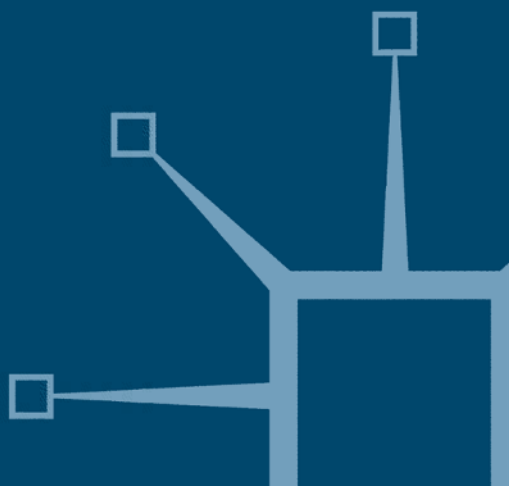


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Paul Grice, Philosopher and Linguist

Siobhan Chapman



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ACCENT IN CONTEXT

PHILOSOPHY FOR LINGUISTS

Paul Grice, Philosopher and Linguist

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For my parents,
Raymond and Patricia

Preface

There is an inherent tension in writing about Paul Grice because two separate academic disciplines lay claim to his work, and do so with justification. Those who know him as a philosopher may not be aware of the full significance of his role in the development of present day linguistics, while those whose interest in him originates from within linguistics may be unfamiliar with the philosophical questions that are integral to his work. Grice would not have considered himself to be anything other than a philosopher, so the title of this book might seem odd or even provocative. But I chose it in order to reflect the profound influence he has had on a discipline other than his own. Grice's work is of interest to philosophers and to linguists alike.

I myself belong to the second group. My first encounter with Grice's work was when I was introduced to his theory of conversation as a student, and was struck by the ambition and elegance of his proposed solution to a range of linguistic problems, as well as by the questions and difficulties it raised. I have since been pleased to recognise just these reactions to the theory in many of my own students. As I read more of Grice's work, I became intrigued by the question as to whether there was a unity to be found in his thought that would incorporate the familiar work on conversation into a larger and more significant philosophical picture. This book is my attempt to answer that question. I certainly hope that it will be of interest to readers from both philosophical and linguistic backgrounds, with the following words of caution to the former.

Grice's work draws on a range of previous writings that often go unacknowledged, presumably because he assumed that his audience would be aware of its philosophical pedigree. The questions he is addressing can be less familiar to linguists, so on a number of occasions I have offered an overview of the history of an idea or an exegesis of a work. I run the risk that these sections may appear to be superficial, or alternatively to be labouring the obvious, to readers well versed in philosophy, but I have offered the degree of detail necessary to enable those unfamiliar with the relevant background to follow Grice's arguments and appreciate the nature of his contribution. Further, my intention in

these sections is to sketch the relevant history of a philosophical debate, rather than to offer either a critique of or my own contribution to that debate. I can only ask for tolerance of these aspects of my book from readers already familiar with the relevant areas of philosophy.

1

The Skilful Heretic

In 1986 Oxford University Press published a volume of essays drawing on the work of the philosopher Paul Grice, who was then 73. It was not formally described as a Festschrift, but Grice's name was concealed as an acronym of the title, *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality: Intentions, Categories, Ends*, and many of those who contributed to the volume took the opportunity of paying tribute to his work and influence. Among these, Gordon Baker revealed that what he admired most was Grice's 'skilful advocacy of heresies'.¹ In a similar vein, Grice's colleague Richard Grandy once introduced him to an audience with the comment that he could always be relied on to rally to 'the defence of the underdogma'.² Given Grice's conventional academic career together with his current status in philosophy and, particularly, in linguistics, these accolades may seem surprising. His entire working life was spent in the prestigious universities of Oxford and Berkeley, making him very much an establishment figure. Much of his philosophy of language, particularly his theory of conversational implicature, has for a number of decades played a central role in debates about the relationship between semantics and pragmatics, or meaning as a formal linguistic property and meaning as a process taking place in contexts and involving speakers and hearers. But the canonical status of Grice's ideas masks their unconventional and even controversial beginnings. As Baker himself observes, Grice's heresies have tended to be transformed by success into orthodoxies.

In fact, Grice's work was often characterised by the challenges it posed to accepted wisdom, and by the novel approaches it proposed to established philosophical issues. The theory of conversational implicature is a good example. It is often summarised as one of the earliest and most successful attempts to explain the fact, familiar to common sense, that

what people literally say and what they actually mean can often be quite different matters. In particular, the theory is concerned with some apparent discrepancies between classical logic and natural language. More generally, it addresses the question of whether the meaning of everyday language is best explained in terms of formal linguistic rules, or in terms of the vagaries and variables of human communication. Grice's theory developed against the background of a sharp distinction of approaches to these issues. Philosophers such as Bertrand Russell, who saw logic as the appropriate apparatus for explaining meaning, dismissed the differences displayed by natural language as examples of its inherent imperfection. Everyday language was just too messy and imprecise to form an appropriate topic for philosophical inquiry. The opposing view is perhaps best summed up by the slogan from Wittgenstein's later work that 'meaning is use'.³ Philosophers from this school of thought argued that if natural language diverges from logical meaning, this is simply because logic is not the appropriate philosophical tool for explaining language. Meaning in language is an important area of study in its own right, but can be considered only in connection with the variety of ways in which language is used by speakers.

Grice's approach to this debate was to argue that both views were wrong-headed. He proposed to think outside the standard disjunction of positions. Logic cannot give an adequate account of natural language, but nor is language simply a multifarious collection of uses, unamenable to logical analysis. Rather, logic can explain much, but not all, of the meaning of certain natural language expressions. More generally, formal semantic rules play a vital part in explaining meaning in everyday language, but they do not do the whole job. Other factors of a different but no less important type are also necessary for a full account of meaning. Most significantly, Grice argued that these other, non-semantic factors are not a random collection entirely dependent on individual speakers and contexts, but can be systematised and explained in terms of general principles and rules. The principles that explain how natural language differs from logic can also explain a wide range of other features of human communication.

In this novel attitude, Grice was certainly rejecting formal approaches, with their claim that the only meaning amenable to philosophical discussion was that which could be described in terms of truth-conditions, and could enter into truth-functional relationships. But also, and perhaps more surprisingly, he was rejecting a belief in everyday use as the chief, or indeed the only, location of meaning. This was a central tenet of philosophy at Oxford while Grice was developing his theory of

conversation, or at least of that subsection of Oxford philosophy known as the philosophy of ordinary language. Grice himself was an active member of this subsection and is often referred to as a leading figure in the movement. However, his use of formal logic in explaining conversational meaning demonstrates that his heretical impulse extended even to ordinary language philosophy itself. Indeed, the success of his theory of conversational implicature has been credited with the eventual demise of this movement as a viable philosophical approach.⁴ Grice's readiness to question conventions, even those of his own subdiscipline, makes him hard to categorise in terms of the usual philosophical distinctions. He does not sit easily on either side of the familiar dichotomies; he is neither exactly empiricist nor exactly rationalist, neither behaviourist nor mentalist. This makes synoptic discussions of his work difficult, as is perhaps entirely appropriate for a philosopher who readily expressed his dislike of attempts to divide philosophy up into a series of '-ologies' and '-isms'.

The theory of conversation is undoubtedly the best known of Grice's work. The particular, and often exclusive, emphasis on it can be explained perhaps in part by its intrinsic potential as a tool for linguistic analysis, and perhaps also, more accidentally, by the historical inaccessibility of much of his other writing. A notorious perfectionist, Grice was seldom happy that his work had reached a finished, or acceptable, state, and was therefore always reluctant to publish. Those who knew him have related this reluctance to the penetration of his own philosophical vision, turned as relentlessly on his own work as on that of others. His Oxford colleague Peter Strawson has suggested that this resulted in an uncomfortable degree of self-doubt:

I suspect, sometimes, that it was the strength of his own critical powers, his sense of the vulnerability of philosophical argument in general, that partially accounted, at the time, for his privately expressed doubts about the ability of his own work to survive criticism. After all, if there were always some detectable flaws in others' reasoning, why should there not be detectable, even though by him undetected, flaws in his own?⁵

Certainly, Grice's account of conversation as an essentially cooperative enterprise is generally discussed, and frequently criticised, in isolation from the rest of this work, seen as a free-standing account of linguistic interaction. It is paraphrased, often in just a few pages, in most introductory text books on pragmatics and discourse analysis.⁶ It has

been used or referred to in analyses of gendered language, children's language, code switching, courtroom cross-examination, the language of jokes, oral narrative and the language of liturgy, along with many other topics.⁷ However, it is only one aspect of a large and diverse body of work from a career of over four decades. In the context of this work, it can be seen as an intrinsic part of the gradual development of Grice's thinking on a range of philosophical topics. It also offers an analytic tool that Grice himself applied in his later work to a variety of philosophical problems, although never to the data of actual conversation. To some extent, then, Grice's later use of the theory of conversation offers its own explanation of the significance, and the theoretical purpose, of that work. More than that, however, Grice's less-known work merits attention in its own right. It ranges over a wide range of topics: not just the philosophy of language but epistemology, perception, logic, rationality, ethics and metaphysics. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a number of running threads, and some striking continuities of theme and approach, throughout this diverse *oeuvre*. Grice himself argued that the disparate themes and ideas of his career displayed a fundamental unity.⁸ In general, however, as Richard Grandy and Richard Warner observe in their introduction to *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality*, 'the systematic nature of his work is little recognised'.⁹

Throughout his work Grice focused on aspects of human behaviour, linguistic or otherwise, and the mental processes underlying them. Increasingly central in his work was the idea that an analysis of these processes revealed people to be rational creatures, and that this rationality was fundamental to human nature. In an overview of his own work, Grice himself suggested, with typical tentativeness, that: 'It might be held that the *ultimate* subject of all philosophy is ourselves.'¹⁰ He also displayed a sophisticated respect for common sense as a starting point in philosophical inquiry. It is sophisticated in that he did not espouse the straightforward adoption of common sense attitudes and terminology into philosophy. Rather, he urged that the philosopher remain aware of how the themes of philosophical inquiry are usually understood by non-philosophers. In a large part, this meant paying serious attention to the language in which particular issues were ordinarily discussed, or to what Grice once described as 'our carefree chatter'.¹¹ In this focus at least he retained an approach recognisable from his background in ordinary language philosophy. However, he proved himself ready to go beyond the dictates of common sense where the complexity of the subject matter demanded. Philosophy, he argued, is a difficult subject

that deals with difficult issues, and it is often necessary to posit entities not current in everyday thought: to construct theoretical, empirically unverifiable entities if they are explanatorily useful. Within these parameters, as he once suggested, 'whatever does the job is respectable'.¹² He was certainly not a simple egalitarian in philosophy. In the early 1980s he noted down, apparently for his own edification, the following complaint:

It repeatedly astonishes me that people who would themselves readily admit to being devoid of training, experience, or knowledge in philosophy, and who have plainly been endowed by nature with no special gifts of philosophical intelligence should be so ready to instruct professional philosophers about the contents of the body of philosophical truths.¹³

Despite his readiness to add entities to philosophical explanations when this seemed appropriate, Grice was concerned that such explanations should remain as simple as possible, in the philosophical sense of simplicity as drawing on as few entities as possible. In the lectures on conversation he endorsed 'Modified Occam's Razor', which he defined as '*senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity*'.¹⁴ This philosophical parsimony was carried over into other areas of his work; he sought general explanations that would account for as wide a range of subject matter, for as few theoretical constructions, as possible. If he prized philosophical simplicity, Grice's ideas were often far from reductive in more general terms. In particular, he did not shrink from explanations that saw people as separate and different: different from animals, in terms of communicative behaviour, or from automata, in terms of rational thought.

More generally, Grice sustained an enthusiasm for the business of philosophy itself, accompanied by a conviction, unfashionable at the start of his career, that the works of philosophers from other schools of thought and different ages deserve thoughtful and continual re-analysis. His work reveals a belief that philosophical investigation and analysis are worthwhile ventures in their own right and a willingness to employ them to offer suggested approaches, rather than completed solutions, to philosophical problems. Further, Grice was always ready to hunt out and consider as many possible counter-arguments and refutations of his own ideas as he could envisage, often advancing some particular idea by means of a detailed discussion of an actual or potential challenge to it. These factors together lend a 'discursive' and at times a

frustratingly tentative air to Grice's work. But despite the earnestness of Grice's interest in philosophy, and the rigour with which he pursued it, his tone was often playfully irreverent. This was, to some extent, the result of a deliberate policy that philosophy could, indeed should, be fun. 'One should of course be serious about philosophy', he argued, 'but being serious does not require one to be solemn.'¹⁵ Grice was not a gifted public speaker, given to elaborate divergences in exegeses, and to stuttering and even mumbling in presentation.¹⁶ Nevertheless, his presentations could be entertaining occasions; tape recordings of him speaking about philosophy, both informally and formally, are often punctuated by laughter.

Grice himself suggested that his search for the fun, even the funny in philosophy was prompted by 'the wanton disposition which nature gave me'.¹⁷ But it had been reinforced 'by the course of every serious and prolonged philosophical association to which I have been a party; each one has manifested its own special quality which at one and the same time has delighted the spirit and stimulated the intellect'. He had no time for those whose method of conducting philosophical debate was that of 'nailing to the wall everything in sight'. In his view, philosophy was best when it was a collaborative, supportive activity. This idea was, to some extent, inherent in his philosophical background; ordinary language philosophy was frequently undertaken as a group activity. However, it is an idea that was peculiarly suited to his personality. Grice could be extremely convivial; he was often surrounded by people, and preferred to develop his ideas by discussion rather than by solitary composition. He was no ascetic; he ate, drank and smoked copiously. But conviviality is not the same as affability. His delight in philosophical discussion often spilled over into an intense desire to 'win' the argument. He could be curt in response to points of view with which he was not in sympathy. On those occasions when he sought intuitive responses to his linguistic examples, he could be dismissive of those who got it 'wrong'. Moreover, those who know him have suggested that at times his tendency towards self-doubt could manifest itself in gloominess, even moroseness.¹⁸

Grice's tendency was to become entirely absorbed with whatever he was engaged in, if it interested him intellectually. Often this was some philosophical issue of substance or of composition. His wife Kathleen recalls that he frequently stayed up late into the night, often pacing up and down as he battled with some problem.¹⁹ Sometimes other people were caught up in this absorption. During his time at Oxford, he conducted a long collaboration with Peter Strawson. In later life, Grice

himself would recount how he was once phoned up by Strawson's wife who told him to stop bothering her husband with late night phone calls.²⁰ This obsessiveness was characteristic of all the activities to which he devoted his considerable energies. Kathleen remembers that he was always engaged on some project; if it was not philosophy then it was playing the piano, or chess, bridge or cricket. These last two were more absorbing than mere hobbies. He played both bridge and cricket competitively at county level. Cricket, in particular, was an obsession that almost rivalled philosophy; he played for a number of different clubs and 'became an inelegant but extremely effective and prolific opening batsman'.²¹ During his Oxford career, he spent the large part of each summer on cricket tours.

Grice's immense energy in these different directions was undoubtedly aided by the amount of time he had at his disposal, in part the consequence of not having to concern himself too much with everyday practicalities; according to Kathleen, from childhood onwards he always had, or found, people to look after him. He certainly pursued his interests to the exclusion of the mundane, often neglecting food and sleep if a particular problem, or game, had his attention. In those areas where he did have practical responsibility, Grice was legendarily untidy. He took little concern over his clothes, or his personal appearance generally. His desk was constantly covered by huge and apparently unsorted piles of paper. However, he would not allow anyone else to touch these, claiming that he knew exactly where everything was. After he died, these papers were deposited in the Bancroft library at the University of California, Berkeley, as the H. P. Grice Papers. This archive, which amounts to 14 large cartons, contains whatever Grice had about himself at the end of his life, mainly heaped on his desk or crammed under his bed. It consists largely of papers from after his move to Berkeley in 1967. But it also includes those papers from his Oxford days, dating right back to the 1940s, that had seemed important enough to him to take and keep with him.

The cartons contain a mixture of finished manuscripts, draft versions, lecture notes and odd jottings. These are often crammed with writing, but never with anything extraneous to the matter in hand; it seems that Grice never doodled. They offer some clue to at least one reason for Grice's reluctance to publish. Grice seems to have been more struck than most by the essentially inconclusive nature of his own work; no project was, for him, ever really completed, or ever separate from the work that preceded and followed it. So notes and manuscripts were stored along with those from decades earlier if they were perceived to be on a related

theme. Papers covered in Grice's cramped hand in faint pencil, characteristic of his work from Oxford, were annotated and added to by notes in ball-point made years later in Berkeley. Ideas generally associated exclusively with his late work, such as those relating to rationality and to finality, are explored in notes dating back to the 1960s. Work often remained in manuscript form for so long that it needed to be updated as the years went by. In the original version of 'Indicative conditionals', part of the William James lectures of 1967, Grice uses the example: 'Either Wilson or MacMillan will be P.M.'. At a later date 'MacMillan' has been crossed out and 'Heath' written over the top in a different coloured ink. This was the example used when the lecture was eventually published.²²

Above all, the H. P. Grice papers confirm that for Grice there was no real distinction between life and work. He was not in the habit of keeping regular hours of work, or of distinguishing between philosophical and private concerns. In the same way, his current philosophical preoccupation would spill over into his everyday life. Any piece of paper that came to hand would be covered in logical notation, example sentences, trial lists of words, invented dialogues, or whatever else was preoccupying him at that moment, all written in what Grice himself described as 'a hand which few have seen and none have found legible'.²³ So the cartons contain not just the orthodox pages of ruled note paper, but also a miscellany of correspondence (often unopened), financial statements, menus, paper napkins, playing card boxes, cigarette packets and even airline sick bags that came to hand as ideas occurred to him during a flight. Some of these suggest that Grice's writing style was not as spontaneous as it may sometimes appear. Certainly the manuscripts of articles and the lecture notes, always written out in full, were produced in longhand with little significant revision. But Grice was not averse to jotting down what he once described as 'useful verbiage' in preparation for these. In conjunction with some work on the place of value in human nature drawing on, but diverging from a number of previous philosophers including John Stuart Mill, he noted down the phrase: 'so as not to be just Grice to your Mill . . .'.²⁴ While working on an account of value and freedom drawing on both Aristotle and Kant, he tried out possible hybrids: 'Ariskant? Kantotle?'.²⁵

This book considers Grice's work within a broadly chronological framework, following the course of his philosophical life. However, because Grice did not work on discreet topics in neat succession, it is sometimes necessary to group together strands of work on related topics even where they in fact extend over years or decades. Nevertheless, the

chronological arrangement makes possible an understanding of the development, as well as the remarkable unity, of Grice's thinking. It also allows some scope for considering the impact on it of the work of other philosophers, and of the various personal associations he formed throughout his life. The final chapter is concerned with the impact of Grice's ideas on linguistics. It is concerned with the development of what has become known as 'Gricean pragmatics' and therefore concentrates on responses to the theory of conversation.

2

Philosophical Influences

In a conversation recorded in 1983, Grice commented that fairly early in his career he stopped reading current philosophy.¹ In the light of his constant engagement with the work of his contemporaries, this characteristically mischievous claim need not be taken at face value. Indeed, his own immediate elaboration somewhat modifies it. Instead of spending his time trying to keep up with all the philosophical journals, he concentrated increasingly on the history of philosophy, choosing his reading matter by strength of ideas rather than by date of composition. To this it might be added that he also devoted a great deal of time to face-to-face discussion with those he chose as his philosophical colleagues. Grice's exaggerated claim therefore draws attention to two constant influences on his own philosophy: debate and collaboration with others engaged in similar fields of enquiry, coupled with what in the same conversation he calls 'respect for the old boys'.

It is tempting to identify the emergence of this tension between old and new ideas, or perhaps more accurately this dialogue between orthodox and challenging ways of thinking, throughout Grice's early life. Born on 15 March 1913, he was the first son of a wealthy middle-class couple, Herbert and Mabel (née Felton) Grice, and grew up in Harborne, an affluent suburb of Birmingham. He was named after his father, but preferred his middle name, and was from an early age known generally as Paul. His early publications were credited to 'H. P. Grice', and are sometimes still cited as such, but in later years he published as simply 'Paul Grice'. Herbert Grice is described in his son's college register as 'business, retd'. In fact he had owned a manufacturing business making small metal components that prospered during the First World War. When the business subsequently began to fail, Mabel stepped in to save the family finances by taking in pupils. She included Paul and his

brother Derek in this miniature school, meaning that the first few years of their education were conducted at home. This reversal of roles explains Herbert's early 'retirement'. After the failure of the manufacturing business, he did not attempt another venture, preferring instead to concentrate on his skills as a concert cellist. His musical talent was inherited by both his sons; Herbert, Paul and Derek would often perform domestically as a trio.

Family life at Harborne was punctuated not just by musical recitals, and by innumerable games of chess, but also by controversy and debate, although the topic was generally theological rather than philosophical. Herbert had been brought up in a nonconformist tradition, while Mabel was a devout Anglo-Catholic. The third adult member of the household, an unmarried aunt, had converted to Catholicism. Grice recalled fondly the many doctrinal clashes he witnessed as a result of this mix, particularly those between his aunt and his father. He suggested that his father's self-defence in these circumstances awakened, or at least reinforced, his own tendency towards 'dissenting rationalism'; this tendency stayed with him throughout life.² It would seem from this that he lent more towards his father's way of thinking, but certainly by the time he reached adulthood he had abandoned any religious faith he may initially have held. He did not retain the Christianity with which he had been surrounded as a child, but he kept the enthusiasm for debate in general, and for the habits of questioning received wisdom and challenging orthodoxy on the basis of personal reasoning in particular.

When Grice was 13 his education was put on to a more formal footing when he went as a boarder to Clifton College in Bristol. This public school, exclusively male at the time, provided excellent preparation for Oxford or Cambridge for the sons of those wealthy enough to afford it, or for those who, like Grice, passed the scholarship examination. Boys belonged to one of a number of 'houses', rather in the style of Oxbridge colleges, and received the education in classics that would equip them for entry to university. It seems that Grice excelled at this; at the end of his Clifton career, in July 1931, he won a classical scholarship to Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He had not concentrated exclusively on academic matters, however. He had been 'Head of School' during his final year, and had also kept up his musical interests. He performed a piano solo in the school's 1930 Christmas concert. Joseph Cooper, Grice's contemporary at Clifton who went on to become a concert pianist and then chairman of the BBC television programme 'Face the Music', played a piece by Rachmaninoff at the same concert. 'We

enjoyed Grice's playing of Ravel's "Pavane"', runs the school's report on the concert, 'its stateliness provided an effective contrast to the exuberance of the Rachmininoff.'³

Corpus Christi had a strong academic tradition, but was not as socially fashionable as some of the larger colleges. It therefore tended to attract students from more modest backgrounds than colleges such as Christ Church or Magdalen, where social success often depended on demonstrable affluence. However, despite such distinctions between individual colleges, Oxford in general was a place of privilege. Students were nearly all male, were predominantly from public schools, and were generally preparing to take their places as members of the establishment. Fashionable political opinions were left wing, and students of Grice's generation tended to see themselves as rebelling against nineteenth-century notions of responsibility and propriety. Such rebelliousness, however, was of a very passive nature; it lacked the zeal and the active protest that was to characterise student rebellion in the 1960s. It did little to affect the day to day life in Oxford, where the university was legally *in loco parentis*, and where all undergraduates lived and dined in college. Some 50 years later, Grice recalled the atmosphere of the time with amused but affectionate detachment:

We are in reaction against our Victorian forebears; we are independent and we are tolerant of the independence of others, unless they go too far. We don't like discipline, rules (except for rules of games and rules designed to secure peace and quiet in Colleges), self-conscious authority, and lectures or reproaches about conduct. . . . We don't care much to talk about 'values' (pompous) or 'duties' (stuffy, unless one means the duties of servants or the military, or money extorted by the customs people). Our watchwords (if we could be moved to utter them) would be 'Live and let live, though not necessarily with me around' or 'If you don't like how I carry on, you don't have to spend time with me.'⁴

Grice was at Corpus Christi for four years. Classics was an unusual subject in this respect; most Oxford degree programmes were a year shorter. At that time, philosophy was taught only as part of the Classics curriculum, and it was in this guise that Grice received his first formal training in the subject. The style was conservative, based largely on close reading of the philosophers of Ancient Greece. This seems to have suited Grice's meticulous and analytical style of thought well, as the tutorial teaching method suited his dissenting and combative

nature. Although there were lectures, open to all members of the university, teaching was based principally at tutorial, therefore college, level. Students would meet individually with their tutors to read, and then defend, an essay. In reflecting on his early philosophical education, Grice always emphasised what he saw as his own good fortune in being allocated as tutee to W. F. R. (Frank) Hardie. A rigorous classical scholar and an exacting tutor, Hardie might not have been everyone's first choice, but Grice credited him with revealing the difficulty, but also the rewards of philosophical study. Grice also, it seems, relished the formalism that Hardie imposed on his already established appreciation of rational debate. Under Hardie's guidance, this appreciation developed into a belief that philosophical questions are best settled by reason, or argument:

I learnt also from him *how* to argue, and in learning how to argue I came to learn that the ability to argue is a skill involving many aspects, and is much more than an ability to see logical connections (though this ability is by no means to be despised).⁵

Grice even recounts with approval, but reluctant disbelief, the story that a long silence in another student's tutorial was eventually broken by Hardie asking 'And what did you mean by "of"?'.⁶ No doubt the contemporary detractors of ordinary language philosophy would have seen Grice's enthusiasm for this anecdote of the 1930s as a sign that he was perfectly suited to the style of philosophy that would flourish at Oxford in the following two decades. This was crucially concerned with minute attention to meaning and to the language in which philosophical issues were traditionally discussed.

Grice's admiration for Hardie was later to develop into friendship; they were both members of a group from Oxford that went on walking holidays in the summers leading up to the Second World War, and Hardie taught Grice to play golf. The friendship was based in part on a number of characteristics the two had in common. There was their shared rationalism; Grice found welcome echoes of his own approach in Hardie's 'reluctance to accept anything not properly documented'.⁷ Moreover, Hardie never admitted defeat. Discussions with him, Grice later observed, never actually ended; they would simply come to a stop. In response, Grice learnt to adopt a similar stance in philosophical argument, clinging tendentiously to whatever position he had set out to defend. Once, when Grice was taught by a different philosophy tutor for one term, the new tutor reported back to Hardie that his student

was 'obstinate to the point of perversity'. To Grice's enduring delight, Hardie received this report with thorough approval.

However some may have judged his style of argument, Grice's undergraduate career was an indisputable success. Students took 'Moderations' exams five terms into their degree, before proceeding to what was popularly known as 'Greats', the stage in the degree at which philosophy was introduced. Grice achieved First Class in his Moderations in 1933. In the summer of 1935 he took his finals, and was awarded First Class Honours in *Literae Humaniores*, as 'Greats' was officially called. His studies did not take up all of his time during these years, however, and he mixed academic success with extracurricular activities, particularly sporting ones. He played cricket, and in the summer of 1934 captained the college team. In the winter he followed up this success by becoming captain of the college football team. During this same period, he was president of the Pelican Philosophical Society and editor of the *Pelican Record*. Both took their name from the bird forming part of the Corpus Christi crest that had become the informal symbol of the college.

After Grice completed his undergraduate studies, there was a brief hiatus in his academic career. There were at that time few openings at Oxford for those graduates who had not yet gained a University Lectureship or been elected to a College Fellowship. For the academic year 1935–6 Grice left Oxford, but not the elite education system of which he had been part for the past decade, when he went as Assistant Master to Rossall in Lancashire. At a time when there were very few Universities in the country, an Honours degree, especially from Oxford or Cambridge, was regarded as more than adequate a qualification to teach at a public school such as Rossall. It was not at all uncommon for Assistant Masters to stay in post for just a year or two before moving on to a more permanent position or embarking on a career in some other field. Indeed, of the 11 other Assistant Masters appointed between 1933 and 1937 by the same headmaster as Grice, only four stayed for more than a year; none of the other seven went on to careers as school masters.⁸ In Grice's case, his appointment at Rossall filled the time between his undergraduate studies and his return to Oxford in 1936. It was also in 1936, unusually a year after the completion of his studies, that Grice was willing, or perhaps able, to pay the fee necessary for conferment of his BA degree.

He was enabled to return to Oxford by two scholarships, both of which would have required him to sit examinations. First was an Oxford University Senior Scholarship, an award for postgraduate study at any

college and in any subject. In the same year, Grice was awarded a Harmsworth Senior Scholarship, a 'closed' scholarship to Merton college. The Harmsworth Scholarships, funded by an endowment from former college member Sir Hildebrand Harmsworth, were a relatively new venture, aimed specifically at raising the profile of postgraduate achievement at the college. A history of Merton notes that the scheme 'brought to the college a succession of intelligent graduates from all colleges. In that way a window was opened on to the world of graduate research at a time when there were few opportunities at that level in the university as a whole.'⁹ The scholarships had been available only since 1931, and only three were awarded each year, across the range of academic subjects. Grice's contemporaries were Richard Alexander Hamilton, also from Clifton College, in sciences, and Matthew Fontaine Maury Meiklejohn in modern languages. Grice was a Harmsworth Senior Scholar at Merton between 1936 and 1938, but no award or higher degree resulted from his time there. He was awarded an MA from Oxford in 1939 but this was a formality, available seven years after initial matriculation to students who had received a BA, upon payment of a fee. Nevertheless, the time spent at Merton was an important period in Grice's philosophical development not least because it was during this time that he became aware of subjects and methodologies then current in philosophy, and indeed taking shape in Oxford itself. He added knowledge of contemporary and dissenting philosophy to his existing familiarity with established orthodoxy.

Grice's experiences of undergraduate study had been typical of the time. The philosophy taught and conducted at Oxford between the wars was extremely conventional, that is to say speculative and metaphysical in nature, with an almost institutionalised distrust of new ideas. The business of philosophy was centred on the exegesis of the philosophical, and particularly the classical 'greats'. Indeed, until just before the Second World War, no living philosopher was represented on the Oxford philosophy syllabus. The picture was different at Cambridge. From early in the century, Russell had been developing his analytic approach to issues of knowledge and the language in which it is expressed, arguing that suitable rigorous analysis can reveal the 'true' logical form beneath the 'apparent' grammatical surface of sentences. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, first published in English in 1922, had taken these ideas further, arguing that such analysis could reveal many of the traditional concerns of philosophy to be merely 'pseudo-problems'. However, such was the insularity of academic institutions at the time that Oxford had not officially, and barely in practice, been aware of

these developments in Cambridge, let alone of those in other parts of Europe.

This isolation was fairly abruptly ended, at least for some of the younger philosophers at Oxford, during the period when Grice was at Merton. This change was due in a large part to A. J. Ayer, and to the publication of his controversial first book *Language Truth and Logic* in 1936. Ayer had himself been an undergraduate at Oxford between 1929 and 1932 but, unusually, had read many of Russell's works, as well as the *Tractatus*. He had been encouraged in this by his tutor, Gilbert Ryle, a socially conservative but intellectually progressive don, who had even taken Ayer on a trip to Cambridge where he had met Wittgenstein personally. Ayer was impressed by the methods of analytic philosophy in general, and in particular by Wittgenstein's ambitious claims that it could 'solve' age-old philosophical problems for good by analysing the language in which they were traditionally expressed. He was even more profoundly affected by the ideas with which he came into contact during a visit to Austria after finishing his studies. There he became acquainted with a number of members of the Vienna Circle, and attended several of their meetings. Then as now, this group of scientists and philosophers were referred to collectively as 'the logical positivists'. They represented a number of separate interests and specialisms, but shared at least one common goal: the desire to refine and perfect language so as to make it an appropriately precise tool for scientific and logical discussion. They distinguished between meaningful statements, amenable to scientific study and discussion, and other statements, strictly meaningless but unfortunately occurring as sentences of imperfect everyday language. Their chief tool in this procedure was the principle of verification.

The logical positivists divided the category of meaningful statements into two basic types. First, there are those expressed by analytic, or necessarily true, sentences. 'All spaniels are dogs' is true because the meaning of the predicate is contained within the meaning of the subject, or because 'dog' is part of the definition of 'spaniel'. They added the statements of mathematics and of logic to the category of analytic sentences, on the grounds that a sentence such as 'two plus two equals four' is in effect a tautology because of the rules of mathematics. The second category of meaningful statements is those expressed by synthetic sentences, or sentences that might be either true or false, that are capable of being subjected to an identifiable process of verification. That is, there are empirically observable phenomena sufficient to determine the question of truth. All other statements, those neither expressed by

analytic sentences nor verifiable by empirical evidence, are meaningless. This includes statements concerning moral evaluation, aesthetic judgement and religious belief. For the logical positivists, such statements were not false; they merely had no part in scientific discourse. The doctrine of the Vienna Circle was radically empiricist and strictly anti-metaphysical.

When Ayer returned to Oxford in 1933 as a young lecturer, he set himself the task of introducing the ideas of logical positivism to an English-speaking audience. *Language, Truth and Logic* draws heavily on the ideas of the Vienna Circle, but also includes elements of the British analytic philosophy Ayer had found persuasive as an undergraduate. In the opening chapter, provocatively entitled 'The Elimination of Metaphysics', he outlines the views of logical positivism on meaning. He also offers his own formulation of the principle of verification:

We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express – that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false.¹⁰

In subsequent chapters, Ayer applies this criterion uncompromisingly to the analysis of statements such as those of ethics and theology, those of our perceptions of the material world, and those relating to our knowledge of other minds and of past events.

Language, Truth and Logic, which was widely read and discussed both within Oxford and beyond, tended to polarise opinions. Not surprisingly, many of the older, established Oxford philosophers reacted strongly against it and the explicit challenge it posed to philosophical authority. It dismissed many of the traditional concerns of philosophy on the grounds that they were based on the discussion of meaningless metaphysical statements; it proposed to solve many apparent philosophical problems simply by analysis of the language in which they were expressed and, of course, it rejected all religious tenets. However, to many of the younger philosophers it offered a welcome and exhilarating change for precisely these same reasons. Ayer became a central figure in a group of young philosophers who met to discuss various philosophical topics. The meetings took place in the rooms of Isaiah Berlin in All Souls College during term times for about two years from early 1937. Here Ayer first began to talk, and to disagree, with another young philosopher, J. L. Austin.