

Analytic Philosophy as a Critique of System Building: The Oxford Philosophers' Approach

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Abstract

This paper examines analytic philosophy, in its formative Oxford phase, as a sustained critique of philosophical system building. Where the idealist metaphysics that dominated British philosophy at the close of the nineteenth century sought comprehensive, architectonic accounts of reality modelled on the systems of Hegel and Bradley, the Oxford philosophers—working from the logical innovations of Moore and Russell and radicalised by the later Wittgenstein—reoriented philosophy away from system construction toward the patient analysis of language, concepts, and ordinary usage. The paper argues that this reorientation was not merely a change of method but a distinct meta-philosophical stance: the conviction that many philosophical problems are generated by the systematic misconstruction of ordinary expressions, and that the philosopher's task is therapeutic and clarificatory rather than constructive. Drawing on the work of Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, and P. F. Strawson, the paper reconstructs the Oxford critique of system building, assesses its philosophical merits and limitations, and considers its continuing relevance to contemporary metaphysics and philosophy of language.

Keywords: analytic philosophy, system building, Oxford philosophy, ordinary language, Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, P. F. Strawson, metaphysics

1. Introduction

Philosophy in the grand style has traditionally aspired to system: a single, internally coherent account of reality, knowledge, and value, in which every particular truth finds its place as a moment within an encompassing whole. This aspiration reached its most confident expression in the absolute idealism of F. H. Bradley, whose *Appearance and Reality* attempted to show that

the categories of ordinary thought—relation, quality, causation, the self—dissolve into contradiction unless subsumed within a single, undivided Absolute¹. Bradley's idealism was itself an English inheritance of the systematic ambitions of Hegel, for whom philosophy was properly the self-comprehension of the Idea unfolding through a logically necessary sequence of categories². It is against this background of system building that analytic philosophy first defined itself, and it did so, from the outset, as a critique.

The purpose of this paper is to examine that critique in its most developed form: the work of the Oxford philosophers of the mid-twentieth century, principally Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, and P. F. Strawson, who inherited and radicalised the anti-systematic impulse first announced by G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell in Cambridge at the beginning of the century. The paper proceeds in five stages. Section two situates the Oxford critique historically, tracing its roots in the revolt against idealism. Section three examines the distinctive Oxford diagnosis of philosophical error as arising from the systematic misconstruction of ordinary language. Section four considers the positive method that this diagnosis generated—analysis in place of construction. Section five assesses the strengths and limitations of the Oxford approach, and the conclusion considers its continuing significance.

2. From System to Analysis: The Revolt against Idealism

The proximate origin of analytic philosophy's suspicion of system building lies in the joint revolt of Moore and Russell against British idealism at Cambridge. In "The Refutation of Idealism," Moore attacked the idealist thesis that *esse est percipi* by insisting on the sheer distinctness of an act of awareness from the object of which one is aware, a distinction the idealist system had been at pains to dissolve³. Moore's method was piecemeal: he isolated a single inference, subjected it to close scrutiny, and rejected it on its own terms, without offering any rival system to replace the one he had dismantled. This piecemeal procedure—analysis of a claim in isolation from any requirement that the result cohere with a total picture of reality—became a defining feature of the tradition that followed.

Russell extended Moore's piecemeal method into logic proper. His theory of descriptions, developed in "On Denoting," showed that a definite description such as "the present King of France" need not be treated as a name denoting some shadowy, subsistent entity, as certain Meinongian and idealist theories of meaning had implied; properly analysed, the sentence containing it turns out, on examination, to be a quantified statement with no denoting phrase left standing for logical scrutiny⁴. For Russell, this was more than a technical result: it was a demonstration that grammatical form regularly misleads philosophers into positing entities, and hence into building systems, that a correct logical analysis dissolves⁵. Logical analysis, on this view, is not one department of philosophy among others feeding into a larger system; it is the whole of philosophy's proper business, since it alone can show which apparent problems are genuine and which are merely artifacts of unexamined grammar.

¹ F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), 1–30.

² G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), §§1–18.

³ G. E. Moore, "The Refutation of Idealism," *Mind* 12, no. 48 (1903): 433–453.

⁴ Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting," *Mind* 14, no. 56 (1905): 479–493.

⁵ Bertrand Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 1914), 1–20.

The Oxford philosophers did not simply repeat this Cambridge inheritance. They transformed it under the twin influence of the later Wittgenstein, whose *Philosophical Investigations* treated philosophical problems as arising when language “goes on holiday”—when expressions are wrenched from the ordinary contexts (the “language-games”) in which alone they have a determinate use⁶—and of their own, characteristically Oxonian, attention to the fine grain of ordinary speech. Where Russell had trusted the artificial precision of symbolic logic to reveal the true form beneath misleading grammar, the Oxford philosophers increasingly trusted ordinary language itself, patiently and comparatively examined, as the surer guide.

3. The Oxford Diagnosis: Systematically Misleading Expressions

The distinctive Oxford contribution to the critique of system building is a diagnosis of where systems come from. Ryle's early paper “Systematically Misleading Expressions” argued that a large class of philosophical assertions, though perfectly intelligible and even true, possess a grammatical form that misrepresents their actual logical form, and that this mismatch tempts philosophers into treating superficial grammatical similarity as evidence of a shared underlying structure of reality⁷. “Unpunctuality is a common fault” wears the grammatical dress of “Jones is a common friend,” inviting the philosopher to search for some entity, Unpunctuality, that possesses the property of commonness, on the model of searching for a person, Jones, who possesses friendship. A metaphysical system, Ryle suggests, is very often nothing more than the systematic generalisation of such misreadings across an entire vocabulary—mind, substance, universal, the Absolute—each apparent noun-phrase treated as naming an entity because the grammar of naming is uncritically extended to it.

This diagnosis reaches its fullest application in Ryle's treatment of Cartesian dualism in *The Concept of Mind*, where he famously characterises the doctrine of mind as “the Ghost in the Machine” and diagnoses it as a category mistake: the assimilation of mental-conduct words, which describe dispositions and capacities exercised in intelligent behaviour, to the logical category of words describing occult inner episodes, on the model of physical-object words⁸. Descartes did not merely make an error of fact; he built an entire dualist system—two substances, two realms, a problem of their interaction—out of a single, initially inconspicuous misassimilation of one kind of expression to another⁹. The lesson Ryle draws is general: because a system inherits and compounds the errors of its foundational category mistakes, the size and apparent coherence of a metaphysical system are no evidence of its truth. Indeed, systematic elaboration can make an original error harder to detect, since each new doctrine is tailored to cohere with what has already been mistakenly assumed.

Austin pressed the same diagnostic strategy against the sense-datum theories that had themselves arisen, in the empiricist tradition, as system-building responses to scepticism about perception. In *Sense and Sensibilia*, Austin subjects Ayer's defence of sense-data to a minute examination of the actual use of words such as “perceive,” “illusion,” and “seem,” concluding that the entire apparatus of sense-data was erected to solve problems generated by an initial,

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), §§109, 133.

⁷ Gilbert Ryle, “Systematically Misleading Expressions,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 32 (1931–1932): 139–170.

⁸ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), 15–24.

⁹ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 16.

unforced oversimplification of the vocabulary of perception, a simplification no one who attended to ordinary usage need have made¹⁰. His later methodological essay "A Plea for Excuses" generalises the point into something close to a manifesto: our common stock of words, refined over long usage by many generations for practical purposes, embodies more numerous, more sound, and certainly subtler distinctions than any philosopher is likely to invent from the armchair, so that close attention to ordinary language should precede, and may often obviate, the construction of theory¹¹. Where the traditional system builder distrusts ordinary language as a confused surface beneath which the philosopher must dig for the true structure of reality, Austin inverts the relation: it is the philosopher's technical vocabulary that is more likely to be confused, and ordinary usage that has already, tacitly, got the distinctions right.

4. Descriptive Metaphysics without System: Strawson's Middle Path

Strawson's contribution complicates any picture of the Oxford school as merely destructive. In *Individuals*, he distinguishes descriptive from revisionary metaphysics: revisionary metaphysics, of which he takes Descartes and Leibniz to be examples, seeks to produce a better structure than the structure of our ordinary conceptual scheme, typically by way of some officially sanctioned system; descriptive metaphysics, by contrast, is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, articulating the most general categories and their connections without proposing to replace them¹². Strawson's own practice—his analysis of the interdependence of the concepts of a person and a body, and of particulars and universals generally—shows that the Oxford rejection of system building need not entail a rejection of generality or rigour. What is rejected is not systematic description as such but the ambition to construct a superior, revisionary architecture that would stand in judgment over ordinary thought rather than articulate it.

This same discrimination is already visible in Strawson's earlier paper "On Referring," where he criticises Russell's theory of descriptions for conflating the meaning of an expression, which is a matter of the rules and conventions governing its use, with the assertions that particular utterances of the expression, on particular occasions, are used to make¹³. Russell's theory, precisely because it was designed to fit within a general logical system in which every well-formed sentence receives a determinate truth-value, had been forced to assign a truth-value to "The present King of France is bald" that ordinary usage does not require it to have. The moral Strawson draws is characteristically Oxonian: the demands of logical system can override and falsify what attention to actual use would have revealed, and where the two conflict, use is normally the better guide.

A comparable resistance to grand system building, though from a different direction, is evident in A. J. Ayer's logical positivism, which for a period exercised considerable influence at Oxford. Ayer's verification principle was itself intended as an instrument for the wholesale dissolution of metaphysics, since a sentence purporting to describe a reality transcending all possible

¹⁰ J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, ed. G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 1–4.

¹¹ J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 57 (1956–1957): 1–30.

¹² P. F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959), 9–11.

¹³ P. F. Strawson, "On Referring," *Mind* 59, no. 235 (1950): 320–344.

experience was declared neither true nor false but literally without factual meaning¹⁴. Yet the verification principle proved, on scrutiny, to be self-undermining and difficult to state with precision, as Isaiah Berlin showed in his early critique of the various formulations of verifiability then on offer¹⁵, and the Oxford philosophers who succeeded Ayer largely abandoned the positivist weapon in favour of the subtler, more patient method of examining what a form of words is actually used to do, rather than legislating in advance, by way of a single general criterion, what could count as meaningful. The movement away from verificationism toward ordinary-language analysis is itself an instance of the pattern the paper traces: the replacement of one more general, system-like instrument of critique by the more piecemeal, descriptive procedures characteristic of Ryle, Austin, and Strawson.

5. Assessment: Merits and Limits of the Oxford Critique

The Oxford critique of system building has genuine philosophical merit. It correctly identifies a recurring source of metaphysical error: the tendency of grammatical form to outrun logical form, and the consequent risk that an entire system will be erected on a foundation no more solid than an unexamined figure of speech¹⁶. Its insistence on beginning from the actual use of expressions, rather than from a philosopher's antecedent theoretical commitments, supplies a discipline that even sympathetic critics of the movement, such as Karl Popper, acknowledged as a valuable corrective to speculative excess, whatever their reservations about ordinary-language method as a complete philosophy¹⁷. And the distinction Strawson draws between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics shows that the critique of system building need not collapse into a mere refusal of generality; a philosophy can be systematic in its thoroughness while renouncing the ambition to legislate a single, all-encompassing architecture for reality.

Nonetheless, the Oxford approach faced serious internal and external pressure, much of it captured in contemporary reportage of the Oxford philosophical scene, such as Ved Mehta's portrait of the "linguistic" philosophers at the height of their influence¹⁸. Critics observed that ordinary usage is not always uniform, is sometimes itself confused, and cannot by itself settle questions—about the nature of time, causation, or personal identity—that arise precisely because our ordinary concepts pull in different directions under theoretical pressure. Wittgenstein's own remark that philosophy "leaves everything as it is"¹⁹ was read by some as a virtue and by others as an unacceptably conservative constraint, one that risked mistaking the contingent shape of English idiom for the permanent structure of thought itself. Later commentators, including Michael Dummett and Peter Hacker, have argued that the movement's suspicion of system nevertheless coexisted with, and depended upon, systematic achievements of its own—Russell's logic, Wittgenstein's account of language-games, Strawson's descriptive metaphysics—so that the opposition between analysis and system is

¹⁴ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd ed. (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946), 33–45.

¹⁵ Isaiah Berlin, "Verification," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 39 (1938–1939): 225–248.

¹⁶ Gilbert Ryle, "Philosophical Arguments," in *Collected Papers*, vol. 2 (London: Hutchinson, 1971), 194–211.

¹⁷ Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959), 34–48; see also Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 17–18.

¹⁸ Ved Mehta, *Fly and the Fly-Bottle: Encounters with British Intellectuals* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), 41–55.

¹⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §116.

better understood as a matter of degree and of aim than as an absolute methodological divide^{20,21}. The Oxford philosophers did not abolish system; they redirected the ambitions proper to it, from the construction of a single comprehensive metaphysics to the disciplined, piecemeal clarification of the concepts already at work in thought and speech.

6. Conclusion

Analytic philosophy, in the Oxford idiom examined here, is best understood not as the absence of philosophical ambition but as a redirection of it. Beginning from Moore's and Russell's piecemeal rejection of idealist system building, and radicalised by the later Wittgenstein's therapeutic conception of philosophy, Ryle, Austin, and Strawson developed a coherent diagnosis of why philosophical systems arise—the systematic misconstruction of ordinary expressions—and a correspondingly disciplined method of response: patient attention to the actual use of words in place of the construction of comprehensive metaphysical architectures. This critique remains of considerable contemporary relevance. Wherever philosophy is tempted toward grand, unifying theories—whether in the philosophy of mind, metaphysics, or elsewhere—the Oxford insistence on returning to ordinary usage, and on distinguishing genuine problems from those generated by grammar alone, retains its diagnostic value, even for philosophers who, unlike the Oxford school at its most austere, wish ultimately to build.

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²⁰ Peter Hacker, *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 100–124.

²¹ Michael Dummett, *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*, 174–193.

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