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THE PRINCIPLE OF VERIFICATION
IN THE LOGICAL POSITIVISM OF ALFRED JULES AYER
by Sister St. George of Mary, C.N.D.

Thesis presented to the Faculty
of Philosophy of the University
of Ottawa as partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts



Ottawa, Canada, 1962

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary mind seems to have conceived a deep distaste for the science of metaphysics, and many students as well as professionals of philosophy are loudly vocal in their denunciations of that science as word-chopping or barren speculation.

It is only too true that eternal metaphysic does not fit in with the modern mind... Three centuries of mathematical empiricism have so bent the modern mind to a single interest in the invention of engines for the control of phenomena - a conceptual network, which procures for the mind a certain practical domination over and a deceptive understanding of nature, where thought is not resolved in being but in the sensible itself.¹

In Britain, this disaffection for speculative philosophy is nowhere more manifest than in the writings of those whom we may call "analytic philosophers" or more precisely "logical positivists". While these appellations might suggest that the group is monolithic, that is by no means the case.

The scope of what I regard as analytic philosophy is wide. It allows for serious disagreement, not only over technical niceties, but on major points of doctrine, including the method and purpose of analysis itself.²

¹ Jacques MARITAIN, The Degrees of Knowledge, tr. by Bernard Wall, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938, p. 3.

² Alfred Jules AYER, ed., Logical Positivism, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1959, editor's introduction, p. 3.

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Logical positivists may differ in opinion, and differ they do; yet, it is not unfair to attribute to them one common trait: aversion for traditional speculative metaphysics. How may we explain the bewitchment which logical positivist beliefs exercise over British minds?

It would seem that their negations are congenial to an age of disillusionment when men, surfeited with knowing how and despairing of knowing that, find consolation in erecting ignorance into a principle.³

Logical positivism, negative though it may be, has stimulated the enthusiasm of many first-class minds. Indeed, "the doctrines of Logical Positivism are embraced with some of the fervour appropriate to a new religious creed".⁴

Prospects seem bright for the further development of logical empiricism, which has had the good luck to be stimulated by the metaphysical verbosity re-emerging in the wake of the last war, in almost the same way as the Vienna School and its predecessors were in their day stimulated by the unverifiable nebulous speaking of speculative metaphysics.⁵

On the other hand, there are serious thinkers who doubt the durability of this philosophical school (if we may designate

³ Denis J.B. HAWKINS, "Inquest on Logical Positivism", in The Month, New Series, Vol. 5 (1951), p. 205.

⁴ Cyril E.M. JOAD, A Critique of Logical Positivism, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 11.

⁵ Joergen JOERGENSEN, The Development of Logical Empiricism, International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, Vol. 2, No. 9, 1951, p. 84.

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as such). James Collins sees it as an "intermediate and transitory"⁶ movement; Frederick Copleston, S.J., says of it: "Neopositivism... is no longer fashionable".⁷ However, although it may be a

fashion of yesterday... it retains a real importance, both because it crystallized a number of previous tendencies in dogmatic form and because in undogmatic form it continues to make philosophers suspicious of affirmations which go beyond the limits it assigned to thinking.⁸

Among the adherents to this mode of philosophizing, one personality emerges on the contemporary scene: Alfred Jules Ayer, Grote professor of the Philosophy of Mind and Logic at University College, London. Professor Ayer is an avowed, brilliant, militant foe of traditional metaphysics.

Even to ask whether there is a reality underlying the world of phenomena is to formulate a bogus question.⁹

Nor is Mr. Ayer content with decrying the ravages wrought in the world of ideas by traditional metaphysics; he has

⁶ James COLLINS, in a review of Philosophical Analysis by J.O. Urmson, in Thought, Vol. 32 (1957), p. 144.

⁷ Frederick COPLESTON, Contemporary Philosophy, Studies of Logical Positivism and Existentialism, Westminster, Md., The Newman Press, 1956, p. 9.

⁸ Denis J.B. HAWKINS, Crucial Problems of Modern Philosophy, London, and New York, Sheed and Ward, 1957, p. 72.

⁹ Alfred J. AYER, "Demonstration of the Impossibility of Metaphysics", in Mind, Vol. 43 (1934), p. [335].

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evolved what he considers a valid, constructive method of controlling them once and for all. It is his principle of verification, or his verificational theory of meaning. Under its glare, he scrutinizes all possible categories of linguistic expression; to some, he assigns meaningfulness... others, he condemns as utterly nonsensical, literally meaningless.

In the course of the following pages, we shall trace first the general historical backdrop against which logical positivists move. We shall then describe Ayer's procedure in developing his principle of verification, from his analytic starting-point akin to Hume's, through the varieties of formulation he successively adopts in an effort to achieve scientific exactitude and stringency, to concrete examples of the principle of verification in use. Our conclusions concerning this keystone of the logical positivism of Alfred Jules Ayer will then be drawn in the light of Thomistic doctrine.

CHAPTER I

LOGICAL POSITIVISM AND ALFRED JULES AYER

1. General Context

Philosophy does not surge up out of a vacuum. Rather, it is bred, nurtured and brought to maturity under concrete historical conditions, which cannot but determine its flavor at a particular time, and affect its orientation. Logical positivism, one of the most vigorous philosophical movements of the past thirty-five years, is a case in point. It is the product of the impact upon the modern mind and temper of the spirit of scientific inquiry and the methods of the sciences. Indeed, in modern times, that is, since the Renaissance, philosophy has moved against a backdrop provided to an ever-increasing extent by the empirical sciences. The Renaissance in general turned men from a universe of hierarchy, and fixed their eyes on the things of this world alone. It came to exalt nature skimmed off from its higher causes and discoverable meanings. Wherever the Renaissance spread, it abetted a skeptical view of the intellect. It raised beauty as a human aim above truth, and the stress on experience relegated reason itself to second place.

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The empirical sciences have grown and developed amazingly in the last three centuries, especially in the twentieth. They have made possible our industrialized and technocratic civilization. Man is overawed by the success achieved by the sciences; he is impressed by the tangible results of applied scientific hypotheses; he is convinced that science alone can provide us with useful and factual knowledge. Philosophic hypotheses and speculations are useless because they are sterile of visible results, and cannot be proved "scientifically". This exaggerated prestige of the sciences which, by creating the impression that all that can be known can be known by means of them, has created an atmosphere and mental climate which is reflected in logical positivism.

[...] the soil out of which has grown the mentality favorable to logical positivism was prepared by that development of the empirical sciences which is the characteristic of the modern era.¹

[...] the growth of the empirical sciences has helped to produce a mental outlook which is unfavorable to metaphysics.²

Precisely how does logical positivism reflect this mentality of obsession with the sciences? Logical

¹ Frederick COPLESTON, S.J., Contemporary Philosophy, p. 31.

² Ibid., p. 32.

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positivism stands in direct opposition to the traditional conception of philosophy as a description of ultimate reality, or as a search for absolutes. It declares that if philosophy is to justify its own existence, it must attach itself in some way to the scientific endeavour, rather than pursue the barren course of metaphysics that yields nothing but confusion. It must cease its pretense of being queen of the sciences, and become companion and servant. It is no longer "ancilla theologiae", but must become "ancilla scientiae". Mr. John Laird's description of the philosophy of contemporary logical positivism is amusing but nonetheless true:

By positivism in its most general sense we mean the theory that if you want to know anything about anything, you must either make an appointment with one of the sciences or else be content to be cheated. Outside the sciences there is no information. The poets may beguile you or exalt you but they cannot tell you anything. Theologians may bewilder you, philosophers may rack you, and rhetoricians may soothe you. But none of them can tell you anything.³

³ John LAIRD, "Positivism, Empiricism and Metaphysics", in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Vol. 39 (1938-39), p. 220.

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2. Precursors of Logical Positivism

The forerunners of logical positivism, in the opinion of the members of the movement themselves, are

[...] all those philosophers and scientists who show a clear anti-metaphysical or anti-speculative, realistic or materialistic, critical or skeptical, tendency.⁴

Among the most prominent philosophers whose work constitutes an attempt to demolish metaphysics, none stands out more clearly than David Hume (1711-1776) who, in his critical work, is the first great positivist. Hume expresses time and again his aversion for metaphysics, "the most uncertain and disagreeable part of learning".⁵

Any hypothesis, that pretends to discover the ultimate original qualities of human nature, ought at once to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical.⁶

And again:

⁴ Joergen JOERGENSEN, The Development of Logical Empiricism, p. 4.

⁵ David HUME, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Chicago, Gateway Editions, Inc., Henry Regnery Co., 1956, p. 10.

⁶ IDEM, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. xxi.

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Nothing is more requisite for a true philosopher, than to restrain the intemperate desire of searching into causes, and having established any doctrine upon a sufficient number of experiments, rest contented with that, when he sees a farther examination would lead him into obscure and uncertain speculations.⁷

No great interest was taken in Hume's philosophy during his lifetime, but in modern empiricism, his theories have come into their own. He undoubtedly exercised a profound influence on philosophical thought in the eighteenth century; but, if we except his influence on Kant, we may say its more important manifestations were reserved for a later period.

It is indeed remarkable how much of the doctrine that is now thought to be especially characteristic of logical positivism was already stated, or at least foreshadowed, by Hume.⁸

J.R. Weinberg, in his masterful study of the movement, states: "The empiristic trend of logical positivism may be safely traced, I believe, to Hume".⁹

The immediate precursor of logical positivism was the Austrian physicist and philosopher, Ernst Mach (1838-

⁷ David HUME, A Treatise of Human Nature, Part I, Sect. IV, p. 13.

⁸ Alfred Jules AYER (ed.), Logical Positivism, editor's introduction, p. 4.

⁹ Julius Rudolph WEINBERG, An Examination of Logical Positivism, The International Library of Psychology, Philosophy and Scientific Method, Paterson, N.J., Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1960, p. 3.

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1916), who was the first to hold the chair of the philosophy of the inductive sciences founded at the University of Vienna in 1895. Mach strongly and tirelessly advocated the unification of science through the elimination of metaphysics. Thus, there has existed a long tradition of empirical philosophy in Austria, concerned primarily with the natural sciences.

3. The Vienna Circle

In 1922, Moritz Schlick was appointed professor of philosophy at the University of Vienna. Soon, a circle formed itself around him, consisting not only of students, but also of mature intellectuals interested in philosophy, even scholars like Neurath, Feigl, Carnap, and Kraft. They met at a so-called "Thursday Seminar", drawn by the magnetism of one idea: that philosophy ought to be scientific. It must disengage itself from the sterile speculation of the past, and must proceed along scientific lines. The Vienna Circle, as the group became known, claimed that unambiguous clarity, logical rigour, and cogent argument are as indispensable to philosophy as to other sciences. Metaphysics, with its chronic condition of endless and unresolved debates, was to be completely eliminated. Thus the Vienna Circle was tied to positivism.

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The postulate that philosophical method should be scientific was the most basic postulate of the Vienna Circle, the very foundation of the Circle's unity. There was agreement with the tenet of positivism that philosophy does not investigate a special domain of reality. As regards empirical reality, that is the concern of the special sciences; and non-empirical, transcendental reality is no possible object of knowledge. The traditional subject matter of metaphysics, absolute being, as well as absolute values and norms, cannot constitute a special domain of knowledge. For questions and assertions concerning such a domain are wholly devoid of factual content, they are but pseudo-questions and pseudo-statements. Philosophy in the sense of metaphysics does not admit of scientific treatment.¹⁰

Herbert Feigl considered the traditional philosophical treatises as typical expression of immature attitudes which

try to explain experience in ways which lack the distinguishing marks of science. Certain of these pre-scientific modes of explanation, like the magical, the animistic, and the mythological are nearly extinct; others, like the theological and the metaphysical, still prevail.¹¹

And he wrote further,

Throughout its history, philosophy has been the particular stronghold of verbal magic. By purely verbal means it has tried to explain things which only science could explain or which cannot be explained at all.¹²

¹⁰ Victor KRAFT, The Vienna Circle, The Origin of Neo-Positivism: A Chapter in the History of Recent Philosophy, tr. by Arthur Pap, New York, The Philosophical Library, 1953, p. 187.

¹¹ Herbert FEIGL, William SELLARS (ed.), Readings in Philosophical Analysis, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949, p. 19.

¹² Ibid., p. 19.

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The first official statement of the Vienna Circle's position and of the problems which formed its chief concern, was published in 1929 under the title, The Vienna Circle: Its Scientific Outlook.¹³ This manifesto set out its principal aims as follows: first, to provide a secure foundation for the sciences; second, to demonstrate the meaninglessness of metaphysics. The group had high hopes that much would be accomplished if this double aim were realized. As Moritz Schlick put it the following year at the seventh international congress of philosophy held at Oxford,

It appears that by establishing the natural boundaries of philosophy we unexpectedly acquire a profound insight into its problems; we see them under a new aspect which provides us with the means of settling all so-called philosophical disputes in an absolutely final and ultimate manner.¹⁴

What means was to be adequate to this settling of philosophical disputes in an absolutely final and ultimate manner? It was to be the logical analysis of language. This was to provide the cornerstone on which the edifice of the sciences could be solidly built. The logical analysis of language was to concoct the powerful solvent which could

¹³ Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung, Der Wiener Kreis, Vienna, 1929.

¹⁴ Moritz SCHLICK, "The Future of Philosophy", in Seventh International Congress of Philosophy, Oxford, Oxford Press, 1930, p. 112.

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cause the problems of metaphysics to vanish forever. Philosophy, according to the logical positivists, was to be no more than the clarification of language. The common thesis came to be that the proper task of philosophy was to analyze the logic of science, and not to deal directly with real things. Negatively, this meant that metaphysics is a tissue of cognitively meaningless statements, that is, statements conveying no real knowledge. Metaphysics is cast out from philosophy both because it concerns matters which are not reducible to the lexicon of science, and also because it claims to be a direct inspection of the real world. Philosophy then loses its status as a special field of investigation; it becomes the activity of making our ideas clear; it consists simply of the methodological principles underlying all scientific investigation. Thus the use of logic is what differentiates modern positivism from the older empiricism, just as the insistence on the primacy of empirical data is the direct connection between them.

Of fundamental importance for the efforts of the Viennese positivists, was the work of Bertrand Russell (b. 1872), who had brought a high degree of systematization and precision to formal logic, making it a formidable instrument in analysis. Basic also to their progress, was the study of

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the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus¹⁵ of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). The latter never joined the Vienna Circle but his work was looked upon as the most powerful and exciting, though not indeed the most lucid, exposition of its ideas. It was eagerly discussed at the weekly meetings of the Circle, and a critical examination of its theories, leading partly to their further development, partly to their transformation, partly to their abandonment, resulted in the crystallization of the Vienna Circle's philosophical views, which were published, as mentioned above, in 1929.

The Vienna Circle, as a cohesive group, did not last long; by 1938, it had practically ceased to exist. Its leader, Moritz Schlick, was killed in 1936 by a demented student; some prominent members accepted teaching posts in America; others were forced to take refuge in foreign countries, because their ideas were unpalatable to the Nazi government. The second World War then swept before it whatever fragments remained, so that the Vienna Circle is now a thing of the past. However, its most important tenets live on particularly in England, Scandinavia and the United States.

¹⁵ Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, with an introduction by Bertrand Russell, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955.

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4. Viennese Positivism in England

The transplantation of Viennese positivism to Britain can be attributed in large measure to the work of Professor Alfred Jules Ayer (b. 1910), who personally participated in the evening sessions of the Circle for some time.

During the thirties and forties positivism gained ground at Oxford, where A.J. Ayer, now at London, was its chief representative and did much to popularize it.¹⁶

Mr. Ayer teaches all the essential doctrines of logical positivism, and he does so in a personal and appealing way that has made him an influence to be reckoned with in contemporary thought. His works constitute an authoritative, incisive statement of the case for logical positivism. They have the great virtue of translating into clear and concise English prose the sometimes cloudily expressed ideas of the Circle. He reduces to a minimum the arid logical background that prevents the writings of his fellow-empiricists from enjoying a wide public, and he dispenses altogether with both logistics and symbolism. All these factors have done much to spread his opinions in the Anglo-Saxon world.

¹⁶ James L. JARRETT (ed.), Contemporary Philosophy - A Book of Readings, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1954, p. 365.

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The impact of this book upon a generation of students in Britain and America has been profound. This influence was by no means confined to professional philosophers, since Ayer set forth his views in a literate way and in apparent continuity with the prevailing scientific outlook.¹⁷

It is important to note that the Vienna brand of positivism did not subsist in a pure state in Britain, (if ever there was such, in a movement that allowed wide diversity of opinion). Perhaps the reason is, as Father Copleston suggests, "that neo-positivism in its Continental form is not congenial to the English mind".¹⁸ However that may be, it must be stressed that the idea that philosophy should consist mainly of analysis had developed in England, prior to and independently of, the Vienna Circle, and had gained powerful and prominent adherents. Let it suffice to name Professor G.E. Moore (1873-1958), who was associated with Cambridge analysis from 1911 on, when he began a career that made him successively lecturer, editor of the philosophical review, Mind, and professor of philosophy at Cambridge from 1925 to 1939.

Professor Moore [...] has undoubtedly had a greater influence than any other one man on English philosophy in general and Cambridge philosophy in particular during the last fifty years.¹⁹

¹⁷ James COLLINS, "Metaphysics Under Fire", in America, Vol. 98 (November 9, 1957), p. 158.

¹⁸ Frederick COPLESTON, S.J., Contemporary Philosophy, p. 9.

¹⁹ James L. JARRETT (ed.), Contemporary Philosophy - A Book of Readings, p. 365.

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There were also, as we have mentioned, Bertrand Russell, who published his theory of "logical constructions" in 1912, ten years before the Vienna Circle was founded,²⁰ and Ludwig Wittgenstein, the successor of Moore as professor of philosophy at Cambridge. The result is that the strands that make up the preoccupations of the contemporary British philosopher are hard to unravel, because they are often quite elusive. But it would seem that logical positivism and Cambridge analysis have more or less merged, through

general agreement in their empiricism, their eschewing of metaphysics, their aggressive respect for science, and in their pursuit of analysis in the interest of thought.²¹

The main tenet of logical positivism, both of the Continental and British brands, can be summed up succinctly as follows:

The determination that a given series of signs alleged to express a proposition is significant depends on the reduction of the group of signs to elementary propositions by tautological transformations, definitions, and other methods of logical syntax.

If a propositional sign can be dealt with in this fashion it is significant. Otherwise it is not. It is easy to see, therefore, how metaphysics

²⁰ Bertrand RUSSELL, The Problems of Philosophy, Oxford, Galaxy Books, 1959.

²¹ Charles D. BROAD, British Philosophy in the Mid-Century, A Cambridge Symposium, ed. by Cecil A. Mace, New York, Macmillan and Co., 1957, p. 50.

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is to be eliminated from significant discourse. No way of determining the method of verifying metaphysical assertions can be given either by syntactical rules or by an empirically possible test. This is the thesis of Logical Positivism.²²

5. Ayer's Work

It is the above credo which calls forth the crusading spirit of Alfred Ayer, and makes of him a champion in the logico-positivistic campaign for the elimination of metaphysics.

Mr. Ayer does not aim at reducing scientific language or scientific concepts to sense-data, so the unification of the sciences is not at least a conscious aim of his work. He concentrates merely on the elimination of metaphysics from everyday speech, by means of the principle of verification.²³

In 1934, he publishes in Mind an essay entitled, Demonstration of the Impossibility of Metaphysics.²⁴ The first chapter of his main work, Language, Truth and Logic, first published in 1936, with a new and revised edition in 1946, is called, The Elimination of Metaphysics,²⁵ a task he feels

²² Julius R. WEINBERG, An Examination of Logical Positivism, p. 173-174.

²³ Ephrem McCARTHY, O.P., "The Logical Empiricism of A.J. Ayer", in Philosophical Studies, Vol. 2 (1952), p. 25.

²⁴ Vol. 43 (1934), p. [335]-345.

²⁵ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, 2nd ed. revised, London, Gollancz, 1946. References throughout the following pages are from the reprint by Dover Publications.

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has been accomplished, since, after a short forty-eight pages, he is moved to proclaim, "With this we complete the overthrow of speculative philosophy".²⁶ His other books and essays carry on in much the same vein.

Attacks on metaphysics are nothing new in the history of philosophy. The novel aspect of Ayer's work is his method of approach. He banishes metaphysics from the field of human knowledge not because it is erroneous or inadequate, not because, as Kant claimed, the human mind loses itself in contradictions when it ventures out to the meta-empirical. Ayer's doctrine holds that all metaphysical assertions are "literally senseless".²⁷ Metaphysics deals with the transcendent, with such things as the non-empirical world of values, the existence of the soul, the reality of God, but it is impossible, he claims, to express in language anything dealing with the trans-empirical realm.

We shall maintain that no statement which refers to a 'reality' transcending the limits of all possible sense-experience can possibly have any literal significance.²⁸

²⁶ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 48.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

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Our charge against the metaphysician is not that he attempts to employ the understanding in a field where it cannot profitably venture, but that he produces sentences which fail to conform to the conditions under which alone a sentence can be literally significant.²⁹

Ayer concedes that a "misplaced poet"³⁰ may find in metaphysical statements a way of giving vent to emotion - such statements may even have "considerable value as means of moral inspiration".³¹ He calls them "rhapsodical outpourings".³²

Literature and the arts afford the best medium for this. Metaphysics results when men attempt to extrapolate their emotions: they wish to objectivate their feelings, therefore, express them as argument and theory. But nothing is thereby asserted.³³

Does Ayer believe that the writer and the metaphysician both dabble in nonsense? Yes, he does; however, he asserts that the author produces deliberate nonsense to create an artistic effect, whereas the metaphysician is deceived by language into writing nonsense.

²⁹ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 35.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

³¹ Ibid., p. 44.

³² Idem, "Demonstration of the Impossibility of Metaphysics", in Mind, Vol. 43 (1934), p. 342.

³³ Ibid., p. 343.

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There are writers who[...]produce sentences that are apparently not intended to have literal meaning but only rhythm and balance, as for example 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose': and [...] there are writers who produce sentences that are intended to have literal meaning but fail to achieve it [...] they] have simply let themselves be caught in linguistic traps.³⁴

On this question, Ayer concludes:

[...] even the utterances of a metaphysician who is attempting to expound a vision are literally senseless; so that henceforth we may pursue our philosophical researches with as little regard for them as for the more inglorious kind of metaphysics which comes from a failure to understand the workings of our language.³⁵

What then remains of philosophy shorn of metaphysics? Can we any longer consider it as the general explanatory scheme it has always purported to be? What is to be its task? Ayer maintains that philosophy is not a discipline aiming at some superior type of knowledge or intellectual discovery but only a method of revealing the linguistic confusions that give rise to philosophical problems and of solving those problems simply by showing there were no genuine problems to begin with. He agrees with Wittgenstein that the philosopher must wage a "battle against the

³⁴ Alfred J. AYER, "The Genesis of Metaphysics", in Analysis, Vol. 2 (1934), reprinted in Philosophy and Analysis, ed. by Margaret Macdonald, Oxford, Blackwell, 1954, p. 23.

³⁵ Idem, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 45.

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bewitchment of our intelligence by language".³⁶ The philosopher should point out nonsense when it appears, and the search for meaning must become his major occupation. As a case in point, Ayer asserts in the course of a discussion on the meaning of symbols:

[...] the view that I am taking is that the reason why this problem appears to defy solution is that there is really no problem to solve. We cannot find the 'other term of the relation of meaning', because the assumption that meaning is a relation which somehow unites a symbol with some other unspecified object is itself erroneous. What one is asking for when one seeks to know the meaning of a symbol is an explanation of the way in which the symbol is used.³⁷

The questions and problems of traditional philosophy can be dissolved rather than solved, by analyzing or reformulating them in various ways.

Thus philosophy does not produce propositions of its own. Directly, it has nothing to say about the world, and it is anything but an ontological science. It turns a purely logical analysis on the statements made by the empiriological disciplines [...] Such studies as these have a universal charter for the study of fact. Philosophy becomes not a 'doctrine' but an 'activity'.³⁸

³⁶ Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, p. 31.

³⁷ Alfred J. AYER, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, London, Macmillan and Co., 1947, p. 97.

³⁸ Vincent E. SMITH, Idea-Men of Today, Milwaukee, The Bruce Publishing Company, 1950, p. 134-135.

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Instead of wasting time on otiose speculative issues, the philosopher clarifies verbal confusions, punctures the pretensions of past philosophers, dissipates age-old problems, and manipulates symbols with mathematical virtuosity.

Viewed as analysis, philosophy deals with the language used in speaking about actual objects, and not with the objects themselves: it operates on the level of language rather than experience. Along with all this, there seems to go a feeling of intellectual superiority, a feeling of "How could these once respected figures of the past have been so blind?" — and equally a great sense of relief that metaphysics can safely be dismissed as nonsense. Nevertheless, there are certain modern analysts who seem ill at ease with this summary dismissal of metaphysics. Professor H.H. Price, in his inaugural address to the Aristotelian Society in 1945, said:

When we consider the long line of speculative metaphysicians from Plato to Whitehead, when we reflect that many of them were admittedly men of the very highest genius, can we really feel very comfortable about this conclusion that metaphysics is nonsense? Or if we do feel comfortable about it, may we not be the victims of temporal parochialism? Is it not more likely that such men were talking sense (in some good sense of the word 'sense'), than that the arguments which purport to prove that they were talking nonsense are correct?³⁹

³⁹ Henry H. PRICE, "Clarity is not Enough", in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Suppl., Vol. 19 (1945), p. 23.

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Mr. Ayer attempts to defend himself against the charge of iconoclasm by holding that the destructive element of logical positivism has been over-emphasized.

We do not maintain that philosophy should entirely 'shut up shop'. For when metaphysics is eliminated, analysis remains, and we claim that our conception of philosophizing as an activity of analysis accords with the majority of the great philosophers of the past.⁴⁰

Mr. Price readily concedes the latter point to Professor Ayer.

In all ages, philosophers have in fact been greatly concerned with words [...] I need only mention Socrates. If anyone was ever a 'linguistic analyst', surely Socrates was. No one was more concerned with the unravelling of linguistically generated muddles, the curing of 'headaches' arising from linguistic usages [...]⁴¹

Alfred J. Ayer, then, finds no place in his philosophical scheme for the science of metaphysics. He makes a sharp distinction between philosophy as he understands it, that is, as an activity of analysis, and metaphysics, "a game played with language".⁴² After all, if a philosophical

⁴⁰ Alfred J. AYER, "The Principle of Verifiability", in Mind, Vol. 45 (1936), p. 203.

⁴¹ Henry H. PRICE, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Vol. 19 (1945), p. 26.

⁴² Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, Philosophical Investigations tr. by G.E.M. Anscombe, 2nd ed., Oxford, Blackwell, 1958, p. 19.

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problem is one which arises "when language goes on holiday"⁴³ why should the philosopher take it seriously? The only conceivable role he can play is to recall language sternly from its gamboling, to correct its whimsicalities, to restrain its idiosyncracies, to make it serve "serious purposes", those of the physical sciences.

It is indeed misleading to draw a sharp distinction [...] between philosophy and science. What we should rather do is to distinguish between the speculative and the logical aspects, and assert that philosophy must develop into the logic of science.⁴⁴

Consequently, there is nothing left for those who profess to belong to the class designated by the standard expression "philosopher", other than to disregard what has been the specifying object behind the use of that appellation, and to concentrate upon discovering and exhibiting uses of traditionally philosophical terms, concepts and problems, and then positively investigate the actual, non-distorted uses of contentious and practically important expressions.

The theory whose goal is the eradication of metaphysics from the field of traditional philosophy is without doubt a bold one, one which no thoughtful philosopher would

⁴³ Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, Philosophical Investigations p. 19.

⁴⁴ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 153.

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attempt to elaborate without solid arguments. Alfred Jules Ayer is a serious and powerful thinker, although his early work does manifest a degree of unphilosophical brashness and impetuosity. He himself says about the first edition of Language, Truth and Logic,

Being in every sense a young man's book, it was written with more passion than most philosophers allow themselves to show, at any rate in their published work [...] I think now that much of its argument would have been more persuasive if it had not been presented in so harsh a form.⁴⁵

Our interest lies, of course, in the contents of Ayer's work. What is the basis for his claim to invalidate metaphysics as a branch of knowledge? What is the crux of his contention that metaphysics is meaningless? What is the scalpel he wields to cut out the cancer of metaphysics from the body of philosophy? We shall answer these questions by studying Ayer's personal methodological tool, the principle of verification. However, it is imperative to discuss first Professor Ayer's starting-point, the classification of propositions, since it is basic to his whole verificational theory of meaning.

⁴⁵ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 5.

CHAPTER II

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The metaphysician in the genuine pursuit of his traditional vocation, was interested in truth; whereas, "preoccupation with the theory of meaning could be described as the occupational disease of twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon and Austrian philosophy."¹ It is not now proper to ask whether a word is true, but it is highly proper to ask what a word means. To say, "Caesar crossed the Rubicon", is of interest both to the historian and to the logician of language. The first is concerned with the facts of truth in the case; the second wants to know what the statement means. Logical empiricism is not busied with the truth of fact, as we have seen; the whole region of truth, of fact, of reality, of knowing "what is the case"² in the world of outer experience, logical empiricism commits to modern physics. It wants primarily to clarify the language of the physicist by asking him what he means by his statements, and requiring him to answer by his own methods. "So it is a safe

¹ Gilbert RYLE, British Philosophy in the Mid-Century, A Cambridge Symposium, p. 239.

² Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, p. 31.

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conclusion to state that logical empiricism, wherever it is true to itself, takes words and sentences as its data."³

Professor Ayer, as a true logical positivist, also restricts the sphere of the philosopher's activity to that of the logical analysis of language. Language, then, is his datum; his starting-point is language.

[...] it is important that no one should be deceived [...] into supposing that the philosopher is engaged on an empirical or a metaphysical enquiry. We may speak loosely of him as analyzing facts, or notions, or even things. But we must make it clear that these are simply ways of saying that he is concerned with the definition of the corresponding words.⁴

The philosopher ought to engage his interest and his activity not in reality, but in rules, and more specifically, the rules of combination. What is it that the contemporary empiricist of Ayer's stamp seeks to combine by his logical machinery? His material for combination is not thought or sense experience, but propositions. Logical empiricism

works with the propositions which are the issue of empiriological research and [...] it questions the meanings of those propositions, with the same kind of method that justified their enunciation in the laboratory.⁵

³ Vincent E. SMITH, Idea-Men of Today, p. 137.

⁴ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 59.

⁵ Vincent E. SMITH, Idea-Men of Today, p. 136.

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The initial item of procedure in Ayer's positivistic analytical technique is the classification of all propositions into two, and only two, groups, which division is avowedly Humean. We shall, then, investigate first those views of Hume pertinent to our purpose, in order to trace as closely as possible their direct influence on the logical positivism of Alfred Ayer. Secondly, we shall study Ayer's starting-point.

1. Hume's Doctrine

It was through a long, complicated process of psychological analysis, that David Hume developed the theory of human cognition which became the basic postulate of his empiricism.

All the objects of human reason or inquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, relations of ideas, and matters of fact.⁶

The human mind has as its possible objects, then, only two categories of things: by "demonstrative reasoning", it may know relations of ideas; by "moral reasoning", matters of fact.

⁶ David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, p. 23.

a) Relations of Ideas

Demonstrative reasoning investigates the relations which exist between ideas. Here, the mind deals with the rules underlying its own operations, and disregards questions about real existence. Mathematical propositions belong to this class of objects of knowledge. "Of the first kind, are the sciences of geometry, algebra, and arithmetic".⁷ Hume insists that the truth of mathematical propositions depends solely and simply on thought, and requires no confirmation in experience. Mathematical statements are formal propositions which cannot possibly be refuted by experience, that is, whose truth is independent of their application. The relations therein asserted are necessary and yield absolute certainty, since a denial of them would entail a contradiction.

⁷ David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, p. 23. It is interesting to note that in his earlier work, Hume had written: "There remain, therefore, algebra and arithmetic as the only sciences, in which we can carry on a chain of reasoning to any degree of intricacy, and yet preserve a perfect exactness and certainty[...]. The reason why I impute any defect to geometry, is, because its original and fundamental principles are derived merely from appearances". A Treatise of Human Nature, p. 71.

b) Matters of Fact

Moral reasoning, reasoning concerning matters of fact, attempts to go beyond what is presented in sense perception in order to discover something about the existence and activity of objects that lie beyond experience. It relies on the relation between cause and effect.

All reasonings concerning matters of fact seem to be founded on the relation of cause and effect. By means of that relation alone we can go beyond the evidence of our memory and our senses.⁸

In other words, reasoning concerning matters of fact, as contrasted with relations of ideas, is causal inference. Or, to put the matter more concretely, in mathematics we have demonstration, and in the empirical sciences we have causal inference.

c) Validity of Causal Inference

It is supremely important, then, to study the role played by causal inference in the acquisition of knowledge, that is, to inquire into the legitimacy of our procedure when we pass, by means of causal inference, beyond the immediate testimony of the senses. This Hume does at great length; indeed his doctrine on this point is of prime meaning in his system. It is impossible, though, to

⁸ David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, p. 25.

reproduce his complete argument here, nor is it necessary or relevant. Suffice it to underscore this all-important point Hume claims to show that the principle of causality is neither intuitively certain nor demonstrable.

The relation of cause and effect, therefore, lacking the possibility of validation by abstract reason, can only be supported by the findings of experience. Now, sensible experience does not certify a necessary connection between two facts, but only their succession; for instance, a tactile sensation of heat always follows a visual sensation of fire. The psychological effect produced by repeated observation of such instances of constant conjunction is a habit, a propensity of the mind, the custom of forming an associative link, whereby the mind passes from one object to another. This habit, and this habit alone, enables us to pass beyond experience or observation. What guarantee have we of the validity of such an inference? The only ultimate answer Hume gives is empirical verification.

When it is asked, What is the nature of all our reasonings concerning matter of fact? the proper answer seems to be, that they are founded on the relation of cause and effect. When again it is asked, What is the foundation of all our reasonings and conclusions concerning that relation? it may be replied in one word, experience.⁹

⁹ David HUME, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, p. 32.

Knowledge concerning matters of fact, then, depending as it does on sensible verification, can never yield more than a high degree of probability, and causal inference can never surpass this intrinsic limitation. It follows that all supra-empirical thinking, relying of necessity on appeal to the causal relation to arrive at its conclusions, for example, those regarding the existence of the substantial world, the human soul, God, must also be subject to this crushing limitation.

'Tis therefore by experience only, that we can infer the existence of one object from that of another.¹⁰

2. Ayer's Doctrine

We saw that Hume's teaching on the questions of relations of ideas and of matters of fact is the fruit of an involved process of psychological analysis. The self-styled disciple, Alfred Jules Ayer, moves in a manner which we might describe as parallel to that of Hume, although on a different level. In the preface to the first edition of his main work, Language, Truth and Logic,¹¹ which "has in

¹⁰ David HUME, A Treatise of Human Nature, Part III, Sect. VI, p. 87.

¹¹ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic,

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Oxford since the end of the war [1945] acquired almost the status of a philosophic Bible",¹² we find the following announcement:

Like Hume, I divide all genuine propositions into two classes: those which, in his terminology, concern 'relations of ideas', and those which concern 'matters of fact'.¹³

Hume speaks of "objects of human reason"; Ayer deals with "propositions".

[...] the main difference is that whereas Hume uses a psychological terminology, the modern Positivists - at least in the latest phase of their thought - prefer a syntactical terminology.¹⁴

Professor Ayer himself makes his position quite explicit on this question of his approach to the problems of philosophy, as opposed to that of the traditional empiricists:

[...] it must be made clear that, in calling ourselves empiricists, we are not avowing a belief in any of the psychological doctrines which are commonly associated with empiricism [...] It could be established only by observation, and not by the purely logical considerations upon which our empiricism rests.¹⁵

¹² Cyril JOAD, A Critique of Logical Positivism, p.9.

¹³ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 31.

¹⁴ Henry H. PRICE, Hume's Theory of the External World, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1940, p. 222.

¹⁵ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 71-72.

Clearly, then, logical analysis is Ayer's methodological tool. He intends to probe into the meaning of language. In this regard, Ayer is very much the man of his century. In his introduction to a collection of essays entitled, The Revolution in Philosophy,¹⁶ which Ayer edited and to which he contributed, Gilbert Ryle declares: "The story of twentieth-century philosophy is very largely the story of this notion of sense or meaning".¹⁷ In the same work, we read:

The new philosophy is really an empiricism based on judgments or propositions, instead of being based on ideas. And this was an important advance, since propositions are complete units of thought, whereas ideas, like terms or separate words, are incomplete fragments.¹⁸

Let us return to Ayer's classification of propositions.

The former class [concerned with 'relations of ideas'] comprises the a priori propositions of logic and pure mathematics, and these I allow to be necessary and certain only because they are analytic [...]. Propositions concerning empirical matters of fact, on the other hand, I hold to be hypotheses, which can be probable but never certain.¹⁹

¹⁶ Alfred J. AYER (ed.), The Revolution in Philosophy, New York, St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1956.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁹ Alfred J. Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 31.

a) The Analytic A Priori Proposition

Whereas Hume counted only the propositions of mathematics in the class of relations of ideas, Ayer includes the propositions of logic, but otherwise he defines them in the same way, and labels them all "analytic a priori propositions".²⁰ Propositions are analytic when they contain truths directly evident to the intellect through a comparison or analysis of the ideas of the judgment, without the aid of any immediate sense-perception or logical reasoning; for example, "the whole is greater than one of its parts". In them, the predicate is always found to be contained in the subject, and an analysis of the subject will reveal the presence of the predicate. The predicate does not increase our knowledge of the subject because it is only explicative.

²⁰ This is obviously Kantian terminology. "In all judgments wherein the relation of a subject to the predicate is cogitated (I mention affirmative judgments only here;...), this relation is possible in two different ways. Either the predicate B belongs to the subject A, as somewhat which is contained (though covertly) in the conception A; or the predicate B lies completely out of the conception A, although it stands in connection with it. In the first instance, I term the judgment analytical, in the second, synthetical. Analytical judgments (affirmative) are therefore those in which the connection of the predicate with the subject is cogitated through identity; those in which this connection is cogitated without identity, are called synthetical judgments." Immanuel KANT, Critique of Pure Reason, New York, The Colonial Press, 1900, Introduction, Section IV, p. 7.

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For this reason, analytic propositions are without value for science.

Ayer is meticulous about showing 1) that analytic a priori propositions are necessary truths; 2) that analytic a priori propositions are devoid of factual content. If he were to fail in this, "the whole force of our attack on metaphysics would be destroyed."²¹ He first rejects J.S. Mill's contention that these truths are neither necessary nor certain, although he admits that his rejection is "somewhat dogmatic".²² He then proceeds to substantiate his claim to necessity and certainty for his analytic propositions, by examining cases in arithmetic, geometry and logic, in which they would seem to be confuted. He finds the claim unassailed whatever instances he chooses, and concludes:

The principles of logic and mathematics are true universally simply because we never allow them to be anything else. And the reason for this is that we cannot abandon them without contradicting ourselves, without sinning against the rules which govern the use of language, and so making our utterances self-stultifying. In other words, the truths of logic and mathematics are analytic propositions or tautologies.²³

²¹ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 73.

²² Ibid., p. 75.

²³ Ibid., p. 77.

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Tautologies do not give us any information about matters of fact. This is obvious and indisputable, since such propositions are not about matters of fact at all. Their usefulness lies solely in revealing concealed complexities. Furthermore, Ayer insists that the tautological order is not only arbitrary and completely independent of experience, but that it is also completely independent of the nature of the mind. There are absolutely no laws of thought. Even the laws of identity and non-contradiction are, according to Professor Ayer, purely arbitrary conventions, valid in their own right, and do not depend upon incorporation into a system.²⁴ In brief, they are valid in virtue of their form alone. The tautological makes for consistency in logical relationships. For this reason, tautologies are not pieces of nonsense, but give us a special kind of knowledge. Precisely because they say nothing about reality, they cannot be confuted and are, therefore, certain.

b) The Synthetic Proposition

The proposition dealing with matters of fact Professor Ayer calls synthetic.²⁵ A synthetic proposition is one

²⁴ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 81.

²⁵ Cf. footnote 20, p. 32.

in which the subject is not contained in the comprehension of the subject. The relation between the two is one of fact only, and this fact is a contingent fact. That the predicate actually belongs to the subject may be true; however, the connection is discovered not by an analysis of the subject and predicate, but by an appeal to fact and experience. Thus, says Ayer, "There are ants which have established a system of slavery" is a synthetic proposition.

For we cannot tell whether it is true or false merely by considering the definitions of the symbols which constitute it. We have to resort to actual observation of the behaviour of ants.²⁶

3. Summary

To sum up: Ayer divides the totality of genuine propositions into analytic a priori, and synthetic (we might add "a posteriori", but Ayer does not use the term). "[...] tautologies and empirical hypotheses form the entire class of significant propositions."²⁷ "[...] all propositions are either empirical or a priori".²⁸ This division is exhaustive. Any proposition outside the pale of these

²⁶ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 78-79.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 41.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 87.

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two classes, that is, any which does not belong to the tautological order, and does not express an empirical fact, is literally nonsensical. Herein, it is very easy to detect a pronounced Humean influence. Indeed, this teaching of Ayer is the faithful echo of David Hume's whose "excellent statement of the positivist's position"²⁹ is found as a conclusion to his Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.

Hume says:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.³⁰

Ayer comments:

What is this but a rhetorical version of our own thesis that a sentence which does not express either a formally true proposition or an empirical hypothesis is devoid of literal significance?³¹

The analytic proposition has perfect validity in virtue of its form alone independently of experience. It is certain because nothing can disprove it, since it does not deal with facts. Any information we obtain about reality must come

²⁹ Alfred J. AYER, Logical Positivism, p. 10.

³⁰ David HUME, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, p. 183.

³¹ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 54.

through the synthetic proposition. All sciences are made up of these propositions. It follows that, since logical positivism wishes to study meaningful sentences, and those only, the central preoccupation of its work will be synthetic statements.

The key question is consequently: How is the validity of this type of proposition tested? How can we distinguish it unfailingly from pseudo-propositions, from pure babbling? Ayer's answer is the following: "[...] the only sort of justification necessary or possible for self-consistent empirical propositions is empirical verification".³² This principle constitutes the core, the very heart of the logical positivism of Alfred Jules Ayer.

³² Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 49.

CHAPTER III

FORMULATION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF VERIFICATION

Mr. A.J. Ayer is far from apologetic or reticent in the presentation of the crucial theory of his philosophy. Indeed, his confidence in the power of his method is so great that he does not hesitate to proclaim that it provides "a definitive solution of the problems which have been the chief source of controversy between philosophers in the past".¹ He purposes to establish "beyond question"² by means of it, what the proper method of philosophical enquiry is. He is concerned with stating views so thoroughly his own, so natural to his mode of thinking, that he seems not to anticipate the possibility that any competent philosopher might differ with him. "The traditional disputes of philosophers are, for the most part, as unwarranted as they are unfruitful".³

The situation is the following. When there is linguistic expression, the question always arises: has this

¹ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 32.

² Ibid., p. 33.

³ Ibid., p. 33.

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linguistic expression meaning or has it not? Is it, perhaps, a pseudo-proposition, that is, "a series of words that seems to have the structure of a sentence but is in fact meaningless"?⁴ In other words, meaning has to be added to language and the problem seems to be in what way it can legitimately be added. The principle of verification has been proposed to settle the difficulty.

1. Early Formulations

Various forms of the principle of verification have been enunciated by philosophers interested in the question of meaning. One of the earliest attempts at a satisfactory formulation was made by Moritz Schlick, the founder of the Vienna Circle, for whom meaning meant a "kind of entity inherent in a sentence, and hidden in it like a nut in a shell - where it might be discovered".⁵ He puts forth the following definition: "The meaning of a proposition is the method of its verification".⁶ This was the embryonic, rudimentary tenet from which the original positivists'

⁴ Alfred J. AYER, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. 102.

⁵ Moritz SCHLICK, "Meaning and Verification", in The Philosophical Review, Vol. 45 (1936), p. 348.

⁶ Ibid., p. 349.

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speculations developed. It was the first link in a long chain which positivists have tried to forge and with which they planned to moor the boat of meaning. The great weakness of Schlick's link, however, is that his form of the verification principle required too much, was so exacting that it nullified the meaning of expressions which positivists were loath to segregate from the body of significant language. Another philosopher who wrote on the point was Mr. A.E. Blumberg. In Demonstration and Inference in the Sciences and Philosophy,⁷ referring to verification, he speaks of "empirical inference",⁸ and again, of "elucidations".⁹ Rudolf Carnap too attempted the feat: "[...] an expression of language has meaning [...] if we know how to use it in speaking about empirical facts, either actual or possible ones".¹⁰ Similarly, Professor W.T. Stace,¹¹ and Professor A.C. Ewing,¹² have studied the problem of verification. But let us come to Mr. Ayer.

⁷ The Monist, Vol. 42 (1932).

⁸ Ibid., p. 581.

⁹ Ibid., p. 584.

¹⁰ Rudolf CARNAP, Philosophy of Science, Baltimore, Williams and Wilkins, Publishers, 1937, p. 2.

¹¹ "Metaphysics and Meaning", in Mind, Vol. 44 (1935) p. [417]-438.

¹² "Meaninglessness", in Mind, Vol. 46 (1937), p. [347]-364.

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2. Modified Verification Principle

Ayer expresses the "fundamental contention"¹³ of his philosophy in the following words:

The criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability. 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.¹⁴

Ayer calls this a "modified verification principle"¹⁵, in allusion to the earlier unsuccessful efforts, some of which are mentioned above, at finding some acceptable wording of the principle, and he goes on immediately to make a distinction of prime importance. He differentiates between verifiability in practice, and verifiability in principle.¹⁶

a) Verifiability in practice

By practical verifiability, Ayer means the actual, physical possibility of a proposition being tested here and now. "The Yankees are playing baseball at the Stadium".

¹³ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 73.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

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What does practical verification of this proposition require? I can go to the Stadium; watch a game, which I can (if I know the rules) recognize as baseball; remark on the familiar uniform as belonging to the team I know as the Yankees, etc. This would be practical verification.

b) Verifiability in principle

Verifiability means that there exists at least "logically" the possibility of making observations to determine the truth or falsehood of the propositions enunciated. I need not be in a position to make them physically, at the present moment. I may lack the facilities which would enable me actually to carry out observations, but it is not impossible to conceive of making them.

c) Illustration

The example Mr. Ayer uses to illustrate the contrast between the two forms of verification, an example used by Moritz Schlick before him, is: "There are mountains on the farther side of the moon".¹⁷ This proposition is in practice unverifiable.

¹⁷ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 36.

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No rocket has yet been invented which would enable me to go and look at the farther side of the moon, so I am unable to decide the matter by actual observation.¹⁸

The incapacity of verification here is a matter of practical impossibility. The lack of means of verification is not a theoretical lack but a practical one. We simply do not possess the technical instruments to verify statements about the other side of the moon.¹⁹ "But I do know what observations would decide it for me, if as is theoretically conceivable, I were in a position to make them".²⁰ Therefore, although the proposition cited is practically unverifiable, it is verifiable in principle, and that is sufficient in Mr. Ayer's scheme to make it meaningful. He insists that verifiability is not a mere matter of the physical possibility of verification, much less of actual verification. Rather, verifiability refers only to the "logical" possibility of direct observation. To determine meaningfulness, one need only be able to conceive of observations which would confirm or deny the proposition.

¹⁸ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 36.

¹⁹ No doubt, if Mr. Ayer were writing Language, Truth and Logic now, he would use a different example, in view of the fact that scientists have succeeded in making photographic observations of the other side of the earth's satellite.

²⁰ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 36.

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d) Degrees of Practical Verifiability

Mr. Ayer deems it necessary to make a second distinction, one concerning the degree of practical verifiability of which a proposition is susceptible.

A proposition is said to be verifiable in the strong sense of the term, if, and only if, its truth could be conclusively established in experience. But it is verifiable, in the weak sense, if it is possible for experience to render it probable.²¹

We may gather from this that he wishes so to use "strongly verifiable" and "weakly verifiable" that "S is strongly verifiable" is to mean "S could be conclusively established in experience", and "S is weakly verifiable" is to mean "S could be rendered probable in experience".

3. Adoption of the "Weak Verifiability" Criterion

Alfred Ayer decides that the adoption of conclusive verifiability as a criterion would "prove too much",²² and he gives two reasons for his decision. First, statements of law, being universal by their very nature, would require an infinite series of observations to be established conclusively in experience. To verify "arsenic is poisonous" in this way, would entail testing for poison every sample

²¹ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 37.

²² Ibid., p. 37.

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of arsenic that ever has existed, is now in existence, and will ever exist. And that, he cannot even in principle conceive of doing. Yet, clearly, statements of general law are not nonsensical; they are not meaningless. Therefore, strong verification is to be discarded. Secondly, under this extreme form of the criterion, historical statements are condemned to meaninglessness. Obviously, it is utterly impossible in principle to carry out all the tests which would give conclusive assurance that, for example, Charlemagne was crowned Emperor in 800 A.D. Yet, to maintain such a statement to be nonsense is "unplausible to say the very least".²³ Ayer is convinced that to require conclusive verification, or even conclusive verifiability, as a test of meaningfulness for all statements of fact, would so narrow down the field of language that it would be impossible to make a significant statement of fact at all. Therefore, conclusive verification is impossible because to attempt it is self-stultifying, so Professor Ayer casts his vote for the weaker sense of verification, and decides to revise somewhat his initial formulation of the principle of verification.

²³ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 37.

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We say that the question that must be asked about any putative statement of fact is not, Would any observations make its truth or falsehood logically certain? but simply, Would any observations be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood?²⁴

As it stands, however, the suggested criterion is far too vague to be of use. Relevance is not a precise logical category, and, as Isaiah Berlin contends, "fantastic meta-physical systems" may choose to claim that observation data are "relevant" to their truth.²⁵ Such claims cannot be rebutted unless some precise meaning is assigned to the concept of relevance, which, because the word is used to convey an essentially vague idea, cannot be done. Mr. Ayer himself concedes that "the word 'relevant' is uncomfortably vague".²⁶ Thus, weak verification, designed to admit only general, and material-object statements, cannot be prevented from opening the gates for any proposition, however meaningless, to enter, provided that someone can be found to claim that a certain observation is in some sense relevant to it.

²⁴ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p.38.

²⁵ "Verification in Principle", in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Vol. 39 (1938-1939), p. 233.

²⁶ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 11.

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4. Elaboration of a More Rigorous Formula

As a criterion for distinguishing sense from nonsense, relevance plainly does not work: indeed, to accept it would amount to the abrogation of the principle of verification altogether. Professor A.J. Ayer, conscious of this, attempts to provide another, far more rigorous formulation of weak verification, which at first sight, fits the need more adequately. He says:

To make our position clearer, we may formulate it in another way. Let us call a proposition which records an actual or possible observation an experiential proposition. Then we may say that it is the mark of a genuine factual proposition, not that it should be equivalent to an experiential proposition, or any finite number of experiential propositions, but simply that some experiential propositions can be deduced from it in conjunction with certain other premises without being deducible from those other premises alone.²⁷

Ayer adds, "This criterion seems liberal enough". Unfortunately, it is a good deal too liberal, and does not seem to guarantee us against nonsense any better than the previous test. Even in this diluted form, the principle will not do.

Undaunted, Professor Ayer, in the introduction to the second edition of Language, Truth and Logic, tries some

²⁷ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 38.

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more verbal maneuvering. He decides to use the phrase "observation-statement" in place of "experiential proposition", to designate a statement which records an actual or possible observation.

In this version, then, the principle is that a statement is verifiable, and consequently meaningful, if some observation-statement can be deduced from it in conjunction with certain other premises, without being deducible from those other premises alone.²⁸

But the embarrassing difficulty remains: such a form of the verification principle seems to allow meaning to any statement whatsoever. Ayer himself admits the deficiency:

"[...] a criterion of meaning that allows such latitude as this is evidently unacceptable".²⁹ To emend the difficulty by leaving out the words about other premises would exclude hypotheticals from the class of empirical propositions and, therefore, make nonsense of scientific theories. No solution is available in that direction.

5. Final Form

So, Professor Ayer sets to work anew and makes valiant efforts to save his cherished principle by still another variation of its expression. Though quite lengthy

²⁸ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 11.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

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and involved, it requires quotation in full:

[...] a statement is directly verifiable if it is either an observation-statement, or is such that in conjunction with one or more observation-statements it entails at least one observation-statement which is not deducible from these other premises alone; [...] a statement is indirectly verifiable if it satisfies the following conditions: first, that in conjunction with certain other premises it entails one or more directly verifiable statements which are not deducible from these other premises alone; and secondly, that these other premises do not include any statement that is not either analytic, or directly established as indirectly verifiable. And I can now reformulate the principle of verification as requiring of a literally meaningful statement, which is not analytic, that it should be either directly or indirectly verifiable, in the foregoing sense.³⁰

It is interesting to note that fellow-positivists are not satisfied that Ayer has successfully corrected his principle. Carl Hempel, in "Problems and Changes in the Empiricist Criterion of Meaning,"³¹ is of the opinion that the emended criterion is still too broad, allowing significance to any conjunction whatever. Professor A. Church makes the same point in his review of Language, Truth and Logic.³² Karl R. Popper, in his essay, "Philosophy of Science: A Personal Report", reflects:

³⁰ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 13.

³¹ Revue Internationale de Philosophie, Vol. 9 (1950), p. 50.

³² Journal of Symbolic Logic, Vol. 14 (1949), p. 52-53.

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The original proposal of verifiability as criterion of meaning was at least clear, simple, and forceful. The modification and shifts which were now introduced were the very opposite.³³

The verification principle, then, becomes more and more difficult to pin down, and Ayer hedges more and more. He has told us that a statement is factually meaningful (non-analytic), if, and only if, it is either directly or indirectly verifiable. But this becomes shortly,

[...] unless it [a factual statement] satisfied the principle of verification, it would not be capable of being understood in the sense in which either scientific hypotheses or common-sense statements are habitually understood.³⁴

All that this means is that unless a proposition has the sort of verification a scientific or common-sense proposition has, it will not be a scientific or common-sense proposition. Thus, John Wisdom writes that by an analysis of the verification principle, we arrive at this complementary platitude, that "every sort of statement has its own sort of meaning".³⁵

³³ British Philosophy in the Mid-Century, A Cambridge Symposium, p. 165.

³⁴ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 16.

³⁵ Note on the second edition of Language, Truth and Logic, in Mind, Vol. 57 (1948), p. 418.

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Indeed, on Ayer's own admission, this supposedly self-evident criterion of meaning is not all it seemed to be. To quote Professor Ayer:

In putting forward the principle of verification as a criterion of meaning, I do not overlook the fact that the word "meaning" is commonly used in a variety of senses, and I do not wish to deny that in some of these senses a statement may properly be said to be meaningful even though it is neither analytic nor empirically verifiable.³⁶

And again,

It is indeed open to anyone to adopt a different criterion of meaning and so to produce an alternative definition which may very well correspond to one of the ways in which the word "meaning" is commonly used.³⁷

This is a far cry from the self-assured proclamation already quoted: "With this we complete the overthrow of speculative philosophy".³⁸ Can the principle of verification, based on empiricist postulates, become an adequate instrument for the overthrow of metaphysics? We do not wish to present here what seems a conclusive answer to this searching question. Let us merely give Mr. Ayer's own testimony:

³⁶ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 15.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 48.

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[...] although I should still defend the use of the criterion of verifiability as a methodological principle, I realize that for the effective elimination of metaphysics it needs to be supported by detailed analyses of particular metaphysical arguments.³⁹

A frank and honest admission to be sure.

Now, in justice to Professor Ayer, we must ascertain whether in his philosophical writings published since 1946, there is any evidence of his having modified his principle of verification. In a review of Ayer's Philosophical Essays (essays written in 1945 and 1953), Father Frederick Copleston says:

If one takes a broad point of view, it is doubtless true to say that Professor Ayer's outlook has remained fundamentally the same.⁴⁰

Ayer has mellowed but not changed. He is more cautious; he shows a greater readiness to consider other people's points of view. However,

He still believes that philosophical problems are in some sense problems of language. He still maintains the principle of verifiability as a methodological tool.⁴¹

A simple reading of Philosophical Essays will confirm Copleston's judgment. In other books or essays belonging

³⁹ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 16.

⁴⁰ The Month, New Series, Vol. 9 (1955), p. 47.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 47.

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to the period of 1954 on, Ayer either omits mention of his principle, or assumes a stand identical with that which we have just outlined.

From Alfred J. Ayer's view, the meaning-dogma has been elevated to its throne and any statement which fails to meet its demands must forfeit its right to factual meaning. Of importance to note is that, by means of the verification principle, Ayer purports to strain out factual statements from all others. The residue is made up of tautologies and nonsense. But just how successfully is this separation accomplished? Exactly how does Ayer, followed by other logical positivists, decide which statements are literally meaningful and which are not? That is the point we shall now attempt to elucidate, by giving concrete examples of their linguistic techniques.

CHAPTER IV

APPLICATION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF VERIFICATION

It might well be that the manifold attempts made at casting and recasting the verification principle into an acceptable mold, have blurred its basic meaning, so a re-statement of it in clear, unadorned terms will not be redundant. The Ayerian principle of verification is this: all propositions about material things that are significant are ultimately reducible to propositions about actual or possible sense-data. Statements containing words such as "table" or "chair", if they are meaningful, are replaceable by equivalent statements which omit these expressions and refer only to actual or possible sensory observations.¹ Mr. Alfred Ayer presents his verificational theory of meaning as a full-fledged epistemological theory.

¹ In Ayer's terminology, a sentence is any form or sequence of words that is grammatically significant, regardless of literal meaning. Any declarative sentence, whether or not it is literally significant, expresses a statement, and any two mutually translatable sentences are regarded as expressing the same statement. When sentences are literally meaningful, the meaning content is labeled a proposition. "In general, we use the word 'proposition' [...] whenever we are concerned, not with the precise form of an expression, or the fact that it belongs to a particular language, but with its meaning. Consequently, we speak of propositions, and not sentences, as true or false." Alfred J. AYER, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. 102.

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For it is easy to see that the purpose of a 'theory of truth' is simply to describe the criteria by which the validity of the various kinds of propositions are determined.²

It is this theory whose application we shall now study, and since it has been adopted and used by many empiricists other than its author, we shall not confine ourselves to examples from the latter's writings.

Analytical propositions are exempt from testing, that is, need not have the verification principle applied to them, since they are meaningful and certain by virtue of their form alone. All other statements will be dealt with in the following order:

1. Basic, ostensive or protocol propositions;
2. Propositions about material things;
3. Metaphysical propositions.

1. Basic Propositions

Mr. Ayer identifies basic, ostensive or protocol propositions as those which refer "solely to the content of a single experience".³ In this first class, he places the verbal expression of individual sensations, such as "I am cold", or "this is green", which record immediate

² Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 87.

³ Ibid., p. 10.

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experiences. Many analysts maintain that such propositions are not mere hypotheses but are absolutely certain, since they cannot be confuted by subsequent experience. In the earlier phase of his thought, Ayer disagreed and held adamantly

[...] not merely that no ostensive propositions ever are expressed, but that it is inconceivable that any ostensive propositions ever should be expressed.⁴

[...] if Von Juhos wishes to maintain that some special sacrosanctity attaches to propositions which purport to be records of our immediate experiences, I think that he is wrong.⁵

By 1946, Mr. Ayer had revised his position, however, and allowed that basic propositions are not hypothetical.

[...] I should now agree with those who say that propositions of this kind are 'in corrigible', assuming that what is meant by their being incorrigible is that it is impossible to be mistaken about them except in a verbal sense.⁶

For, as L. Susan Stebbing points out, if I am looking at a patch which is not a borderline case of colour but is clearly red, then when I say "this is red", it would be absurd to say that I am not sure that what I am seeing is red.

⁴ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 91.

⁵ IDEM, "Verification and Experience", in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Vol. 37 (1936-1937), p. 155.

⁶ IDEM, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 10.

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"I think that I should then also be using the word 'this' correctly, and that 'This is red' would be incorrigible".⁷

After all, [the observer] is the final authority on the way things look to him, and what criterion is there for deciding how things look to him except the way that he assesses them?⁸

It would seem absurd to ask someone how he knew that he was in pain or how he knew that what he was seeing looked to him to be of such and such a colour. For what better answer could he give than that these just were the experiences he was having?⁹

Of course, Ayer contends, these statements are almost sterile of meaning; the guarantee they provide is almost useless. For, in any given case, "it would operate only for a single person and only for the fleeting moment at which he was having the experience in question".¹⁰ Basic propositions, it remains, are accepted as certain. They refer solely to the content of a single experience, and "what may be said to verify them conclusively is the occurrence of the experience to which they uniquely refer."¹¹

⁷ Critical notice on the first edition of Language, Truth and Logic, in Mind, Vol. 45 (1936), p. 361.

⁸ Alfred J. AYER, The Problem of Knowledge, London, Pelican Books, 1957, p. 65.

⁹ Ibid., p. 69.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

¹¹ IDEM, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 10.

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2. Propositions about Material Things

The second category of sentences to be tested is that including all statements made regarding material things. Professor Ayer gives a very simple example of the application of his principle to this class in his Demonstration of the Impossibility of Metaphysics.

Let us assume that someone says of my cat that it is corylous. I fail to understand him and enquire what circumstances would make it true to say that the cat was corylous. He replies 'its having blue eyes'. I conclude that in the sense in which he uses the word corylous, 'X is corylous' means 'X has blue eyes'.¹²

If, however, the first speaker can give no indication or description of the situation which verifies the proposition when something is called corylous, the assertion is meaningless. Should the person protest that he does mean something but that his meaning cannot be established by a mere observation, we may admit that he has certain feelings connected in some way with the emission of the sound "corylous". We might even find these feelings and their expression interesting.

¹² Alfred J. AYER, Mind, Vol. 43 (1934), p. 337-338.

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But he does not thereby make any assertion about the world. He utters a succession of words, but they do not form a genuine proposition [...]. In itself, it has no sense.¹³

Another good illustration is found in Metaphysics and Meaning. The author first comments - as a good empiricist - that any statement a man makes about the external world must be interpreted in the long run, in terms of sensible experience. It must be analysable into statements each of which sets forth a possible or actual experience. Any part of it which is not so analysable, cannot be said to have meaning.

Thus if I say, 'This is a wooden table', this statement means that I am now seeing a certain oblong coloured patch, that if I touch it I shall receive a tactile feeling of resistance in my fingers, that if I tap it it will emit a sound, if I cut it open I shall receive certain visual sensations characteristic of unvarnished wood, that if I walk across the room I shall see the other side of it, and so on.¹⁴

It is said in effect that the meaning of the statement consists in these possible experiences for myself, and presumably for other people in the same circumstances. Furthermore, these very same experiences would constitute the verification of the statement.

¹³ Alfred J. AYER, Mind, Vol. 43 (1934), p. 338.

¹⁴ William T. STACE, "Metaphysics and Meaning", in Mind, Vol. 44 (1935), p. 420.

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Hence the verification of the statement would consist in bringing to actuality the very same experiences the assertion of whose possibility constitutes its meaning. From whence it may be concluded that the meaning of the statement is identical with the method of its verification.¹⁵

If instead of using the terms "wooden table", the speaker had said "cotilaginous table", he would be asked to make himself clear by describing some possible sensations which in certain circumstances might be received from the table. If he could to so, and also assert that the character of yielding such experiences was what he meant by the term "cotilaginous", I would understand his statement. He would have succeeded in communicating to me a meaning for his word. But if this proved impossible, then I should be unable to recognize the difference between "cotilaginous" and "non-cotilaginous", and the word would be a meaningless noise.

My conclusion is, then, that we can have no reason to believe in the truth of any set of empirical propositions unless at least one of them can be directly verified; and that, for a proposition to be directly verifiable, it is necessary that the meaning of the sentence which expresses it should be determined by correlation with some observable state of affairs.¹⁶

¹⁵ William T. STACE, "Metaphysics and Meaning", in Mind, Vol. 44 (1935), p. 420.

¹⁶ Alfred J. AYER, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. 111.

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Modern philosophers seem fascinated not only by statements about some concrete, singular thing, as in the examples shown above, but also by the general question, "What is a material thing?" and many have considered it at length. Questions of this nature abound in traditional philosophy. They seem to be questions of fact, but are not; they are merely requests for definitions of the symbols employed.

If one can define accurately all the conceivable experimental phenomena which the affirmation or denial of a concept could imply, one will have therein a complete definition of the concept, and there is absolutely nothing more in it.¹⁷

Accordingly, "What is a material object?" means only "How can propositions about material objects be translated into propositions about sense-contents?" As a matter of fact, the introduction of the term "material thing" into Ayer's philosophy is a mere linguistic convenience; for, his theory, following Bertrand Russell's, is that material things are "logical constructions" out of sense-data. A table, for example, is not one existent entity denoted by the symbol "table", but a multiplicity of entities called sense-data or "sense-contents". Logical constructions are not fictitious beings. To say that a table is a logical construction

¹⁷ Charles PEIRCE, "What Pragmatism Is", in The Monist, Vol. 15 (1905), p. 162-163.

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out of sense-contents is not a factual statement. It is a "linguistic assertion, to the effect that the symbol "table" is defined in terms of certain symbols which stand for sense-contents".¹⁸ The justification for equating material things with sensations is this:

[...] we know that it must be possible to define material things in terms of sense-contents, because it is only by the occurrence of certain sense-contents that the existence of any material thing can be in the least degree justified.¹⁹

Two conclusions of capital importance in Ayer's philosophical scheme flow from the above theory.

1) Since verifiability in sense experience is equated with meaning, a proposition will have only so much meaning as it affords possibilities for verification. Now, it is logically impossible to conceive of exhausting all the possibilities of verification, that is, of carrying out all the tests which would guarantee the meaning or the truth (no distinction is made between truth and meaning) of a statement; therefore, it follows that an empirical proposition is never absolutely certain. There is always the possibility that subsequent experience will contradict past or present experience. Synthetic, a priori propositions

¹⁸ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 53. ⁵⁴

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 53.

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are thus ruled out completely. An empirical proposition can never be more than a hypothesis; it can never yield absolute, incontrovertible certainty.

Of what use, then, are empirical hypotheses? The function of an empirical hypothesis is "to enable us to anticipate the course of our sensations".²⁰ Each additional experiment carried out in an effort to test a hypothesis, increases its probability, that is, "increases the degree of confidence with which it is rational to entertain the hypothesis".²¹

Every synthetic proposition is a rule for the anticipation of future experience, and it is distinguished in content from other synthetic propositions by the fact that it is relevant to different situations.²²

ii) Since verifiability in sense experience is the sine qua non criterion of meaning (keeping in mind the exceptions already dealt with), a proposition not so verifiable simply has no claim to meaningfulness; that is, all propositions which are not analytic, basic, or empirically verifiable, say nothing, are empty noise, "flatus vocis", meaningless babbling. This conclusion represents the apogee

²⁰ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 97.

²¹ Ibid., p. 101.

²² Ibid., p. 101.

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of Alfred Ayer's thought. Indeed, the ultimate goal of Ayer's philosophical work so far seems undoubtedly to be the elimination of metaphysics from the realm of meaningful speech. This purpose has now been reached: metaphysical statements are meaningless.

[...] as tautologies and empirical hypotheses form the entire class of significant propositions, we are justified in concluding that all metaphysical assertions are nonsensical.²³

3. Metaphysical Propositions

This status of meaninglessness which metaphysical propositions have attained by default, that is, by failing to satisfy the principle of verification, we shall now examine from a positive angle.

Ayer defines a metaphysical sentence as "a sentence which purports to express a genuine proposition, but does, in fact, express neither a tautology nor an empirical hypothesis".²⁴ It is a pseudo-proposition, "a series of words which may seem to have the structure of a sentence but is in fact meaningless".²⁵ It is not necessary, says Mr. Ayer,

²³ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 41.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

²⁵ IDEM, "Demonstration of the Impossibility of Metaphysics", in Mind, Vol. 43 (1934), p. [335].

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to take a list of metaphysical terms such as the Absolute, the Unconditional, the Ego, and so forth, and prove each of them to be meaningless: for it follows from the task metaphysics sets itself that all its assertions must be nonsense.²⁶

A metaphysical enquiry is a search for a reality underlying or transcending the phenomena which the special sciences study. Metaphysics attempts to describe something lying beyond experience, and therefore, any proposition which would be verified by empirical observation is by that very fact, not metaphysical.

But what no observation could verify is not a proposition. The fundamental postulate of metaphysics "There is a super-(or -hinter) phenomenal reality" is itself not a proposition. For there is no observation or series of observations we could conceivably make by which its truth or falsehood would be determined. It may seem to be a proposition, having the sensible form of a proposition. But nothing is asserted by it.²⁷

In every case where we have a series of words which has the appearance of good grammatical structure, we must consider what circumstances would determine whether it is true or false. If this cannot be done,

the series of words in question does not express a genuine proposition at all, but is as much a piece of nonsense as 'the moon is the square root of three', or 'Lenin or coffee how'.²⁸

²⁶ Alfred J. AYER, "Demonstration of the Impossibility of Metaphysics", in Mind, Vol. 43 (1934), p. 339.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 338.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 338.

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Again we detect clear Humean overtones:

When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but inquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion.²⁹

Mr. Ayer does not claim, of course, that all metaphysicians knowingly and willingly write nonsense. He expends considerable effort in showing that many so-called traditional philosophical problems are the fruit of grammatical errors. In fact, with all logical positivists, he holds that the thorniest metaphysical enigmas are reducible to purely linguistic problems. The task of the philosopher is to analyse away the errors which up to now, have masqueraded as genuine problems. A typical example is provided by the problem of substance. Is this a question of vital importance, or is it not rather a verbal shadow, a metaphysician's dream with words?

As we have seen, the logical positivist "thing" is composed of nothing more than the properties which, in ordinary language, it is said to have.

²⁹ David HUME, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, p. 20.

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What would commonly be called a 'thing' is nothing but a bundle of co-existing qualities such as hardness, redness, etc.³⁰

There are no substances distinct from the experientible qualities; there is nothing behind the barrier of knowable attributes. The idea that behind the attributes or surface qualities there exists a hidden substratum has been produced by the language we use, not by the things perceived.

It happens to be the case that we cannot, in our language, refer to the sensible properties of a thing without introducing a word or phrase which appears to stand for the thing itself as opposed to anything which may be said about it. And, as a result of this, those who are infected by the primitive superstition that to every name a single real entity must correspond assume that it is necessary to distinguish logically between the thing itself and any, or all, of its sensible properties.³¹

Bertrand Russell has put it this way:

'Substance' [...] is a metaphysical mistake, due to transference to the world-structure of the structure of sentences composed of a subject and a predicate.³²

It would seem that the technique designed to destroy the transference and cure the linguistic delusion consists of

³⁰ Bertrand RUSSELL, An Inquiry Into Meaning and Truth, New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1940, p. 120.

³¹ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 42.

³² Bertrand RUSSELL, A History of Western Philosophy, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1945, p. 202.

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reframing the language in such a way that it will no longer offer the temptation to make the transference. Precisely that remedy has been suggested. Whenever the necessity arises in common speech to mention a thing as having a certain quality C,

we should say instead, that C itself exists in that place, and that the 'thing' is to be replaced by the collection of qualities existing in the place in question. Thus C becomes a name, not a predicate.³³

Whether or not this juggling with words solves any problem at all, is not our concern here. We are merely trying to show that for logical positivists, substance is not an existing entity; the assertion of the existence of substance can be ascribed to the mistaken belief that, to every word or group of words that can serve as the grammatical subject of a sentence, there must be a real entity corresponding. A real problem in metaphysics has been solved, or rather dissolved, by a reduction of it to linguistics.

It must be noted that Mr. Ayer's use of the term "metaphysical" covers all non-experiential and non-analytic statements, including those of aesthetics and ethics. His theory in regard to the latter is consistent with his

³³ Bertrand RUSSELL, An Inquiry Into Meaning and Truth, p. 122.

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empiricism as a whole. Statements of value are significant if they are scientific; if not, they have no literal sense. They are so many expressions of emotion and can be termed neither true nor false. This explains why we did not consider these statements of value in a class by themselves, but studied them in the bulk of metaphysical propositions.

It should be evident from all we have said concerning the principle of verification and its application, that Alfred Jules Ayer's philosophy stands or falls on the strength or weakness of this principle.

His attack on metaphysics is valid if the verification theory of meaning has validity; if the principle fails as a criterion of meaning, his attack falls wide of its target. Our position is that the principle of verification, whatever its originality, whatever the forcefulness with which it is propounded, is not a valid criterion of meaning, and cannot displace the mighty queen of the sciences.

CHAPTER V

CRITICISM OF THE PRINCIPLE OF VERIFICATION

The contemporary philosophical world seems to be largely divided into those who blindly and uncritically swallow whole the verificational theory of meaning as the latest gospel from heaven, and those who complacently ignore it, oblivious apparently to the seriousness of their position.¹ The former lack judgment; the latter are asleep.

It is in an effort to escape from this Scylla and Charybdis of present-day British philosophy that we will now apply a critical scrutiny to the principle of verification as evolved in the writings of Mr. Alfred Jules Ayer.

1. Positive Contribution of the Verificationists

It is to be emphasized at the outset that the analytical school of philosophy, of which the criterion of meaning is the pivot, has furnished some valuable assets to the philosophy of our day. It does not represent a new system of philosophical thought — this would be a betrayal of its loftiest ambitions — but it has furthered a critical attitude which, combined with inventiveness and imagination, is the basic condition for a sensible approach to the

¹ W.T. STACE, "Metaphysics and Meaning", in Mind, Vol. 44 (1935), p. 419.

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practical problems of the present time, and to scientific investigation. Like most reformers, the analysts make some over-exuberant claims; yet, it remains true that, like most reformers, they eliminate much that sorely requires elimination.

One real service they may well perform is to help in clearing away the debris of Cartesian rationalism. When they reject gratuitous, a prioristic metaphysical reasoning, we must heartily agree. And there seems little doubt that this is the prime target of their demand that every utterance be verifiable in experience.²

The work of Alfred Ayer and other philosophical analysts has led to the appearance of new points of view as regards philosophical questions. The school deserves admiration for its firm resolution to study philosophy in a scientific manner, and for its technical accomplishments in logic and semantics. One of its great claims to merit is its insistence on clear definitions. Much of the practice of these philosophers contains valuable insights as well as praiseworthy strivings for precision of expression in the statement and solution of philosophical problems.

² Marc F. GRIESBACH, "The Analysts and the Nature of Philosophy", in Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, Vol. 34 (1960), p. 214.

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When the analyst approaches such problems with clinical precision allied with the vigor of one who believes himself to be blazing a trail, he compels all others to reflect again, perhaps more carefully, on all too familiar themes.³

The analyst deserves praise for insisting on the qualities characteristic of science: "[...] clarity and consistency, testability and adequacy, [...] and objectivity".⁴ He is at his best when he ceases to pursue the destruction of existing systems, and concentrates on the elucidation of language, which he claims as his first duty.

[...] we do not have to begin with an existing philosophical knot, and stop as soon as it seems to have come untied; we may examine language in the spirit of pure research, describing and ordering its features with no other essential aim than to do just this.⁵

Unfortunately, most analytic philosophers, Ayer among them, do not confine their efforts to the linguistic sphere.

[...] in spite of the great merits of the school, it suffers from a certain narrowness and blindness for some problems of considerable importance.⁶

³ Francis M. TYRRELL, in a review of Ayer's The Problem of Knowledge, in The New Scholasticism, Vol. 32 (1958), p. 410.

⁴ H. FEIGL, "Logical Empiricism", in Twentieth Century Philosophy, ed. by D.D. Runes, New York, The Philosophical Library, 1943, p. 376.

⁵ Alfred J. AYER, The Revolution in Philosophy, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1956, p. 115.

⁶ Victor KRAFT, The Vienna Circle, p. 195.

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2. Status of the Principle

Holding first place among the questions left unanswered by contemporary logical positivism, is the status of the verification principle itself, or rather of the proposition in which it is expressed. Since Ayer devised the principle as a yardstick whereby the meaning of all propositions without exception is to be measured, surely it is rational to expect that the principle should itself satisfy the conditions it lays down. It does not.

It amounts to philosophical murder and suicide - for the very 'principle of verification' is, itself, unverifiable in terms of the required space-time verifications.⁷

On logical positivist principles, a proposition is meaningful if it is either a) empirical, or b) analytic. Ayer no doubt intended that his criterion be considered meaningful (he certainly considered it so); therefore, the principle of verification is necessarily empirical or analytic a priori.

Is it an empirical, that is, a synthetic statement? It would seem to be so, in so far as it purports to give

⁷ Robert G. MILLER, C.S.B., "The Empirical Dilemma: Either Metaphysics or Nonsense", in Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, Vol. 29 (1955), p. 175.

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actual information about empirical reality, and so be subject to justification by actual or possible sense-data. However, Mr. Ayer nowhere indicates what sense experiences would verify the principle that the meaning of a statement is wholly verifiable in terms of sense experience. Besides, all knowledge other than the tautological lies within the realm of empirical science, and is obtained by induction. The verification principle should be thus obtained. The reading of Ayer's works reveals no such process being used; Ayer does not attempt to establish his principle inductively.

I conclude that the verification principle is not a principle of the kind to which these criteria apply, and that it does not, therefore, conform to the conditions which Ayer lays down.⁸

Again, the verification principle is descriptive, that is, it is supposed to provide us with a description of meaning. This is a further reason why, to our mind, it ought to be regarded as an empirical principle. But, if it is empirical it is a hypothesis, shares in the uncertainty of all empirical hypotheses, and thus could not be held to be more than probable. Yet, Ayer is sure of his position.

⁸ Cyril JOAD, A Critique of Logical Positivism, p. 66.

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[...] there is nothing in the nature of philosophy to warrant the existence of conflicting philosophical 'schools'. And I attempt to substantiate this by providing a definitive solution of the problems which have been the chief sources of controversy between philosophers in the past.⁹

There is no indication of doubt or admission of probability there. In any case, Mr. Ayer categorically declares: "[...] I wish the principle of verification itself to be regarded not as an empirical hypothesis [...]"¹⁰

The other possibility that Ayer's initial classification of propositions warrants, is that the principle is a tautological statement, an a priori proposition. Is it, then, a tautology? It would seem to be such, since Ayer states that he regards it as a definition¹¹, and a definition in his system is a tautology. However, this interpretation opens the door to serious difficulties. Tautologies,

[...] though they may serve to guide us in our empirical search for knowledge, do not in themselves contain any information about any matter of fact.¹²

They make no assertion concerning the empirical world.

⁹ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 32.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 16.

¹² Ibid., p. 86-87.

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Since no empirical principle is used in addition to the verification principle as a premise of logical positivist arguments about verification, it seems to follow that the whole structure [...] consists of tautologies.¹³

Yet, logical positivists, Mr. Ayer in particular, will refuse to concede that they express no truth of fact at all. So,

[...] the view that the verification principle is a tautology is one which logical positivism cannot maintain consistently.¹⁴

Apparently, Ayer was conscious of the problems raised by the attempt to classify the principle of verification into either of the two logical positivist categories of meaningful propositions, for he says:

A favourite argument of those who wish to defend metaphysics against the logical positivists' attack is that the verification principle is itself not verifiable. And, of course, it is not; it was not meant to be. It was put forward as a definition, not as an empirical statement of fact. But it is not an arbitrary definition.¹⁵

However, there is definitely no foundation in Ayer's philosophy for a definition that is not arbitrary. According to him, a definition is an arbitrary combination of words ("our definitions of things are not immutable"¹⁶), while an

¹³ C.E.M. JOAD, A Critique of Logical Positivism, p. 69.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 69.

¹⁵ Alfred J. AYER, The Revolution in Philosophy, p. 75.

¹⁶ IDEM, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 95.

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empirical hypothesis is a combination based on experience. A definition that is not arbitrary, in so far as it is not arbitrary, must be based on sense experience to have meaning. The problem has surely not been solved by the verbal maneuvering of calling the principle of verification a non-arbitrary definition.

It is essential for Mr. Ayer's philosophy that the principle of verification be a necessary truth. It is also imperative that it should have some experimental basis. Unfortunately for Mr. Ayer, these two necessities cannot be reconciled by him. The only possible cogent conclusion from all that precedes on the question of the status of the principle, is the following:

Since the principle of verification is not a tautology and, as an absolutely universal principle, cannot possibly be verified in accordance with its own demands, it appears to be, on logical positivist grounds, a metaphysical and meaningless statement. The logical positivists have not yet found a completely satisfactory way of evading this difficulty.¹⁷

The verification principle is itself, then, a metaphysical statement concerning the nature of reality, a metaphysics of empiricism dressed up in twentieth-century clothing. It would not be unfair to say that Ayer, despite

¹⁷ Denis J.B., HAWKINS, "Inquest on Logical Positivism", in The Month, New Series, Vol. 5 (1951), p. 206.

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his theoretical aversion to metaphysics, manifests in practice a more or less disguised metaphysical position of his own. Indeed, the positivist cannot help formulating some theory of the universe, some world view, to serve as the foundation stone of his views on science, history, psychology, ethics and theology. Ayer's adoption of Russell's theory of "logical constructions" by which he reduces mind and matter to sense-contents, is the substitution of one metaphysics for another. Instead of the doctrine of substance, he holds a theory of sense-data, and the latter he makes the ultimate constituents of reality. Is this theory not metaphysical? Ayer claims, of course, that his position is a logical one, not an ontological one.

For my own part, however, I feel rather doubtful about the efficacy of this escape from the accusation of proposing a metaphysical theory [...]¹⁸

Positivism can find no justification of the verification principle without appealing to a metaphysics. It destroys metaphysics by means of a metaphysics, and therefore destroys itself, because it includes in the realm of nonsense the philosophical principles on which its own conclusions depend.

¹⁸ F. COPLESTON, S.J., Contemporary Philosophy, p. 10-11.

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It is now clear that Logical Positivism cannot eliminate metaphysics [...] and that it cannot establish the logical foundations of science without alteration of the principles absolutely essential to its teaching.¹⁹

If this most distinctive and most essential principle of logical positivism proves useless, positivism, as a philosophy of the real, can only die of frustration.²⁰

3. Other Objections to the Principle

a) Arbitrariness - Sensism

Suppose now, we ask the modern positivist disciple of Ayer whether or not his principle of verification is arbitrary. He would explain that the criterion is an arbitrary convention about what he understands by meaning and, as such, requires no justification. But if this is his stand, the positivist is excused from having to prove his theory

only at the expense of admitting that there is no more reason for accepting it than there is for accepting any theory whatever.²¹

¹⁹ J.R. WEINBERG, An Examination of Logical Positivism, p. 199.

²⁰ James A. DUNNEEN, "The Course of Logical Positivism", in The Modern Schoolman, Vol. 34 (1956), p. 21.

²¹ A.C. EWING, "Meaninglessness", in Mind, Vol. 46 (1937), p. 351.

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This is what positivists do: they define knowledge as they please, and declare dogmatically that whatever does not satisfy their definition of knowledge must be nonsense.

Logical positivism invents a notion of what it wishes to take as true knowledge, and then says that nothing can be true knowledge which does not fit that notion.²²

Some analysts have tried to shield themselves from the charge of using arbitrary presuppositions at the core of their thought. Alfred Ayer, however, in an address to the 1959 meeting of the Aristotelian Society, strongly maintained that linguistic philosophers are committed to some form of the verification principle as a *sine qua non* starting-point. Ayer says:

[...] from what else does it follow that the analysis of an empirical statement is yielded by a description of the observable situation in which it holds?²³

As Ayer sees it, there cannot be a descriptive philosophy without presuppositions; but, to identify verifiability with verifiability by sense experience, to limit the real to the sensible, is an arbitrary assumption which begs the whole question of metaphysics from the start. To assert that the

²² Johannes MESSNER, Ethics and Facts, London, B. Herder Book Co., 1952, p. 301.

²³ Alfred J. AYER, "Phenomenology and Linguistic Analysis", in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supp. Vol. 32 (1959), p. 122-123.

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only true knowledge is reducible to sense knowledge, is implicitly to assert that the only real is sensible. This assertion Ayer does not and cannot prove. It is his initial act of faith.

When one scans closely the verbiage by which the anti-metaphysician seeks to support his precious principle, one discovers what Maritain terms "the positivist superstition concerning positive science".²⁴ What has no meaning for the positive scientist, simply has no meaning at all. The creation of the positivist criterion of meaning delimits for us a legitimate area where we can speak of knowledge, and whatever is outside this privileged zone cannot pass for knowledge.

Outside this domain is the inexpressible realm of feeling, of formless desires and satisfactions, immediate experience, forever incognito and incommunicado. A philosopher who looks in that direction is, or should be, a mystic; from the ineffable sphere nothing but nonsense can be conveyed, since language [...] will not clothe experiences that elude the discursive form.²⁵

There can be no knowledge which in any way transcends sense experience. What else is this but a purely arbitrary and

²⁴ Jacques MARITAIN, Scholasticism and Politics, tr. by Mortimer Adler, London, Macmillan and Co., 1940, p. 31.

²⁵ Suzanne K. LANGER, Philosophy in a New Key, Harvard University Press, 1942, p. 86.

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dogmatic assumption, for, how can the positivist know that there is none? It is undeniable that his knowledge that there is no knowledge transcending sense experience is in fact knowledge which transcends sense experience. Limiting himself to sense experience, how can the empiricist discover that there is not and cannot be knowledge beyond sensible observation? This seems neither self-evident nor demonstrable. Wittgenstein emphasizes the arbitrary nature of this criterion by remarking that since a limit cannot be drawn for thinking because we should have to think what supposedly cannot be thought by thinking both sides of this limit, one can and must draw the limit only in language, and then one will arbitrarily say that what lies on the other side of this linguistic limit will be simply nonsense.²⁶

The basic logico-positivist fallacy is the extreme sensism which underlies its criterion of meaning, nor can the logical positivist reasonably justify his position. From the start, he posits that true knowledge is limited to the correlation of observational data; the human knower cannot rise above the level of sensation. But, sensation, by its very nature, does not carry with it its own

²⁶ L. WITTGENSTEIN, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, p. 27.

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justification. Because the senses are limited and conditioned by matter, man could never make a complete reflection on the validity of his act and faculty of sense with sense alone. If sense experience is the only factor apt to confer meaningfulness on a statement of fact, then we cannot prove a simple statement of fact.

How can we ever know by sense experience that there is a part of the meaning of a statement that we cannot verify? The fact that we do not have any sense experience of such a part proves nothing, since the point at issue is whether there is something in what we mean beyond sense experience; and how can we ever know by sense experience that there is not?²⁷

As a matter of fact, do we really get meaning as the result of verifying? Does it not seem, on the contrary, that what we verify is a meaning and that we do not verify in order to obtain a meaning? It seems evident that a proposition can be verified only if one supposes that some meaning is already constituted in the proposition. Do we not have to know what we are going to verify?

It is clear that if a proposition can be verified at all, it must have sense prior to its actual verification.²⁸

²⁷ A.C. EWING, "Meaninglessness", in Mind, Vol. 46 (1937), p. 349.

²⁸ J.R. WEINBERG, An Examination of Logical Positivism, p. 178.

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Or, as C.E.M. Joad expresses it, before we can apply the criterion of meaning to a proposition, we must already know the meaning of the proposition.²⁹

b) Solipsism

One of the most damaging accusations aimed at Ayer's logical positivism is that his principle of verification issues fatally in solipsism. It makes intersubjective science impossible.

There should [...] be no doubt about the linguistic solipsism to which the positivist criterion of meaning inevitably leads.³⁰

The problem seems insurmountable to Weinberg who explains that, if the limits of a subject's world are set by the statements he understands, and if he understands a statement only when the fact indicated by it is an ingredient of his experience, then transsubjectivity cannot be achieved.³¹

²⁹ C.E.M. JOAD, A Critique of Logical Positivism, p. 46.

³⁰ J.R. WEINBERG, An Examination of Logical Positivism, p. 206.

³¹ This is a logical consequence of extreme empiricism. "Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: Let us chase our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appear'd in that narrow compass." David HUME, A Treatise of Human Nature, Part II, Section VI, p. 67-68.

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In other words, if language is powerless beyond picturing the particular empirical facts that may exist, the limits of the language of empirical facts constitute the limits of all significant discourse. It is, therefore, impossible to make significant statements about the experiences of other people, or about the physical world independent of specific experience, and so, an objective (or intersubjective) realm of meanings is out of the question.

Mr. Ayer tries on several occasions to defend himself against this grievous objection, which he labels "the egocentric predicament". To mention only one relevant text:

[...] there is nothing in an experience considered by itself, [...] to make it form part of one person's history rather than another's. And so [...] the sense in which the experiences of other persons are inaccessible to my observation is not such as to make the hypothesis of their existence inaccessible to my understanding.³²

This argument does not sound to us too forceful; the inevitable conclusion must be that once a beginning is made with subjective impressions, the thought in Descartes, the forms in Kant, the ideas in Berkeley, language in logical empiricism, there is no escaping from solipsism.

³² Alfred J. AYER, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. 169. Cf. also Language, Truth and Logic, p. 128-131.

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c) Inconsistency - Bias

Morris Lazerowitz has strong misgivings about the whole question of the Ayerian terminology of verification.³³ He objects particularly to Ayer's distinction between "conclusive verification" and "weak verification", a distinction which he calls a pseudo one. Unless some statements can be verified conclusively, it is obviously inconsistent to speak of weakly verifiable ones. Ayer does claim that there is a class of propositions which are verifiable in the first sense: basic propositions; for example, if I am seeing black spots, then "I am seeing black spots" is true, and I know it to be true incorrigibly, it is established conclusively. Lazerowitz objects:

But does it make sense to say that I could verify such statements, in the sense that by verifying them I obtain knowledge, which I otherwise should lack, as the result of making certain observations?³⁴

It seems to him, and we agree, that to verify "I now have a pain", I should first have to be ignorant of the pain I am now having, and then after making pertinent tests, ascertain

³³ Morris LAZEROWITZ, The Structure of Metaphysics, The International Library of Psychology, Philosophy and Scientific Method, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955, p. 117-143.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 125.

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that I am feeling it. This is obviously ridiculous. No man can say "I shall now verify whether or not I am in pain". Therefore, even in the case of basic propositions, the terms "conclusively verifiable" are devoid of sense.

Knowledge of the truth of a basic proposition is had without being arrived at by a process of verification.³⁵

This use of 'conclusively verifiable' is not merely unnatural but also senseless. And if it is senseless I do not see that 'weakly verifiable' has sense.³⁶

Despite this powerful criticism, Mr. Ayer has not worked out the requirements of his terminology. The reason suggested for the omission is that he wishes to create damaging contrast between strongly and weakly verifiable statements.

One receives the impression that his revision of language is motivated by emotional rather than practical considerations, and that one of his objects is to throw statements which go beyond what is immediately given into an unfavourable light.³⁷

Other prominent British philosophers concur in the view just quoted. In fact, Professor W.T. Stace protests against the

³⁵ Morris LAZEROWITZ, The Structure of Metaphysics, p. 135.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 129.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 142.

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strong flavour of materialist bias which pervades most logico-positivist literature. He is disturbed by this "tendency of thought which proceeds from [...] temperament, and not from the rational and impartial weighing of evidence."³⁸

In this connection, we feel that words are accorded a privileged treatment by logical positivism. Are not words empirical phenomena just as chairs are? When written, they stimulate my visual sense, when spoken, my aural, yet, words are not regarded as logical constructions. The thing, table, is considered as a symbol which requires, if it is to be meaningful, translation into other symbols standing for sense-contents; no such translation is necessary for the word, table. Words, as sensible phenomena, are surprisingly exempt from testing with the verification principle; that is, logical positivists exclude at least one class of sensible phenomena from the supposedly universal application of their principle to material things. We contend that when we know what words occur in a sentence, we know a non-verbal fact about things; on this point, Ayer and his fellow-philosophers seem to agree. However,

³⁸ W.T. STAGE, "Metaphysics and Meaning", in Mind, Vol. 44 (1935), p. 429.

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If our knowledge of words is treated as if it were not merely verbal, why should it not also be possible for our knowledge of other facts, to be not merely verbal?³⁹

Is not an analysis which grants exceptional status to words, as distinguished from other sensible things, biased or, at the very least, inconsistent?

4. Key Fallacy:

Exclusion of the Synthetic A Priori

a) Ayer's Position

Professor Ayer allows for two kinds of propositions: on the one hand, the analytic a priori propositions of logic and mathematics, which are formal and give no information about reality; on the other, synthetic (a posteriori) statements, which give information about reality, but are corrigible hypotheses. This classification evidently excludes any necessarily true existential propositions, and also all propositions which, while not affirming the existence of anything, purport to be informative about reality and true a priori in the sense that their truth cannot be empirically refuted. In a word, there are no synthetic a priori propositions. As a matter of fact, the

³⁹ C.E.M. JOAD, A Critique of Logical Positivism, p. 86.

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very expression is a contradiction in terms.

[...] while it is true that we have a priori knowledge of necessary propositions, it is not true [...] that any of these necessary propositions are synthetic.⁴⁰

To say that a proposition is true a priori is to say that it is a tautology. And tautologies [...] do not in themselves contain any information about any matter of fact.⁴¹

No proposition can be synthetic, that is, dependent for its justification on sense experience, and a priori, that is, absolutely necessary.

b) Scholastic Position

The Schoolmen divided judgments and their expression in language, propositions, into two classes, which have been variously called over the years, modus dicendi per se and modus dicendi per accidens, analytic and synthetic, a priori and a posteriori, metaphysical and physical. All these couples are meant to express the same broad distinction: that between judgments in which the subject-predicate connection is necessary and immutable, and judgments in which it is contingent or changeable.

There are two kinds of necessary judgments: the first is that in which the predicate gives all or part of

⁴⁰ Alfred J. AYER, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 84.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 87.

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the essence of the subject; the second in which analysis of the terms reveals the predicate to be a property of the subject. In both types, there is a necessary link between subject and predicate, that is, those propositions are "in *materia necessaria*". We can ascertain the truth of a proposition of this kind independently of any additional experience over and above the experience required for knowledge of the concepts involved. This explains the appellation a priori. It is to be stressed that they do and must presuppose some experience. Examples would be: "A square is a rectangle", "Man is rational", "Every number is either odd or even", "A is A". In the case of synthetic or modus dicendi per accidens propositions, we know the truth or falsity only from extrinsic sources; hence, they are called a posteriori, that is, subsequent to or independent of experience, "in *materia contingenti*"; for example, "Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo".

The class of judgments described by the Scholastics as "necessary" is very much wider than the class of "analytic" judgments in the modern sense of the term. The former include all the truths of the purely deductive sciences, whereas the latter are restricted to the comparatively small group of judgments which constitute definitions, or self-evident axioms and principles. The propositions

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constituting the quantitative margin between the two, that is, between the broader Scholastic "necessary" judgment and the narrower positivistic "analytic" judgment are reducible to what were termed by Kant, "synthetic a priori" propositions. Although we differ with Kant in the precise definition of the latter type of statement, we accept his terminology and claim strict validity for the synthetic a priori proposition as a bridge from the seen to the unseen, from the sensible to the metaphysical.

It is of prime importance, of course, to have a perfectly clear notion of the meaning attached by Scholastic philosophy to its use of the expression "synthetic a priori".

The Scholastic 'synthesis' is a union or comparison of two intellectual notions or concepts; [...] the Scholastic 'a priori' means simply that sense experience does not form the ground or motive for our belief in the necessary and universal validity of necessary judgments, or for that validity itself, but does not exclude - nay, rather presupposes - the sense experience by which we obtain the data from which to abstract our intellectual concepts.⁴²

What is analysed in Thomism, is not only the pure, formal meaning of the concept, but its content, the thing itself, the real object. The realistic Thomist solution distinguishes a double comprehension in a concept: the logical,

⁴² P. COFFEY, The Science of Logic, New York, Peter Smith, 1938, Vol. I, p. 179.

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or formal and subjective, and the ontological, or real and objective.⁴³ The Scholastic philosopher, to put the question in another way, does not derive the necessary and universal validity of "materia necessaria" judgments from the constitution of the mind exclusively, as Kant did, but from the nature of the mind, together with the nature of Being itself. Why can we not help thinking that whatever begins to be has a cause? The Scholastic will answer: "Because things are that way, and therefore, compel the mind to think that way".

To cross the bounds of immediate evidence, there is need of reasoning, and for this universal principles are required which are immediately evident. The synthetic a priori judgment, understood in the Scholastic sense, in which the subject is an abstract from experience, [...] is the means of extending our knowledge beyond the immediate.⁴⁴

By repudiating the validity of synthetic a priori propositions, Ayer rejects the view that there are certain first principles which are perceived to be true, and that by reasoning ^{deductively} inductively from them, it should be possible to reach certain truths about the nature of reality.

⁴³ F.-J. THONNARD, A.A., A Short History of Philosophy, Paris, Desclée, tr. by Edward A. Maziarz, 1955, p. 660.

⁴⁴ Joseph DE VRIES, Critica, Ad Usus Scholarum, Fribourg, University Press, 1901, p. 50-51.

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General principles to be fruitful, must, Ayer declares, be obtained inductively. Many philosophers, he points out, have accepted as first principles a set of a priori truths; but these [...] are, on Ayer's view, tautologies and from them only further tautologies can be deduced.⁴⁵

Mr. Joad adds wryly: "This declaration is itself a first principle". And there are many such, the principle of verification being a prime example. "All manner of consequences are deduced from them, which are simply announced"⁴⁶.

Under the pretense of ultimate wisdom, Ayer guillotines religion, ethics and esthetics, self, person, free will, responsibility and everything worthwhile. I thank Mr. Ayer for having shown us how modern philosophers can fiddle and play tricks while the world burns.⁴⁷

5. Conclusion

There certainly exists a fundamental incompatibility between Thomistic philosophy and Ayer's brand of logical positivism. They are philosophies whose ultimate questions and basic intellectual attitudes are radically divergent. The questions Ayer asks, the method he adopts, make of philosophy primarily a communication theory rather than a knowledge of being.

⁴⁵ C.E.M. JOAD, A Critique of Logical Positivism, p. 87.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 88.

⁴⁷ Martin D'ARCY, S.J., "Philosophy Now", in Criterion, Vol. 10 (1936), p. 103.

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We are asked to abandon the attempt to understand being and to concentrate on understanding the words men use to talk about things. But unless the words men use are founded upon an understanding of things, what is their language but babbling, and their philosophy but babbling about their own babbling?⁴⁸

Such philosophy is properly stuck with meanings; and it opens itself to the charge of being a policeman who has no one to police but himself.⁴⁹

Undoubtedly, Professor Ayer has reason to oppose the erection of unproved, purely a prioristic principles as bases for metaphysical systems. In this sense, his struggle against metaphysics is laudable. However, in his effort to escape from the irrationality of rationalism, he commits the equally irrational error of extreme empiricism. He crusades against the one extreme of deifying the intellect, by falling into the other of deifying the senses, seemingly unaware that there exists a "media via", which takes into account the complete sense-mind composition of man. His verification principle succeeds only in robbing the intellect of its proper object and reducing it to a mere

⁴⁸ Marc F. GRIESBACH, "The Analysts and the Nature of Philosophy", in Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, Vol. 34 (1960), p. 215.

⁴⁹ Francis WADE, S.J., in a review of The Revolution in Philosophy, by A.J. Ayer, W.C. Kneale, etc., in The New Scholasticism, Vol. 32 (1958), p. 121.

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functional faculty whose work will be to catalogue, correlate and express the objects attained by the senses, that is, Ayer denies the intellect in favour of the senses.

We claim that Professor Ayer should not brand all metaphysics as nonsense; he should disengage at least Thomistic metaphysics from his supposedly univocal target. It is a pity that he has not realized that for Thomistic existential metaphysics, all human knowledge, including metaphysics itself, is rooted immediately and fundamentally in the senses and in physical being. He should also know that Thomists agree with him in opposing any system which by conceptual analysis, claims to derive existence from concepts, or to develop a metaphysics directly from the contents of concepts even though they are derived from sensible things. Unfortunately, either Ayer is totally ignorant of the Thomistic synthesis, or he wilfully chooses to disregard it. He does so to his loss, for on his own grounds and independently of the positive edifice of the Scholastics, not only has he failed to eliminate metaphysics from the field of rational and meaningful speech with his principle of verification, but he gives every symptom of the need of Thomism to make of his system a truly meaningful system of science.

The road to metaphysics, then, is not barred by Alfred Jules Ayer's verificational theory of meaning, and

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we may still believe the words which My Lady Philosophy addressed to Boethius when she appeared to him in his prison cell:

[...] let me shew you the road which shall lead you to your home. I will give wings to your mind, by which it shall raise itself aloft: so shall disquiet be driven away, and you may return safe to your home by my guidance, by the path I shall shew you, even by myself carrying you thither.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ BOETHIUS, The Consolation of Philosophy, The Modern Library, New York, Random House, Inc., 1943, xxii, 406 p., p. 75.

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PRECIS

THE PRINCIPLE OF VERIFICATION
IN THE LOGICAL POSITIVISM OF ALFRED JULES AYER

The extraordinary development of the physical sciences in recent times seems to have prejudiced the modern mind against any knowledge which is not obtained and cannot be checked by means of exact material measurement. It is this attitude, latent or expressed, which constitutes the context of logical positivism. The adherents to this modern doctrine are self-confessed disciples of earlier empiricists, all of whom exhibited a marked anti-metaphysical bias. The British brand of contemporary empiricism is a curious blend of Austrian positivism of which the Vienna Circle was a concrete expression, and of English analytical philosophy pioneered by such men as Russell, Moore and Wittgenstein. One of the most articulate present-day exponents of logical positivism is the professor of the philosophy of mind at the University of London, Mr. Alfred Jules Ayer, an avowed follower of Hume, who holds that metaphysics is nonsense. The interesting facet of his work is the method by which he purposes to destroy metaphysics: the application of the so-called principle of verification.

Ayer first divides all the statements which compose the body of meaningful speech into analytic a priori and synthetic propositions, and this division he views as an exhaustive one. Any linguistic expression of thought which does not fall into one of these categories is literally senseless. Analytic propositions are purely formal; they are not about anything, that is, they do not make any assertion about the empirical world. Synthetic propositions, on the contrary, give information about reality; their subject matter is the extra-mental world.

Analytic a priori propositions are valid in their own right, independently of reference to any norm; since they cannot be disproved by experience, they are incontrovertibly certain. Synthetic propositions need to be validated, that is, the series of words in which they are expressed must be referred to some criterion of meaningfulness. This criterion is the principle of verification, which, briefly stated, amounts to this: a statement will be meaningful and have validity if, and only if, it can be shown to be equivalent to other statements dealing with sense experience. In other words, a proposition will have meaning in proportion as it is verifiable in experience. Such propositions, subject to the fluctuations of the senses, can never be absolutely certain; they are corrigible hypotheses.

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An evident conclusion suggests itself: any statement that is not a purely formal one, and which does not lend itself to sensible verification, lies outside the area where language has meaning. This is precisely the point at which metaphysics, according to Mr. Ayer, vanishes from sight, or rather, is declared literally devoid of meaning, as metaphysical "truths" are couched in language that does not qualify for meaningfulness. All knowledge, therefore, is equated with sense knowledge; only the sensible is real. It is nonsensical to speak of a trans-empirical, a supra-sensible world.

The principle of verifiability is obviously an arbitrary criterion, and consists in the extreme; besides, it can only lead fatally and inevitably to solipsism. More serious still, logical positivism can be said to be based on a metaphysical principle, so that in pretending to destroy metaphysics, it destroys itself. Along with logical positivists, Thomism holds the validity of analytic a priori and of synthetic a posteriori propositions. Against the logical positivists, Thomism claims the validity of synthetic a priori propositions, that is, of statements dealing with reality, yet absolutely true. The synthetic a priori, understood in the Thomistic - not the Kantian - sense, is the bridge that enables the thinker to cross validly from the empirical to the trans-empirical, from the sensible to the supra-sensible, and to deduce a cogent system of metaphysics.