Ayer’s View of the Vienna Circle: The Linacre Letter
Rom Harré and John Shosky

Introduction

In 1968, Gilbert Ryle retired as Waynflete Professor of Metaphysics in Oxford. At that time he donated some of his professional books to the young library at Linacre College, University of Oxford. At Ryle’s instruction, a further donation of books, manuscripts, and personal papers was made after his death in 1976. These books and papers were gathered together and examined by Ryle’s friend, the philosopher John Mabbott, who acted as an early executor of Ryle’s will. The books became a central part of the college library for many years and then were stored and locked in the Linacre Bookcase, a massive glass-fronted antique at Linacre College long associated with the college name-sake. Loose-leaf letters and notes were regularly found stuffed inside various volumes of the collection or as Ryle’s bookmarks of key passages.

René Meyer, a philosophy professor from South Africa, recognised the value of the unpublished manuscripts, two of which he included in his collection of Ryle’s work entitled Aspects of Mind. It seems doubtful that any philosopher

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1 One reason for this bequest may have been Ryle’s role as one of the Founding Delegates and his brief honorary fellowship with Linacre College. Another may have been his friendship with former student Rom Harré, who acted as the college’s librarian in its early days. A third reason may have been the dire need for books within the college. Ryle’s brief relationship with Linacre is mentioned in Colin Newbury, “The Origins of Linacre College, 1956-1965,” The Linacre Journal 1 (June 1997): 5-26. Ryle’s relationship is specifically mentioned on p. 18.
2 These papers are contained in the “Red Box” in the Ryle Collection, Linacre College Library.
3 These papers are also now stored in the “Red Box”.
4 Gilbert Ryle, Aspects of Mind, ed. René Meyer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). The two papers are “Reason” and “Ontological and Logical Talk in Wittgenstein’s Tractatus”. Both are printed in
other than Meyer examined the Ryle papers at Linacre College in any detail from 1976 to 1997. However, in the summer of 1997 and the fall of 1998, we conducted a detailed and thorough inquiry into the history of the Ryle books and papers at Linacre. We found extensive marginalia in his books, particularly in several copies of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* his copy of Russell’s *Principles of Mathematics,* and many other books in his extensive library. There are even first editions of volumes from the 1800s, which may have been inherited from Ryle’s father, who was also a philosopher. There are many signed presentation editions from Ayer, Antony Flew, G. E. Moore, Peter Strawson, and others. We uncovered such items as hand-written commentary on Plato, much unpublished discussion on reasoning and thinking, a paper on Jane Austen, loose-leaf papers on Wittgenstein, a postcard from Husserl, an army photo, and many other notes and letters.

**Ayer and the Vienna Circle**

Among the materials now at Linacre, presumably from the second donation, was a letter from A. J. Ayer, dated 19 February 1933. Upon graduation from this volume of *The Linacre Journal.*

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5 The reason for several copies becomes obvious upon examination. There are two English translations of the *Tractatus*: one in 1922 by C. K. Ogden and F. P. Ramsey for Routledge and Kegan Paul, and one in 1961 for the same publishers by David Pears and Brian McGuinness. In the Linacre collection there are two copies of the Ogden translation containing Ryle’s re-working of many passages, presumably based on the seminars he gave on Wittgenstein, his own conversations with Wittgenstein, and his knowledge of German. A third copy in the Linacre collection, which is the Pears and McGuinness translation, mainly contains Ryle’s cross-referencing to a then unpublished book-length manuscript by Russell, written in the spring and summer of 1913, which was discovered in 1968 when Russell’s papers were sold and catalogued for transfer to McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada. The McMaster archives has a record of a photocopy made for David Pears sometime after 1968. Pears may have given Ryle this same copy or yet a further copy sometime around 1970. Ryle notes that he received his copy of the manuscript from Pears. Ryle’s extensive cross-referencing shows a realisation of the manuscript’s importance in the generation and development of Wittgenstein’s ideas, especially as revealed in the *Notebooks 1914-1916,* translated and edited by G. E. M. Anscombe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). Ryle would have worked from the first edition of the *Notebooks,* which contains three Appendices, one of which was the Costello version of the 1913 “Notes on Logic” (later replaced in a second edition by a pristine version given to Wittgenstein’s literary executors by Bertrand Russell). The Russell book-length manuscript was later published in 1984 as *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Volume 7, Theory of Knowledge,* edited by Elizabeth Ramsden Eames and Kenneth Blackwell (London: Allen and Unwin).

6 The marginalia in this book is a fascinating display by Ryle of his knowledge of philosophical logic which examines “the way constituents (of logical form) are put together”. See Bertrand Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy* (London: Open Court, 1914) 52.
Christ Church in 1932, Ayer obtained a lectureship at his college. His duties did not require his immediate presence in Oxford, so Ayer was persuaded by Ryle to go to Vienna and attend the deliberations of the ‘Vienna Circle’, a discussion group formed by Moritz Schlick around 1924 to explore the work of Ernst Mach, Ludwig Boltzman, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Ryle had met Schlick at a conference in England in 1930. He thought that Ayer would be better served by going to Vienna and hearing something new, instead of going to Cambridge to study under Wittgenstein, which was Ayer’s preference. The Circle became associated with the views of ‘logical positivism’ or ‘logical empiricism’, two names that refer to its belief in a ‘scientific view’ of the world and in a series of doctrines summarised in the ‘verification principle’, that ‘the meaning of a proposition is its method of verification’. The Circle wanted to rebuild the bridge between philosophy and science that had been destroyed by the romantic movement and idealist metaphysics. Participants included some of the most distinguished philosophers of the twentieth century, including Rudolf Carnap, Friedrich Waismann, Otto Neurath, Philipp Frank, Hans Hahn, Herbert Feigl, Gustav Bergmann, Marcel Natkin, Theodor Radakovic, Karl Menger, Kurt Godel, Olga Hahn-Neurath, and Victor Kraft. Within the orbit of the Circle, but not officially members, were Kurt Grelling, Karl Popper, and Alfred Tarski. Aside from Ayer, the only other ‘outsider’ was Willard van Orman Quine, recently graduated from Harvard. The Circle met in Vienna, but satellite circles were in operation in Prague, Berlin, and Poland.

Ayer’s contact with the Circle was from December 1932 to April 1933. On 26 November 1932, the day after he was married, Ayer and his wife left for

8 The best summary of the doctrines of logical positivism remains A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, written upon his return to Oxford. He began work on it during the Christmas vacation of 1933-34 and finished writing it in July 1935, three-and-a-half months before his 25th birthday. It was published by Victor Gollancz in 1936. A second edition, with an additional introduction, was published in 1946. It would be hard to exaggerate the importance and influence of this book in twentieth-century philosophy, especially in the United Kingdom.
Vienna, arriving after the first of December. Armed with an introductory letter from Ryle, Ayer met with Schlick and was immediately introduced into the Circle.

The Letter from Vienna

This letter, sent from Vienna after Ayer went there with an introduction from Ryle to Moritz Schlick, gives a contemporary view of the Vienna Circle and brief commentary on some of the important individuals associated with the Circle, such as Waismann, Wittgenstein, and Quine. Previously unpublished, except for a few brief passages, the letter was designed to provide Ryle with an update of Ayer’s own thinking and a participant’s analysis of the Circle at work. Since Ryle had suggested that Ayer spend time with Schlick, and had provided a written introduction for Ayer to Schlick, the letter also reports on the success of Ayer’s encounter.

Wien IV
Schönburgstrasse 25,
Frau Jones
February 19th, 1933

Dear Gilbert

Thank you for the pamphlet on Locke. I don’t know how accurately you interpreted him, but I agree with your views whether or no they were his also. And inasmuch you had to eulogise him for something I think you made a good job of it.

I met Schlick about a month ago. He was very cordial though really too busy to take much interest in me. He lectures for three quarters of an hour every morning on Natur Philosophie. I go on the average

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12 The letter was discovered by the two of us in September 1998. It would appear that it was known to the Ayer Estate, because the college librarian was contacted some years before about any possible papers in the Ryle collection that might pertain to Professor Ayer. At that time, the librarian sent a photocopy of the letter to the Ayer Estate for possible inclusion in an authorised biography. While our article was in final editing, a biography by Ben Rogers appeared which referenced several brief passages from this letter. See Ben M. Rogers, A. J. Ayer: A Life (London: Chatto and Windus, 1999) 85-86, 95. It seemed to us that we should make this valuable document available in its entirety to those interested in the Vienna Circle, the work of Professor Ayer, and the philosophical contributions of Wittgenstein.

13 The letter is published with the permission of the Board and Fellows of Linacre College, the Estate of A. J. Ayer, and the Estate of Gilbert Ryle. We have not edited the letter or made any corrections.
three times a week to hear him. At first I understood very little but now I know enough German to follow a lecture pretty well, though hardly enough yet for the purposes of ordinary conversational intercourse. Schlick holds a seminar weekly which I have attended once, and a fortnightly meeting of professors and tutors which I attend regularly. On the whole I have got very little out of them all. The discussion of probability in the seminar did not go beyond the enunciation of the principle of indifference as the foundation of the frequency theory. They take Bolzano as their textbook. In his Natur Philosophie Schlick seems, as far as I have been able to follow him, to take the view that science is purely descriptive. He rejects the view held by Eddington that natural laws are conventions, and seems himself to hold the ordinary opinion that they are generalisations with a specific probability without going any deeper into the matter. A great deal of his time is taken up with analyses of the concepts of Space and Time, of the same sort as Broad attempted in the first part of Scientific Thought. In this matter Schlick seems very competent.

Of Weissman's [sic] philosophy I have learned very little except that he thinks Ramsey solved the problem of Universals. He is the expert on Wittgenstein, about whom he has been writing a book for the last five or ten years. Wittgenstein is treated here as a second Pythagoras and Weissmann [sic] is the high priest of the cult. If one praises Ramsey they say 'of course he got it all from Wittgenstein' or Moore 'we hear he attends all Wittgenstein's lectures but doesn't always understand them' or Braithwaite 'Wittgenstein does not speak well of his philosophy'. They say here that Wittgenstein has changed his views a great deal since the publication of the Tractatus. It has only been divulged to a few what these changes are, and they are as secretive about it all as the initiates of a mystery religion. I do not make myself more inquisitive, feeling I think that with your help I have already got from Wittgenstein all that he has to give us, and that is the correct attitude towards philosophy, the appreciation of what is and what is not a genuine philosophical problem. His actual handling of these problems does not interest me so much. I am bold enough to want to attempt that on my own.

The news that Wittgenstein has changed his views has however together with other considerations determined me not to bother to revise my article on the Tractatus. Instead I am working to find a definition of 'proposition' from which it will follow formally that all propositions are elementary or truth functions of elementary propositions and a definition of meaning from which it would follow formally that certain 'metaphysical' assertions, e.g. assertions of necessary connexion were meaningless. Then of course one would have to show that the definitions were not arbitrary. That would be a
question of fact. In the case of meaning there is the difficulty that you have to apply your criterion of meaning to prove that it is correct. I am not sure yet how important this is. Altogether I have made little progress in this enquiry.

There is an American here called Quine, a pupil of Sheffer, who rewrote Nicod’s reduction of the primitive propositions of logic to one in Mind a short while ago. He has invented a new symbolism which enables him to assert theorems and deduce propositions which are true of relations in general irrespective of degree. His book is going to appear in the summer. I admire the man but I have not made a serious attempt to digest his work. The problems of pure logistic do not interest me very much. The important thing in Principia Mathematica from a philosophical point of view seems to me to be the theory of descriptions and incomplete symbols. I think it is only a mathematician who is capable of inventing or even admiring new theorems in Formal Logic.

The more I read Keynes on Probability the more I am convinced that his whole treatment of the subject is in fundamental respects wrong, but I am still as confused as possible about the whole business.

We expect to leave Vienna about March 20th. We may go to Italy if the reductions on the Italian railways are as large as we have been led to suppose them. Anyhow we mean to be back in England by April 1st. I hope therefore to have the pleasure of seeing you within two months.

Yours ever

Freddie Ayer

Commentary

Ayer may not have kept a copy of this letter. Since it was hand-written during his time in Vienna, there is every reason to believe he did not. Therefore, the Linacre letter is the only copy. It is a fascinating record of Ayer’s impressions, experiences, and speculations at that time. These impressions were later amplified in his articles about logical positivism and his autobiography. Arguably, it is a rare, if not the only, eye-witness account of the Vienna Circle available from that time, although Quine, Carnap, and others have written about the Circle at a removed distance in later life.
There are many references in the letter to Ayer’s contemporaries and their work. We add the following commentary to provide further understanding of the letter.

The pamphlet on Locke concerns Gilbert Ryle’s Tercentenary Address on John Locke in 1933. These addresses were compiled and edited by J. L. Stocks for Oxford University Press in 1933.14 Locke was viewed as an early linguistic philosopher, who provided “permanent emancipation from a besetting confusion. He taught us to distinguish the types of our inquiries, and thus made us begin to understand the questions that we ask.”15 Ryle must have sent a copy to Ayer, perhaps before the pamphlet was published, given the dates of the lecture and the letter.

Schlick offered lectures at the University of Vienna on the philosophy of science. Ayer attended those lectures, but had great difficulty in understanding them, both because of his limited German and his limited knowledge of science. In his autobiography, Ayer described Schlick as delivering his lectures seated, speaking “in a monotonous tone without very much exerting himself to capture the attention of the audience”.16

The meetings of the Vienna Circle were held once a week on Thursday in an institute away from the University. Ayer remembered Schlick sitting at the head of a rectangular table and Neurath opposite him, with Menger and Hahn on Schlick’s right and Waismann on his left. During Ayer’s attendance the subject almost always concerned so-called ‘protocol sentences’, which were descriptive of sense experience. Sometimes papers were read, such as on the frequency theory of probability, discussed by Hans Reichenbach, a logical positivist in Berlin, and on current tendencies in logic, given by Quine.17

15 Ryle, “John Locke on the Human Understanding,” 39. Ryle saw Locke as achieving the ambition of being an “under-labourer, in clearing ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge” in that he taught the “whole educated world the lesson (which might with profit be coned over in some quarters in our own day) that there are differences in kind, and roughly what those differences are, between mathematics, philosophy, natural science, theology, inspiration, history, and common-sense acquaintanceship with the world around us” (pp. 38-39).
16 Ayer, Part of My Life 134.
17 See Ayer, Part of My Life, and Quine, The Time of My Life 95. It would seem that the Quine presentation was on January 20th, so the paper was Ayer’s first introduction to Quine.
The history of the Vienna Circle is well-known and won’t be repeated here in much detail. One of the more tantalising aspects of the Circle was the presence of Wittgenstein, who refused to attend the Circle’s meetings but often met with Schlick and Waismann to discuss philosophy. In turn, they would transmit Wittgenstein’s views to the rest of the Circle. Waismann became a close confidant of Wittgenstein, virtually a secretary. He took notes of many of the conversations between 1929 and 1931. The notes have been published, demonstrating early evidence of changes in Wittgenstein’s philosophy, where he moved from the logical treatment of philosophy in the *Tractatus* to an analysis of ordinary language, later explained in his posthumous *Philosophical Investigations.*

Waismann and Wittgenstein also planned to collaborate on a book, advertised for imminent publication in 1929 in the Circle’s journal, *Erkenntnis,* as *Logik, Sprache, Philosophie* (*Logic, Language, Philosophy*). However, after many tortured twists and turns in their relationship, Wittgenstein ended their collaboration after Schlick’s death in 1936. Waismann took the manuscript with him to Cambridge in 1937, where he planned to publish both a German and an English edition. A translation was made from the German text by Margaret (Ramsey) Paul in 1938-39. The English edition was then set into galley proofs. A contract was drawn up with a Dutch publisher for the German edition and the text was sent to Holland, where it disappeared with the outbreak of the Second World War. Unfazed, Waismann kept working on the English galley proofs and the earlier drafts of the German text. In 1953, he virtually re-wrote the text. Additions and other changes were often written in short-hand and kept on note cards. However, the book remained unpublished at Waismann’s death in Oxford in 1959. The manuscript was almost lost. Ryle visited Waismann’s apartment a few days after his death and, seeing the landlady dumping large amounts of paper into the trash, he discovered that the discarded papers belonged to Waismann. Hailing a passing postman’s van, Ryle obtained two large mailbags into which he stuffed the papers, note cards, and other written materials discarded from Waismann’s apartment. Coincidentally, Rom Harré later asked Ryle about Waismann’s papers, only to be told that they were stored in two mail bags in Magdalene Tower. Harré retrieved the manuscript and note cards, worked on the changes, and published the book in 1965. The book has been described

20 Friedrich Waismann, *The Principles of Linguistic Philosophy,* ed. Rom Harré (London:
as "a geological deposit laid down gradually by one of the major events of twentieth-century philosophy: the impact of Wittgenstein’s thinking on two of the main participants in the Vienna Circle (Schlick and Waismann)."  

The paper on Wittgenstein mentioned by Ayer was probably the one read at Oxford to the Jowett Society prior to his visit to Vienna. Ayer has described it as having "no great merit, being little more than a resumé of what I took to be Wittgenstein’s opinions [. . .]". It was later submitted for publication in *Mind*, but it was rejected by the editor, G. E. Moore. Ayer believed that his paper "was the first occasion in Oxford on which there had been any public discussion of Wittgenstein’s work". 

In the Linacre letter, Ayer then offers his view about the nature of propositions, an early rendering of the concepts that generate the verification principle. The references to Keynes, Ramsey, and probability theory underline the vast interest in this topic, both in the United Kingdom and in Central Europe. Ayer’s homage to Frank Ramsey reflected his admiration for the young logician, who died at the age of 26 in 1930. 

Interestingly, we now know that Ryle and Wittgenstein were friendly from 1930 onwards. Wittgenstein once remarked that Ryle was only one of two people who understood his philosophy. Conspicuous in its absence, there is no mention of Ryle’s famous ‘turn’ to ordinary language philosophy, which was revealed in his “Systematically Misleading Expressions”, published in 1932. Wittgenstein’s influence on Ryle and his role in the ‘conversion’ still demand serious inquiry.

25 Ayer later wrote that "(Ramsey’s death) still seems to me to have been a disaster from which British philosophy has never quite recovered [. . .]". See Ayer, *Part of My Life* 115. Ramsey’s work was collected in Frank P. Ramsey, *Foundations of Mathematics and Other Logical Essays*, ed. R. B. Braithwaite (London: Routledge, 1931).  
Conclusion

Ayer’s letter gives us an eye-witness account of the workings of the Vienna Circle. We are taken directly into the discussion of the Circle, with comments about the personalities involved and the revolutionary nature of the Circle’s doctrines. For those with an interest in logical positivism, the history of ideas, twentieth-century philosophy, Ayer’s intellectual development, or Wittgenstein’s thought, the letter offers valuable insights. Given Ayer’s central role in the history of philosophy, this letter is an important discovery in the Ryle papers at Linacre College.²⁸

REFERENCES


