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Reviewed by Joseph Bentley

Review: *The Historical and Philosophical Significance of Ayer's Language, Truth and Logic*, by Adam Tamas Tuboly

Joseph Bentley

The last forty years have seen a dramatic resurgence of scholarship on the Vienna Circle and the Logical Empiricist movement, rescuing them from the scornful dismissal that had become commonplace. And yet, despite remaining possibly the most famous anglophone (self-proclaimed) adherent of Logical Positivism, this rising tide has left A. J. Ayer largely untouched. Whereas contemporaries like Rudolf Carnap, Philipp Frank, and Otto Neurath are subjects of growing scholarly interest, no such revival of interest and reinterpretation is as yet forthcoming for Ayer. Ayer remains famous for, even identified with, the book he published as an impetuous 25-year-old, *Language, Truth and Logic* (*LTL*). What Thomas Uebel has called Ayer's 'shilling shocker' dropped like a bomb on the British philosophical scene at the time of its initial release in 1936, with the second edition in 1946 going on to become a surprise best-seller (especially by the standards of academic philosophy) (Uebel 2007, 189). In some ways, this fame (or infamy) has undermined the perceived need for revisiting the work. But as Adam Tuboly notes in his introduction, the modern scholarship on the history of Logical Empiricism has cast doubt on *LTL*'s status as a definitive statement of the movement's philosophy, reopening the question of how we ought to appraise the significance of Ayer and his book.

As the title suggests, the volume approaches Ayer and his most famous work from both the historical and the philosophical perspective (sometimes separately, sometimes simultaneously). Historically, the volume aims to contextualise Ayer and his book within the intersecting spheres of British philosophy, analytic

philosophy and Logical Empiricism in the middle of the twentieth century. The historical chapters collectively not only situate Ayer with regards to his contemporaries, but also appraise the historical impact and legacy of his thought, and *LTL* in particular. Philosophically, the papers in the volume consider what elements of Ayer's thought hold up through a contemporary lens. In both cases, the conclusions reached about Ayer's significance are frequently critical, but still help to bring a better understanding of his work and legacy.

From a historical perspective, what many of the chapters (on their own and cumulatively) make clear is how intellectually isolated Ayer was. As the lone self-proclaimed Logical Positivist in Britain, Ayer was not the spokesman of a broader movement, or even small circle of similarly minded thinkers. In her chapter 'Viennese Bombshells', Siobhan Chapman compares Ayer's positions in *LTL* to those of three of his philosophical contemporaries; the empirical semanticist Arne Naess, the Cambridge analyst Susan Stebbing, and the Oxford ordinary language philosopher J. L. Austin. Whilst all three found points of agreement and disagreement in Ayer's work, Chapman emphasises how different Ayer's approach and assumptions were from those of these thinkers. Naess for instance took semantic questions of meaning and synonymy to be established, not formally as Ayer suggested, but via empirical investigation. Stebbing, like Ayer, took philosophical analysis to be an essential philosophical tool, but where Ayer saw analysis as revealing of language, Stebbing saw analysis as providing an 'understanding of the make up of the world' (82). Stebbing's conception of analysis lacked the anti-metaphysical stance that was definitive of Ayer's. Austin and Ayer's relationship was personally closer, both being colleagues at Oxford, and yet still marked by even more profound disagreement (Austin would use Ayer as the foil in *Sense and Sensibilia*), the fundamental difference being Ayer's disregard for ordinary language use, which Austin took as the primary topic for philosophical consideration. This interpretation of Ayer's relationship to Ox-

ford ordinary language philosophy is furthered in Sally-Parker Ryan's 'Linguistic Analysis: Ayer and Early Ordinary Language Philosophy'. Ryan argues that despite important points of agreement, an anti-metaphysical orientation and linguistic methodology, the conceptions of language proved too different. Ayer, she argues, must be understood as a representative of the ideal language tradition, taking the primary purpose of language to be representational. Like Russell and Frege before him, Ayer takes natural language to be an obstacle to philosophical knowledge, where for the ordinary language philosopher, 'expressions of language, in their very *ordinariness*, can occlude interesting and perhaps enlightening philosophical insights' (145).

That Ayer's views differed from those of competing philosophical schools is perhaps unsurprising. But Ayer was also not in lockstep with the European Logical Empiricists themselves, the movement with which he was keen to self-identify. This is highlighted in a less obvious way by László Kocsis's subtle interpretation of Ayer's theory of truth. Kocsis argues that Ayer distinguished the two tasks of providing a definition of truth (to capture its nature) and a criterion of truth (the standard for deeming things true). By separating these two questions, Ayer could maintain deflationism about the nature of truth and correspondentism as the criterion of truth: whilst there is no predicate or relation 'truth', and 'true' is therefore a meaningless term, the standards for when we can correctly deploy the term 'true' are determined by correspondence to reality. Situating Ayer relative to the European Logical Empiricists within the protocol sentence debates, Kocsis argues that he represents a 'third view in this debate' (297). The two primary camps concerning the criterion of truth were the correspondentist's like Schlick and the coherentists like Hempel and Neurath. Whilst agreeing with Schlick that correspondence must be the criterion of truth, Ayer's differing epistemological commitments lead him to an alternative conception of 'agreement with reality'. This subtle interpretive difference sets Ayer apart from both other camps within the debate.

Ayer's outsider position is again highlighted in Thomas Uebel's chapter, via another very specific case-study: Ayer's later mischaracterisation of the *LTL* argument for knowledge of other minds. In explaining the source of this mischaracterisation, Uebel convincingly shows how the epistemologically radical positions that Ayer adopted in *LTL*, and which he shared with Vienna Circle members like Neurath and Carnap, were quickly abandoned in favour of more traditional empiricist epistemological commitments. Where in *LTL* Ayer defended fallibilism about immediate experience, by 1940 Ayer was endorsing 'a more substantial phenomenalism' and a 'correspondentist foundationalism' much closer in spirit to traditional British empiricism, which would soon become associated with the caricature of Logical Empiricism. Whilst highlighting the radicalism of *LTL*'s epistemology is important, and easily overlooked, in terms of Ayer's historical impact what matters more is how short-lived this radicalism was. As far as the significance of *LTL*, Uebel concludes with an apposite warning: 'I would strongly urge caution against... employ[ing] Ayer's *LTL* as a stand-in for the "real thing"' (240).

The complicated relationship between Ayer and the Vienna Circle whose Logical Empiricism he professed to share is explored in the volume's excellent first two historical chapters. These two chapters both convincingly show the primary heritage of *LTL* to be a contribution to the hegemonic image and narrative of Logical Empiricism in the public imagination. Tuboly's helpful introductory chapter gives a clear and concise historical background for the volume, covering Ayer's personal and intellectual background, putting the circumstances of Ayer's interaction with the Vienna Circle and the writing of *LTL* into their historical context, and setting the stage for the disputed legacy of the book. Even in the introduction however, critical assessment of Ayer cannot be avoided. As Tuboly describes, the Vienna Circle that Ayer spent fourth months attending over the winter of 1932/1933 was 'somewhat past its prime' (5); increasingly inter-

nally divided, and with a slowly dwindling membership. And yet, these nuances are not represented in *LTL*, which features '[no] mention of the rich history and ideas of logical empiricism' (33).

Andrea Vrahimis goes further in arguing for the distorting effect of *LTL*'s influence and legacy, emphasising the decontextualised and strangely anglicised version of the Vienna Circle's thought that Ayer outlines, and the impact this had in shaping the anglophone world's conception of Logical Empiricism. In his insightful historiographical discussion, Vrahimis emphasises the ways in which *LTL* is at times both ahistorical and unhistorical, for instance 'ignor[ing] the fact that the Vienna Circle were critically engaged in larger Germanophone debates' (63) whilst also forging a lineage for Logical Empiricism that lies almost entirely within the British Empiricist tradition. Vrahimis is absolutely correct here. The influence of this anglicised narrative can be easily seen. Take for instance Rorty's dismissive characterisation of logical empiricism as 'restat[ing] the foundationalist epistemology of British empiricism' (Rorty 1997, 1).

Vrahimis's chapter therefore serves as a welcome correction to Ayer's presentation, highlighting the variety of influences that are underplayed in *LTL*, including Frege, Russell, and the French conventionalists. In particular he emphasises the Germanophone influences on the Vienna Circle, primarily the neo-Kantian influence (on Carnap especially) and the Austrian philosophical milieu of Bolzano, Brentano and Mach. The influence of these figures on the Vienna Circle is well known, but such a clear demonstration of the historiographical lapses in *LTL* is essential to recognising the problematic imprint it has left on the broader conceptualisation of Logical Empiricism and its history. Vrahimis highlights the sense in which the fame and prominence of *LTL* were ultimately some of its most problematic characteristics. Received at the time as the definitive English-language statement of Logical Empiricist philosophy (and still often treated as such up to the present day) *LTL* played an integral role in form-

ing the everyday understanding of Logical Empiricism. Ayer's *LTL* is a key contributor to the received view of Logical Empiricism that the past forty years of scholarship has so rigorously dismantled.

The most severe assessment of Ayer's historical impact comes from Aaron Preston's 'Ayer's Book of Errors and the Crises of Contemporary Western Culture'. Preston argues that the import of *LTL* (the eponymous 'book of errors') must be understood entirely as a historical phenomenon, the philosophical import being 'minimal at best' (334) 'once you realize that its wrong in all, or nearly all, the details' (361). This is a harsh assessment, but one that could be justified and may well be shared by many contemporary philosophers. But how this historical legacy is understood is far more dubious. Preston argues not only for the error of Ayer's ideas, but for a profoundly pernicious influence emanating from Ayer's philosophy in *LTL*, and philosophies like it, which 'helped to problematize the West's relationship to truth in general, and moral truth in particular' (335). This philosophy, Preston argues, is ultimately responsible for the epistemological and moral decay of Western culture. The epistemic malaise of the modern post-truth world and even the election of Donald Trump are ultimately framed as 'down-stream consequences' of Ayer's thinking (335).

The primary failure is located in Ayer's emotivism, which discounts the possibility of there being moral truths and results in a 'practical moral nihilism' (360). That this isn't even true of Ayer on a personal level has been recently demonstrated by Tuboly elsewhere (2020). But the broader historical claim is patently absurd, relying on an extraordinarily generous interpretation of 'downstream' causes. Any attribution of such profound and long-term societal trends to any single thinker or book seems to require an extraordinary level of proof and argument. Unsurprisingly then, Preston caveats his argument, admitting that Ayer is not solely responsible for our current predicament. Rather, *LTL* is taken as a particularly forceful and sophisticated statement of

a scientific mentality. In this story, Ayer's positivism and the nascent native positivism in North America (the focus being primarily on American educational reforms) cultivated a scientific world-view which sharply separated fact from value, and left the domain of values to the humanities. And these humanities were tainted by 'corruption... by "postmodern" thought' (354). The resulting moral vacuum is there to be filled by whatever comes along: 'In 2016 in the United States, it was Donald Trump' (360).

Even with the caveats, this narrative and the accompanying argument still rings false. For all its talk of 'the West', Preston's primary concern is with the United States. But Ayer and his influence were profoundly British. As Preston's own chapter recounts, the influence of and controversy surrounding *LTL* were primarily felt in England, Oxford specifically. Of the sources Preston cites describing the immediate cultural impact of *LTL*, at least five (Mary Midgley, Isaiah Berlin and Brian Magee's remembrances, the pseudonymous 'Oxonian', and Dubnov's biography of Isiah Berlin) are concerned specifically with Oxford university life. But the crucial gap between post-war British philosophy and twenty-first century cultural norms is not filled, the leap not justified. Whilst the influence of *LTL* undoubtedly extended beyond Oxford undergraduates, the link from this (undoubtedly interesting) snapshot of British postwar intellectual history to contemporary American politics is simply not sufficiently well established. Ultimately Preston himself concedes taking a certain artistic licence, admitting that Ayer's book is utilized in his chapter as an emblematic stand-in for the 'spirit of the age' (361), the broad swing towards cultural scientism. This 'decline of the West' historical narrative itself is in need of further support. But in so far as *LTL* is being used as a proxy for a broader intellectual trend, this seems like an unfair basis for an assessment of Ayer or his book on their own merits.

Less questionable appraisals of Ayer are however not entirely uncritical. Whilst not rejecting Ayer's philosophical significance entirely, Hans Johann Glock does plausibly argue that the over-

arching argument of *LTL* must be taken to fail, and that philosophical significance must be at least in part determined by 'getting things right' (274). Glock addresses Ayer's verificationism, which he takes to be the lynchpin of *LTL*, undergirding a metaphysical argument against the metaphysical conception of the task and goals of philosophy. The argument of *LTL*, which Glock reconstructs and dubs the 'anti-metaphysical argument', is then argued to be unsound and potentially even invalid (252). The chapter provides an accessible survey of the various permutations that verificationism underwent within the Vienna Circle, distinguishing the principle of verification from the criterion of verifiability and strong and weak senses of verifiability. And yet, despite the criticisms Glock does not dismiss verificationism entirely. Whilst he concludes that verificationism (more specifically, the criterion of verifiability) cannot be used as it is by Ayer as a decisive refutation of metaphysical philosophy, Glock maintains that the criterion of verifiability remains a valuable 'tool of clarification and mystification' (275). Deploying some Wittgensteinian insights, Glock defends the core impulse of verificationism, that 'If there are no standards of correctness for the metaphysical application of a term, then that employment of it is meaningless' (274). But the future prospects for verificationism are left unclear. The ambivalence of this conclusion is not entirely abated through the clever use of a Frank Zappa quote.

Two other chapters in the volume also focus on this kind of historico-philosophical exegesis. Gergeley Ambrus's chapter 'The Evolution of Ayer's Views on the Mind-Body Relation' argues that Ayer moves from the phenomenalism of *LTL*, in which the question of sense-data being mental or physical is understood as nonsensical, to a more pragmatic realism justified by the 'general structure of experience' (188). This development is meticulously covered throughout Ayer's published work. Krisztián Pete's chapter focuses on Ayer's emotivist theory of ethical language, which he argues can be buttressed against potential criticisms via a comparison with Berkeley's theory of meaning for

religious mysteries. Pete suggests supplementing Ayer's emotive reading with a secondary descriptive component, moving Ayer 'toward contemporary expressivism' (330). In this way, an approach in Ayer's spirit may still prove a plausible account of ethical language. Both chapters are worthwhile works of philosophical exegesis, providing close readings of less prominent aspects of Ayer's thought from his writings.

The most positive take on Ayer's philosophical work in the entire volume is found in Nicole Rathgeb's chapter, where she argues for an interpretation of Ayer's account of analyticity as not only playing a crucial role in the argument of *LTL*, but also as 'fundamentally correct' (120). In *LTL* Ayer maintains that all statements with factual content are empirical, and that no empirical proposition is necessarily true. Ayer also maintains that the truths of logic and maths are necessary, since they cannot conceivably be false. He therefore requires a conception of analyticity that renders analytic truths necessary and contentless. Rathgeb argues that the solution Ayer finds is not the definition of analyticity typically attributed to him, that being 'truth in virtue of meaning'. What Ayer actually advocates is that analytic propositions are those 'that can be verified solely *by appeal to definitions*' (107). Contrary to the metaphysical reading of 'truth in virtue of meaning' (see [Boghossian 1996](#)), in which meaning contributes to the way things are, Rathgeb interprets Ayer as saying that 'the meaning of the expressions involved in an analytic proposition are responsible for the proposition not imposing any constraints on the world' and consequently being true in all circumstances (111). Analytic propositions thereby remain necessary and without empirical content. But this necessity is relative only to a presupposed meaning. And these meanings can be changed. The result is an epistemological conception of analyticity according to which analytic statements can be abandoned, although they can by necessity never be false. They are necessarily true, given the determination to adopt that specific meaning. Rathgeb's chapter not only represents an excellent piece of Ayer

scholarship, highlighting an as yet unacknowledged (or at least unheralded) nuance in Ayer's thinking but, as she argues, it also provides a promising account of analyticity for advocates of the epistemological conception of analyticity. Ayer's work does, Rathgeb convincingly argues, have contemporary philosophical (not merely historical) significance.

The present volume does not therefore begin a process of wholesale reinterpretation and re-evaluation of Ayer's work and legacy, as has previously happened for the likes of Carnap. It does not represent a Neo-Ayerian reaffirmation of the philosophical project of *LTL*. The consensus remains critical of Ayer's current philosophical significance, albeit (primarily) via a more nuanced and charitable criticism than the scornful dismissal that Logical Empiricism has historically been subject to. More concretely though, the current volume does make an important contribution to our understanding of the historical significance of *LTL*, by placing the book, its ideas, and its author within a specific period in the development of analytic philosophy. One of the emergent themes of the book as a whole is the relationship between Ayer as the Anglophobe cheerleader of Logical Empiricism, and his relationship to the British philosophical scene. Whilst the warm and ultimately fruitful reception of Logical Empiricism in North America is an ongoing topic of important historical research, the contemporaneous and frostier reception of the movement by the British philosophical landscape has not been studied in such detail. Ayer's own life and work are an illuminating case study in this as yet under-explored area of the history of analytic philosophy, and this volume is an important step towards a deeper understanding of this period.

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