

THE EXAMINED LIFE OF A PHILOSOPHER

Richard M. Gale



A.J. Ayer: a Life, by Ben Rogers. (New York: Grove Press, 1999, ISBN 0-8021-1673-6)
402 pp. Cloth \$30.

This is a remarkable book, for it succeeds in doing full justice to both the man and his philosophy, as well as uncovering interesting connections between them. It also makes fascinating reading, given the exorbitant richness of philosopher A.J. Ayer's life in which he did not burn the candle at both ends, but set the candle itself on fire. Rogers meticulously records every detail of this life, including staggering details of Ayer's amorous adventures, approximating Leporello's opening aria in *Don Giovanni*, only minus the music. The exhaustive scholarship of the book occasionally has the vice of overwhelming the reader by listing everyone who was with Ayer on every occasion, at times resembling a gossip column's string of proper names desperately trying to become a sentence. This is especially true of the listing of Ayer's multitude of lovers and, in turn, their lovers, and so on.

Rogers depicts Ayer as the quintessential outsider, desperately seeking to be accepted by a snobbish, chauvinistic establishment. As a Jew born of foreign parents who were not financially successful, he felt ostracized at Strachey and then Eton, often being the target of bullies. His small stature also was a drawback. But alongside of his need to belong was a deep resentment of the establishment, which would become the target of his iconoclastic philosophy. "His childhood, one senses, was associated in his mind with the longer history of irrationality and superstition that he denigrated as a philosopher" (p. 37).

Ayer's philosophy served his icon-

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oclastic aim by making philosophy an exclusively second-order activity of analyzing concepts, thereby completely separating philosophy from life.

As Ayer conceived it, philosophy . . . cannot discover anything about the world; only empirical science can do that. Nor can it tell us how to live—at most, it can only remind us, as Ayer did again and again, that there is no truth in morality or art, no right answer to the fundamental questions of life. Instead philosophy is the inquiry into what we mean when we refer to causation, the mind, infinity, into what we are asserting when we assert that a table is made up of indiscernible particles, that pain is caused by certain processes in the brain, that a nation is something above and beyond its members, that a murderer acted "freely." Philosophy is concerned with the analysis, paraphrase, translation or reduction of those and other perplexing statements, so that we can see precisely what sorts of claim are being made—in exactly what circumstances they are true. (p. 3)

By limiting philosophy to the humble second-order activity of analyzing concepts, he clears the deck for uninhibited action in our real life without fear that that there will be philosophical, religious, or moral strictures placed upon our worldly activities. "Ayer was not just trying to separate philosophy from life but to liberate life from philosophy." (3) This has the iconoclastic upshot of undermining the establishment's appeal to these disciplines for justifying the imposition of its will on its subjects. An important part of this iconoclastic endeavor is his notorious verifiability theory of meaning, which was wielded so as to show the non-cognitivity, and thus meaninglessness, of ethical, religious, and metaphysical sentences. Ayer's atheism was, in part, morally motivated, for he "was repelled by what he saw as an irrational guilt,

damnation, and blood sacrifice and did his best to convince his peers of his point of view" (p. 36).

It would seem that Ayer's verifiability theory also had an ulterior motive. For when he faced up to the difficulties with his 1936 formulation of the theory in the Second Edition of *Language, Truth and Logic*—that it is itself neither verifiable nor true in virtue of a linguistic rule—he reinterpreted it as a "proposal" to use the word "meaningful" in the way it depicted. But his opponent is not going to accept this proposal unless there are good moral reasons for doing so. Rogers is right on target when he wrote that with *Language, Truth and Logic*, "the really defining feature of the book is not so much its attack on metaphysics as a more far-reaching rejection of philosophical authority in both knowledge and morals" (p. 119).

Ayer's fact-value dichotomy was one way in which he separated philosophy from life. From this dichotomy Ayer drew the existentialist conclusion that each of us has an obligation to take responsibility for our actions. Rogers questions whether Ayer is consistent. "To argue from the existence of a fact-value distinction to the obligation to take responsibility for our actions is to violate the fact-value distinction" (p. 201). Ayer could escape this apparent inconsistency by applying his own emotive ethical theory to his own moral obligation claim: It serves only the emotive function of evincing his attitudes so as to invoke similar attitudes in his audience. But I doubt that Ayer would have been happy with this way out, since his life-long commitment to the cause of justice seems to commit him to accepting some ethical sentences as true and therefore cognitive.

Ayer's confinement of philosophy to conceptual analysis is one form that the "linguistic turn" took in twentieth century analytic philosophy.

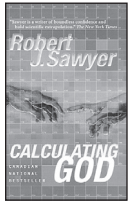
It is ironic that the history of philosophy subsequent to the deconstructionist efforts of Ayer and other analytical philosophers has reverted back to traditional metaphysics with a vengeance. Consider the philosophy of religion as a case in point. Ayer thought he had slain the monster of theology by his application of the verifiability theory of meaningfulness to it. I remember when I was a graduate student in the late 1950s and was caught up in the analytic frenzy

that was all around me, I would have bet anything and given any odds against there being a revival of philosophical defenses of theism. But this is just what happened in the last forty years, which has been one of the all-time great eras for philosophical defenses of theism; and, surprise, it was analytically rooted philosophers, such as Alston, Plantinga,

and Swinburne, who led the charge. But this should not come as a surprise once it is realized that the significant developments in philosophical theism historically have come upon the heels of breakthroughs in the core areas of philosophy, concerning meaning, knowledge, logic, and scientific methodology, which supposedly are the bailiwick of

analytic philosophy. Philosophy is just like the fashion industry. This year the hems are short, next year they'll be long. Maybe Ayer's passionate and forceful attempts to show the meaninglessness of religious language helped to trigger this revival of philosophical theism by pissing off theists.

SCIENCE FICTION GOES ANTHROPIC



Tom Flynn

Calculating God, by Robert J. Sawyer (New York: Forge, 2001, ISBN 0-812-580354) 352 pp. Paper \$6.99.

Postmodernism, “quantum reality,” intelligent design, healing prayer, generic spirituality . . . pre- or frankly anti-scientific notions like these have warped the way millions of people think about science. It was inevitable that this audience would engender a science fiction literature all its own. *Calculating God* is not the first entry in this genre, but it may be the most influential: author Robert J. Sawyer is a past winner of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America’s Nebula Award. *Calculating God* came within three votes of snagging this year’s Hugo, awarded by the World Science Fiction Convention. It’s also a great read, filled with big ideas, fast action, and biting black humor reminiscent of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Iain M. Banks, and James Morrow.

Still, *Calculating God* is a calculated assault on scientific naturalism—science fiction for an audience that thinks it’s outgrown materialism and takes Deepak Chopra seriously. Thomas Jericho is a paleontologist at Toronto’s Royal Ontario Museum, the unlikely site that a race of highly intelligent aliens chooses for its first contact with humanity. Jericho is a naturalist, an atheist—the sort of guy we expect a *Tom Flynn* is editor of *FREE INQUIRY*. His forthcoming novel, *Nothing Sacred*, includes the *Anthropic Principle* among its themes.

scientist to be. He’s also dying of cancer. To put it mildly, he’s startled when the aliens announce that God exists.

Much of the book concerns Jericho’s deconversion from atheism, a position the aliens find incomprehensible. To them, the evidence for God’s existence is overwhelming. There is the fact that *all* of the worlds known to harbor intelligent life suffered a meteor strike 65 million years ago that redirected evolution. But the principal evidence is our old friend the Anthropic Principle—the fuzzy-minded argument that the parameters of existence, from the magnetic moment of the electron to the fraction of oxygen in Earth’s atmosphere, had to be so precisely balanced in order to

support life that they must be the work of a designer.* Sawyer also offers an audacious answer to the problem of evil, attacking atheists’ best argument against the existence of a benign and powerful creator.

Sawyer’s God reveals Himself in a climactic sequence that exemplifies science fiction’s power to evoke wonder. This deity is far from omnipotent, surely not the Christian God. (Nor is *Calculating God* a pro-Christian book: its semi-comic villains are a pair of biblical literalists who want to destroy the Burgess Shale fossils because they consider evolution the devil’s theory.) Sawyer comes down hard for a worldview that includes both evolution *and* a cosmic designer with big, if vague, plans for us. If you want to see where today’s popular “post-materialist” mindset is inclined, you could do worse than to read *Calculating God*. **f i**

*For a magisterial refutation of the Anthropic Principle, see Steven Weinberg, “A Designer Universe?,” *New York Review of Books*, October 21, 1999, reprinted in *Skeptical Inquirer*, Sept./Oct. 2001.

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