XVI—GILBERT RYLE

by G. E. L. Owen

When Gilbert Ryle died, swiftly and cleanly as would be expected of him, he left work in progress. Some consisted in comments on manuscripts sent him and left neatly ordered; John Mabbott says that after going through Ryle's papers he wrote twenty letters to such correspondents—to the United States and Canada, Australia, Germany and Italy and France, Israel and Pakistan, Mexico and the Armenian Republic of the Soviet Union, conveying his comments and the news of his death. Ryle was assiduous in maintaining such philosophical traffic. It took some toll, perhaps, in the later years of his editing of *Mind*. (There was allegedly a Discussion Note that he thought should be published partly because, written from the Far East, it made so many references to different papers in *Mind*; but it turned out that the papers were from one issue and no doubt from one copy.) He went willingly to speak to philosophical conferences where most speakers were what he cheerfully grouped on return as "the continentals", and he enjoyed such occasions as that on which he and Urmson were due to give consecutive lectures in Europe and were introduced by "This is Mr. Urmson, whose work we know well, and this is Professor Waynflete, with whose writings we are of course equally familiar".

He left other work in progress. There was a paper on Plato's *Meno* ready for delivery to the Cambridge B Club in October, but here too he was still reviewing it: his last postcard to me in the summer carried some radically new proposals to be incorporated. (The postcard ended with a characteristic note to my wife: "Tell Sally not to try to remember what I asked her to tell you".) And on his final walking-tour with John Mabbott he was still exercised by the question why the *Meno* is some twenty pages shorter and the *Gorgias* some twenty longer than what he took to be the standard length for dialogues of their group. Just because they were counter-examples to a favourite thesis of his about the public delivery of such works, he could not let them alone or be content with his current solutions. Plato had held his

interest since the 1930s. In 1939 he published a paper on the *Parmenides* which initiated a revolution in the philosophical interpretation of Plato's later work. (Yet he said to me in 1949 that no serious notice had been taken of it in its first ten years.) The same interest issued in other papers, in almost countless letters and drafts exchanged with colleagues, and then in two very different later works: the book *Plato's Progress*, which successfully teased non-philosophical historians on their own ground, and the exegesis of Plato which he contributed to Paul Edwards' *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* and which rivals in importance and outdoes in scope those early papers on the *Parmenides*. Aristotle too he admired: in his reminiscences at the 500th meeting of the Oxford Philosophical Society he sketched the prehistory of *The Concept of Mind* and said that, as against a Husserlian phenomenology, he had been "fairly clear that what was wanted was a Nicomacheanized *De Anima*". But for as long as I knew him the greater and more constant stimulus was Plato. He proposed that one should dine with Aristotle, but then serenade Plato. For one whose musical sense matched that of the Old Lady of Breen, this was uncommon devotion.

When Stuart Hampshire wrote his admirable memoir of Austin for these *Proceedings* in 1960 the need was different. There were indeed seminal papers of Austin in print; but nothing comparable in range, either of time or of theme, with Ryle's books and collected papers. Hampshire's diagnoses had to await proof by the publication of Austin's lectures—and were proved. Hampshire wrote, partly, for those not in the know. Ryle's works have now been, as Austin's were only coming to be, combed and carded to the point where it is small part of this writer's duty to add another extended philosophical critique, even if there were space. Austin's methods in teaching and argument were pretty well known in 1960, but often in caricature and by hearsay. Ryle's, by dint of many graduate classes in Oxford and equally by his frequent appearances in many parts of the world where he took philosophy to be going on, are widely familiar. The number and geographical diversity of those who have heard him and find him unforgettable, whether they argued with him or not, are astonishing. So I write for those in the know, and my first job is to try to add things they may not know.

In the later 1930s two fairly jealously guarded groups of senior philosophers were meeting in Oxford. One, inaugurated some ten years earlier, included Ryle, Mabbott, Price and Hardie and at different times C. S. Lewis, Kneale and Cox. It met fortnightly for dinner and discussion and was formally disbanded some forty years after its inception. The younger group began later and dissolved earlier. It included Austin, Berlin, Hampshire, Ayer, Hart and Grice. Its weekly meetings were continued and enlarged after the war, and carried on after the loss of Austin by Paul Grice until he left Oxford. There was no overlap, or only the most occasional and contingent, in the membership of these groups. Their motivations were different. The earlier set had found the philosophy faculty at Oxford peopled with seniors who had been too old for service in the first war. Ryle said "Paton and Collingwood were the main, though not quite the only, chronological intermediaries to survive and return to Oxford from that war". But by the 1920s Russell's work, and even the *Tractatus* (if only in the charming King James translation), were known and prized by the younger men. There was no Vienna behind them, as there was behind the group that started in the 1930s. The seniors prized Moore, not for his published accounts of analysis or of perception, but for his indefatigable and unstubborn readiness to argue at Joint Sessions; and they found the same unstubborn provocativeness in Prichard. But the air was stale, and they opened windows.

One window which took some time to open but whose opening was, I believe, mainly due to the senior group was the Oxford B.Phil. In his Memorial Lecture for Ryle John Mabbott generously called him the inventor of the B.Phil. degree. Ryle sometimes said that it was a joint invention of the two of them. I am allowed to say something more of this. One, and probably the, principal impulse to the long and fruitful conversations between the two which issued in Ryle's construction and public advocacy of the new degree was Mabbott's lasting dissatisfaction with the postgraduate instruction in philosophy at Oxford of which he, but not Ryle, had had first-hand consumer's experience. No such instruction was specially engineered for graduates, save the attention of one supervisor in a special field which was unlikely to promote

and likely to preclude philosophical debate with other graduates. Ryle's moves to redress this situation came after he returned to take up the Waynflete Chair in 1945, and they were systematically rehearsed to Mabbott. But the structure of the Degree was Ryle's, with its inventive combination of a thesis that was not to be a premature tome, with written examinations in subjects chosen from a range of other philosophers and philosophical fields. (There is small need to stress the difference from the conventional requirement of other universities, notably American, to take preliminary examinations *before* being allowed to proceed to the tome.) The inclusion of a paper on a Chosen Authority was Ryle's idea, and the choice of the Authorities was his: Plato, Aristotle and Kant were each to stand for one, but the Empiricists for instance represented only one choice. And the public advocacy was his, perhaps most notably in a letter to the Oxford Magazine in November 1946. It is worth quoting: "A man who has done distinguished work in Greats or P.P.E. can look for systematic advanced instruction in philosophy neither to Oxford nor to any other British University. Nor can a graduate from another Honours School get philosophical training outside the Final Honour School curricula . . . We want, therefore, to create a graduate philosophy School, the students in which are qualified to tackle contemporary philosophical theory and scholarship, and to get a wider and deeper knowledge of past philosophers than can be demanded in Final Honour Schools". After marking this project off from the B.Litt. he adds, almost as an afterthought, "We ought also to provide advanced training not only to our own graduates, but also to graduates from other Universities." He can hardly have foreseen the great strength of Americans and Australians, Canadians and other energetic nationals that characterized the B.Phil. classes once they were well under way in the 1950s.

The remarkable organization of classes and supervision that marked the subsequent stages of the B.Phil. was not very evident in its early years. But I recall some weekly sessions in 1949, held before the publication of *The Concept of Mind*, at which Ryle read parts of the forthcoming book for half an hour or so, then stopped and lit a pipe to initiate discus-

sion. It was a fairly small group, and Hart and Cross were there; later, and I think rightly, it became the exception and not the rule to admit the senior establishment to B.Phil. classes. But Ryle's answers to any member took the same form: not the silencing epigrams sometimes ascribed to him but, as usual, pithy examples that the interlocutor had to accommodate or take leave to meditate.

This was the style of discusion with which his juniors became familiar. Sometimes indeed he talked in laconic paragraphs and not laconic sentences or phrases. Sometimes these even began with "Ah, I don't believe . . .". But the "that"-clause that followed "believe" was never a résumé of the interlocutor's thesis but a reminder of some larger debatable assumption behind that thesis. With him the conversation did not stop, there was no Q.E.D. in philosophy, the lapidary sentences were not lapidary stones; so even epistolary discussions were never concluded. One soon learnt that if two of his pages evoked a one-page reply that was in turn likely to evoke two pages or more, and not a sentence of them dispensable. (One of his replies to me finished "Sorry I haven't had time to make this shorter", and it would have been an unimmersed Japanese paper flower if he had.)

Karl Britton once divided a subset of philosophers into those who wished to write as they spoke and those who wished to speak as they wrote. To Ryle, I imagine, the question never presented itself. His grandfather, the Bishop of Liverpool, who wrote *Knots Untied* (not a bad title for *Dilemmas*), said "In style and comparison I have studied so far as possible to be plain and pointed and to choose what an old divine calls 'picked and packed' words". Ryle wrote and spoke in that family tradition.

In 1949 we juniors had pirated copies of the *Blue* and *Brown Books* in our hands; but we did not think Ryle's methods much indebted to Wittgenstein, even though both proceeded by "the assembling of reminders" and not by would-be proofs. It was not just that Ryle allowed himself "since" and "consequently"; but that was part of it, for he was patently ready to argue, often with a becoming immodesty, and on the evidence we could not envisage a direct argument with Wittgenstein using "No, because . . .". (What

Austin would have appreciatively called "a good bang-about".)

At any rate it is this readiness for argument that dissolves an unreal dilemma sometimes derived from Ryle's determination to maintain philosophy by personal interventions around the world. At least since his 1937 paper on "Taking Sides in Philosophy" he was implacably opposed to cults and sects in his subject. He prized his friendship with Wittgenstein but deplored the Cambridge adulation that he thought Wittgenstein tolerated or even encouraged. Neither of the two Oxford groups I have named came near to a cult, though perhaps the later came nearer. Yet inevitably Ryle himself became and knew he was becoming something of a cult figure, just because his own convictions on how to do and not to do philosophy were so deeply held and so widely and winningly presented. But where another man's students might unworthily ape even his tones and gestures of perplexity, Ryle was not aped. Savingly, he would have laughed at the attempt.

In his later years in Oxford he worked to establish a philosophical centre, with its own building and library, and succeeded; but he did not see the present splendid results himself. There is a room now dedicated to him. There are generations of philosophers dedicated, in the only ways he would have prized, to him.

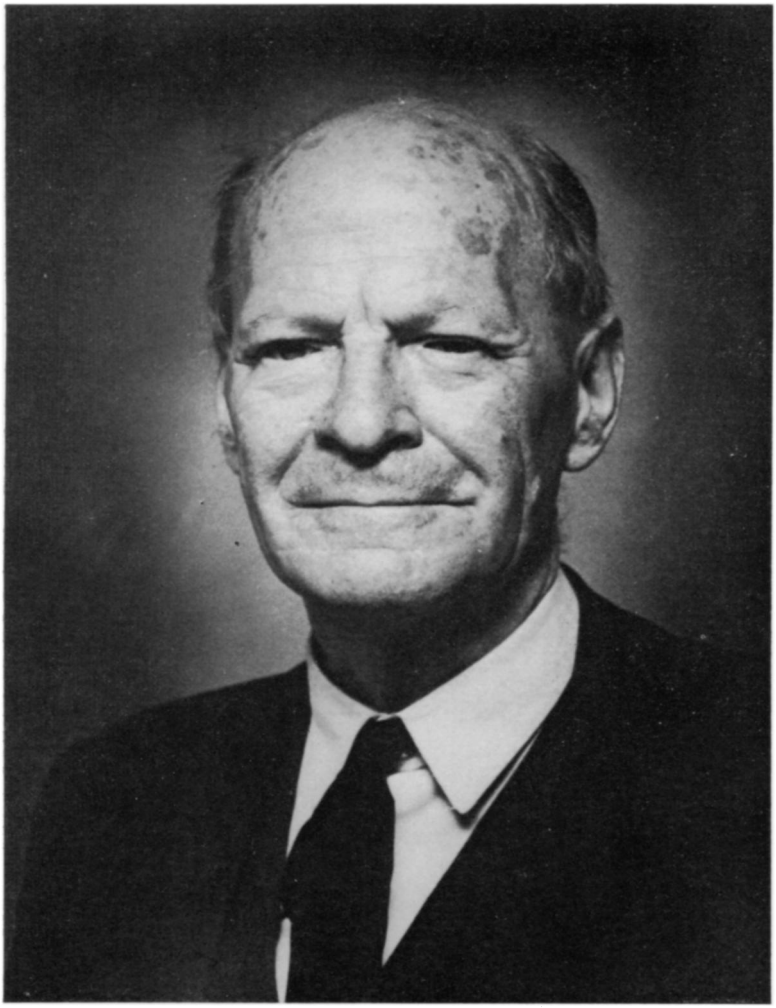

Photo: *Robert Turnbull, Columbus, Ohio*

GILBERT RYLE

19th August, 1900 to 6th October, 1976
President, 1945–46