Gilbert Ryle's Debt to Bertrand Russell

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Introduction

Gilbert Ryle disliked talking about himself. However, as a frontispiece for a collection of critical essays, he wrote a brief 15-page autobiographical reflection in 1970.¹ Ryle explained that after a rather traditional Oxford education in the 1920s, which included a moderate dose of the Greeks, Kant, Croce, Schiller, and Bradley, he was “awakened” by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, and above all, Bertrand Russell. Suspicious that his formal education in Oxford had neglected logicians like Boole, DeMorgan, Venn, Frege, and others, Ryle wondered why Russell’s works on logic were only “the objects of Oxonian pleasantries”.² Realising that “philosophising essentially incorporates argumentation”, Ryle “went all Cambridge”, studying “Russell the logician and not Russell the epistemologist”.³

However, Ryle’s lack of mathematical training limited his understanding and use of logic. So he rejected a career as a formal logician or logical system builder. He was drawn to logic’s use in studying language:

Having no mathematical ability, equipment, or interest, I did not make

² Ryle, “Autobiographical” 4. Ryle recalls that Russell’s views were “ostracised” in Oxford. This was the “official line” (p. 3). Logic, Aristotle excepted, was not part of the canon. Ryle laments that there were no new contributions to logic by an Oxford philosopher between Lewis Carroll in 1896 and the mid-twentieth century. Presumably, Ryle, William Kneale, Hao Wang, Sir Peter Strawson, Michael Dummett, and Rom Harré were among those who ended the drought. For a picture of the hostility toward Russell, see A. J. Ayer, Part of My Life (London: Collins, 1977) 76-80.
myself even competent in the algebra of logic; nor did the problem of the foundations of mathematics become a question that burned in my belly. My interest was in the theory of Meanings – horrid substantive! – and quite soon, I am glad to say, in the theory of its senior partner, Nonsense. I laboured upon the doublets: Sense and Reference, Intension and Extension, Concept and Object, Propositions and Constituents, Objectives and Objects, Facts and Things, Formal Concepts and Real Concepts, Proper names and Descriptions, and Subjects and Predicates. It was in Russell’s Principles of Mathematics and not in his Principia Mathematica, in his Meinong articles and his “On Denoting” and not his epistemology that I found the pack-ice of logical theory cracking. It was up these cracks that Wittgenstein steered his Tractatus.⁴

This tribute to Russell’s influence may surprise many scholars.⁵ Ryle found Russell’s philosophical logic a powerful tool to tackle philosophical problems. Russell refined the logical advances of Boole, Cantor, Peano and Frege into a productive new conceptual scheme, presented in The Principles of Mathematics and expanded in Principia Mathematica.

In this essay I will outline Ryle’s debt to Russell, which in no way diminishes


⁵ At least one philosopher has noted Russell’s influence on Ryle. See Ayer, Part of My Life 79-80:

(Ryle) had been strongly influenced by Russell’s philosophy of logic and was coming to regard the principal function of philosophy as being that of exhibiting facts in their proper logical form, which was often obscured by the grammatical form of the sentences that were used to state them. The essay, “Systematically Misleading Expressions”, which he published in 1931 [ed: actually 1932], was his first development of this view in print, and it survives as one of the best examples of a line which others were to follow in the course of the decade.
an equal, if not stronger, debt to Wittgenstein.

Russell’s view of propositions

For Russell, a major concern for philosophers was the nature and complexity of propositions. A proposition is "anything that is true or that is false". Russell found that issues related to meaning, reference, identity, and existence could be embedded in a single proposition, interwoven and criss-crossed in ordinary language, and thereby hiding beneath the surface. However, symbolic logic could isolate each function within a proposition, separating out the tangled strands of various possibilities. For example, acknowledging that a proposition can have meaning without reference, such as ‘The present King of France is bald’, Russell showed that theories which do not allow for this distinction commit logical errors, such as presupposing that ideas must have a level of existence simply because we can think about them. Russell claims that “[a] logical theory may be tested by its capacity for dealing with puzzles, and it is a wholesome plan, in thinking about logic, to stock the mind with as many puzzles as possible, since these serve much the same purpose as is served by experiments in physics”.

Russell’s theory of descriptions, which split the question of meaning and reference into two conjunctive propositions (‘that baldness is predicated of the King of France’ and that ‘there is an individual who is the King of France’) is offered as the solution to puzzles about the meaning and denotation of propositional puzzles.

The matter of existence, which is taken up further in “The Existential Import of Propositions”, illustrates a problem known as the ‘existential fallacy’, attributed to Boole. Russell argued that philosophers often confused two types of existence: existence predicated of an individual and existence predicated of class membership. So, based on this confusion, if we argue that ‘No chimeras exist’, we may mean that they do not exist in space and time or that the class of chimeras has no members. This becomes a problem if we say ‘No numbers exist’, because the statement would be true in terms of

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6 Russell, _The Principles of Mathematics_ (sec. 13) 12-13. A proposition is contrasted with a propositional function, which is neither true nor false, such as ‘x is a man’.

existence in the real world, but false in terms of class membership. The solution is to recognise that existence in epistemology is not the same as in logic, and that universal propositions, such as ‘No numbers exist’, may have different truth values depending on denotation or meaning. Further, universal propositions will sometimes determine their truth values based on class concepts that are true or false for a universal proposition by definition and true or false for a particular proposition, such as ‘The Chesire Cat is a chimera’ by actual membership in a class, the former becoming a problem of definition or meaning, the latter a problem of presence within a class or denotation.

The discussion of problem of propositions was masterfully continued by Wittgenstein in his *Notebooks 1914-16* and later in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In fact, Russell and Wittgenstein made discussion of propositions a central question of philosophy.

But Russell was also interested in the components of propositions. The subject and predicate of a proposition were each represented by a class. Russell called the notion of class “one of the most difficult and important problems of mathematical philosophy”. Epistemological problems aside, class construction could lead to contradiction, which Russell discovered in 1902. He realised that class attribution, as a concept, was enough to engender contradiction. For example, consider the statement ‘$x$ is a predicate’. If so, then $x$ may or may not be a predicate of itself. Assume that ‘not-predicable of oneself’ is a predicate. Contradiction follows. In a letter to Frege, Russell puts the problem this way:

Let $w$ be the predicate: to be a predicate that cannot be predicated of itself. Can $w$ be predicated of itself? From each answer its opposite follows. Therefore we must conclude that $w$ is not a predicate. Likewise there is no class (as a totality) of those classes which, each taken as a totality, do not belong to themselves. From this I conclude that under certain circumstances a definable collection does not form a totality. 

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This paradox can be stated formally. Consider a class of classes. Not all classes are members of themselves. Is the class of all classes which are not members of themselves a member of itself or not? Either answer leads to the contradiction known as ‘Russell’s Paradox’.

Russell quickly realised that many famous paradoxes suffered from this same difficulty, namely a contradiction created by self-predication. For instance, the Cretan Liar paradox from Epimenides: ‘The Cretan says, “All Cretans are Liars.”’ If the Cretan speaks truthfully or falsely, contradiction results. Russell argued that self-predication is not of the same logical type as the predicate class. Therefore, “the distinction of logical types [...] is the key to the whole mystery”.11

From 1902 through 1910, Russell developed his theory of types. Self-predicating statements are without meaning. Instead, we must speak of sets of statements that form a genuine totality. A statement referring to other statements must be of a higher type order than the statements it is about. The class of all first order classes which are not members of themselves is a second order class. The paradox is shown to be non-existent.12

**Ryle’s contributions to philosophy**

Russell made many other contributions to philosophy. But the theory of descriptions and the theory of types were the keys to the kingdom for Ryle. Both demonstrated the ways that language could mislead philosophers. Both were tools to eliminate confusion. With proper applications of logic, philosophers could create clarity and remove haunting philosophical problems. Ryle had no need for the axiomatic edifice of *Principia Mathematica*. Rather, he only needed Russell’s insights on logic and language to make his own contributions to philosophy.

I agree with Antony Flew and Rom Harré that Ryle’s friendship with Wittgenstein must have been decisive. However, both Ryle and Wittgenstein needed Russell’s groundbreaking work in logic to pursue their own.

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Wittgenstein, Russell’s student and brief collaborator, decided to examine the formal nature of logic in the *Tractatus*. Afterwards, he began to look more closely at ordinary language. Ryle was further influenced by Wittgenstein in the early 1930s at the beginning of the latter’s movement away from logic. So Ryle learned from the ideas of Russell and Wittgenstein.

However, while Wittgenstein’s influence is generally cited, you also can see an extension of Russell’s work in “Systematically Misleading Expressions”, published in 1932, which became the first important landmark in linguistic philosophy and a manifesto for Ryle. He claimed:

> The gist of what I want to establish is this. There are many expressions which occur in non-philosophical discourse which, though they are perfectly clearly understood by those who use them and those who hear and read them, are nevertheless couched in grammatical or syntactical forms which are in a demonstrable way improper to the states of affairs which they record (or the alleged states of affairs which they profess to record). Such expressions can be reformulated and for philosophy but *not* for non-philosophical discourse must be reformulated into expressions of which the syntactical form is proper to the facts recorded (or the alleged facts alleged to be recorded).\(^{13}\)

When “an expression is of such a syntactical form that it is improper to the fact record”, it is systematically misleading. For example, consider the proposition ‘Mr. Baldwin is a statesman’. This does not record the same kind of fact as ‘Mr. Pickwick is a fiction’, even though the grammar and syntax are arguably the same. Philosophers must restate such propositions like ‘Mr. Pickwick is a fiction’ to make them more clear and honest. This is surely the same enterprise as “On Denoting”, in other words an attempt to penetrate beyond the appearance of a proposition to its actual logical form and then to examine its meaning and reference. While Ryle actually credits Wittgenstein, in my view he should have mentioned Russell too.

Perhaps Ryle’s most famous contribution to philosophy was his notion of a ‘category mistake’, or the placement of a fact in one “logical type or category” when it should be placed in another.\(^{14}\) Using Descartes’ distinction between mind and body (“The Cartesian Myth”) Ryle demonstrates that “the

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ghost in the machine” view of the mind, where the mind is a thing made of some vague stuff relying on some form of causation, is actually a “paramechanical hypothesis”, thereby committing a category mistake. This is Russell’s worry about logical types extended to philosophical matters other than paradoxes.

In the Tarnér Lectures, Ryle looks at conflicts between so-called ‘rival theories’, such as determinism and free will, perception and reality, and formal and informal logic. He argues that many rivalries are the result of confusion about logical types:

Sometimes thinkers are at loggerheads with one another, not because their propositions do conflict, but because their authors fancy that they conflict. They suppose themselves to be giving, at least by direct implication, rival answers to the same questions, when this is not really the case. They are then talking at cross-purposes by saying that the two sides are, at certain points, hinging their arguments upon concepts of different categories, though they suppose themselves to be hinging them upon different concepts of the same category, or vice versa.

Again, this is Russell’s theory of types applied to conventional problems in philosophy.

One final example: Ryle’s notion of ‘heterologicality’. This was a direct response to a discussion about Russell’s use of paradox. The term ‘heterological’ is used to describe words that are not predicable of themselves. Ryle discusses a host of words that potentially self-predicate, such as ‘English’, ‘heterological’, ‘self-epithet’, and others. The only reason for confusion with such words, according to Ryle, is “inattention to grammar”. The same inattention is found with the paradoxes of the Liar, the class of classes, and impredicability. Clear attention to the use of quotation marks and inverted commas eliminates confusion: “Minding our inverted commas, in the required ways, is minding our grammar.”

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18 MacDonald, Philosophy and Analysis 52.
19 MacDonald, Philosophy and Analysis 52.
Here Ryle applies the theory of types, using grammar in place of logic, to indicate solutions to questions of class inclusion or exclusion.

These examples are not self-selected or ancillary to the Ryle program. They are its core, its centre. Such contributions represent Ryle’s lasting legacy. My argument is that he follows in Russell’s footsteps; Ryle was a second-generation Russellian. Ryle claimed that Russell set up philosophical problems as hurdles and used “self-applied tests by which philosophical thinking may become a self-correcting undertaking”. So did Ryle.

Russell’s hatred of ordinary language philosophy

Ryle’s respect for Russell was not generously returned. Russell’s dislike of ordinary language philosophy obscured the obvious methodological link to his early work. This dislike – hatred – is beyond question, with the first attacks coming in Russell’s “The Cult of ‘Common Usage’” in 1953. ²⁰ Russell felt that ordinary language philosophy was an abdication of work on traditional questions, particularly because it gave credibility, in Russell’s view, to the cause of many philosophical problems, and viewed with suspicion the tool for removing this confusion, namely logic and the development of a logically pure language. His personal dislike was further displayed in hostile comments in later books reviews and articles, with notable personal, non-professional attacks on Warnock and Strawson. In fact, the comments about Strawson may have set the (low) standard for personal invective in a philosophical journal. ²¹

Of course, Russell’s early epistemological views were attacked by ordinary language philosophers, which must have fueled his animosity. Ryle, J. L. Austin and others critically examined traditional views of sense data and other staple concepts in epistemology, shredding the work of Russell and those known to favourably apply his work in Oxford, such as H. H. Price and Freddie Ayer.


However, despite his feelings about ordinary language philosophy, Russell had some regard for Ryle. In Russell’s review of The Concept of Mind, he treats Ryle with proper decorum, noting the originality of the book and its importance, “if true”.\(^{22}\) Russell finds three areas of commonality with Ryle: the rejection of Cartesian dualism, the rejection of sense data, and the rejection of sense data as a form of knowledge. Then Russell examines Ryle’s view of the ‘mental’ and of the notion of ‘mind’ in some detail, finally rejecting Ryle’s position because of disagreement about key terms and because of non-reliance on empirical science. Russell’s notes for his critique are in the Russell Archives at McMaster University. Photographic plates of these notes have been included in Volume 11 of The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell. The notes show a very careful reading of the text, with a precise outline and page numbers.\(^{23}\)

Russell and Ryle were at least cordial. There is a story, recounted by Ryle, of meeting Russell on a train to North Wales. The two had an enjoyable conversation. At one point Ryle asked: “Why is it that, although nearly every youthful student of philosophy both can and does in about his second essay refute Locke’s entire Theory of Knowledge, yet Locke made a bigger difference to the whole intellectual climate of mankind than anyone had done since Aristotle?” Russell agreed and suggested that Locke was the “spokesman of Common Sense”. Ryle retorted, “I think Locke invented Common Sense”. Russell rejoined, “By God, Ryle, I believe you are right. No one ever had Common Sense before John Locke – and no one but Englishmen have ever had it since.”\(^{24}\)

But Ryle’s reliance on Russell’s work was not noted or appreciated by Russell, who saw ordinary language philosophers as side-stepping serious work in the subject.

A later controversy eliminated any hope of winning Russell’s approval. In 1959, Ryle refused to review Ernest Gellner’s book, Words and Things,\(^{25}\) in Mind, for which Russell wrote the preface. Gellner’s harsh treatment of

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\(^{23}\) Russell, The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell 683-687. Plates III-V.


ordinary language philosophy was laced with considerable personal invective. So Ryle returned the copy sent by the publishers, citing the book as “abusive”. Russell defended Gellner in the London Times, setting off a fire-storm of comments about the proper role of philosophical criticism and responsible editorial policy.26 Russell’s comments about Ryle during this episode were less than favourable.

Ryle’s writing style

Historically, one could easily claim that Ryle is one of the great philosophical stylists, deserving mention with Plato, Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Russell, Wittgenstein, Ayer, and Austin. Ryle’s use of language is extraordinary, memorable, and penetrating, setting him apart from the vast majority of writers in philosophy. He had a powerful command of language. Further, he enjoyed language, having fun with concepts, their use and their usage. He runs rampant with witty barbs and bombast-busting pin-pricks.

Ryle even invented conceptual categories, creating a world filled with ‘logical howlers’, ‘designated fatalities’, ‘sub-stretches’, and other logico-linguistic designations, allowing us to enter a new universe of categorical zoology.

Who were his influences? Surprisingly, John Mabbot, a personal friend of Ryle’s, reports that Ryle read hardly any fiction “but Jane Austen and P. G. Wodehouse”.27 Yet these two influences are not surprising. Austen’s moral judgements intrigued Ryle, and Wodehouse “was a natural for him as a lord of language in a different vein”.28

Personally, I suspected the Wodehouse link long before reading Mabbot. The loaded comedy, unique metaphors, and use of slang betrayed a kindred spirit, if not an inspiration.

For instance, consider a passage picked out of Wodehouse at random:

Of course considering the sort of girl Madeline Bassett was — stars and rabbits and all that — you might say that a sober sadness would have been more fitting. But in these matters you have to realize that tastes differ. The impulse of right-thinking men might be to run a mile when they saw the Bassett, but for some reason she appealed to the deeps in Gussie, so that was that.29

Compare the following three passages from Ryle which incorporate unique or odd uses of words to make insightful, illuminating philosophical points in a lively, robust style:

(1) Overt intelligent performances are not clues to the workings of minds; they are those workings. Boswell described Johnson’s mind when he described how he wrote, talked, ate, fidgeted and fumed. His description was, of course, incomplete, since there were notoriously some thoughts which Johnson kept carefully to himself and there must have been many dreams, daydreams, and silent babblings which only Johnson could have recorded and only a James Joyce would wish him to have recorded.30

(2) The notion that our eyes, ears, and noses are foreign correspondents who send us messages, which, on examination, turn out often and perhaps always to be fabrications, does enjoy a wide vogue. I think that I need not labour the point that, when taken seriously, it is an attempt to fit familiar generalities about perception, delusions, misestimates, deafness, etc. into an unsuitable conceptual harness, namely that of some political or social fabric, like that of a police-court or the head-office of a newspaper.31

(3) But why does Plato let the Socrates of our Meno so un-Socratically erect upon a poem and a fairy-tale a self-demolishing epistemology? As long ago as the Dissoi Logoi the verses of poets had been disqualified as dialectical premisses. The induced geometrizings of the slave-boy can indeed teach an important epistemological lesson, but only if it is detached from the fable about our knowledge-bequeathing Before-Lives.

Had Athens heard a Meno-dialogue with a different dialectical plot, to which this Retrieval story was at most a tributary?32

29 P. G. Wodehouse, Right Ho, Jeeves (London: H. Jenkins, 1934) 100.
31 Ryle, Dilemmas 99.
32 Ryle, Aspects of Mind 93.
Now maybe Wodehouse is the better comedian. But the creative, intriguing, masterful use of words is common to both. In each case the sentences are alive; they make their own way. Words are used with a broader range of meanings than with most writers. The construction of the sentences shows a remarkable use of grammar and syntax. There is a humour that escorts the arguments though they address the vast complexities of philosophy.

Ryle himself felt that his style reflected an intellectual temperament credited to William James and Russell, who combined seriousness with humour. In his memorial lecture on Russell, Ryle noted:

James and Russell found out for themselves and so taught us at our best how to pop doctrinal bubbles without drawing blood; how to be illuminating and un恶意ously naughty; and how, without being frivolous, to laugh off grave conceptual bosh. Stufiness in diction and stuffiness in thought were not, of course, annihilated, but they were put on the defensive from the moment when James and Russell discovered that a joke can be the beginning, though only the beginning, of a blessed release from a strangling theoretical millstone.33

In turn, Ryle’s writing style influenced several generations of philosophers in Oxford, among them A. J. Ayer, Anthony Quinton, Antony Flew, J. O. Urmson, R. M. Hare, David Pears, Stuart Hampshire, Peter Strawson, Rom Harré, and G. J. Warnock – each a wonderful stylist. Ryle made the doing and the reading of philosophy fun as he tackled the grave questions with surgical operations, categorisation, punchy prose, and beaming grin.

Contrast Ryle’s approach with the beautiful prose, but serious countenance and steep purpose of Wittgenstein, who made every categorisation and distinction seem the result of a painful and tormenting ritual. Ryle’s humour should not blanket his own serious purpose; progress in philosophy can come from more than one approach, temperament, or methodology.

Of course, some credit should also be given here to J. L. Austin, who has been shamefully ignored in my discussion. His tenure, which coincided with Ryle’s until an early death in 1960, was marked by a lasting influence on his students. Like Ryle, Austin presented a sterling style of English writing at its finest.

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Conclusion

In 1970, reflecting on Russell’s death in February of that year, Ryle gave a memorial lecture before the Aristotelian Society. He cited Russell’s intellectual temper, style of philosophical work, use of both universals and particulars, and application of formal logic to traditional speculative problems as four “determining impulses” on the course of modern philosophy. In these ways, “Russell taught us not to think his thoughts but how to move in our own philosophical thinking”.34

This description of Russell was also self-descriptive, acknowledging an influence that guided and punctuated Ryle’s great work in philosophy. Ryle will surely be remembered as one of the most important philosophical figures of his time, both for founding the ordinary language movement and for his classic, The Concept of Mind.

Russell and Wittgenstein were the two major influences on Ryle’s philosophical enterprise and his methodology. Flew once asked Ryle if he was influenced by Wittgenstein. The reply: “You can see his influence in everything I do.”35 In my view, Russell’s influence is there, too.36

REFERENCES


35 Personal conversation with Flew, July 1997.
36 Two essays that attempt to summarise Ryle’s contributions to philosophy are J. O. Urmson, “Gilbert Ryle,” Encyclopedia of Philosophy 7, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 269-71, and René Meyer, “Philosophy, Logical Geography and Dilemmas” in Ryle, Aspects of Mind, 9-15. Ryle’s last days are remembered in J. D. Mabbot, Oxford Memories (Oxford: Thorntonsof Oxford, 1986) 142-44. Mabbot also has an important appendix that discusses the creation in Oxford of the BPhil, for which Ryle was primarily responsible. I would like to thank Rom Harré, Santiago Zorzopolus, and Samantha Pogorelsky for comments on an earlier draft of this essay. I also benefited from topical conversations with David Rodier, Peter Strawson, Antony Flew, Alan Schwerin, Carlos Armintor, Matt Caia and Bob Barnard.


