Oxford and the "Epidemic" of Ordinary Language Philosophy
Author(s): Lynd Forguson
Source: The Monist, Vol. 84, No. 3, The Epidemiology of Ideas (JULY 2001), pp. 325-345
Published by: Oxford University Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/27903734
Accessed: 14-01-2019 08:21 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Oxford University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to The Monist
In the ten years following the end of World War II, Oxford University was a center of extraordinarily fertile philosophical activity. Out of it arose a new and distinctive philosophical movement, variously known as "ordinary language philosophy," "linguistic analysis," "conceptual analysis," or simply "Oxford philosophy." Although it was centered in Oxford, by the end of the 1950s philosophers based throughout Britain, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and other English-speaking former British colonies were publishing work debating the philosophical concerns of the movement and reflecting its distinctive style of thinking and writing. By the mid-1960s, however, this way of doing philosophy was already in decline at Oxford, and by the mid-1970s the philosophical climate at Oxford University had become more or less typical of philosophy departments elsewhere in the English-speaking world. Ordinary language philosophy is now a historical movement, rather than an active force in contemporary philosophical discussion.

In many respects, it is useful to think of philosophical movements as intellectual fashions, not unlike changing fashions in architecture or clothing. The question of what accounted for the rise and fall of a particular philosophical fashion is of historical and sociological interest, and the methodology developed to answer the question should be of general applicability in the study of other intellectual or academic fashions, such as the current dominance of "Theory" in English studies, or the period of "Behaviorism" in theoretical approaches to experimental psychology. So it should be of fairly widespread interest if we can develop a method of accounting for the relatively rapid spread of Oxford philosophy beyond its home base, and for its eventual decline as a force in philosophical thought.

In this paper, then, I shall be pursuing answers to these questions. To what extent was ordinary language philosophy a movement, in the

sense that, say, Phenomenology and Logical Positivism were philosophical movements? (2) To the extent that there was a recognizable movement, what factors account for its decline during the 1960s and 70s?

My project resembles that of a medical epidemiologist faced with the task of tracing the spread of a disease throughout a population. The epidemiologist must determine that there is a genuine, single disease to be studied, rather than several distinct diseases with similar symptoms. It is also important to identify the locale where the disease first appeared, to trace the direction in which, and the rate at which, the disease has spread, and if possible to discover why it has spread in this direction and at this rate. Finally, if the disease has lost its momentum and is in retreat, the epidemiologist seeks out the factors accounting for the reversal of fortunes.

Oxford philosophy was indeed considered by many established (and establishment) philosophers to be a kind of disease of philosophy: a particularly noxious strain of the analytical philosophy malaise, infecting philosophy departments and the pages of journals with trivial and arid scholarship, just as the “deconstruction” movement was viewed in the 1980s by most members of the English-speaking philosophical establishment as a malignant infection seeping westward from the intellectual sewers of Paris.

Characteristically, when philosophers inquire into the history of their subject, they concentrate almost exclusively on the written works of the philosophers under investigation. This is of course as it should be, when one is engaged in critical history of philosophy: when one is engaged, that is, in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of a philosopher’s arguments or general philosophical approach. In this sort of inquiry, history of philosophy is almost ahistorical: one is examining philosophical work no longer current (hence it is history); but one is examining the philosophical work on its merits as philosophy. But even when historians of philosophy pursue questions of influence, they typically confine themselves to the examination of the philosophical texts themselves. A philosopher might actually admit having been influenced by reading another philosopher, as Kant admitted to being shaken from his dogmatic slumbers by reading Hume; or evidence might be found in the writings of philosopher A that he had read and been affected in his own thought by philosopher B. But historians of philosophy seldom seem to ask why philosopher A would have read philosopher B in the first place. Questions of this sort are perhaps very difficult to answer in the case of philosophers (and movements) before
the era of professionalization in philosophy. But throughout the twentieth century and for much of the nineteenth, the philosophers who have counted, who have been studied in universities and written about by their contemporaries, have mainly been university teachers. Because this is so, the study of the rise and fall of philosophical movements during this period necessarily becomes in part the study of university philosophy departments: their teaching staff and students. In particular, it becomes the investigation of the institutional and inter-institutional factors that facilitate the transmission of a philosophical fashion throughout an academic population. I will be pursuing this avenue of investigation in what follows. But first it is important to set the scene.

The British Philosophical Establishment on the eve of World War II.

In 1939, Cambridge University was the home of the most distinguished contingent of philosophers in Great Britain. It had been the birthplace of analytic philosophy, at least in the English language, with the ground-breaking work of Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore in the first decade of the century. Wittgenstein’s association with Russell in Cambridge in the years leading up to World War I provided the impetus for his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. During the early years of the century, and up through the 1930s, the new analytic style of philosophy gradually gained ascendancy in Cambridge and influenced philosophical thought in Britain, the United States and Australia, and also notably in the German-speaking universities of central Europe (e.g., the Vienna Circle). Neo-Hegelian idealism had flourished at both Cambridge and Oxford at the turn of the century, and Oxford was then also the home of a group of Aristotelian realists influenced by John Cook Wilson, but by the end of the 1930s idealism was a spent force in Britain, and Cook Wilsonian realism had never made much of a mark outside Oxford.

In 1939, Moore was about to retire as professor at Cambridge, soon to be replaced by Wittgenstein; the other two professors were C. D. Broad and (in ancient philosophy) F. M. Cornford, The four university lecturers were Wittgenstein, R. B. Braithwaite, A. C. Ewing and John Wisdom.

Oxford was by comparison a philosophical backwater. The three professors in 1939 were H. H. Price, R. G. Collingwood and H. J. Paton; the university lecturers were W. D. Ross, J. D. Mabbott, W. F. R. Hardie, D. J. Allen and E. F. Carritt. Although the number of professors and university lecturers was about the same at both Oxford and Cambridge, Oxford
actually had a far larger contingent of philosophers, several of whom would figure prominently in the postwar philosophical scene. The reason for this was that philosophy figured more prominently in the undergraduate curriculum at Oxford.\(^1\) Whereas at Cambridge philosophy was formally studied only as part of the Moral Sciences Tripos, which did not enroll large numbers of students, at Oxford the Honour School of Literae Humaniiores (popularly known as “Greats”) was one of the largest in the university. A program of two years of Greek and Latin language, followed by two further years of either classical literature and history or philosophy, “Greats” was the favored undergraduate preparation for a career in the British or Imperial civil service.

In 1920, the Honour School of Philosophy, Politics and Economics (popularly known as “PPE”) was instituted, for students lacking a background in classical languages. This also proved to be a popular subject. Together, Greats and PPE required a large number of college tutors in philosophy, for the core of the Oxford teaching program was (and remains) the college tutorial. Every student enrolled in Greats or PPE had a weekly session with his or her college tutor, at which the student presented and defended an essay.

Practically every member of the philosophical establishment who was not too old or medically unfit left Oxford shortly after the outbreak of hostilities in the autumn of 1939 to spend the next six years involved in the war effort. At the end of the war, the university teachers whose careers had been interrupted by the war returned to their posts at Oxford, Cambridge and the other British universities. They were returning to universities that had marked time for six years. As a multiple cohort of undergraduates arrived in Oxford to begin, or in some cases to complete, their courses of study, there was suddenly a pressing need for more philosophy instructors. The undergraduate population grew by more than 60% in just two years, from 1946 to 1948. To accommodate this influx, the university dramatically increased its contingent of philosophers, from a total of 11 in 1939 to 43 in 1950.\(^2\) About fifteen were, to a greater or lesser degree, practitioners of the ordinary language approach to philosophy, as indicated by their contemporary publications, and according to attributions of affinity by those who knew them. Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, G. J. Warnock, J. O. Urmson, H. P. Grice, P. F. Strawson, Stuart Hampshire, D. F. Pears, R. M. Hare, P. H. Nowell-Smith, T. D. Weldon, Isaiah Berlin, Friedrich Waismann, G. A. Paul, and G. E. M. Anscombe
differed from one another in many ways, but were generally identified as ordinary language philosophers by others if not by themselves. Ryle, Austin, Berlin, Weldon, Hampshire, and Grice had been members of the philosophical community of Oxford before the war. The others were appointed in the five years between 1946 and 1950. Many of these were recent graduates. Oxford had a long tradition of making new teaching appointments almost exclusively from among its own graduates, and in those days a good first-class Oxford B.A. was considered to be a satisfactory formal qualification for appointment.

Not every Oxford-trained philosopher of the period invariably wrote or taught in a way that reflected a single point of view or philosophical approach, of course. But enough of them did to give rise to the view, quite widespread at the time, that there was a distinctive "Oxford" way of doing philosophy, and that anyone trained at Oxford would be likely to bear the mark of that philosophical style in his or her teaching and writing.

Philosophers as a rule do not enjoy being identified as members of a herd, and the Oxford linguistic philosophers were no exception. They were given to denying that there was any shared doctrine, or method, and that their mutual disagreements were more important than their similarities. It is true that there was never anything amounting to a doctrinal or methodological manifesto of the sort that the members of the Vienna Circle famously produced. And there were indeed significant philosophical differences among them, but as Iris Murdoch once remarked: "Our current philosophers look very different only if, so to speak, one is standing close to them; from further away the family resemblance, at the very least, would look very clear."4

Prominent among the family resemblances was a shared conviction that ordinary, non-technical language of "the plain man" is an invaluable philosophical resource. Not only was it thought that inattention to the ordinary use of words had been a chief source of error and confusion in philosophy; a close scrutiny of the details of ordinary speech was thought to be the primary source of illumination about the concepts germane to prominent areas of philosophical debate, such as the mind-body problem, knowledge, or free will. This attitude toward ordinary language was most memorably articulated by Austin:

So much, then, for ways in which the study of excuses may throw light on ethics. But there are also reasons why it is an attractive subject methodologically, at least if we are to proceed 'from ordinary language', that is, by
examining what we should say when, and so why and what we should mean by it. Perhaps this method, at least as one philosophical method, scarcely requires justification at present—too evidently there is gold in them thar hills: . . . First, words are our tools, and, as a minimum, we should use clean tools: we should know what we mean and what we do not, and must forearm ourselves against the traps that language sets us. Secondly, words are not (except in their own little corner) facts or things: we need therefore to prise them off the world, to hold them apart from and against it, so that we can realize their inadequacies and arbitrariness, and can re-look at the world without blinkers. Thirdly, and more hopefully, our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the con- nexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any you or I are likely to think up in our arm-chairs of an afternoon—the most favoured alternative method. . . . certainly ordinary language is not the last word: in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved on and superseded. Only remember, it is the first word.5

According to G. J. Warnock, Austin, Ryle, and philosophers close to them also closely resembled one another in their philosophical antipathies.

There was a prevailing idea that most of the difficulty, of the unsatisfactoriness and disorder, of philosophy was attributable to obscurity, unclearness, and (consequently) confusion. (Some would have attributed to those defects the very existence of the subject itself.) Thus above all things obscurity was to be avoided; and from that certain more specific avoidances followed. First, literary pretension, rhetoric, the 'high style' of the Idealists, or the deep-mystery-mongering of (for example) Heidegger; a philosopher's first duty, prior even to that of being right and immeasurably prior to that of being eloquent, was to be clearly, plainly, and readily understood. Second, over-ambition and haste, biting off more than could be conclusively and thoroughly chewed, undertaking to settle too many questions too quickly—rather, small points clearly stated, limited aims clearly set out. Related to that was a certain distrust of 'theories', which were apt to be regarded—particularly by Austin—as both over-ambitious (because, in the current rudimentary state of the subject, premature) and potentially distorting, inhibiting clear and accurate perception of the actual phenomena under consideration. And for partly the same reason—and again most markedly in Austin—there was much suspicion of technical terminology, of 'formalization'.6

By the late 1940s philosophy at Oxford had become permeated by the spirit of the new "ordinary language" approach. This Zeitgeist was
recently recalled by Francis Sparshott, who was an undergraduate of the period.

I recall sitting at a table in a café with some fellow students one morning. We were talking about philosophy in general terms, and I was struck by the fact that those present not only assumed that the "ordinary language" mode had superseded all other ways of doing philosophy, but agreed that the task of philosophy would soon be finished. . . . there was a wonderful feeling of euphoria in the air, something for which I feel a deep nostalgia. 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven!' It was a really wonderful feeling that something new and very important was happening here and now in philosophy, and in a way in which one could share.7

There are many points of resemblance between the Oxford ordinary language philosophy of the postwar period and the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, resemblances that, as Murdoch remarked, become more noticeable the further back one stands. Wittgenstein’s followers F. Waismann, G. A. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe were all teaching in Oxford during these years and working in a philosophical idiom rather similar in many respects to the Oxford ordinary language philosophers. This contributed to the impression that the Oxford philosophers and the Wittgensteinians formed a united front. But there were also significant differences. Wittgenstein in his later period thought that philosophical perplexity is a form of obsession arising out of confusion over the way words are actually used. Revealing the actual uses of words in the "language games" in which they play their roles will lead to the dissolution of the perplexity, and as a result the urge to philosophize, to construct philosophical theories, will dissipate. Austin, Ryle and the other Oxford philosophers, on the other hand, though they agreed that philosophical theories generally are generated prematurely and are based on inattention to the relevant linguistic facts, did believe that general philosophical conclusions were possible, and that the main positive task of philosophy is, in Ryle’s words, to “map the logical geography” of our common stock of concepts. However, philosophers who were not themselves close to the work of these two groups tended to lump them together when they spoke of “ordinary language” philosophy. This becomes all the more understandable in view of the fact that the “center of gravity” of the ordinary language movement certainly moved from Cambridge to Oxford after Wittgenstein retired in 1947. Also, by the time his Philosophical Investi-
gations was published in 1953, many of the most characteristic works of the Oxford branch of the movement had already appeared.

Wittgenstein’s influence was not as great as is sometimes thought, and was in any case fairly indirect. But it is clear enough from an epidemiological perspective that Wittgenstein’s later philosophy was one of the sources of what came to be known as “Oxford philosophy.” Wittgenstein had begun to expose to his students in Cambridge in the early 1930s his radical new rethinking of the nature of philosophical problems and the conduct of philosophical enquiry, but he published nothing prior to his death in 1951. However, hints of his new philosophy began to appear in the later 1930s in published work by those whom he had influenced in Cambridge, particularly John Wisdom and G. A. Paul. Also in clandestine circulation, from the mid-1930s, were the ‘Blue” and “Brown” books, preliminary versions of what later became Philosophical Investigations. Copies had reached Oxford by at least 1937. Ryle had met Wittgenstein in 1929, and throughout the 1930s the two occasionally went on walking holidays together. It stretches credulity to suppose that they did not discuss philosophy during these walks, and echoes of Wittgenstein’s influence are apparent in some of Ryle’s papers of the 1930s and 40s, and in The Concept of Mind.

The Concept of Mind was the first large-scale deployment of the ordinary language techniques. It made Ryle probably the most famous Oxford philosopher during the post-war years. Austin, however, had been the driving force behind a distinctively Oxford brand of analytic philosophy. But his influence was exerted not so much through his published works, which were few, but through the force of his personality and his skills as a devastating critic of the views of others. He influenced his Oxford colleagues principally through a weekly “class” he conducted every Saturday morning. Attendance was by invitation only, and only those among the Oxford dons junior to Austin were eligible for invitation. It was in these meetings that Austin attempted to carry out his ambition to turn the conduct of philosophical enquiry into a cooperative undertaking, and it was here also that the focus of attention was frequently the examination of nuances of ordinary language pursued for its own sake, and not in the service of some larger, more recognizably philosophical aim. Austin’s own philosophical approach had developed during the later 1930s. His first published paper, “Are There A Priori Concepts?” (1939) shows
many of the characteristic features of his own distinctive post-war philosophical approach, but there is no trace there of Wittgenstein's influence.

The impact of ordinary language philosophy at Oxford.

With so many like-minded philosophers all teaching in the same university, many of them meeting regularly with one another to discuss philosophy, was there any noticeable effect on the way philosophy was taught in the university during the post-war period? Examination questions provide perhaps the best source of concrete evidence about changes in the philosophy curriculum at Oxford, since all candidates for degrees in “Greats” in a given year are exposed to a common set of essay questions, and those in “PPE” are exposed to a different set. Candidates always have some choice; they must choose four or so questions on each examination paper from a list of about a dozen. But if questions suddenly appear on a topic not covered in examinations of earlier years, or questions crop up which appear to invite a particular line of discussion, it can signal a change in philosophical preoccupation on the part of the examiners, especially if questions of a very similar sort appear in subsequent years.

Those candidates in “Greats” who select philosophy as a special subject write an examination in Logic and one in Moral and Political Philosophy, as do those in “PPE.” Both subjects are very broadly construed. “Logic” is understood to cover not so much formal inference as philosophical logic and also questions in metaphysics and epistemology, whereas “Moral and Political Philosophy” includes as well questions concerning human action and thought. The 1946 examinations in these subjects in both “Greats” and “PPE” are practically indistinguishable in general philosophical orientation from those in the immediate pre-war years. However, questions reflecting the special interests of the Oxford ordinary language philosophers began to appear on both papers of the “Greats” examination as early as 1947. They occur with increasing frequency throughout the 1950s, with the 1957 Logic paper on the “PPE” examination containing no less than eleven of fourteen questions inviting an ordinary language approach. At no time during the period were the question papers so dominated by the concerns of linguistic philosophers that students would be unable to make a good showing if they were not prepared to adopt the “party line.” However, enough questions that did invite such a response were included so that those who wanted to show off
their “ordinary language” credentials had ample opportunity to shine. Questions of this sort continued to be a familiar feature of both sets of examinations into the mid-1960s, when they begin to taper off sharply, and questions began to appear which invited a critique of some of the “signature” features of the ordinary language approach.

In the early post-war years Oxford also instituted a new graduate degree in philosophy, which was to prove very successful in attracting students aiming toward a professional career in philosophy. Between the wars, Oxford offered the post-graduate degree of Doctor of Philosophy (D.Phil.). This was an exclusively research degree, in which the student worked on a rather narrowly defined topic, nearly always historical in nature, under a single supervisor. It was Gilbert Ryle who, more than anyone else, realized that there would be a growing demand for philosophy teachers, and who lobbied strongly and effectively for the institution of the new graduate degree, involving a series of examinations and the preparation of a short thesis. This degree, the Bachelor of Philosophy, was designed specifically to prepare its graduates for teaching careers in philosophy. Among the B.Phil. examination papers in the early years, the ordinary language philosophy approach was also much in evidence among the questions, from the first examination in 1948 through the early 1960s.17 During the twenty years from 1945 to 1965, Oxford continued its tradition of appointing mainly its own recent graduates to junior faculty positions in philosophy. Increasingly after 1950, these included B.Phil. graduates. It should be noted that the successful candidates for these positions were those who had done very well on either the B.A. or B.Phil. examinations, and quite a few of these were young ordinary language philosophers.

*Oxford philosophers in the job market.*

Although the university was faced in the early post-war period with the need to make a large number of philosophy teaching appointments in a very short period, it was fortunate to have an extraordinary pool of local talent from which to choose. But there were considerably more capable young Oxford graduates seeking academic appointments than there were openings at Oxford. They were fortunate that most other British universities also needed to make a significant number of philosophy appointments.

Oxford had been the largest single supplier of teachers in the relatively small British university system before the war, but posts had been
relatively few in number and vacancies relatively infrequent. Many young philosophers were unable to find a position in Britain or even abroad, and had to look elsewhere for employment: typically in the civil service, school teaching, or in earlier days, the Church. That changed dramatically as a consequence of the post-war bulge in university enrolment, created at first by returning veterans of the war, but sustained throughout the fifties as the participation rate gradually increased. By the early 1960s, the “baby boom” generation was reaching university age, leading to another enrolment bulge. Because of the large numbers of its graduates entering the job market throughout all these years, Oxford was much better placed than any other U.K. university—and indeed much better placed than any university in the English-speaking world—to supply the burgeoning demand.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universities</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford Philosophers</td>
<td>11*</td>
<td>43*</td>
<td>46*</td>
<td>48*</td>
<td>52*</td>
<td>59*</td>
<td>60*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other UK Philosophers</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Philosophers</td>
<td>89*</td>
<td>170*</td>
<td>181*</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophers with Oxford degrees in the rest of UK</td>
<td>115**</td>
<td>178**</td>
<td>198**</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those of the above row holding the B.Phil.</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* As reported in Universities Yearbook (those who held some university appointment)
** As listed in Oxford University Calendar (members of the Sub-Faculty of Philosophy). The Calendar discontinued this listing after 1955.

Table 1 shows the growth in the British university system between 1939 and 1975, and the corresponding growth in the philosophy profession. On the eve of the war, Oxford graduates held 36% of the teaching posts in other British universities. By 1950, the number of philosophers outside Oxford had almost doubled, and 54% of the total were Oxford
graduates. Five years later, the proportion had risen to 59%. To get some idea of the magnitude of the impact of the Oxford University philosophy teaching program on the philosophy job market in Britain, try to imagine the majority of philosophy teachers in the United States as graduates of a single university. Oxford continued to dominate the British philosophy job market throughout the 1960s, at a time when more British universities were beginning to offer advanced degrees in philosophy; but even with increased competition, Oxford graduates accounted for 45% of all philosophers in British institutions in 1970, and by 1975 the proportion had declined only marginally, to 42%.

Oxford graduates were also conspicuously successful in securing posts in universities throughout the English-speaking countries of the British Commonwealth. Australia is a case in point. In 1939, three of only twenty philosophy positions there were occupied by Oxford graduates. By 1960, the number of posts had increased to 65, and Oxford graduates held more than a quarter of them (17). Ten years later, 35 of the 122 philosophers in Australian universities had at least one Oxford degree, almost 30% of the total.

Was there an ordinary language philosophy epidemic?

As we have seen, the story of the growth of the philosophy profession in Great Britain in the two decades after 1945 is to a significant extent the story of the success of Oxford-trained philosophers in the job market. Since this was also the period during which ordinary language philosophy began to dominate philosophical discussion at Oxford, one might expect that this distinctive philosophical style would make a similarly strong impact throughout the British universities.

If Oxford was indeed exporting a philosophical movement as well as philosophers, one would expect evidence to show up in the publications of the B.Phil. graduates who had taken teaching posts outside Oxford. Success in a university teaching career was increasingly coming to depend on publications, so one would expect that these graduates would as a group be active publishers, and that the philosophy being published by them would reflect their philosophical orientation. The first B.Phil. degrees were awarded in 1948.19 (See Table 1.) Five years later, by which time over 110 B.Phil. degrees had been awarded, 22 of them were on the teaching staff in sixteen (of 28) institutions. By 1965, 68 graduates of the
program were in 26 of the by then thirty-two British universities. In other words, almost a quarter of all philosophy teachers in Britain (outside of Oxford University) in 1965 were B.Phil. graduates.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oxonians</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.Phil.</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I surveyed the publications of those who received the B.Phil. between 1948 and 1965 and found that no more than 40 of the B.Phil. graduates in British universities ever published anything that could reasonably be identified as exhibiting an ordinary language philosophical orientation. Ten of these held posts in Oxford University itself in 1965, at a time when there were 340 philosophy teachers in Britain. Many of the active publishers were specialists in formal logic, or the history of philosophy, and did not contribute to contemporary debates on currently fashionable philosophical problems. Others who did participate in the contemporary debates actively opposed ordinary language philosophy, or at least showed none of its influence in their writings.

Of course, a survey of the publications of the B.Phil. graduates doesn't tell the whole story of the impact of Oxford linguistic philosophy during the period. Not all oxford graduates entering the profession in Britain period held the B.Phil. degree. It was still possible to find a post with a particularly brilliant first class B.A. in hand, and some Oxonians securing positions held the D.Phil. research degree. Presumably some of these were adherents of the Oxford linguistic approach. And doubtless there were those who had been converted to the Oxford-style of ordinary language philosophy not by personal contact but through exposure to the publications of Austin, Ryle and the other members of the group. However, the total number of ordinary language philosophers in Britain outside Oxford University during this fifteen year period probably never
LYND FORGUSON

amounted to more than twenty percent of the total number of philosophers in the country. One might conclude from these figures that Oxford linguistic philosophy had only a very modest impact on the B.Phil. students who were studying in Oxford during the heyday of the movement, and exerted through them a similarly modest influence on the conduct of philosophical inquiry throughout Britain during this period.

If, however, one found between ten and twenty percent of a population infected by some disease, such as influenza, one would conclude that one had an epidemic on one's hands. Although only 39 of the 68 B.Phil. graduates in British universities outside Oxford in 1965 ever appear to have been practitioners of Oxford linguistic philosophy, and these were to be found in only twenty universities, that meant that fully two-thirds of the universities in Britain in 1965 had on staff at least one representative of the movement. If two-thirds of the schools in one's community harboured carriers of a disease, one might well be alarmed.

Ordinary language philosophy was also carried to Australia by B.Phil. graduates. Quite a number of Australians went to Oxford in the 1950s and 60s to read for the B.Phil., and most of them returned to take up posts in Australian universities. By 1965, twenty-two B.Phil. holders were employed in ten of the country's thirteen universities; ten of these had published something with an ordinary language orientation, and this represented more than 10% of the total number of academic philosophers in the country. Melbourne University was a centre for ordinary language philosophy in Australia. Two of Wittgenstein's students, G. A. Paul and later Douglas Gasking, introduced students to Wittgenstein's later philosophy from the late 1930s through the 1950s, and the Oxford approach was represented by staff appointed in the 1950s and 60s.22 The changes in emphasis can be seen in the reading lists printed in the university calendar and in the examination papers over this twenty-five year period.23

Altogether, of the 171 philosophers who earned a B.Phil. between 1948 and 1965, 50 appear not to have published anything, and of the 121 who have published, 55 have published at least one item identifiable as exhibiting the ordinary language style. That represents over thirty percent of all B.Phil. graduates during those years, and forty-five percent of the published authors among them. Seventeen of these, however, published very little, in some cases a single article early in their careers.
The decline of ordinary language philosophy.

The influence of ordinary language philosophy reached its peak, in both Britain and Australia, in the mid-1960s, as measured both by the number of professional philosophers whose writings exhibited this approach and the number of universities employing them. By this time, it was already in decline as a philosophical force within Oxford University itself. To a significant extent, this happened as a result of two events: the death of Austin in 1960, at the early age of 49, and the return of A. J. Ayer to Oxford.

Austin developed his distinctive approach to philosophy in a discussion-group meeting in Isaiah Berlin’s rooms in the late 1930s.24 Ayer had been a regular participant in those discussions, and those present remember these meetings principally as an ongoing battle between Ayer, the author of the recently published Language, Truth and Logic and the enfant terrible of British philosophy, and Austin, the acerbic critic of Ayer’s confident logical positivism.25 Shortly after returning to Oxford at war’s end, Ayer was appointed Grote Professor of the Philosophy of Mind and Logic in the University of London, where he stayed until he returned to Oxford as Wykeham Professor of Logic in 1959. Ayer made it quite clear that his main reason for coming back was to counteract the influence of Austin. “I wanted to provide some local opposition to the form of linguistic philosophy which Austin had made fashionable, with what appeared to me its excessive concentration on the niceties of ordinary English usage . . . One way in which Austin had maintained his philosophical power in Oxford had been his dominance of a class . . . attendance at which was confined to college tutors younger than himself. Conformably to my original intention of counter-acting his influence, I founded a rival class of a very different character.” But Austin died in 1960, at the end of Ayer’s first term back at Oxford, “and the interest shown by Oxford philosophers in ordinary usage, as such, virtually died with him.”26

There is more than a grain of truth to Ayer’s claim that ordinary language philosophy “virtually died” with Austin, even though Austin’s own philosophy generated a considerable amount of interest and critical attention in the wider philosophical community in the 1960s, as three volumes of posthumous publications came out in rapid succession.27 Several factors, I think, contributed to the decline of ordinary language
philosophy at Oxford University after Austin's death, in addition to the loss of Austin's leadership. First, Ayer's return definitely made a difference, as a rallying point for those philosophers at Oxford who had not been in sympathy with the Austinian way of doing things and resented the influence he had exercised on the philosophical temperament of the place.

Among those who had disapproved of Austin's influence at Oxford was Michael Dummett, who looked to Frege for philosophical inspiration, and who was much more interested in the developments in the more formal, systematic analytic philosophy then being produced in the United States than he ever was in the concerns of the Oxford linguistic philosophers. Dummett began publishing the work for which he has become justly famous in the early 1960s, and began to attract a following from among the undergraduates and graduate students in residence at Oxford.

A more synoptic, systematic philosophical approach was also beginning to emerge in the work of some of those philosophers who had earlier been identified with Oxford linguistic philosophy. Peter Strawson's *Individuals* appeared in 1959. Sub-titled "An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics," this work, self-consciously Kantian in outlook, took up large questions in ontology, epistemology, and the philosophy of mind using a philosophical method clearly centered on language as a source of philosophical insight, but far from the Austinian preoccupation with the piecemeal exploration of the resources of ordinary language. Stuart Hampshire's *Thought and Action,* was also written from a perspective inspired largely by Kantian concerns, but concentrated, as its title indicates, more on practical reason, broadly construed, than on pure reason, as Strawson did.

Through the influence of Ayer, Dummett and others, undergraduates and postgraduate students at Oxford were being regularly exposed to a wider, and very different range of philosophical concerns throughout the 1960s, and gradually these began to be reflected in the examination questions, thus indicating a shift in the philosophical "center of gravity" of the university. In the 1960 B.Phil. examination paper in Logic and Scientific Method, for example, five questions of a highly technical nature bearing on formal logic and philosophy of mathematics appeared for the first time, and this sort of question occurred with increasing frequency thereafter. (Example: "Sketch a proof that the Axiom of Choice is equivalent to the Well-ordering principle.") After about 1970, few questions
appeared on either the B.A. or B.Phil. examinations for which a proper answer would have been based on “what we should say when, and what we should mean by it.”

Another factor in the decline of Oxford analytic philosophy within Oxford itself was the number of prominent Oxford ordinary language philosophers who were lured away to teaching posts elsewhere, principally the U.S.A. By 1970, only six of the fifteen philosophers identified earlier as among the Oxford linguistic philosophers on the staff in 1950 were still on the scene. There were, however, few new recruits to the Oxford style from among the younger Oxford philosophers who joined the teaching staff in the 1960s. During the ten year period beginning in 1965, the university appointed to its own teaching staff seventeen philosophers who had received their B.Phil. degree in 1965 or later. Only one of them has ever published anything bearing the characteristic marks of ordinary language philosophy. By the mid-1970s, philosophy at Oxford University resembled philosophy everywhere else in the English-speaking world: broadly analytic in orientation, but with no remaining trace of the Austin-Ryle emphasis on mining the subtleties of ordinary language for philosophical gold.

The changing philosophical climate in Oxford soon began to have an impact elsewhere, as Oxford graduates continued to fill the lion’s share of teaching posts throughout Great Britain. Forty-one of the philosophers holding teaching posts in Great Britain in 1970 were Oxford B.Phil. graduates who had finished their degrees in 1965 or later. Of these, only six have ever published anything that could reasonably be seen to reflect an ordinary language philosophical orientation, and the writings of many of the graduates of earlier years began to go in new directions during the 1960s. By 1975, 25% of the 476 philosophers in Britain were B.Phil. Graduates. Twenty-five of these had been appointed since 1970, but only four of them showed the influence of ordinary language philosophy in their published work.

The decline of ordinary language philosophy in Australia during the later 1960s is even more dramatic. Australians continued to come to Oxford to study during the 1960s, but increasing numbers of Australians were also now travelling for this purpose to American and Canadian universities. Seven post-1965 B.Phil. graduates were among the 122
philosophers in Australia's universities in 1970, and another five were appointed in the following five years. Only two of the twelve, however, ever appear to have been practitioners of ordinary language philosophy.

After about 1975, then, ordinary language philosophy had more or less ceased to exist as a vital philosophical movement. Oxford University remains today an important supplier of philosophers to the academy; however, it has never regained the dominant position it held in the third quarter of the last century. It is highly unlikely that any single university will ever again command such a large "market share."

Conclusion.

I have been tracing the distribution of Oxford-trained philosophers throughout Great Britain and Australia in the years following the end of World War II, a period in which Oxford was able to supply from its own B.A. and B.Phil. graduates a significant proportion of the large demand for philosophy teachers to respond to the demographic bulge of students of the immediate post-war era in Britain.

The spread of ordinary language philosophy was at least in part a byproduct of the fact that a vigorous and novel philosophical approach emerged at Oxford University at precisely the period in which there was a burgeoning demand for philosophy teachers, which Oxford was uniquely situated to satisfy. The fact that a significant number of able ordinary language philosophers secured positions at Oxford University itself in the early post-war years ensured that a "critical mass" of like-minded thinkers were able to sustain a philosophical conversation locally for many years. This, as we have seen, had an effect on the way philosophy was taught in the university, as reflected in the growing prominence of "linguistic philosophy" questions on the examination papers. Students who are encouraged to read and think about philosophy in a certain way, and are good at doing so and enjoy it, tend to carry on that philosophical approach in their own teaching and writing, at least in their early professional years. We have seen how Oxford-trained philosophers dominated the job market in Britain during the years of expansion in the number of philosophy posts; and we have seen that enough of them published papers and books exhibiting the family characteristics of ordinary language philosophy to feed the widespread impression that ordinary language philosophy was a fast-
spreading contagion, threatening to overrun the British academy and to pose a genuine menace to philosophy throughout the English-speaking world.

Austin's death, and the loss of momentum of ordinary language philosophy in Oxford; the diaspora of prominent Oxford ordinary language philosophers; the growing competition in the job market of other philosophy graduate programs; the general shrinking of the job market in philosophy beginning in the 1970s; all these conspired to reduce dramatically the number of ordinary language philosophers from Oxford taking up posts in philosophy in Oxford, Britain and Australia after about 1965. The posthumous publication of Austin's major writings in the early 1960s spurred a flurry of interest in his views, but few new works exhibiting that approach were now being published. Oxford became just another all-purpose, generally analytic philosophy department, and the ordinary language philosophy movement drifted into history.

Lynd Ferguson

University of Toronto

NOTES

1. The number of graduate students in philosophy at either university at any given time in the years before World War II was negligible.

2. Information on the student numbers and rosters of teaching staff is from the Yearbook of the Universities of the British Empire (London: G. Bell & Sons). The Yearbook was first published in (1914, and was suspended for the years 1942–45. Since 1952 it has been called Yearbook of the Universities of the Commonwealth. Although the Yearbook lists only 11 Oxford philosophers, the Oxford University Calendar for 1939 lists 37 members of the Sub-Faculty of Philosophy. In addition to the professors and university lecturers, there were twenty college tutorial fellows, two heads of colleges, and a number holding junior teaching positions or research fellowships.

3. All of these were still at Oxford in 1960, the year of Austin's death, with the exception of Waismann who died in 1959, and Nowell-Smith, who had been appointed to a professorship elsewhere in Britain.


13. For an account of these meetings, see G. J. Warnock, "Saturday Mornings," in Essays on J. L. Austin, pp. 31–45.


15. Interpretation of the "philosophical orientation" of examination questions is perforce not an exact science. Yet it is a skill that all successful examinees and examiners master. I have been both, and am confident in what I report, but a skeptic can consult the examination papers themselves, which are on deposit at the Bodleian Library of Oxford University.

16. Two examples: "Is it important for the philosopher to attend to the everyday use of language?" "Is it essential to begin by deciding the meaning of the word 'good' before going on to decide what things are good?"

17. Some examples from various years: "Have philosophers devoted too much attention to the term 'beautiful' and too little to other aesthetic terms?" "In what ways, if at all, has the word 'experience' misled philosophers?" "'Every sort of sentence has its own sort of logic.' Have the sentences in which religious doctrines are expressed their own sort of logic?" "How is the formal logicians' notion of proof related to the ordinary notion?"

18. The participation rate is the proportion of secondary school leavers who go on to higher education.

19. The Oxford University Calendar listed B.Phil. degrees awarded each year from 1948 through 1955. Since 1956, the names of those awarded this degree each year have been listed in the periodical broadsheet, Oxford University Gazette.

20. I have not included in these figures the number of B.Phil. graduates holding posts at Oxford University, here or elsewhere in this section.

21. Data on the publications of Oxford B.Phil. graduates is taken from The Philosopher's Index, 1940– . Bowling Green State University: Philosophy Documentation Center. Dialog Information Services, Inc. (On-line Index), 1991– . In determining whether a listed publication should be classified as reflecting a broadly "ordinary language philosophy" orientation, I looked at the abstract published with the Philosopher's Index entry. If no abstract was included, I read the listed publication if possible. In some cases, I made a judgement based on the publication's title. If the title did not make it obvious that the publication based philosophical conclusions on an appeal to ordinary language, I did not count it.


23. Melbourne University Final honours examination papers in philosophy are on deposit in the Special Collections Reading Room of the Baillieu Library of Melbourne University. I am grateful to Margaret Murphy, Curator of Special Collections for allowing me to photocopy the Calendar entries and examination papers.
25. Ibid.