

The Philosophy of A. J. Ayer

Edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn

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This is the twenty-first volume in the late Paul Schilpp's admirable Library of Living Philosophers, now edited by Lewis Hahn, and was almost complete when Ayer died. Following the usual format, it contains an intellectual autobiography together with twenty four articles on aspects of Ayer's philosophy, all but three written in time for Ayer to reply to them. There is a comprehensive bibliography of Ayer's many publications, and a good index. It is also accurately typeset: apart from an error noted below, I found only a missing 'not' seven lines up on p. 155, 'simultaneity' for 'synonymy' on p. 514, 'natural monism' for 'neutral monism' twice on p. 543, and 'compromises' for 'comprises' on p. 656.

The volume exhibits Ayer's many philosophical virtues, which deserve more respect and emulation than they often get today. His enviable facility in writing may have made him, like Russell, write too much too quickly. But better than that than the preciousness or insecurity masquerading as perfectionism which makes many able philosophers write too little for fear of getting things wrong. For nothing comes of nothing, whereas intelligent mistakes can enlighten and be put right; and no one can accuse Ayer the atheist of not heeding the parable of the talents. We should rate him therefore by the many good writings in which he tackles some of philosophy's deepest problems with insight, clarity, wit, passion, precision, persistence and good sense. And as for his work, so for his attitude to philosophy: a respecter not of persons, fashions, ideologies or institutions, but only of arguments, including those that refute his own past views. In short, Ayer is an exemplar for everyone who tries to advance our subject and defend it from the charlatans, gurus and social, political and religious hijackers who perennially threaten it.

Ayer's philosophy is largely governed by his concern with problems of epistemology. These he says (p. 428) he follows 'Russell and Moore rather than the later Wittgenstein or his disciples in taking to be genuine problems and capable of solution', regretting only that he had not more success in solving them. One reason for his failure emerges in Michael Dummett's fine article on 'The metaphysics of verificationism' (marred at the end by silly stuff about god, e.g. 'there would be no difference between creating a universe devoid of rational creatures and not creating anything', p. 147). Dummett argues that the chief

problem of meaning is to link the truth conditions of statements, or of the beliefs they express, to what we take to verify those statements, i.e. to warrant those beliefs. Whether we derive a statement's meaning from the belief it expresses or *vice versa*, or identify its meaning with its verification condition or with its truth condition, the problem is the same: how to link those two conditions.

What stops Ayer solving this problem for empirical statements is the feature of his epistemology that stops it giving our empirical knowledge a sufficient basis. This feature is, oddly enough, not verificationism or empiricism but the rationalism implied by its internalism. It is not that Ayer accepts a Carnapian inductive logic: he does not, for reasons he repeats in his reply to David S. Clarke's 'On judging sufficiency of evidence'. But he needs to, since he takes our empirical beliefs to be warranted by the sense-experiences that are our ultimate evidence for them, evidence whose strength he thinks is neither subjective nor contingent on the external facts they are evidence for. But then he must take the extent to which given experiences warrant given beliefs to be measured by something like an inductive logic, knowable *a priori*.

That Ayer's epistemology needs some such logic is shown by his endorsing John Foster's lucid account of why, in his 'construction of the physical world', Ayer rejects naive realism. For he and Foster (p. 181) take the naive realist to claim that 'truth-reliability' in our perceptual processes 'provides, from our own standpoint, a rational warrant for the ... beliefs' they cause. But it doesn't: for as Foster says, 'if the truth-reliability is only an objective feature of the situation ... the sceptic can still insist that we have no grounds for supposing that it obtains and so no rational warrant for holding the beliefs' (pp. 181-2). But what then can the 'rational warrant' be that *would* satisfy the sceptic, if not a logical but non-deductive relation of evidential support, knowable *a priori*, between the contents of our sense-experiences and those of the beliefs they thereby warrant?

The chief objection to invoking such a warrant is simply that, as Ramsey argues against Keynes in §2 of 'Truth and probability' (in his *Philosophical Papers*), no such logical relations exist: certainly none are detectable *a priori*, as they need to be. This is why, as Ayer admits, 'the sceptic's standards of justification ... cannot possibly be met' (p. 199). But it is not true, as Ayer thinks, that disqualifying the sceptic on this ground '*arbitrarily* turns his victory into defeat' (my italics). The sceptic's defeat is real, since his standards are too high anyway. Truth-reliability is all my senses need to warrant the beliefs they give me, such as the belief (B_1) that it's raining which I get when my eyes will let

nothing but rain cause it. This reliability needs no warrant, rational or otherwise, to enable it to warrant B_1 . For the only belief which Foster's 'grounds for supposing' that my eyesight is reliable could warrant is not B_1 but the belief, B_2 , that B_1 is warranted; and warranting B_1 can only entail warranting B_2 if, in order to know something, I must know that I know it. But since no one has ever justified imposing this generally unsatisfiable condition on knowledge, the naive realist can simply reject it. He need not therefore claim, as Foster makes him do, that the truth-reliability of our senses is self-warranting. He need only claim that it suffices to warrant the beliefs they give us, a claim to which I know of no good objection.

Besides solving Ayer's problem of empirical knowledge, reliabilism also helps to solve Dummett's problem of meaning, by making the truth conditions of perceptual statements part of their verification conditions. When my eyes make rain cause me to believe that it's raining, the fact (that it's raining) which makes this belief true is part of what warrants it. This in turn enables the 'primary recognition' on which, as Ayer says, all our empirical knowledge depends, to be of rain and other perceptible features of the external world. It need not be of the instances of *qualia* from which Ayer thinks we must be able to reconstruct that world. This is not of course to say that reliabilist theories of meaning face no difficulties. It is for example hard for the functionalism I favour to let our senses give us false beliefs without thereby altering their content to make them true. But once we purge our epistemology of Ayer's gratuitous rationalism, these are problems we can solve.

Solving them will also free us from the Kantian idealism to which Ayer confesses in his reply to T. L. S. Sprigge's 'Ayer on other minds'. This is the view that the world is 'structured by our method of describing it' (p. 606). For a reliabilist it is the other way round: it is the truth conditions of our empirical statements which fix their verification conditions and hence their meaning, not *vice versa*. This in turn lets us reject Ayer's incredible view, repeated in reply to Anthony Quinton's 'Ayer and ontology', 'that the question what there is, when treated as an external* question in Carnap's sense, is one for our decision' (p. 509: *the text has 'internal', an obvious misprint). It is nothing of the sort. We may indeed get our answer to this question by deciding between rival conceptual schemes; but that is by the way. No reliabilist need re-echo Ayer's 'echo of Kant, that the idea that we could prise the world off our concepts is incoherent' (p. 606).

The reliabilism that saves Ayer from his sceptic thus also rescues us from several other unattractive views of his. But it does not make us ditch all his views. In particular, it does not entail physicalism: we may still decline to ‘feign anaesthesia’ (p. 600: a phrase Ayer takes from C. K. Ogden’s and I. A. Richards’ *The Meaning of Meaning*). For we may still want tokens of Ayer’s *qualia* to cause our perceptual beliefs, if not to warrant them, thus enabling them – if we accept Ayer’s rebuttal of Wittgenstein’s anti-private-language argument – to define our terms for colours and other secondary qualities.

Many other doctrines of Ayer’s can also survive reliabilism: for example, his denial of natural necessity. Putnam’s ‘Does water have to be H₂O?’ disowns Kripke’s metaphysical necessity, but still accepts a real non-epistemic physical (i.e. natural) necessity. Thus he thinks ‘we discovered that perpetual motion machines are a physical impossibility by discovering the First and Second Laws of Thermodynamics; but it would have been a physical impossibility even if those laws had never been discovered’ (p. 431). So it would; but only because those laws would still have ruled it out. And all this shows is that to be naturally necessary is to be entailed by a law, which does indeed makes laws naturally necessary, but only trivially so. For Putnam’s objection to metaphysical necessity applies equally to his physical variety (p. 447): ‘The “deduction” of each law of physics L from the statement “it is [physically] impossible to violate L” adds no real explanatory content to these marvellously informative deductions’, e.g. to the deduction from thermodynamics of the non-existence of perpetual motion machines. Saying what makes law statements true, and how they support the conditionals that rule out hypothetical as well as actual perpetual motion machines, does of course present problems. But we may reject Ayer’s extreme Humeanism, which denies all such conditionals truth values, and still agree with him that ‘the use of an undefined concept of natural necessity is of no help in solving them’ (p. 461).

I have picked out only a few of the many aspects of Ayer’s philosophy covered in this volume. Other contributors tackle his views on pragmatism, causation, social science, free will and determinism, meaning-rules, logic and mathematics. Yet others deal historically with how his thought develops, and is related to that of Hume, Russell, Wittgenstein and the various members of the Vienna Circle. One discusses its implications for aesthetics, on which Ayer himself wrote little. Not all the articles are equally good, of course, but most are worth having for themselves, and nearly all for Ayer’s replies. And usually the

harder Ayer is challenged the better his response. It is therefore especially sad that Barry Stroud's 'Ayer's Hume' and David Wiggins' 'Ayer on morality and feeling: from subjectivism to emotivism and back?' came too late for Ayer to reply to them. But that still leaves us many large mercies to be thankful for. With so many well-argued and well-related contributions to our subject, this book is not only a worthy memorial to a great philosopher but excellent value for all his successors.

D. H. Mellor

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