Introduction: Ryle’s Oxford Legacy

Rom Harré and John Shosky

This edition of The Linacre Journal is devoted to the landmark philosophical contributions of Gilbert Ryle (1900-1976). Ryle was graduated from Queen’s College, Oxford in 1924 and became a lecturer in philosophy at Christ Church that same year. The following year he became a student and tutor at Christ Church, where he remained until his appointment as Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy in 1945. Ryle was also editor of the influential journal Mind from 1948 to 1971. Briefly, in the early 1960s, he was an honorary fellow of Linacre College. Upon his retirement in 1968, he donated his books and papers to the Linacre College Library. A second donation came with his death in 1976. Other manuscripts by Ryle may be found at Hertford College and the Philosophical Centre, Oxford.

For many generations of students, Ryle embodied Oxford philosophy. He was the founder, with J. L. Austin, of the ‘linguistic analysis’ school of philosophy, primarily associated with Oxford, which emphasised the importance of ordinary language in framing and addressing philosophical questions. This movement can be dated by the appearance of Ryle’s “Systematically Misleading Expressions” in 1932, which argued that a main part of philosophy must be “the detection of the sources in linguistic idioms of recurrent misconstructions and absurd theories”. He was also primarily responsible for the creation of the Bachelor of Philosophy degree in Oxford, which became the premier qualification for teachers of philosophy.

In the world outside Oxford, Ryle’s influence was very wide. He was the author in 1949 of The Concept of Mind, recognised as a modern classic. He also published his Tarnier Lectures as Dilemmas in 1954, followed by Plato’s Progress in 1966, and Collected Papers in two volumes in 1971. Ryle, a collection of critical essays, edited by Oscar P. Wood and George Pitcher in 1971, included an autobiographical essay by Ryle. Posthumously, two further books have appeared: On Thinking, edited by Konstantin Kolenda in 1979,
and Aspects of Mind, edited by René Meyer in 1993. Each work reflects Ryle’s intellectual honesty and his ability to reveal the sources of seemingly intractable philosophical problems. Each sentence is loaded with what philosopher Sir Stuart Hampshire has called “Aristotelian pregnancy”. Ryle was also well-regarded for his prose. Philosopher J. O. Urmson, writing in the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, noted that “although there is much close argument in his writing, the importance of the fresh language, the bold metaphor, and the terse epigram in giving the problems a striking presentation, in bringing down pretentious castles of learned jargon, and in making his own contention memorable is very great indeed”. As a result, Ryle’s work, particularly The Concept of Mind and Dilemmas, remains essential reading in the philosophical canon.

The Ryle Papers at Linacre are a valuable intellectual and historical legacy. The essays in this journal expand the record of Ryle’s contributions by highlighting the importance of his manuscripts and books at Linacre College. Each member of the Linacre College family can be justifiably proud that Ryle chose our institution for housing his books and papers.

In the first essay, Professor Antony Flew, a former student of Ryle’s at Christ Church in the late 1940s, and Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Reading, recalls the personality, philosophical outlook, and humour that made Ryle a significant figure in twentieth-century philosophy.

Next, Giles Barber, for many years Librarian at Linacre College, explains the provenance of the Ryle books and papers at Linacre. His essay underlines the generosity of Ryle and his visionary commitment to providing vital educational resources for Linacre College in its early years.

One crucial document in the Ryle papers is a letter from A. J. (later Sir Alfred) Ayer, writing in 1932 from Vienna about the deliberations of the famous Circle that included Moritz Schlick, Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, Fredrich Waismann, Philipp Frank, Karl Menger, Kurt Gödel, Willard van Orman Quine, and many other key figures of twentieth-century philosophy. That letter is included here, accompanied by background history and comments.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, late Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge and author of two of the great works of twentieth-century philosophy, the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus and the posthumous Philosophical Investigations, was a dynamic and powerful influence on Ryle. Rom Harré, Fellow of Linacre College, Emeritus, and former lecturer in the philosophy of science in
Oxford, was a student in Ryle’s seminar on the *Tractatus*. Using class notes, and Ryle’s own translations and comments that appear as marginal jottings in his many copies of the *Tractatus*, Harré has documented a hitherto asserted, but unsubstantiated, Wittgensteinian influence.

The other formative influence on Ryle was Bertrand Russell, later Lord Russell, the author with Alfred North Whitehead of *Principia Mathematica*, 1910-13, and Noble Prize Laureate in Literature for 1950. John Shosky, sometime Visiting Senior Member of Linacre College and Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at American University in Washington, D.C., has examined Ryle’s acknowledged debt to Russell.

Four essays by Ryle are included. The hand-written versions of all four are part of the Ryle Papers at Linacre. Though each has been previously published, it was thought essential to include them in a record of ‘Ryle and Linacre’.

The first, entitled “Reason”, deals with a longstanding interest of Ryle’s—how we discover knowledge by the proper use of intellectual tools. This essay appeared in the collection *Aspects of Mind*.

The second, “Jane Austen and the Moralists”, delightfully celebrates Ryle’s vast appreciation and love for Austen, acknowledged as an influence on his own writing style. This essay was originally published in *The Oxford Review* (No. 1, 1966), and reprinted in B. C. Southam’s (ed.) *Critical Essays on Jane Austen* (1968). Ryle included it in Volume One of his *Collected Papers*.

The third essay, “Ontological and Logical Talk in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*”, discusses the structure and interpretation of one of the most enigmatic and powerful works in philosophy. The essay was published in *Aspects of Mind*.

The fourth essay, “Oxford Philosophy”, offers Ryle’s own assessment of the ordinary language philosophy movement. A typed copy is in the Oxford Philosophy Library. The only citation by Ryle is that the paper was read to the Oxford Philosophy Society, 500th Meeting, in 1968. This essay also appeared in *Aspects of Mind*.

The inclusion of Ryle’s own essays came after some deliberation. Sir G. J. Warnock, late Principal of Hertford College, in a preface to *On Thinking*, warned of Ryle’s dislike of the “nachloss-business” for two reasons. First, a philosopher should decide which writings would be part of the public record and which should remain private, perhaps consigned to the waste paper
basket. Second, the “reverent solemnity” granted unpublished work would have been “unbearable” for Ryle. However, as Warnock noted, Ryle’s writings are inoculated against “reverent solemnity” because of their insight and wit, leaving only the worry about whether or not Ryle’s unpublished work should become part of the public record or consigned to the eternal slumber of the waste paper basket. The essays by Ryle included here were finished works. In fact, the essays in the Ryle Collection at Linacre contain important insights that remove any doubt of their value. We believe that Ryle would have approved of the publication of the four essays in this journal and in the scholarly value of the other unpublished essays and comments in his papers at Linacre.

The appearance of these essays about and by Ryle are a valuable addition to the intellectual history of the University. They also further enhance the formidable, yet meagre, literature on Ryle. We hope that they will be part of a re-assessment of Ryle’s work and importance in twentieth-century philosophy. Such a re-assessment is long overdue.

REFERENCES


ROM HARRÉ is Emeritus Fellow of Linacre College, Oxford and Professor of Psychology at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., as well as Adjunct Professor at American University in the same city. He studied for his B. Phil. under both Ryle and J.L. Austin. His published work includes studies in the philosophy of the physical sciences, for example Varieties of Realism, and in theoretical aspects of the human sciences, for example Personal Being and The Singular Self.

JOHN SHOSKY is a Visiting Senior Member of Linacre College. He has taught philosophy at American University, Washington, D.C., since 1987. In 1997, he was also a Visiting Scholar in the Academy of Sciences for the Czech Republic and a Visiting Professor of Logic at Charles IV University. He was a speech-writer in the Reagan and Bush Administrations and is now President of Roncalli Communications, Alexandria, Virginia.