Gilbert Ryle and the *Tractatus*

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Among the books in the Ryle Collection, Linaeac College’s magnificent legacy from Gilbert Ryle, there is a heavily annotated copy of the first English edition of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, one of the most influential philosophical treatises of all time. Looking over that volume, once very much in evidence in Ryle’s own hands at a famous university class, provoked some recollections of the atmosphere of the 1950s and some reflections on Ryle’s expressed views and interpretations of the book. At that time no one, so far as I can tell, knew much if anything of the fairly close personal relations that had once existed between Ryle and Wittgenstein. They are described in Ray Monk’s *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius.* Ryle also lectured on the doctrines of the *Tractatus* as part of his course on ‘meaning’. A transcription of the lecture notes I took at the time appears in a later section of this article. In addition, Ryle also wrote some short pieces commenting on the *Tractatus*, only one of which was published in his lifetime, his “Ludwig Wittgenstein”.

Ryle’s Oxford

For many of my generation at Oxford, Ryle was a commanding figure. While he lacked the brilliance of J. L. Austin and the subtlety of Peter Strawson, he had immense personal and intellectual authority. *The Concept of Mind* appeared in 1949 and was very much required reading when I began graduate studies in philosophy in 1954. The style was inimitable and since the method of argument was intimately bound up with the style there was no such thing as ‘Ryle’s way’ with philosophy. Even though Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical
Investigations had come out in 1953, the parallels and similarities between the two books were not obvious to me; nor were they, I believe, to anyone else.

Ryle was a familiar avuncular figure. His prowess as a gardener and his affectation of a certain tweedy style, for all the world like a senior artillery man on furlough, gave him a robustly commonsensical air. This was very different from the rumours that circulated about the mysterious Austrian, which I believe, led us to approach Ryle’s writings in an altogether different frame of mind from that in which we encountered Wittgenstein. The Wittgensteinians in our midst were given to strange grammatical quirks, to odd gestures, and to a kind of throw away conversational style that were, we feared, the genuine marks of the guru himself. Unwilling to imitate else we were thought precious, we extracted core arguments of the Philosophical Investigations with some trepidation, having been assured by some of his intimates that there were none. However that was not the case with the Tractatus. Led by Ryle, even the humblest graduate student was willing to express an opinion on such matters as logical form, atomic facts and so on.

The Oxford logic scene: 1954-1956

Though Wittgenstein’s Tractatus seemed arcane, it was full of familiar, or what we thought were familiar, themes. Formal logic was strongly represented in the Oxford of the 1950s. Hao Wang was to be found dispensing tea and very small cakes in the Balliol tower. Bill Kneale was giving the lectures that eventually appeared as the great history of logic he wrote with the collaboration of his wife, Martha. Arthur Prior, as the John Locke lecturer, was encouraging some of us to wade deeply into the Polish tradition. I spent a good deal of time mastering Łukasiewicz’s Aristotelė’s Syllogistic, and Polish notation. Marcus Dick was giving a long winded but eminently clear proof of Gödel’s theorem in Balliol on Tuesdays at 10. Though some of the notation in the Tractatus was baffling, a good deal of the logical machinery was commonplace, so we thought. The formal problems had moved on, to a post-Ramseysian theory of types, and to the clash between the formalists and those who doubted the powers of Russellian logic to capture the nuances of everyday reasoning, with W. V. Quine and Peter Strawson as the champions of opposing parties.

However there were problems posed by readings of the ontology and epistemology that some saw in the Tractatus. Influenced very much by the
"Introduction" to the Ogden translation, these seemed part of the familiar Russellian point of view, the marriage of logical atomism and sense datum theory. Nor, under the influence of Ryle's lectures, did it any longer seem obvious that the Tractatus was a tangential but confirmatory source for logical positivism. After all we had Ayer's Language, Truth and Logic to compare it with. Even at that time Ayer's book struck many people as shallow, even with the emendations of the second edition.

The Ryle–Pears class

Some of this came out in the class given by Ryle and Pears which I attended in 1954-55. Along with the Grice–Warnock class on 'Perception' (Fridays at 5 p.m. in the Magdalen Summer Common room in Hilary Term, 1955), this was the class that 'everyone' attended. Each meeting began with Ryle dictating corrections to the Ogden–Ramsay translation. These ranged from matters of philosophical substance to some Rylean grammatical bugbears.4

Among the Ryle collection at Linacre are two copies of the 1922 edition, one very much the worse for wear. Both are full of corrections to the translation. Most are concerned with the first three sections, so that to remarks numbered 4.0 and above there are very few marginalia.

The corrections to Section 2 are philosophically important, and surprisingly, some of the errors Ryle pointed out in the 1950s can still be found in the Pears and McGuinness translation.5 The ones that seem to me of the greatest moment are:

a) 2.0271: The object is the fixed [constant]; the configuration is the changing, the variable [mutable].

b) 2.03: In the atomic fact the objects hang one in another like the members [links] of a chain.

The Rylean alternative renderings are clearly different in meaning from those of Ogden, but it is the use of the word "representation" that Ryle queries

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4 I can still recall the tone of Ryle's voice: "Another misplaced 'only' ."


6 Ryle's preferred translation appears in square brackets in what follows.
most deeply. In the sections devoted to the ‘picture theory’, 2.17–2.222, he proposes the more concrete “depict” instead of “represent” in 2.172; and in 2.201, he proposes “display” or “exhibit” as a better translation of “darstellung”. In a marginal note he wrote “Darstellen = ? convey”. Surprisingly, Pears and McGuinness persist in the use of the English word “represent” for both “abbilden” and “darstellung”. Even to someone as uninstructed in German as myself the difference between the concrete sense of the former and the abstract flavour of the latter is striking.

The only major sense-changing correction in the latter part of Ryle’s 1922 copies is 5.1361. This section is rendered by Ogden as “Superstition is the belief in the causal nexus”, but by Ryle as “Belief in the causal nexus is superstition”.

In addition to the persistence of the new translators with “represent” in the context of the picture theory, Ryle also marks up a great many mistaken Teutonisms in the translation of the German definite article by the English “the”. This certainly alters the sense, so that, for example, 2.033 is not “The form is the possibility of the structure”. Rather, we should read “Form is the possibility of structure”, not at all the same thing.

There are some marginal notes, of which the most important to me as casting light on Ryle’s understanding of the Tractatus is his note on page 47, which runs as follows:

? W. confused about sense = significance  
sense = direction

This is one of the points at which the lack of physics misled at least some Wittgenstein scholars. The point was exactly the adoption by Wittgenstein of the second sense from physics. The sense of a vector is its direction, thus AB and BA are the same in magnitude but differ in sense (that is direction). In just this way does negation alter the sense of the picture-sentence ‘The cat is on the mat’ to ‘The cat is not on the mat’.

Another serious gap between what we see in hindsight as Wittgenstein’s intention and the 1950s reading, appeared in the persisting difficulty of understanding the point about how determinacy of sense required elementary objects, a straight borrowing from Hertz’s Principles of Mechanics:

We become convinced that the manifold of the actual universe must be greater than the manifold of the universe which is directly revealed to us by our senses [. . .]. We assume that it is possible to conjoin with
the visible masses of the universe other masses obeying the same
laws, and of such a kind that the whole thereby becomes intelligible
and conformable to law.\textsuperscript{7}

In Ryle’s copy of the 1961 translation there are a great many references to
Russell’s “Theory of Knowledge” and a few to Meinong’s theory of objects.
For example, Ryle asks himself “whether Wittgenstein’s interest in negation
derived from Meinong”.

In my recollection, the ties to Vienna Circle dogma, such as the verification
principle, played almost no role in the philosophical agenda. A great deal of
time was devoted to the picture theory of meaning, and to the vexed question
of the nature of elementary objects. Russell’s assimilation of Wittgenstein’s
ontology to his own position was pretty strongly criticised by both Ryle and
Pears. The question of the connection between the requirement of
determinateness of sense and the existence of simple objects was also
pursued, and as far as I can remember never satisfactorily dealt with. But
more of that later.

Oddly, given Waismann’s intimate knowledge of the discussions between
Wittgenstein and Schlick, he never attended the class, so far as I know. At
that time there was much talk of Frege’s philosophical views. Two books of
Frege readings were in the shops and in my bookcase. Having a special
interest in mathematics, I bought and read Austin’s translation of The
Foundations of Arithmetic,\textsuperscript{4} with great interest. I was studying Kleene,
Hilbert and Church with what I now realise to have been misplaced
enthusiasm. Was it just me? But I made little of the relationships between
Frege, the logicist programme in the foundations of mathematics, and the
themes of the Tractatus. In the lectures, described below, Ryle emphasised
the continuity between some Fregean themes and questions of meaning as
addressed in the introductory sections of the Tractatus. It becomes very clear
in the posthumous paper “Ontological and Logical Talk in Wittgenstein’s
Tractatus”\textsuperscript{7} that Ryle was well aware of the disparity between Russell’s
logical atomism and Wittgenstein’s doctrine of elementary objects. This
realisation, coupled with Ryle’s lack of interest in the formal sections of the
book, made for some difficulty in grasping Ryle’s ‘take’ on the Tractatus.


\textsuperscript{4} Gottlob Frege, The Foundations of Arithmetic: a logico-mathematical enquiry into the concept

\textsuperscript{7} Printed in this issue of The Linacre Journal, pp. 101-107.
For example, in the one article published in his lifetime that refers to the *Tractatus*, he says: “The *Tractatus* had two distinct but connected aims. The first [...] is to show both what philosophy is not, namely any sort of science, and what it is, namely an activity of exploring the internal logic of what is said, for example, in this or that scientific theory. The second, which I shall not even try to sketch, is to show what sort of an enquiry Formal Logic is.” Ryle goes on to say that Wittgenstein’s mathematical training predisposed him to “squeeze whatever can be significantly said into the few statement-patterns with which the logic of mathematical statements operates”.

However “Ontological and Logical Talk in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*” throws a great deal of light on this matter. There, Ryle considers the question of how the successive major sections of the *Tractatus* are related to one another. As Ryle puts it, the first section (paragraphs numbered 1 etc.) is the ‘ontological story’, the second section (paragraphs numbered 2 etc.) is the ‘picturing story’, and the third section (paragraphs numbered 3 etc.) is the ‘propositional story’. Is the former to be read as a set of premisses from which the latter is to be inferred? Ryle thinks that this was not Wittgenstein’s intention. Rather, the first set of remarks tells the reader in a kind of material allegory what is told in a formal or strict style in the third set of remarks. Ryle puts it this way:

I think that for nearly every seemingly factual statement Wittgenstein makes about objects, simples, complexes, etc. in the ontological story, we could find a corresponding meta-statement about propositions in the propositional story. I suggest that this correspondence is not that of premisses to conclusions or conclusions to premisses but of nursery-statements to grown-up statements.

... a typical Rylean image!

**Ryle’s ‘informal instruction’ of Trinity Term 1956**

Among the eighty or so philosophers in Oxford, three, at the time of which I am writing, held Professorships. These Chairs exempted them from tutorial teaching at the cost of taking responsibility for the growing number of graduate students attracted to Oxford by the prestige of the inaptly named “BPhil”. There was Austin at Corpus, Price at New College, and Ryle at

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Magdalen. These three had substantial lecturing commitments. But in addition they presided over 'informal instructions', gatherings at the hours of 5–7 for philosophical conversation and debate. Themes emerged. About half a dozen of us attended Ryle's seance in Trinity Term, 1956. It was good cricketing weather and I missed one or two sessions through clashes with matches. Those attending the Ryle version of this curious institution read short papers on which it was supposed that Ryle would comment. This did not always work out, since he was given to long stretches of meditative interaction with his pipe, punctuated occasionally by laconic and often enigmatic comments. The theme for the term was the early and late writings of Wittgenstein. The sessions began unpromisingly with a paper by a lady of uncertain years whose presence was never explained, which presented the same misreading of Wittgenstein's private language argument for which A. J. Ayer was later notorious. Ryle dismissed the proposal quite sharply. Soon the discussions moved to the question of elementary objects. I had just read Hertz's *Mechanics*, in the recently published Dover edition, and ventured to suggest that they might be a generalisation of the idea of the elementary material entities of physics. Ryle agreed, and for the next thirty-five years, the idea of a Hertzian origin for the *Tractatus* lay, at least for me, firmly buried in the bottom drawer.

To the best of my knowledge we did not discuss the issue of the limits of language (the role of tautologies and contradictions), nor the related problem of 'the ethical' and 'the mystical'. Ryle was happy to endorse a Machian interpretation of the sections on philosophy of science. The similarity to Eddington's view and the common image of the different shaped and sized holes in the net interested him not at all. Now that we know from Ray Monk's researches how well Ryle knew Wittgenstein, I cannot help but feel a sense of having been short changed. But in those days in Oxford the philosophy of science was respected, though from an immense distance.

**The *Tractatus* in Ryle's lectures of 1954-55**

Ryle's course was called "History of theories of meaning". The *dramatis personae* were Mill, Frege, Husserl, Meinong, Brentano, Russell and Wittgenstein, early and late. The philosophers of the Vienna Circle did not appear in person. Ryle's references to the Circle were used only to illuminate the *Tractatus*, by way of contrast. When I attended these lectures I was a great enthusiast for new verbatim note taking, and so I have a detailed record of what Ryle said on those occasions. What follows is a transcription of my
notes taken at those lectures.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{Frege’s account of meaning:}

Ryle began with Wittgenstein’s central preoccupation: what sort of thing is logic? Frege’s answer, that mathematics and logic are truths about logical objects, could not have been accepted by Wittgenstein, who did not believe in logical objects and so there are no propositions describing them. Frege also thought that logicians would look for facts about the world. Wittgenstein says that logical formulae are not statements of additional matters of fact.

Wittgenstein held that logic and mathematics are enquiries into meanings; but meanings are not objects, so there cannot be true or false statements about them. He was profoundly influenced by Frege’s distinction between \textit{sinn} and \textit{bedeutung}. Although Frege admitted that phrases of the same denotation can have different sense, he was much more interested in reference. Wittgenstein emphasised the sense more than the reference. He was suspicious of people saying that things had reference, e.g. Frege wanting a denotation of True and False for sentences. Wittgenstein denies that sentences denote and that numerals denote. For Wittgenstein philosophy and logic are to describe the structure of the sense of expressions.

\textit{What were the differences between Frege and Wittgenstein on reference?}

1. Frege had given referents to names, definite descriptions, sentences, etc. Wittgenstein ascribes reference only to names proper, and denies it to descriptive phrases, numerals, etc.

2. Frege often talked about the sense of words or phrases, though he did say in the \textit{Foundations of Arithmetic} that only sentences had sense. For Wittgenstein only a sentence has sense and only in a sentence has a word a meaning. The sense is connected to what is said, not what is referred to.

\textit{The reasons for Wittgenstein’s views were:}

1. Frege’s idea that only in a sentence did a word have a definite sense.

2. Russell’s trouble: what is it a sentence says that cannot be reconstituted in a list?

\textsuperscript{12} The italicised headings were my own additions.
3. Frege’s new way of splitting up a proposition into the functional expression and the argument place.

4. Russell’s distinction between sentence-like expressions that are nonsensical and sentence-like expressions that are true and false. A word or a phrase can be nonsensical only because the corresponding sentence is nonsensical.

5. The branch of logic which interested Wittgenstein was propositional calculus, rather than quantification theory. The connectives V, & etc. combine whole propositions into molecular propositions, and the ‘atoms’ are entire propositions. Ancient logic concentrated on terms.

6. Husserl’s notion of logical grammar or logical syntax, corresponding to ordinary grammatical syntax. Logical syntax rules are broken when you have a nonsensical sentence.

The Tractatus:

If we make a false statement, understanding it is not the same as knowing the fact apparently stated by the sentence. We know what it would be like if it were a fact-stating sentence. For atomic fact, Wittgenstein used the word "sachverhalte". Sachverhalte is something like "Proposition", functioning like a word.

Picturing:

By picturing, Wittgenstein means any graphical representation. He is impressed by ‘every picture tells a story’, true or false. Consider an architectural drawing of a house:

1. It might be a picture of a house that actually exists (in which case we can criticise it for misrepresentation).

2. It might be of a house not yet built; it might be instructions for a builder and can’t be true or false.

i. A picture can be understood or misunderstood: we can make sense of a drawing or fail to make sense of it or make the wrong sense. The lines have a significance, and you get that significance if you know what they are doing. From the picture we can see the alleged state of affairs.
ii. Facts about marks in the picture tell you facts about the house and this is why Wittgenstein says a picture is a fact.

iii. Pictures also contain conventions which are something given in a key. To make use of a picture with code-signs in it you must know the code.

iv. Another code is the scale.

Pictures for Wittgenstein included such things as pictures with a code as well as photos and paintings. Consider a picture of a house. It could be architecturally ridiculous, for example, if hung in telephone wires. A logically ridiculous house could be made too, e.g. inside two windows and outside three.

Wittgenstein was rather tempted to assimilate meanings of sentences to meanings of pictures; he thought that the difficulties in meanings could be a model for the symbolisation of meanings.

But there are ways in which pictures are inferior to models.

1. You know a house was not thatched. How do you express this in a picture? (Negative statements)

2. How do you represent in your picture that you remember it was either tiled or slated? (Disjunction)

3. "All"?

4. Relative costs?

Code instructions in words would have to be used.

Sometimes an architectural drawing is used to convey instructions to a builder. There is no question here of using true or false, faithful or unfaithful. In the Tractatus Wittgenstein considers only truths and falsehoods.

The two kinds of drawings are connected. The absurdities of the representation picture if appearing in the working drawings makes it impossible for the instructions to be carried out.

The code, e.g. the scale, is a perfectly general construing principle, what Wittgenstein calls the "form of representation", and works like scale or
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perspective.

Meanings in words and sentences:

A single word generally gives no information, only words in sentences give information (there are one word sentences: ‘Ambulo!’, ‘Fire!’).

What sort of concatenations are required for something to be said?

1. Grammatical rules, that is ordinary syntax.

2. Logical syntax, e.g. what rules out such a sentence as ‘Socrates is identical’ which is bound up with meaning.

According to Frege, sentences are not split into independent parts: for example, ‘Socrates is mortal’ breaks up into ‘x is mortal’ and ‘Socrates’. He emphasised simple propositions. Wittgenstein generalised this, and this is his account of logical syntax. Any expression is gap-ridden all round; what can go into the gaps is restricted. ‘X is mortal’ is called a ‘variable’ or ‘propositional variable’ by Wittgenstein; that is, he calls propositional functions ‘variables’.

Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle:

The Vienna Circle’s verificationist theory of meaning was greatly influenced by the Tractatus. Mach’s purge of metaphysics from science was too negative, removing all theories. The Tractatus supplied the members with a better weapon.

1. The meaningful was opposed to the nonsensical, and Wittgenstein indicated how rules of logical syntax are broken. The Vienna Circle could show why metaphysical speculations were nonsensical.

2. What sort of rules were these?

1. Wittgenstein distinguished molecular and atomic propositions (molecular contain ‘and’, ‘or’, etc.) The truth or falsity of a molecular proposition is a function of (or depends on) the truth and falsity of the atomic propositions. Even the understanding of molecular propositions depends on understanding the atomic propositions. The atomic propositions form the truth conditions for the molecular ones.
ii. What kind of proposition is a general hypothesis? (e.g. ‘Scurvy results from lack of vegetables’) It is NOT only a summing up of a series of observations, but applies to all future cases and to all past unobserved cases too.

Verifiability theory:

A proposition that has explanatory and predictive force is meaningful if only and only if we can see how to check it or how to apply it in particular cases. This includes cases of things like the ‘life force’ which hasn’t any experiential applications, and came out of the Tractatus promise and a remark of Wittgenstein’s that “the meaning of a proposition is the method of its verification”. The remark was careless, for it is saying much more than that hypotheses are significant if we can give ways of checking them. This general theory did not work as well for mathematics, ethics, etc., and was refuted in its blown up forms. But it is surely right for scientific hypotheses.

How verification is tied up with significance: If a boy learns \((a + b)^2 = a^2 + 2ab + b^2\) and then takes \((3 + 5)^2 = 9 + 25 + 30 = 64\) as a new mathematical truth, then we would say that he did not understand the general proposition. The same holds good for general scientific hypotheses, e.g. scurvy. Difference appears again in, e.g. ‘Follow suite whenever you can’, which tells you to do something on a particular occasion; compare with ‘Always maximise your tricks’ which doesn’t. The verificationist theory is nearly true for scientific hypotheses. It doesn’t apply to other propositions.

The impact of the Tractatus on the Vienna Circle was very different from its impact in England. ‘Philosophical statements are nonsense’ helped in the war against philosophical nonsense in science. The positive things Wittgenstein said were about philosophical propositions, e.g. their elucidatory function, though they are NOT scientific and strictly nonsensical. They are nonsense because they are dicta about meaning and sense; that is Wittgenstein thought that statements about sense must be nonsense because ‘sense’ is not an object, and so statements about sense cannot be true or false. This with Carnap and Russell gave rise to the idea of meta-linguistic statements.

1. Although Wittgenstein says much in the Tractatus about meaning etc., he also says that meanings are not what we can say significant things about. Russell in the introduction suggests a hierarchy of languages to get out of this difficulty.

2. In contrast to the Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein was
primarily interested in expressions which can function as premises or conclusions in arguments. He overlooks other significant senses not true or false, e.g. questions, commands, etc.

3. Also in contrast to the passive character of the *Tractatus* which depicts a listener’s or hearer’s world, not a speaker’s world, in the *Philosophical Investigations* people use expressions when they want to say things.

*Philosophical Investigations*:

The book is not concerned with the nature of logic. It discusses a great deal about meaning and sense, the inventing of new ways of saying things, etc. Wittgenstein is not just considering would-be statements of fact.

1. There is no limit to the number of different sorts of sentences.

2. Correspondingly, the notion of meaning or sense is much more elastic.

The idea of logical syntax or grammar is used a great deal. The word ‘rule’ becomes very important. Rules of games differ from rules of language because we are not taught language by being taught rules. The notion of ‘rule’ is wanted for cases where an activity can be performed correctly or incorrectly, etc., so we can know something like that a rule has been broken or adhered to. These are rules without formulations, e.g. rules of etiquette. This also puts weight on doing something according to the rules. People are the wielders of language.

Wittgenstein uses the word ‘use’ or ‘employ’ for what we do with linguistic expressions. In English, ‘use’ is a synonym for ‘employment’ or for ‘utility’. Wittgenstein is using it in the former sense.

The analogy of chess: Frege was much opposed to the view that doing mathematics is analogous to moving pieces according to rules. The anti-Frege view was generalised by Wittgenstein to all uses of language.

1. A weak point in the analogy is that the rules are formulated. But of course they need not be; we could just learn by watching games.

2. Another weak point is the rigidity of chess rules, but hide and seek has some definite rules. However there are indefinite ones as well, and the rules can change.

Wittgenstein makes these points himself.
'Language game' was not intended to indicate that language is a game.

Another analogy Wittgenstein uses: he likens language to a box of tools, and one learns to use them. Sometimes one tool looks and feels very much like another, though the job of the tools may be widely different.

Weak points in this analogy:

1. Say we call a pipe a tool, then this seems wrong. Probably because pipes, shoes, etc., become part of our personal life, and this has analogies in language. 'H₂O' is more like a tool than 'water'. Technical expressions are just tools, but well used expressions are more than tools.

Ryle's own criticisms:

Wittgenstein speaks of using words and learning rules for using them, and using sentences and learning rules for them. People speak of using sentences just like using words. This has weaknesses:

1. We learn words but not sentences (educationally all wrong according to Ryle). You can make up sentences; one cannot speak of a fund or stock of sentences. You can have dictionaries of words but not of sentences.

2. When we say the meaning of a word is its rules of use or employment we cannot say the same for sentences.

Further Rylean reservations:

1. Some sentences become clichés, e.g. 'je ne sais quoi', and people misuse them.

2. A word can be used or misused; and is used or misused in some sentence or other; but you cannot say the analogous thing, says Ryle, for a sentence.

A sentence differs from a word because it is the fact that someone has tried to employ words in such and such an order to say such and such a thing. A sentence is a different sort of abstraction from what a word is. It follows that 'meaning of a sentence' has the same sense as 'meaning of a word'. People make sense of sentences and know the meanings of words. A sentence has a sense, and a word has meaning.

Thus Ryle on meaning in Wittgenstein's Tractatus and its successor, The
Philosophical Investigations, in the academic year 1954-55.

REFERENCES:


