykeham chair at Oxford on philosophy and language. 'A study of language', he now maintains, 'is inseparable from a study of the facts which it is used to describe'. The sharp division between the conceptual and the empirical has become a bit blurred.

The most substantial product of Ayer's years in London was *The Problem of Knowledge* (1956). Brilliantly concise even by his standards—it is about 80,000 words long—it is a better account of Ayer's general position than the more comprehensive *Central Questions of Philosophy* (1973), since it confines itself to the epistemological issues in which he was most interested and in which he felt most comfortable.

An initial chapter sets out various more or less methodological preliminaries and concludes with a definition of knowledge: I know that p if, and not unless, p is true, I am sure that p and I have a right to be sure of it. This is more a schema than a definition. What confers the right to which he alludes? It seems exposed to Gettier-style objections. And what, one may unkindly ask, is the status of cognitive or epistemic rights from the point of view of emotivism?

This is followed by a chapter discussing scepticism and certainty. Philosophical scepticism is distinguished from the ordinary kind as questioning not the evidence we actually have but the standards by which evidence of that kind, however abundant, could support or establish the conclusions drawn from it. He says that 'it is held' that unless some things are certain, nothing can be even probable, and he seems to hold that view himself since he assumes it, without examination, in what follows. He goes on to argue that *cogito* and *sum*, or, rather, 'I think' and 'I exist,' are 'degenerate' propositions, in which the verb is a sleeping partner; the conditions for the use of referring expressions involved guarantee the truth of the statement containing them. He considers the incorrigibility of reports of one's own current experience. He now reverts to his original position 'that there is no class of descriptive statements which are incorrigible' on the ground that one can misdescribe one's experience and not all such misdescription is merely verbal.

The most interesting part of the second chapter is Ayer's account of what he calls the 'pattern of sceptical arguments'. All forms of philosophical scepticism point to a logical gap between the available evidence for a certain kind of belief and those beliefs themselves. No array of singular statements entails a truly general statement; no collection of experiences entails the existence of a physical object; from no constellation of behaviour and utterance can it be validly inferred that someone else is having an experience; from no assemblage of memories and traces does the truth of any statement about the past follow. In each of these cases (and others can be added) all the evidence for beliefs of one kind is supplied by beliefs of another kind, but never conclusively, there is always a logical gap. He distinguishes four ways of dealing with problems of this kind. (There is, of course, a fifth possibility, that of scepticism, but that is not exactly a way of dealing with the problem.)

The first way out is intuitionism, which denies that evidence of the second sort is all we have to go on and claims that we have direct access to the allegedly inaccessible items: direct realism about perception,

telepathic awareness of the contents of other minds, retrospective perception of past occurrences. Secondly, there is reductionism, which, denying the supposed gap, takes statements about the problematic entities to be translatable into statements about the uncontroversially accessible ones: the tactic of phenomenalism, 'logical' behaviourism, and the C. I. Lewis theory about knowledge of the past which Ayer had briefly espoused in his first book. Thirdly, there is the 'scientific approach', which attempts to bridge the gap by inductive reasoning, the point of view of causal and representative theories of perception, of those who take present memories and traces to make the existence of past events 'overwhelmingly probable' and those who take the argument by analogy to other minds to be acceptable. Finally, there is the 'method of descriptive analysis' which accepts the gap, neither tries to pull it shut from one end or the other, nor to bridge it, but, as he puts it, 'takes it in its stride'. This might seem irresponsibly blithe, a recognition of the correctness of scepticism together with a refusal to be affected by it. It might more charitably be viewed as an anticipation of the theory of 'criteria', that is to say, necessarily good evidence that falls short of entailment.

In the three remaining chapters, Ayer treats perception, memory, and 'myself and others'. In the first some familiar ground is elegantly covered, with the epistemic primacy of sense-data asserted as usual. But phenomenalism is now fully abandoned for the position that limiting cases of objects seeming to be perceived in all circumstances would entail the existence of the object in question. Such an ideal body of evidence is never in fact achieved, but the bodies of evidence approximating to it that we do have draw their evidential strength from it. He restates this conclusion in a form which was to satisfy him until the end of his career: 'in referring as we do to physical objects we are elaborating a theory with respect to the evidence of our senses'.

The excellent chapter on memory dispels a lot of Russellian confusion about images and feelings of familiarity and pastness. Memory-images occur, but they are dispensable. Habit-memory is simply having learnt something and not forgotten it. To remember that something was the case is to have a true (perhaps also justified) belief about the past. Event-memory is more of a problem. It is more than a true belief about one's own past but it is not quite clear what. Ayer does not consider the possibility of the extra factor being the causation of the belief by a past experience of one's own. The logical possibility of perceiving past

events is handled as before. There is a good discussion of Dummett's question about whether effects might not precede their causes.

The final chapter on myself and others also covers some old ground in a familiar way (e.g. it is only a contingent fact that another's experience was his and not mine), but there is some interesting new material about personal identity.

In 1959, H. H. Price, Ayer's mentor and always courteous critic, retired from the Wykeham chair of logic in Oxford. His election led to something of an academic commotion. The three local senior philosophers on the electoral board voted against him. Ryle and J. D. Mabbott supported W. C. Kneale, the distinguished historian of logic, Ryle arguing, truly but perhaps not altogether relevantly, that 'Kneale had borne the heat and burden of the day'. Austin was for Sir Peter Strawson. Ayer was voted in by the vice-chancellor (Sir Maurice Bowra), Professor John Wisdom of Cambridge, and the two New College representatives. Ryle was very displeased and resigned from all the electoral boards on which he sat in protest. The fuss soon died down and his opponents did not seem to hold Ayer's victory against him. Price, when told the news, was delighted.

For the next nineteen years, until his retirement in 1979, Ayer occupied his chair and the fellowship at New College that went with it with considerable success. His lectures, delivered at high speed and argumentatively dense, were too demanding for the less committed of his undergraduate audiences, which tended to fall away sharply as the term went on. But he was of great value to Oxford's large population of graduate students in philosophy, most of them reading for the new, two-year degree of B.Phil. He energetically reanimated the professorial tradition in Oxford of the 'informal instruction', a weekly two-hour class, open to all graduates and to recommended undergraduates. He would select some recently published monograph or essay-collection, talk about it himself and then cajole members of the class to prepare papers on parts of the book for the remaining weeks. There were also his 'Tuesday evenings', when a group of younger philosophy tutors would meet in his rooms to hear and mangle a paper by one of them. At six o'clock strong drink would be served and under its enlivening influence the discussion would become at once more festive and more vehement. He was an admirable and very hard-working supervisor of graduate students, taking a great deal of trouble about their theses and their professional futures.

There was a non-metropolitan, donnishly respectable side to Ayer's

character which flourished in New College. He had a fine set of rooms, looking over the college garden. He married Alberta Chapman (Dee Wells) in 1960 and lived with her in London, but he spent most weekdays in term in Oxford and so was to all intents and purposes a resident. He dined regularly and brought in guests for common-room nights. For many years he turned out for the fellows' team in their annual cricket match with a team of the college choir school. On his first appearance he scored 74 not out, more than the rest of his team put together. His batting was very much in character: quick, bold, and militant.

In the two decades since *The Foundation of Empirical Knowledge* had seemed the last word in philosophy, the centre of the discipline had unquestionably moved back to Oxford, which, despite a philosophical population of unparalleled size, had been pretty much in eclipse since the early years of the century. Ryle and Austin had, in different but still cognate ways, developed a philosophical procedure remote from Ayer's deductive reasoning about propositions of high generality in which it was assumed that formal logic revealed the essential structure of thought and language, something inherited by Ayer from Russell. The linguistic philosophers of Oxford examined ordinary language and common (or common-sense) beliefs, rather than a logically regimented language and scientific knowledge. At the time of Ayer's arrival this was the consensus with which he was confronted, and it was expected that there would be an illuminating battle of Titans between him and Austin. Because of Austin's lamentably early death in 1960 this never happened. Other factors combined with Ayer's efforts to move the prevailing philosophical attitude into something more Russellian and formalistic: Quine's exhilarating year as Eastman professor in 1953–4, Strawson's move towards system in *Individuals* in 1959, perhaps some influence, to the advantage of scientism, from the 'Australian materialism' of Smart and Armstrong. In his years as professor in Oxford he could feel that the tide was turning his way and that he had helped to turn it.

He had little sympathy for the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein, although he never concealed his large debt to the *Tractatus*. Already in 1954, as has been mentioned, he had rejected the private language argument. Soon after coming back to Oxford he published a gleefully destructive attack on Malcolm's strange theory that dreams are not experiences but that to have dreamed is to be disposed to tell stories when one wakes up. Malcolm responded with some heat. Ayer's

campaign culminated in his lively but slightly superficial book on Wittgenstein in 1985.

From the time of his return to Oxford, when he was nearing fifty, Ayer continued to be very productive, publishing thirteen books between *The Concept of a Person* in 1963 and *Thomas Paine* in 1988, the year before his death. There were three essay collections; two substantial surveys of important, more or less empiricist philosophers of the modern age (*The Origins of Pragmatism*, about Peirce and James, in 1968, and *Russell and Moore: The Analytical Heritage* in 1971); short books on Hume in 1980, Russell in 1972, and Wittgenstein in 1985; an idiosyncratic and rather disjointed history of *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* in 1981, largely recycling material published earlier; slim volumes on Voltaire and Thomas Paine towards the end of his life; and two more ambitious works: *Probability and Evidence* in 1972 and *The Central Questions of Philosophy*, a statement of his ideas about practically everything, in 1973.

These books were, as always, very well written. No words were wasted; complex bodies of thought were lucidly expounded. But there were no major changes of view and no ventures into unfamiliar territory. The book on probability consists of John Dewey Lectures, delivered at Columbia University, supplemented 'in order to bring this book up to a respectable size', as he cheerfully admits, by a pretty lethal criticism of R. F. Harrod's attempt to solve the problem of induction and a concluding essay on conditionals. The Dewey Lectures start with a penetrating attempt to reinforce Hume's argument that no factual inference is demonstrative by way of the notion of an 'intrinsic description', under which every event is indeed logically distinct from every other event. Kneale's doctrine of natural necessity is dogmatically dismissed. Ayer distinguishes three kinds of probability (from Hume to Carnap, most philosophers get by with two): purely mathematical, as in the calculus of chances; statistical, based on frequencies; and epistemic, issuing in judgements about the credibility of particular beliefs. He repeats his earlier contentions that frequencies allow no judgements about particular events and that logical relation theories like Carnap's rely on an unclear and perhaps unclarifiable notion of 'total evidence'. Ayer's account of probability was convincingly criticised for its lack of familiarity with recent work in the field.

The two historical surveys are interestingly different. In the one on Peirce and James the two subjects are examined from a certain distance. Only a selection of their work is investigated, that part of it which

mostly closely overlaps Ayer's own interests. In Peirce's case this means that rather a lot is left out. Fallibilism is mentioned, but only in passing; there is nothing at all about Peirce's critical common-sensism. Ayer considers Peirce's version of the pragmatic theory of meaning, his philosophy of science, where he rejects Peirce's vindication of induction, but expresses sympathy for his belief in objective chance, and his theory of signs, which receives the largest share of his attention. James's pragmatic theory of truth is objected to on fairly familiar lines. Ayer's main concern is with James's radical empiricism, which he sees as a rough, preliminary adumbration of his own account of empirical knowledge as composed of a primary system of sensible elements and a secondary system of theoretical constructions out of these elements (minds, common objects, the theoretical entities of physics). He seeks to replace James's large and sweeping constructional gestures with more detailed and explicit constructions of his own. He concludes by arguing that the constructedness of an entity does not, as James supposed (and in this Russell was to follow him), show that it is of an inferior ontological status to that of the elements from which it is constructed.

His treatment of Russell and Moore is much less distorted by his own preoccupations and supplies a much more comprehensive and balanced account of the subjects. That is obviously because he was much closer to them; their thought was part of the original constitution of his mind as a philosopher and most of his work took the form of developing or reacting against ideas he had found in them. The book is more clear-cut and decisive than that on the two American pragmatists. He begins with Russell's conception of philosophy as the analysis of most of what we think there is as logical constructions out of sensory data, a procedure authoritatively illustrated by Russell's theory of descriptions. The doctrines of logical atomism and neutral monism, in Russell's distinctive interpretation of them, are set out with the fluent concision that is derived from long familiarity. The view which Russell shared with James that logical constructions are not part of the ultimate furniture of the world is once again dismissed. In the case of Moore the early criticisms of the principle that *esse is percipi* and the doctrine of internal relations are largely endorsed; his defence of common sense is not. There is a very thorough examination of Moore's resolutely naïve but nevertheless scrupulously careful dealings with abstract entities such as concepts, universals, propositions, and facts,

and of his ideas about the nature and seemingly paradoxical aspects of philosophical analysis.

Much of the material of these two books reappears in *The Central Questions of Philosophy* which was published not long after them. It is a little odd to find the militantly atheistic Ayer being invited to deliver lectures endowed for the purpose of defending natural religion which had, in practice, recently been the occasion, for the most part, for the presentation of large metaphysical systems such as Alexander's *Space, Time and Deity* and Whitehead's *Process and Reality*. Ayer complied in a negative way with both the principle and the practice of the series. His last chapter is devoted to undermining arguments for religious belief and his first to rejecting the claims of metaphysics, although more politely and less sweepingly than in his first youthful onslaught. On the whole, the book adds up to an admirable summary or textbook of Ayer's own mature philosophy, and, to some extent, of the kind of Russellian analytic philosophy of which he was such an able exponent. This modesty of aim and achievement may explain why it does not seem to have been reviewed in most of the main philosophical periodicals. A great deal of ground is covered in a very short space: most adroitly, perhaps, in the chapter on logic and existence, in which the main ingredients of logic, as well as set theory, are discussed, and also existence, identity, analyticity, and abstract entities. The once most ardent champion of the analytic-synthetic distinction puts up little resistance to Quine's dismissal of it. Having previously believed, no doubt under the influence of Russell, that common sense and physics give incompatible accounts of material things, he suggests here that a loose compromise is possible and that unobservable particles are literally parts of ordinary material objects. Although largely derivative from Ayer's other writings, there can be no book which covers so much of what really is, (or, at any rate, then was) central to philosophy than this. It is the most comprehensive, although not most exciting, introduction to Ayer's philosophy; it is a pretty good introduction to philosophy in general.

His *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* was an attempt, he says, to provide a sequel to Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*, bringing the story up to date. It shares some of the qualities of its predecessor, being brisk and lucid as well as being selective—even more than Russell. Bergson, Alexander, and Whitehead, for example, are considered simply as they figure in Collingwood's *Idea of Nature*, an intriguing but unreliable peep-hole. Price appears only as sharing Broad's

interest in psychical research. The only non-analytic philosophers treated at length are James, a handful of phenomenologists and existentialists, and Collingwood, who is considered at some length. Ayer dutifully sets out some of Collingwood's extravagances, such as that works of art are in the artists' minds, not on gallery walls, and that history is the re-enactment of past thoughts, with an uncomprehending bemusement worthy of Prichard or Moore. Added to brief versions of Ayer's earlier treatment of Russell, James, and Moore is a substantial account of C. I. Lewis, recalling discussions of him in the late 1930s with Austin and others. A singular assemblage of philosophers of mind, from Broad to Davidson, is handled in one chapter. A final one brings the story pretty much up to date with Chomsky, Dummett, Kripke, and Putnam. The book is not as amusing as Russell's and is not encumbered with extraneous historical matter, indeed, it is minimally historical about the people and ideas it does cover. Under a kind of Geneva convention he discloses only the name, date, and professional positions of his selected subjects.

Two of the best essays—on Austin's attack on sense-data and Malcolm's theory of dreams—in the collection *Metaphysics and Common Sense* have already been mentioned, as has, by implication, a third 'On What There Must Be'. The best thing in *Freedom and Morality* is an article 'Identity and Reference' in which Kripke's influential theory of reference is taken to task. The only one of the three short books which requires a mention is that on Wittgenstein. Apart from Ayer's usual merits of clarity, concision, and what might be called transparency of argument—something particularly important in this case—it has the virtue of being wholly unintimidated. Wittgenstein is treated pretty much as if he were Bosanquet, the producer of strange utterances in dire need of interpretation.

Activities outside Oxford were by no means suspended during Ayer's years as Wykeham professor. He was a member of the Plowden Committee on Primary Education and, for all his carefully nurtured radicalism, dissented from its hostility to formal methods of instruction. It was primarily for his services in this connection, and not for what he had done for philosophy, that he was knighted in 1970. He was president of numerous progressive organisations, for the most part concerned with 'humanism' and homosexual law reform. For many years a member of the Institut Internationale de Philosophie, he was its president from 1968 to 1971. This supplied lavish opportunities for attending conferences in more or less exotic places, a pursuit to which he was

strongly attached. At one of these, at Varna, a Black Sea resort in Bulgaria, in face of the total failure of repeated pressure on the button to obtain any room service, he voiced his dissatisfaction in a loud voice. The room's bugging system soon brought up an apologetic secret policeman in managerial guise.

In 1969 he was sounded by some fellows of Wadham about becoming warden and enjoyed thinking about the idea, both until he decided not to stand and, a little wistfully, afterwards. In 1977 he published *Part of My Life*, the first and better of two autobiographical volumes, taking the story up to his arrival at UCL. The second volume, *More of My Life*, which appeared in 1983, covered a shorter and less interesting period, finishing in 1963. He retired from his Oxford chair in 1978, on reaching the statutory age, but his election to a fellowship at Wolfson College gave him a toe-hold in the university for a number of years, which he made use of by regularly attending the Tuesday evening discussions. In 1979 he was elected to an honorary studentship at Christ Church, which was somewhat undermined by an unfortunate speech at some college occasion.

In 1981 Ayer and his second wife, Dee, were divorced and he married Vanessa Lawson. He and Dee had had one son, Nicholas, to whom he was devoted. He was extremely happy with Vanessa and she fell in splendidly with his characteristic style of London entertaining. He seems always to have lived in narrow houses where party guests flowed out of available rooms and on to the stairs. This time of very great domestic happiness did not last long since Vanessa died in 1985. With her he made an extended visit to Dartmouth College in New Hampshire in 1982. In 1987, without her, he made a similar visit to Bard College on the Hudson River.

Ayer was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1952 and was an active one. His 'Privacy' was the annual philosophical lecture for 1959 and 'Bertrand Russell as a Philosopher' the Master-Mind Lecture for 1972. He was awarded honorary degrees by Brussels (1962); East Anglia (1972); London (1978); Trent, Ontario (1980); Bard College (1985); and Durham (1988). There was a distinguished symposium on his work, *Perception and Identity*, edited by Graham Macdonald, to whose contents he replied with freshness and vigour in 1979. He also managed substantial replies to most of the contributions to the less distinguished volume dedicated to him in the Library of Living Philosophers, edited by Lewis E. Hahn, which was not published until 1992, three years after his death. The only serious monograph about his

philosophy is that of John Foster, a most loyal, but penetratingly critical, admirer, which came out in 1985, in good time for him to enjoy it.

Ayer's health was generally good—perhaps surprisingly so for such a heavy smoker; steady, but not problematic, drinker; and, after his annual cricket matches in middle age, resolute avoider of exercise, apart from a little night-club-style dancing. But in the last few years of his life his health declined and he died on 27 June 1989. A curious medical incident occurred during his final illness. At one point he was thought to have died, but, to the surprise of those attending him, he then revived. His accounts of what went through his mind during the conscious part of this process left the question of the afterlife still very much open. He was looked after in his last days by his second wife, Dee, whom he had remarried shortly before his death.

Ayer's general intellectual enthusiasms were, like his philosophy, on the narrow side, but intense. He was extremely well read in the great male Victorian novelists: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Wilkie Collins. He liked painting, but not very ardently. His comments on visits as a young man to the great collections of Europe are dutiful and rather banal, calling to mind A. C. Benson's remarks on Dickens in Max Beerbohm's *A Christian Garland*: 'He had for that writer a very sincere admiration, though he was inclined to think that his true excellence lay not so much in faithful portrayal of the life of his times, or in gift of sustained narration, or in those scenes of pathos which have moved so many hearts in so many quiet homes, as in the power of inventing highly fantastic figures, such as Mr Micawber or Mr Pickwick'. He loved the cinema and had at one time written film reviews. Music was for dancing to.

He was a faithful supporter of Tottenham Hotspur and, in something of the same spirit, of the Labour Party. He was the friend of many prominent Labour politicians and regularly spoke out in their and their party's interest. There was a kind of boyish mischievousness about his politics as about the vehemence of his attacks on religion which preserved them from any taint of rancour so that they were no obstacle to close and long-lasting friendships with Conservatives and Christians. Like Bloomsbury he thought personal relations much too important to be sacrificed to the abstractions of ideology.

He was undoubtedly one of the liveliest figures on the British philosophical scene in his time and, when he appeared on it, it was in need of enlivening. He was not a highly original thinker. His impact

was due to the brilliance with which he arranged and expressed the ideas he had acquired from others. Perhaps his greatest intellectual virtue was his unremitting adherence to clarity and to rational argument. His work is without allusions, undeveloped suggestions, obscurity, and mannerism. Through his books and his teaching he set a fine example of intellectual discipline.

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Bibliographical note. There are substantial bibliographies of Ayer's writings in two collections of essays devoted to his work. Much the better of the two is in *The Philosophy of A. J. Ayer*, ed. Lewis E. Hahn, (Illinois; Open Court, 1992). That in *Perception and Identity*, ed. Graham Macdonald, (Macmillan, 1979) (a better collection of essays) is very sketchy.