

The death of A.J. Ayer, rational actor models, and the curriculum

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Abstract. This paper reflects on an article that appeared after the death of A.J. Ayer, which complains about what British philosophers focus on. I propose that the content of the philosophy curriculum can be predicted from a rational actor model.

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Like a flying horse

You land on every course—

A complete winner

Till horsemeat for dinner!

A.J. Ayer, a minor philosopher, died on the 27th of June 1989. An obituary appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* on the 29th of June. In that issue of the paper, there also appeared an article on Ayer which ended with the following paragraph:

Whatever one's assessment of his influence, Sir Alfred Ayer's death is a reminder of the sheer importance of ideas. After a period of philosophical sterility in this country, the field of inquiry at last seems to be widening: the new interest in the profoundly un-British figure of Heidegger is just one example. And whatever one may think of him, there is always a case for knowing. Unfortunately, last week's Paris conference included distinguished Americans, Germans, French and Italian scholars — but no British. (Walden 1989)

I presume that whoever wrote this article would be disposed to raise questions about the philosophy curriculum. Why is this stuff taught and not that stuff? Why not Hegel and also Heidegger and company? Is it nationalism?

I think the content of the philosophical curriculum can be subject to a rational actor model, which does not appeal to nationalist sentiments. Here is an outline of my thinking. Assume that all students with the potential for being good contributors to philosophy also have the potential for being good contributors to some other discipline. A philosophy department is competing for these students as undergraduates and postgraduates, and not just with other philosophy departments. A strategy that is used in this competition by other disciplines is: we can give you some philosophy as well, so join us. The literature department, the law department, the anthropology department, and more all have a course with a lot of philosophical content. What the model predicts is curriculum content in the philosophy department which gives rise to the questions identified, or similar questions. Heidegger is already taught outside the philosophy department. David Lewis is good and he is much less likely to be taught by others, hence his more prominent position. “We can offer you this, which others do not.”¹

References

- n.a. 1989. Obituaries: Sir Alfred Ayer. *The Daily Telegraph* June 29th 1989: 21.
- Walden, G. 1989. After Ayer: are the tides of philosophy on the turn? *The Daily Telegraph* June 29th 1989.

¹ David Lewis is probably of use for making sense of similar questions. “In a nearby possible world, is Lewis an Englishman? Is that why he is preferred?”