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A CRITICAL STUDY OF
A. J. AYER
ON THE PROBLEM OF PERCEPTION
by K. L. McGovern

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Philosophy of the University of
Ottawa as partial fulfillment of
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ABSTRACT

A. J. Ayer has devoted a considerable amount of his ample philosophical writings to a consideration of the "problem of perception", the problem "of justifying our belief in the existence of physical objects which it is commonly taken for granted that we perceive". He has, moreover, throughout the course of his career changed his views on the way in which this problem ought to be resolved. It is the purpose of this dissertation both to examine and assess the various attempts that Ayer has made to deal with this problem. This involves four steps: first, it is necessary to place the problem itself in historical perspective; secondly, I will consider Ayer's early solution of the problem, and examine some of its difficulties; thirdly, Ayer's later treatment of the problem, as found in The Problem of Knowledge, will be considered; and finally, I shall attempt to show that his later resoltuion fails to overcome the earlier difficulties and inevitably leads him to adopt a sceptical position concerning our knowledge of the external world.

An examination of Ayer's relationship with the general philosophical point of view of logical positivism as espoused by the members of the "Vienna Circle", indicates that from an epistemological point of view at least that

he lies squarely in the tradition of Humean empiricism. A brief examination of Hume shows that a phenomenalist analysis of perception, the view that what is perceived is a discrete, momentary percept, leads inevitably to the conclusion that the belief in the continued and distinct existence of physical objects is without rational warrant. It is the attempt to reconcile the phenomenalist analysis of perception with the common sense belief in the existence of physical objects that creates, for Ayer, the problem of perception.

Ayer's early attempt to resolve this problem, as found in Language, Truth and Logic and The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge is an attempt to show that the dispute between the phenomenalist and the realist has no factual basis. He rejects that traditional argument (illusion) as being sufficient to entail the sense-data theory on logical grounds. He then re-introduces this same theory as a linguistic alternative to ordinary language. Sense-data, he argues are not entities; the sense-data language is simply an alternative way of referring to the same "empirical facts" to which the physical object language refers. Thus the relation between physical objects and sense-data is a purely logical one and the task of showing how statements which refer to the one can be translated into statements which refer to the other is the programme

of phenomenalism. There are, however, serious difficulties with this position, some of which Ayer comes to recognize, the result of which re-introduces the traditional gap between what we perceive (sense-data) and physical objects, and the problem of perception emerges once more.

The view that this "gap" cannot be bridged is, says Ayer, in The Problem of Knowledge the sceptic's position. Ayer does not, however, show that the sceptic is wrong; he shows rather that there is a similar gap at the root of all claims to knowledge - even a priori statements. This should not, Ayer suggests, indicate that we do not "know" that an a priori statement is true; it is evident that we do. Perception is simply a parallel case. There is a "gap" there and it cannot logically be bridged; nonetheless, as with a priori statements, there comes a stage when one simply sees that a perceptual judgment is true. The sceptic, Ayer suggests, has overreached himself; he has demanded what cannot be expected -- a rational proof of the truth of a knowledge claim. In short, there is no problem of perception.

While this may be a true position, it cannot, however, be true for a sense datum theorist. The reason for this is that the assumption that lies behind the sense-data theory (that sense-data and not physical objects are

perceived) necessarily place the physical world in doubt. Nor can this doubt be erased by appealing, as Ayer does, to the fact that it does not make "sense" to doubt the existence of physical objects. For such an appeal is, in fact, an appeal to common sense knowledge, which knowledge has already been placed in doubt by the presuppositions of the theory. Thus Ayer cannot coherently maintain both that only sense-data are perceived and that one's knowledge of the external world is justified. Indeed, his most recent remarks on the subject (that the question whether physical objects really exist cannot be answered, that a belief in their existence amounts to little more than a "decision" or a "normative judgment") - would seem to indicate that the scepticism that has always been implicit in his position has finally begun to surface.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the central themes which threads its way through most of the writings of A. J. Ayer is the problem of perception which, he claims in one of his more recent works, is the problem "of justifying our belief in the existence of physical objects which it is commonly taken for granted that we perceive."¹ Formulated in such terms, the problem of perception is not peculiar to the philosophy of Ayer; it is, indeed, almost axiomatic to trace its origin back to René Descartes, who, besieged by doubts, came to the realization that some kind of "valid and considered judgment" was required to justify the veracity of those sense experiences of which he, along with some others, had previously been inclined to accept on the basis of a "blind and rash impulse."² That these

¹ A. J. Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, (London: MacMillan & Co., 1965), p. 91.

² René Descartes, The Meditations Concerning First Philosophy, trans. L. J. LaFleur, (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, Inc., 1960), p. 96.

doubts produced an epistemological malaise within the development of early modern philosophy is patent in the evolution of early British Empiricism which, beginning with Locke's queries in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, was to culminate in the scepticism of Hume.³ Again, in the twentieth century, especially due to the enormous influence of Russell, the problem of perception continues to be a crucial philosophical issue.⁴ And in thus formulating the question, Ayer has put in his bid to resolve what has become, since the time of Descartes, a sort of perennial philosophical question.

He has, in fact, devoted a good deal of his work to the subject of perception, although, as shall be seen, the manner in which he approaches the problem varies

3
cf. R. J. Schwartz, ed., Perceiving, Sensing and Knowing. (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1965), p. xii. "The first mature expression of this approach (inquiring into the foundations of empirical knowledge) appear in the philosophies of Descartes and the British Empiricists, Locke, Berkeley and Hume. Their reflections about perception and knowledge typically began with questions about the reliability of the senses."

4
B. Russell, Our Knowledge of the External World. (New York: The New American Library, 1960). This book was originally delivered as the Lowell Lectures in Boston in 1914 and was published in the same year. cf. especially chapter 3, pp. 54 - 80.

from time to time. A brief glance at his literary output, which presently spans a period of some thirty-five years (and shows no signs of abating), indicates certainly more than a casual interest in the area of perception.⁵ In fact, it is not unduly misleading to regard a major part of his developing philosophical labour as a sustained attempt to resolve, in one way or another, this admittedly difficult problem. And it is to give an explanation and an evaluation of these labours that this dissertation is directed.

The immediate difficulty, however, is not so much to point out the fact that Ayer was interested in, even preoccupied with, the subject of perception, but it is rather to show that what he has had to say on this matter is worthy of the kind of detailed attention which must be expected in a major dissertation. For it must be admitted that in spite of the fact that Ayer has been and still

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As will become apparent during the course of this paper, all of Ayer's major publications have been, either in whole or in part, concerned with the subject of perception. He has produced, in addition, numerous articles on the sense-data theory, phenomenalism and so on, all of which reflects his pre-occupation with this subject.

remains one of the more prolific philosophers of our century, a great deal of his work has received only superficial attention.⁶ His earlier works, to be sure, caused a sensation of sorts and were subjected to detailed critical examinations by such notable philosophers as John Austin⁷ and C. E. M. Joad.⁸ Nonetheless, his more recent and more mature offerings, while they have not

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For example, even though Ayer's publications have been more voluminous since the second World War than they were prior to it, the amount of commentary to be found which concerns itself with his later efforts is remarkably small. In addition, those selections of Ayer's writings which have been selected to appear in various philosophical anthologies have, with only a few exceptions, been limited to his very early writings, especially to Language, Truth and Logic.

7

John Austin, Sense and Sensibilia, ed. G. J. Warnock. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1962). In spite of the rather late date of the publication of this work, it is, in fact, almost exclusively a critique of one of Ayer's earliest works, The Foundations Of Empirical Knowledge (1940).

8

C. E. M. Joad, A Critique of Logical Positivism, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950). This work is a detailed critical examination of Ayer's Language, Truth and Logic (1936).

been totally ignored, have aroused only moderate interest and have not produced the same impact as that which was consequent upon the publication of Language, Truth and Logic (1936) and of The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge (1940).

Among those who have engaged in a general appraisal of Ayer's philosophy, it seems to be more or less agreed that, in spite of the success that attended the writing of The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, Ayer has tended gradually to modify his earlier positions on epistemological matters as a whole. The difficulty arises in attempting to ascertain, even in a most superficial way, the results of this modification process. While there is, or at least seems to be, a consensus to the effect that Ayer has been moving towards a more 'realistic' theory of knowledge,⁹ there is little agreement on precisely what form this realism is taking. Indeed, it has been sugges-

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Herbert Feigl, for example, points out that "we (the original band of positivists) all have changed our minds. Alfred Ayer in his recent book, The Problem of Knowledge, is very close to Critical Realism. The way he formulates it may be open to question but there is no question about the transition that Carnap, Ayer and many others have made." cf. H. Feigl, "Logical Positivism after Thirty-five Years", Philosophy Today, Vol. 8, (1964), p. 245.

ted by at least one commentator that Ayer has finally arrived at the rather unhappy point of being an epistemologist with no identifiable epistemological position whatsoever.¹⁰ In a general way then, when one confronts those few writers who have attempted to give an over-all evaluation of Ayer's more recent writings on the theory of knowledge, one is presented with the view that Ayer, in spite of his exceedingly lucid literary style, has produced an epistemology that is at best, vague and ambiguous and at worst, outdated and contradictory.¹¹ This explains perhaps the rather peculiar phenomenon that,

10 "Ayer has greatly qualified his earlier views (as found in The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge with regards to sense-data) so that he almost fails to take any position at all." See Peter K. Machamer, "Recent Work on Perception", American Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 7, (1970), p.2.

11 While many commentators remark upon Ayer's literary style as being lucid, even elegant, it is not unusual to find, at the same time, a criticism of the "obscure nature of his philosophical contentions." See Willis Doney's review of The Problem of Knowledge in The Philosophical Review, (1960), p. 109.

While many philosophers appear to welcome this apparent rejection of the stern logical reductionism that attended Ayer's earlier writings,¹² there is, at the same time, a general tendency to regard Language, Truth and Logic and The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge as his really significant works. Clearly then, one must raise the question of whether a serious inquiry into Ayer's theory of perception, especially as it is found in his later writings, is warranted.

There are, nonetheless, a number of reasons in favour of such an analysis of Ayer's 'theories' of perception. The first, and by no means the least, is based on the simple abundance of literature which Ayer has produced on the subject. As mentioned above, his writings on perception span the best part of two generations and, while there has been a certain amount of detailed investigation of his earlier writings as well as some articles and reviews on his more mature work, his doctrine of perception, taken as a whole, has not yet been subjected.

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cf. F. Harrison III, "Ayer's Metaphysics and Common Sense", Philosophy Today, Vol. 14, pp. 33 - 37.(1970).

to really careful scrutiny.¹³

A second reason in favour of such an investigation is somewhat more subtle: Ayer has, in fact, been one of the very few philosophers in the British tradition who, since the early days of Russell, has seriously and repeatedly examined the problems associated with a theory of perception based on the epistemological structure of empiricism. This is not, of course, to suggest that Ayer is in any way unique in maintaining an empiricist theory of knowledge. The overwhelming predominance of Hume as one of the chief background figures in British philosophy today is a fact which scarcely needs to be mentioned.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the current pre-occupation with ordinary language and its attendant reliance upon 'common sense' has produced a type of naive realism which neatly

¹³ See above, page 4, note 6.

¹⁴ An example of the importance of Hume's position today can be gathered from a remark inscribed on the overleaf of the Pelican edition of A.H. Basson's David Hume: "It is because of Hume more than any other single writer, that philosophy is what it is today." cf. A. H. Basson, David Hume. (London: Pelican Books, 1958).

circumvents the problem of perception.¹⁵ At the same time, empiricism remains, even within the ordinary language school, as a kind of hardened attitude;¹⁶ and Ayer has been relentless in pointing out that problems such as perception cannot be so easily circumvented.¹⁷ For this reason, a careful examination of his writings would seem to be fundamental as a source to understanding some basic problems which have tended to be ignored by contemporary empiricists.

There is, moreover, a third and more crucial argument which justifies this investigation. For the very ambiguity and vagueness that has tended to pervade Ayer's work, especially his later writings, must be regarded as indicative of a kind of philosophical uneasiness in a thinker who has produced what is perhaps the most

¹⁵ See below, chapter 3.

¹⁶ cf. A. J. Ayer, "Philosophy and Language" in The Concept of a Person and Other Essays. (London: MacMillan and Co. Ltd., 1962).

¹⁷ See, for example, Ayer's analysis of Wittgenstein's famous treatment of 'games' in The Problem of Knowledge, op. cit., pp. 5 - 7.

emphatic work in British philosophy in the twentieth century.¹⁸ Why, it must be asked, has Ayer abandoned the comparative security that attended the almost dogmatic character of his earlier position? Further, what knowledge can be gleaned about the state of contemporary empiricism in the light of Ayer's various attempts to resolve this problem? The answers to these questions can only be found through a detailed analysis of his writings.

For these reasons, the many works of Ayer on the subject of perception will provide, at the very least, an interesting case study in the development of the man's thought and, perhaps more to the point, such an investigation should provide the basis for a more adequate insight into the nature of contemporary empiricist epistemology inasmuch as Ayer, though he does waver on many points, seems to tenaciously hold on to the basic epistemological strictures which had been outlined and defended by David

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I refer here to Language, Truth and Logic which has achieved, as Ayer himself points out in an Introduction appended to a later edition "something of the status of a text book" A.J. Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic. (New York: Dover Books, 1946), p. 5.

Hume. It is, indeed, to the empiricism of Hume that Ayer makes his most apparent philosophical commitment: "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'."¹⁹

And, as shall be seen in the course of this dissertation, this allegiance to Hume in particular and to empiricism generally is a constantly apparent feature in all of his discussions on the subject of perception.

It is in fact in his very loyalty to Hume's empiricism that Ayer finds himself confronted by the problem of perception; indeed, in the light of the sceptical conclusions concerning our knowledge of the external world to which Hume himself was drawn, it is difficult to see how such a problem could be avoided. And, if one assumes for the moment that Ayer, unlike Hume, would regard himself as a most unwilling accomplice to philosophical scepticism, it should be the case that the problem would emerge as one of paramount importance in all of his works which concern themselves with one's knowledge of external

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Ibid, p. 31.

objects. For while it is true that empiricism has had in general an almost overwhelming appeal to contemporary British philosophers, it seems, at the same time, to be the case that it has in the past and still continues to inevitably move towards a scepticism with respect to one's ability to justify his perceptual judgments about the external world.²⁰ And this is found to be true in Ayer's later writings where the problem of perception, as it has already been formulated, is subjected to a careful analysis.²¹

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See, for example, Bertrand Russell, Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits, (London: George Allan & Unwin Ltd., 1948), p. 195. Russell points out in this work that all empiricists are, of necessity, faced with the problem of scepticism. This follows from the fact that if "all our knowledge is based on experience, it must not only be based on experience, but confined to experience; for it is only by assuming some principle or principles which experience cannot render even probable that anything whatever can be proved by experience except the experience itself."

21

cf. A.J. Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge. In this, one of Ayer's more recent works, a full chapter is devoted to scepticism generally and one is also devoted to the problem of perception in particular.

This is not the case, however, with his earlier writings. There is, to be sure, a vast amount of material on the subject of perception, but the question of the validity of one's perceptual experience and the question concerning the existence of the objects one perceives receive only minimal attention. It is not without a note of disparagement that Ayer, in Language, Truth and Logic, suggests that most of the discussions which have centred around the "problem of perception" have been metaphysical in character; that regardless of what conclusions any philosopher may come to concerning the logical adequacy of a language that refers to "material things", their findings can have "no bearing whatsoever on the validity of our perceptual judgments." ²² In short, Ayer is, in this early work at least, suggesting that to whatever extent the problem of perception is conceived as a question of the validity of our perceptual knowledge, i.e., a question of the existence of the material things we apparently perceive, to this extent it is not a properly

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Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, pp. 50 - 51.

philosophical problem at all; it is just the sort of metaphysical difficulty which the principle of verification was engineered to eliminate from the entire province of philosophy.²³ In this way the nature of a fundamental ambiguity, often remarked upon by commentators, with respect to Ayer's approach to the whole question of perception, is brought to the fore. In The Problem of Knowledge, for example, Ayer devotes no less than a full chapter to the problem of perception; and, in this case, the problem raised is precisely the 'metaphysical' problem concerning the validity of our perceptual judgments which had been so adeptly pared from the structure of philosophy as the result of his earlier labours.²⁴ In this way, it is clear that the ambiguity referred to above reflects a good deal more than a minor alteration in Ayer's views on perception.

From these arguments, there are two tentative conclusions that might be drawn. In the first place, if

²³ Ibid. See chapter 1.

²⁴ Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p, 91.

one assumes that the reason for the modification in Ayer's point of view is not primarily due to a fundamental relaxation in his belief in the main tenets of empiricism, then surely it must, in the light of his earlier statements about the restricted function of philosophy, indicate that he has, in a rather important way, altered his views on precisely what this function is; for it is patently clear that in even raising the question of the existence of the external world, Ayer is boldly trespassing the clearly defined boundaries which he himself had earlier imposed upon philosophical inquiry.

A second, and perhaps more telling conclusion that may be drawn at this point, is that Ayer's reappraisal of the question of perception seems to indicate a rather profound dissatisfaction with his earlier treatment of the problem. And this is the case in spite of the enormous confidence that he seems to have shown in his earlier work.²⁵ It is indeed in his abandonment of the

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Even as late as 1946, in a new Introduction to Language, Truth and Logic, Ayer says of this book that "I still believe that the point of view which it expresses is substantially correct." A.J. Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 5.

views set down in Language, Truth and Logic and in The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge that one finds the focal point on which a critical discussion of Ayer's theory of perception must turn.

These conclusions make it possible to reassess and more clearly define the task of analyzing Ayer's accumulated writings on perception. The original problem of giving such an analysis can now be seen to involve at least three distinct steps. In the first place, one must fully analyze the theory of perception which is developed in his earlier writings, especially in relation to his determination to circumvent the problem of the existence of the external world. A second step must involve a study of Ayer's later writings in order to elucidate the way in which he resolves the problem of perception in the light of his reasons for abandoning his earlier position. And finally, one must raise the questions as to whether, in his later works, Ayer has been able to overcome the limitations which he himself saw in his earlier efforts and whether he has been able to satisfactorily resolve this problem. These three steps will constitute the major sections of this dissertation. However, like all other philosophers, Ayer's thought is, to a large extent, direct-

ly dependent on the ideas of others. He inherited, as it were, a certain epistemological framework, parts of which, as we have already seen, had been originally constructed by Hume. He was also greatly influenced by the logical atomism he found in the works of Russell and in the Tractatus of Wittgenstein.²⁶ And, of the greatest importance, he was a pre-eminent spokesman for, and advocate of, many of the principles incorporated in the philosophical constitution of that school of philosophy known as logical positivism. For while he often disagreed with Carnap and other members of the Vienna Circle on epistemological matters, their influence upon his early development was clearly profound.²⁷ Thus, an adequate understanding of the development of Ayer's theory of perception must first involve a thorough inquiry into the

26

Ibid, p. 31. "The views which are put forward in this treatise derive from the doctrines of Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein, which are themselves the logical outcome of the empiricism of Berkeley and David Hume."

27

Ibid, p. 36. "The philosophers with whom I am in closest agreement are those who compose the "Viennese Circle", under the leadership of Moritz Schlick, and are commonly known as logical positivists. And of these I owe most to Rudolf Carnap."

nature of those epistemological commitments to which he had subscribed and which, in turn, provide the basis for an explanation of the manner in which he tended to resolve the philosophical disputations which he encountered.

Following this outline, the present dissertation, which is concerned generally with Ayer's treatment of the problem of perception, will be divided into four main chapters: first, Ayer's epistemological background; secondly, his early theory of perception; thirdly, his later theory of perception; and finally, an evaluation of his resolution of the problem of perception.

CHAPTER I

The Background to the Problem

In 1940, Ayer published The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, a book largely concerned with the subject of perception, the main goal of which was to resolve "the philosophical problems which are commonly brought under the heading of 'our knowledge of the external world'".¹ In spite of the fact that the views expressed in this work are, as Ayer himself has recently admitted, no longer generally accepted,² its publication did much to secure for him a prominent position among contemporary British philosophers. Indeed, for a time at least, his formulation and resolution of these problems were

¹ A. J. Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge. (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1964), p. vii.

² Ayer has recently admitted, for instance, that "it is widely believed that the sense-datum theory [as expressed in The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge] succumbed to Austin's attack [in Sense and Sensibilia]." This is not, of course, to suggest that Ayer himself is ready to completely abandon the sense-datum theory. There is indeed much evidence to suggest that he still retains some form of this theory. However, it should be clear that even he is convinced that this theory no longer carries the philosophical influence that it once did. See A. J. Ayer, "Has Austin Refuted the Sense-Datum Theory", Metaphysics and Common Sense. (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1969), p. 126.

considered as a paradigm case of the type of philosophical clarification to which logical analysis had always aspired.³ The notoriety which he received as the result of this was mainly dependent on what was regarded as a rather ingenious attempt to formulate, on the basis of principles which were derived largely from Hume, a sense-data theory which would be capable of circumventing the rather sceptical conclusions to which a number of other philosophers had been led in the past. Thus, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, while it was in many ways a novel philosophical work, was related to the past both in the empiricist principles that were implicit within it and in its alleged purpose. For this reason, an adequate understanding of it would seem to require some kind of brief historical investigation of those positions to which Ayer was subjected.

He was, as we have already mentioned, variously influenced by the movement of logical positivism, and by Russell and Wittgenstein. Moreover, the philosophical

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That Ayer's stock was high at this time is clear in the following remark made by Gustav Bergmann: "A. J. Ayer's Language, Truth and Logic and The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge have almost the status of textbooks." Gustav Bergmann, The Metaphysics of Logical Positivism, (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1954), p. 3, note 2.

positions espoused by these philosophers were themselves considered by him to be the "logical outcome" of the empiricism which had been originally, if inadequately, formulated by Berkeley and Hume. In this sense, Ayer might be more properly considered as a disciple of a philosophical tradition than he is of any particular philosopher - a fact which renders the task of an historical examination of his theory of perception somewhat difficult. The reason for this is two-fold. In the first place, 'empiricism' refers only in a most ambiguous way to a 'school' of philosophy. For this reason, it is most difficult to discern which principles, if any, are essential to it or, for that matter, which philosophers belong to it. Though far removed from the Humean tradition, Aristotle,⁴ for example, is not uncommonly held to be an empiricist. A second reason which complicates the kind of inquiry that has been suggested is closely related to the first; it relies on the tendency, in no way peculiar only to empiricism, of a philosophical point of view to somehow establish its conclusions almost independently of its major

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cf. J. H. Randall, Jr. Aristotle. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 95 - 97.

spokesman. Thus, while it is common to associate a scepticism concerning the knowability of the external world with empiricism in a most general way, one finds that there are, in fact, a few contemporary empiricists who actually subscribe to this view.⁵ From this one might draw the tentative conclusion that empiricism exists, not so much in the overt commitment to any explicit set of principles or conclusions, but in the form of what one might call a hardened philosophical attitude. And this being the case, it becomes important to realize, that in assessing a work such as The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, one must take care to go beyond those principles which are explicitly put forward for consideration to discover those which, however concealed they are, tend to play a decisive role in its philosophical make-up.

There is, to be sure, no reason why one could not engage from the beginning in a straight forward philosophical analysis of Ayer's theory of perception; but surely, without an adequate understanding of his philosophical

⁵ This point is very effectively made by H.H. Price. See below, p. 86.

background, such an investigation could be conducted in only a most cavalier manner. And, it might be added, if the need for a somewhat historically oriented explanation is evident with respect to Ayer's earlier views on perception, such as those found in The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, it is even more apparent with respect to his later writings on the subject. For since these writings possess a rather guarded, and even ambiguous, character, it follows that any attempt to deal with them, especially when one is motivated by critical, as well as exigetical aspirations, must be largely interpretive. And such an interpretation is certainly aided in the light of a clear understanding of those philosophical principles to which Ayer is implicitly, as well as explicitly, committed.

Since Ayer has himself, in Language, Truth and Logic, claimed a special affinity to the doctrines of logical positivism⁶, an analysis of this philosophical movement provides a convenient starting point for this inquiry. An investigation of this position leads, as we shall see,

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Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 32.

to the consideration of a number of important principles, common to most positivists, to which Ayer subscribed. An examination of the collective epistemological significance of these principles points the way to a further consideration of the over-riding influence of the empiricism of Hume. The importance of this consideration becomes apparent in the light of the fact that Hume's "empiricist principle" has some immediate implications concerning the nature of perceptual experience which Ayer does not accept. Thus it is found that the very relation which Ayer bears to Hume is somewhat ambiguous. While he seems to accept in a general way the empiricist principles which were laid down by Hume and even, to some degree, Hume's analysis of perceptual experience, he is nevertheless hesitant to accept what Hume, at least, thought were its implications. In this way, the problems which Ayer must face in devising a theory of perception on empiricist principles are brought to the fore.

It has already been noted that Ayer, from the very beginning, had strongly identified with the views of the Vienna Circle. Indeed, it is not unusual to find his first major work, Language, Truth and Logic, considered almost solely as an attempt to popularize and faithfully

present the various doctrines that were upheld by the members of that group.⁷ While this view undoubtedly overstates the degree to which Ayer is merely a kind of spokesman for the Vienna Circle, the extent to which he was influenced by their thought is nonetheless more than apparent. It was, admittedly, a unique group of philosophers. Seldom in the history of philosophy has a group of men, so apparently disparate in their backgrounds, combined to present to the world at large such a remarkable degree of philosophical unanimity. Indeed, an historical account of the genesis of the movement, of the long "policy" meetings, of the great devotion to Moritz Schlick,⁸ the acknowledged founder and leader of the movement, of

⁷ While it is true that Ayer has generally been recognized as a more or less independent philosophical thinker, one does occasionally get the impression that he has been regarded, at least in the past, as essentially a transmitter of the doctrines of others. Urmson, for example, seems to look upon Language, Truth and Logic as the vehicle through which logical positivism "gained any wide currency in England." J.O. Urmson, Philosophical Analysis. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 106.

⁸ The position of Schlick as leader of the Vienna

the philosophical "constitution" to which the various members one and all apparently subscribed⁹, reads somewhat more like the founding of a new political party than it does of the formulation of a new school of philosophy.

Of the history of this group, a good deal has already been written.¹⁰ It is, I think sufficient to say that even a casual perusal of the nature of the primary

Circle is made eminently clear in this rather poignant statement of the effects that his death had on the Circle: "And during the same year [1936] the Circle was dealt its heaviest blow: Professor Schlick was shot at the University by a mentally deranged former student. It was a loss beyond repair, to have Schlick thus torn away from his fruitful work and to have his further development cut off, with a good many projects left behind unfinished. Now the meetings of the Circle were discontinued, and after the forced annexation of Austria by Germany in 1938 the organization dissolved completely," Victor Kraft, The Vienna Circle, trans. Arthur Pap. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), p. 8.

⁹ In 1929, The Vienna Circle: its Scientific Outlook, a pamphlet jointly written by Carnap, Hahn and Neurath, and dedicated to Schlick was published; "It briefly described the history and membership, the orientation and the goals of the Circle." Ibid, p. 5.

¹⁰ See, for example, Victor Kraft, The Vienna Circle, op. cit., A.J. Ayer, Logical Positivism, Glencoe, Ill., 1959 and Herbert Feigl, "Logical Positivism after Thirty-five Years", Philosophy Today, Vol. 8. (1964), pp. 228 - 245.

interests of the original participants indicates that a prima facie devotion to philosophy itself was not by any means the sole raison d'être of the movement. Mathematics, logic and a number of the more specialized sciences were all represented by members of this august little band. It was, to be sure, to philosophy that the general interest of the membership soon turned. This, one must suppose, was natural enough. It was not, however, to "pure" philosophy in a Kantian sense or to speculative philosophy in an Hegelian sense that the attention of the group was drawn. The central theme around which these various individuals had gathered was a common belief that the nature and function of philosophy must be strictly determined by the requirements of science:

There was one common tenet: that philosophy ought to be scientific. The rigorous requirements of scientific thinking were postulated for philosophy. Unambiguous clarity, logical rigour, and cogent argument are as indispensable to philosophy as to the other sciences. There is no place in philosophy for dogmatic assertions and untestable speculations, such as still nowadays abound in philosophy. Opposition to all dogmatic-speculative metaphysics was implicit in these postulates. Metaphysics was to be completely eliminated, and the Vienna Circle was tied to positivism.

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At the same time, the positivistic spirit cannot by any means be considered as being peculiar to the Vienna Circle. The rejection of metaphysics in favour of the more convenient data of experience had already been discussed in the writings of such philosophers as Mill,¹² Comte, Mach and, of course, Hume.

Nevertheless, this abiding faith in the ultimate efficacy of science, coupled with a dark suspicion of any form of intellectual inquiry that appeared speculative in character, could not help but determine the nature and limits of philosophy itself. If it was to be impossible or illicit to pursue the traditional metaphysical form of philosophy, how was this discipline, one of the oldest and most honoured products of the Western mind, to be conceived? The answer to this question was, in the eyes of the logical positivists, simple enough: philosophy was to be conceived as the handmaiden of science. This is not to say that philosophy was to be considered as a science in its own right; this vision of itself, as the supreme science, was traditionally at the root of the

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Ayer, Logical Positivism, p. 4.

difficulty.¹³ True, there were those in the movement who were willing to allow to philosophy her traditional title as Queen of the Sciences - so long as it is remembered that "it is nowhere written that the queen of the sciences must itself be a science."¹⁴ In short, philosophy was to shed its old role and take on a new one: it will no longer be regarded as a "system of statements" or a "system of cognitions"; in the future it must be regarded as "that activity through which the meaning of statements is revealed or determined"¹⁵, the nature and method of which will become clear shortly.

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As Schlick points out, the fundamental error in traditional philosophy was that it conceived of itself as the "pursuit of truth". Truth, however, was conceived by Schlick and other positivists as belonging to science alone. Therefore, if philosophy is to pursue anything, it must not be truth. As Schlick points out, ". . . I believe science should be defined as the 'pursuit of truth' and philosophy as the 'pursuit of meaning'". It is, therefore, when philosophy encroaches into the realm of science that unresolvable philosophical difficulties arise. Moritz Schlick, "Philosophy as Analysis", Perspectives in Philosophy, ed. Robert N. Beck. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston Inc., 1969), p. 33.

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Moritz Schlick, "The Turning Point in Philosophy" in Logical Positivism, p. 50.

15

Ibid.

Thus the basic aspiration of the Vienna Circle was to wed philosophy to science and, as a consequence of this union, to redefine the nature and function of philosophy in such a way that both the conflicts that had arisen between philosophy and science in the past and those between the various "systems of philosophy" (rationalism, realism, etc.) could be, if not solved, then perhaps resolved, and if not resolved then at least circumvented.¹⁶ And, in a very short time, these goals were espoused by many philosophers outside of the limits of the original Vienna Circle. The enormous popularity of the international congresses that were organized by the Circle did much to popularize its aims and, through them, the influence of the original band of logical positivists was much extended.¹⁷ Ayer, for instance, in 1933, began to regu-

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Ayer, for example, devotes a full chapter in Language, Truth and Logic to the question of the function of Philosophy. Here it becomes apparent that once we accept the complete overthrow of speculative philosophy, "we are now in a position to see that the function of philosophy is wholly critical", that is it is not the business of a philosopher to make factual assertions; these belong to the province of science. A.J. Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 48.

17

Ayer, Logical Positivism, p. 5.

larly attend the meetings of the group in Vienna, and spent a good deal of time under the influence of Schlick,¹⁸ Neurath and others. His attendance at these meetings, and his early interest in the whole movement of logical positivism point out a root sympathy with the main tenets of the movement concerning the relation of philosophy and science which is clearly evidenced in his very early writings: "There is", he says, in Language, Truth and Logic, "no field of experience which cannot, in principle, be brought under some form of scientific law, and no type of speculative knowledge about the world which is, in principle, beyond the power of science to give."¹⁹ From this it follows that one must completely reject the view that philosophy is itself some kind of independent discipline which, like psychology, can "be ranged alongside the existing sciences, as a special department of speculative knowledge."²⁰ On this point, Ayer is at one with the

18
Ibid, p. 6.

19
Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 48.

20
Ibid.

essential tenet of logical positivism: factual knowledge belongs, in its entirety, to the province of the various sciences. Thus, Ayer points out in the concluding paragraphs of Language, Truth and Logic that his main concern has been "to emphasize . . . the unity of philosophy and science."²¹

This concern with adapting the function of philosophy in accordance with the strictures of science in order that philosophy "does not in any way compete with the sciences" can, one must suppose, be employed to identify Ayer's basic philosophical predisposition with that of the Vienna Circle, and for this reason, it can be regarded as in no way unnatural that Ayer should fall under the influence of this latter group. The commitment to fashion philosophy in relation to science is, however, no more than a kind of pre-philosophical commitment. While it does, of course, indicate more than a casual intellectual kinship, it is, at the same time, in no way inconceivable that Ayer might have chosen to develop his philosophical position in some way that might have almost completely

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Ibid, p. 151.

alienated him from the form of positivism espoused by the
 Vienna Circle.²² It follows, then, that the extent to
 which Ayer was influenced by this school of philosophy
 must be dependent upon his acceptance of the more specific
 principles which they had defended.

It can, of course, be no part of the intention of
 this dissertation to discuss fully all of the various
 doctrines that have been defended in one way or another
 by all or by any of the positivists. Such a procedure
 would of necessity lead one far afield into areas which
 are not relevant to the subject of this paper. There are,
 however, four positions shared generally by all of those
 in the movement which do bear some detailed consideration:
 first, all positivists generally agreed on an empiricist
 criterion of meaning; secondly, they maintained the view,

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It is, for instance, conceivable that Ayer could
 have followed the more naturalistic tendencies espoused
 by such pragmatic thinkers as C. S. Peirce and William
 James. Certainly, in the case of Peirce, the tendency
 to base philosophy on science is most evident. cf. C. S.
 Peirce, "Inquiry and Belief", in Perspectives in Philosophy,
op. cit., pp. 136 - 144. The fact that one of Ayer's
 most recent books is a detailed study of the epistemological
 positions of Peirce and James is itself an indication of
 more than a casual relationship between their points of
 view. cf. A. J. Ayer, The Origins of Pragmatism. (London:
 Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1968).

following Russell, that all of the propositions of logic and mathematics were tautologous; they held, thirdly, that the main function of philosophy was that of logical analysis, that is, "as a clarification of the language which we all speak in everyday life"; and finally, all positivists agreed that philosophy, considered in this way, was incompatible with metaphysical speculation and that, for this reason, the latter should be discarded.²³ The reason for considering these positions is twofold: in the first place, while one might argue that not all positivists subscribed to them, the doctrines do figure pre-eminently in those early writings of Ayer which most clearly reflect the influence of logical positivism; and secondly, taken cumulatively, they embody the peculiar form of empiricism which creates, for Ayer, the problem of perception.

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The last three of these doctrines are taken from a list suggested by Bergmann. He claims, in addition, that all logical positivists "hold Humean views on causality and induction." While it is not my intention to in any way dispute this view, it will be part of the purpose of this chapter to show that the general acceptance of Hume's views on causality rests on a more fundamental commitment to certain presuppositions of Humean empiricism. For this reason, I have not included Humean causality or induction in the present list, although, they will be considered later (see below, pp.80 - 83). Gustav Bergmann, The Metaphysics of Logical Positivism, p. 2.

The emergence of the empirical criterion of meaning was in the eyes of many of the positivists merely "empiricism brought up to date." What had been expressed by Hume, in fundamentally psychological terms, was now given expression in a purely logical form.²⁴ To the empirically minded positivist, the advantages of this principle were obvious. Not only did it provide for what appeared to be a simple and clear explanation of the meaning of empirical propositions, but it also, by way of immediate implication, placed into a kind of philosophical limbo the traditional statements and propositions of metaphysics.²⁵ The empirical criterion of meaning is, taken by itself, simply an attempt, and in many ways a very good one, to explain how it is that one can, on the basis of one's perceptual experience come to an understanding of various statements and expressions the meaning of which was hitherto unknown. Suppose, to use Urmson's example, someone present at his first football match were to overhear such remarks as, "he was off-side" or "he missed his tackle." It seems

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Herbert Feigl, "Logical Empiricism", p. 338.

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See below, pp. 61 - 66.

highly unlikely that he would have any understanding of the meaning of these remarks.

But if we go on watching, listening when these things are said, and noting when they are accepted or rejected by other experts, i.e. observing what counts as a verification of them and what a falsification, we shall get at first a rough, and later an exact, understanding of them. When, and only when, I have learnt what empirical circumstances verifies and what falsifies the statement, 'He has missed his tackle', then I understand the statement.

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The key to the success of this criterion was, in large measure, that it seemed to describe exactly the way in which science operated in affixing definitions on terms. In the simplest sense, one indicates the meaning of a term simply by "pointing at that which is designated by the word . . . "²⁷ Thus, one can presumably define such terms as 'ashtray' and 'telephone' ostensibly by pointing out the objects which the words signify; one is, in fact, defining these terms simply on the basis

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Urmson, Philosophical Analysis, pp. 109-110.

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Kraft, The Vienna Circle, p. 30.

of what one empirically observes. Moreover, even in the case of comparatively more complicated terms, or even propositions, the empirical criterion of meaning can be employed with ease. In the case, for instance, of an expression which may be quite theoretical in character, one can explain its meaning by simply describing the empirical observations one must have in order to verify the expression in question: "Einstein", for example, "fixed the meaning of 'distant simultaneity' by describing an experimental method for determining distant simultaneity." In this way he was defining the term by indicating "the conditions under which this word is to be used . . .".²⁸

It is apparent why the empirical criterion of meaning proved to be most attractive. It was, in the first place a comparatively simple theory of meaning and "this", as Urmson points out, "was not its least attraction".²⁹ More importantly, it seemed to represent the triumph of a purely empirical epistemology without the

²⁸ Ibid, p. 31.

²⁹ Urmson, Philosophical Analysis, p. 111.

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aid of any metaphysical justification. For to indicate "the conditions under which a word is to be used" is simply to state those observations which would be relevant to its definition. And, as mentioned above, the meaning of a proposition can be determined in much the same way; for to know the meaning of any given proposition is simply to know "the conditions under which it is accepted as true or false"; that is, to know what empirical observations one must make in order to determine its truth or falsity. For this reason then it was generally maintained by those in the Vienna Circle that "the meaning of a proposition is determined by its method of verification."³¹

In Language, Truth and Logic, Ayer develops a theory of language which, in spite of some important

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Urmson suggests that one of the primary reasons for formulating the empirical criterion of meaning was an attempt to eliminate metaphysics without committing the error of importing another metaphysics, a position which was ascribed to logical atomism. Thus, rightly or wrongly, the early positivists thought that, in devising the empiricist criterion of meaning, they had been able "to give a direct epistemological justification of the verification principle", thereby avoiding the demise of falling into simply another kind of metaphysical speculation. Ibid, p. 109.

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Kraft, The Vienna Circle, p. 31.

differences, greatly reflects the influence of logical positivism. Although it is couched in somewhat different terms, Ayer basically accepts the view that the meaning of an empirical proposition is dependent on observations: "Every synthetic proposition is a rule for the anticipation of future experience, and is distinguished in content from other synthetic propositions by the fact that it is relevant to different situations."³² We understand, therefore, the significance of a proposition when we know what observations would be relevant to its truth or falsity.³³ For Ayer, as for the other early positivists, there is really no difference between knowing what observations one would make in order to verify the truth of the proposition, 'there are mountains on the other side of the moon', and knowing its meaning.

Ayer was, indeed, at variance with some of the

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Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 101.

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Ibid, p. 15. It is worth noting here that Ayer is referring only to synthetic propositions, or those which intend to make factual assertions of some kind. Thus, the propositions of logic and mathematics which are a priori rather than synthetic cannot be analyzed in this way.

members of the Vienna Circle on many important points. Notably, he rejects the view, maintained by Schlick and others, that it is possible by ostensive definition to fully verify any proposition.³⁴ Ayer's argument is based on a simple premise: in any proposition, one must describe what he is experiencing (or expecting to experience) and in so doing, he must go "beyond what is immediately given." From this it follows that there is, for Ayer, no synthetic proposition that can be completely immune from error. For this reason, he regards all of these statements as empirical "hypotheses" which "are designed to enable us to anticipate the course of our

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It is of interest here to remember that Ayer maintains, in Language, Truth and Logic, that all synthetic propositions, even basic propositions (those which simply record our immediate experience) are one and all hypotheses. Schlick, on the other hand, had claimed that these latter statements are incorrigible: "The problem of the 'basis' [of knowledge] changes then automatically into that of the unshakeable point of contact between knowledge and reality. We have come to know these absolutely fixed points of contact, the confirmations [observations] in their individuality: they are the only synthetic statements that are not hypotheses." Therefore, and this is one of the main points of Schlick's paper, if one does not accept the incorrigible character of these propositions, one has no firm basis whatsoever to justify any of one's knowledge. See Moritz Schlick, "The Foundation of Knowledge", Logical Positivism, ed. A. J. Ayer, pp. 226 - 227.

sensations . . . , to enable us to make accurate predictions." Since it always remains possible, with respect to any synthetic proposition, that some "future observation will discredit it", no proposition of this kind can be fully verified.³⁵

One should not, however, allow this deviation from the views held by some of the more established members of the Vienna Circle to conceal the fact that Ayer has generally accepted the empiricist criterion of meaning. For while he does reject the notion that a synthetic proposition can, by empirical observation, be conclusively verified, he does maintain the position that the degree of credence which can be rightfully attached to these propositions derives entirely from observation:

Empirical propositions are one and all hypotheses, which may be confirmed or discredited in actual sense-experience. And the propositions in which we record the observations that verify these hypotheses are themselves hypotheses which are subject to the test of further sense-experience. Thus there are no final propositions. When we set about verifying a hypothesis we may make an observation which satisfies us at

the time. But the very next moment we may doubt whether the observation really did take place, and require a fresh process of verification in order to be reassured. And, logically, there is no reason why this procedure should not continue indefinitely, each act of verification supplying us with a new hypothesis, which in turn leads to a further series of acts of verification.

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In this way, all propositions of a synthetic character are derived from empirical observation, and can be altered only by future empirical verification.

One finds then that Ayer, along with many other contemporary British philosophers who have been influenced to any extent by the tenets of positivism, begins by adopting an epistemological position which places him squarely in the Humean tradition. One is not, therefore, surprised to note that Ayer, in the introduction to Language, Truth and Logic, prefaces the whole work by pointing out that the views developed in it are simply "the logical outcome of the empiricism of Berkeley and

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Ibid, p. 93 - 94.

and David Hume."³⁷ He does, it is true, "express dissent" in the face of certain Humean positions; however, in general, his own view of Language, Truth and Logic as the "logical outcome" of Hume's empiricism seems indicative of the fact that the key to unravelling Ayer's somewhat peculiar epistemology lies in Hume.³⁸

The second important view which Ayer held in common with members of the Vienna Circle concern the tautological character of the propositions of logic and mathematics. As was the case with the acceptance of empiricism, this view bespeaks the overriding influence of Hume, although in this case, it was rather more directly acquired through the writings of Bertrand Russell. The position that all of the propositions of logic and mathematics were tautologies was developed, at least in part, as a rebuttal of the view, usually associated with the philosophy and

³⁷ Ibid, p. 31.

³⁸ Ayer points out for instance, that while "we agree in the main with Hume's epistemological views concerning the validity of general propositions of law, we do not accept his account of the way in which such propositions actually come to be formulated." Ibid, p. 137.

logic of John Stuart Mill, that propositions of this kind were, in fact, empirical generalizations which, based on an exceedingly large number of instances, were arrived at inductively.³⁹ This view, though it is apparently consistent with empiricism, contained implications which were regarded by members of the Vienna Circle as being untenable; for it would seem to be the case that, looked at in this way, the laws of logic would be tantamount to the laws of nature and would be, therefore, "refutable by experience."⁴⁰

This point of view is wholly untenable. After all, if discrepancies between mathematical propositions and observations occur, nobody would for a moment think of declaring the mathematical propositions as refuted and of revising them in the light of experience. Rather we regard the theorems as more certain than our counting and measurements. For if the latter lead to contradictions with the former, we reject our measurements as insufficiently precise and our counting as mistaken. This proves that

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"He [Mill] maintained that these propositions were inductive generalizations based on an extremely large number of instances. The fact that the number of supporting instances was so very large accounted, in his view, for our believing these generalizations to be necessarily and universally true." Ibid, p. 74.

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Kraft, The Vienna Circle, p. 19.

mathematics is not based on experience, but is valid independently of experience. Nor is logic derivable from experience, since all controlled empirical inquiry presupposes logic. How could logic ever be changed by new experience! . . .

. This insight has so far stood as a decisive objection against empiricism and made the latter untenable in the eyes of anybody who had the insight.

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So much then, for the view that the propositions of logic and mathematics are empirical generalizations. This, however, rather than eliminating the difficulty, seems to aggravate it. For if one is to shelve the empiricist notion of logic and mathematics, does it not follow from this that one must also reject empiricism as well? Is it not a patent contradiction to maintain the view that all genuine propositions are those that can be verified, or falsified, by empirical observations and at the same time accept the position that the propositions of logic and mathematics are "valid independently of experience"?

It is very much to the credit of the logical positivists that they were able to devise an explanation of the nature of these propositions which however peculiar

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Ibid, p. 19-20.

it might seem to be, served to remove them from this contradictory state of affairs. Their explanation was that if one was committed in a general way to the doctrine of empiricism and yet believed, at the same time, that logic and mathematics were valid independently of experience, the only solution was to consider these latter propositions as saying nothing at all, i.e. to regard them as being tautologous.⁴² In Ayer's words, "we show the truths of pure reason, the propositions which we know to be valid independently of all experience, are so only in virtue of their lack of factual content."⁴³ The proposition, for example, 'either some ants are parasitic or none are', is one which, although it is impossible to deny its truth, "provides no information whatsoever about the behaviour of ants, or, indeed, about any matter of fact."⁴⁴ Ayer does not, of course, intend to imply that

⁴² For a full discussion of the implications of this "new logic", see Rudolf Carnap, "The Old and the New Logic", in Logical Positivism, ed. A.J. Ayer, pp. 133-146.

⁴³ Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 87.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 79.

tautologies, since they make no factual assertions, are meaningless in the sense that metaphysical propositions are. The reasoning for this is, apparently, that even though the propositions of logic, looked at in this way, provide us with no information about the world, "they do enlighten us by illustrating the way in which we use certain symbols." Propositions of this sort simply "record our determination" to use language in a certain way.⁴⁵

This view furnishes the logical positivist with two important points of reference. In the first place, it provides him, in a manner which has already been noted, with a reasonably facile response to the objection that his attempt to wed empiricism with an a priori conception

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If one wishes to ask why it is that we are determined to use language in this way, Ayer can only fall back on the explanation which he has derived from Wittgenstein: "As Wittgenstein puts it, our justification for holding that the world could not conceivably disobey the laws of logic is simply that we could not say of an unlogical world how it would look." It is therefore, for this reason that the validity of an analytic proposition is guaranteed "independent of the nature of our minds." Ibid, p. 84.

of logic and mathematics must lead to a contradiction.⁴⁶
 For to this objection he may simply supply the rejoinder that, because these propositions intend to make no factual assertion of any kind, to maintain that they are true a priori in no way conflicts with the empirical import of the positivist's criterion of meaning.⁴⁷ A second consequence of this view is that it provided a basis upon which the empirically minded philosophers of the Vienna Circle, and their followers, were able to acquire a sensitivity "for the distinctive character of logic and mathematics, a sense lacking among traditional empiricists."⁴⁸ Nor was the actual philosophy of logic and mathematics, based on purely a priori principles, found lacking. Russell and Whitehead, in 1903, had published the jointly-authored Principia Mathematica, which was to dramatically revolutionize the whole approach to logic

46 Kraft, The Vienna Circle, p. 20.

47 See below, p. 50.

48 Kraft, The Vienna Circle, p. 19.

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and mathematics. The main contention of the work that, on the foundation of only a few purely formal logical principles, the whole of logic and mathematics could be erected, was welcomed by the positivists as securing the victory of empiricism over rationalism.⁵⁰ In this way, positivism was able to secure a place for a purely formal logic within the framework of empiricism. This, as Victor Kraft points out, was the distinctive contribution of the logical positivists. It is true, he admits, that others had recognized the analytic nature of logical and mathematical propositions;

But most of those earlier philosophers who had recognized the a priori nature of logic and mathematics were apriorists and rationalists even with regard to knowledge of reality. Empiricists, on

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B. Russell and A. N. Whitehead, Principia Mathematica. (London: Cambridge University Press), 1910.

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See J. O. Urmson, Philosophical Analysis, pp. 6-7: "Russell's great problem had been to construct a logic by means of which he could derive from the smallest possible number of purely logical notions and axioms, and no others, the whole of mathematics, thereby exhibiting the continuity of mathematics and logic."

the other hand, failed to see their a priori nature. Only the Vienna Circle knew how to combine insight in the latter with empiricism. This constitutes a fundamental revision of empiricism, and the solution is immensely significant (The) core of empiricism is preserved. However, recognition of the a priori validity of logic and mathematics does not entail rationalism with respect to factual knowledge, since neither of these sciences makes any factual assertions at all. In this way empiricism has been subjected to a thorough-going reform which provides it with a tenable foundation, hitherto lacking.

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In much the same way, Ayer contends that the "system" outlined by Russell and Whitehead in Principia Mathematica shows that logic is in no way concerned with making factual statements with respect to material objects or how we think about them; rather it is concerned "simply with the possibility of combining propositions by means of logical particles into analytic propositions, and studying the formal relationship of these analytic propositions, in

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Kraft, The Vienna Circle, pp. 23 - 24.

virtue of which one is deducible from the other."⁵² Thus, in this as in other matters, Ayer is in agreement with the logical positivists in opting for the view that the propositions of logic and mathematics were all of them analytic in character, a view which further commits Ayer⁵³ to the empiricism of Hume.

The acceptance of empiricism on the one hand together with an analytic view of logic and mathematics on the other hand combine to give rise to yet another position characteristic of logical positivism. This concerns the nature of philosophical inquiry itself. One of the most evident consequences of a thorough-going empiricism which, like positivism, strongly attaches itself to the methodology of the exact sciences, is the position that all propositions which are in any way

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Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 81.

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In maintaining the view that these propositions are tautologous and, therefore, make no factual assertions whatsoever, Ayer is, in effect, freeing empirical propositions from the inconsistency which he associates with Mill's position. Thus, Ayer feels that in doing so, he is actually getting back to a form of empiricism which is more typical of Hume. See below, pp.70 -71 .

descriptive of empirical events are those, and only those,
of the various empirical sciences.⁵⁴ This in turn
produces a rather delicate question: What is the function,
if any, of the propositions of philosophy? This becomes
a question of more than a little importance because of
the fact that it has always appeared to be the case that
philosophical propositions represent an attempt to say
something either about the world itself or the way in
which we think about the world.⁵⁵ And if this is the case,
it would seem that the propositions of philosophy are,
in fact, nothing but pseudo-scientific propositions. For
it has already been established that statements about
empirical matters of fact fall, one and all, into the
domain of science. This is, indeed, the raison d'être

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Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 48.
"Those who make this supposition [that philosophical
propositions can be descriptive] cherish the belief that
there are some things in the world which are possible
objects of speculative knowledge and yet lie beyond the
scope of empirical science. But this belief is a delusion.
There is no field of experience which cannot, in principle,
be brought under some form of scientific law, and no type
of speculative knowledge about the world which it is, in
principle, beyond the power of science to give."

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In Language, Truth and Logic, Ayer disputes this

of the positivist movement. It would seem then that philosophical propositions should have no meaning whatsoever since they cannot be descriptive statements, a view which does seem to be taken by Wittgenstein in the conclusion to the Tractatus.⁵⁶ In any case, one might argue that there is a kind of suicidal tendency implicit in the extreme empiricism espoused by logical positivism in that they have,

claim when he points out that "it is not the case that the 'history of philosophy' is almost entirely a history of metaphysics." He then goes on to point out that Locke, Berkeley, Hume and many others, are philosophers who have been in general analytically oriented. He even goes on to mention that a complete list of these analytically oriented philosophers "would certainly include Plato and Aristotle and Kant." He adds, however, that it is true that these philosophers were gravely misrepresented throughout much of the history of philosophy. And, put in its simplest terms, "what has contributed as much as anything to the prevalent misunderstanding of the nature of philosophical analysis is the fact that propositions and questions which are really linguistic are often expressed in such a way that they appear to be factual." Thus Ayer does maintain the position that the tendency to think of philosophical propositions as factual propositions is at the root of many tedious and unnecessary philosophical disputes. See pp. 52 - 58.

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"My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: Anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them - as steps - to climb beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it." Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, trans. D. F. Pears & B. F. McGuinness. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 151.

by means of philosophical argumentation, established a position which renders this sort of argument impossible. 57

Again the logical positivists were able to supply an answer to an objection which appeared to pose a major stumbling block to the success of their whole programme. The answer was simply to radically revise the function of philosophy in such a way that it could not be confused with any of the sciences and yet would still retain a valuable role in human knowledge. Once more, Ayer's Language, Truth and Logic provides an explanation of this

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It is interesting to note that Ayer, in an introduction appended to a later edition of Language, Truth and Logic, takes a somewhat more moderate view concerning the lack of factual content in philosophical propositions: "It used to be said by positivists of the Viennese school that the function of philosophy was not to put forward a special set of "philosophical" propositions, but to make other propositions clear Nevertheless I now think that it is incorrect to say that there are no philosophical propositions. For, whether they are true or false, the propositions that are expressed in such a book as this do fall into a special category; and since they are the sort of propositions that are asserted or denied by philosophers I do not see why they should not be called philosophical." A. J. Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 26.

revised view of philosophy. Here Ayer points out quite emphatically that philosophy is not concerned with empirical matters. These are, he said, quite properly left to the various sciences. Nor is it within the province of philosophy to concern itself with "speculative truths" or "first principles"; these are practices which, though long associated with the activity of philosophy, are usually misleading and always fruitless. For this reason, one must, says Ayer, define in a more precise way the exact function of philosophy:

It should now be sufficiently clear that if the philosopher is to uphold his claim to make a special contribution to the stock of our knowledge, he must not attempt to formulate speculative truths, or to look for first principles, or to make a priori judgments about the validity of our empirical beliefs. He must, in fact, confine himself to works of clarification and analysis of a sort which we shall presently describe.

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It is clear then that the method which is here considered proper for the practice of philosophy is the analytical method, and that the purpose in terms of which this

practice is carried out is the clarification of language.

It is important to note here that it is language, rather than "matters of fact", with which Ayer and the other positivists believe philosophy is concerned. Much of the difficulty, Ayer says, about the true character of philosophical investigation can be traced to the tendency, evident in the writings of almost all philosophers, "to write about linguistic questions in 'factual' language . . .", a practice which has tended to give rise to the view that philosophy is, in some substantive way, concerned with factual matters.⁵⁹ Consider, for example, the proposition, 'relations are not particulars, but universals', which Ayer uses to demonstrate the nature of philosophy as analysis. This proposition, he points out, seems to be "of the same order as 'Armenians are not Mohammedans, but Christians.'" Yet to suppose that it is would lead one into error.

For whereas the latter proposition is an empirical hypothesis relating to the religious practices of a certain group of people, the former is not a proposition about things at all, but

simply about words. It records the fact that relation symbols belong by definition to the class of symbols for characters, and not to the class of symbols for things.

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In this way philosophy can be reconstructed so that it does not "in any way compete with science." This is seen to follow from the fact that "the propositions of philosophy are not factual, but linguistic in character - that is, they do not describe the behaviour of physical, or even mental objects; they express definitions, or the formal consequences of definitions."⁶¹ And this view, in its turn, leads to the understanding of philosophy as "a department of logic", for it essentially belongs to logic to concern itself with the purely formal character of language.⁶²

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Ibid, p. 58.

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Ibid, p. 57.

62

It is important to note here that Philosophy, considered as a department of logic, further emphasizes the empiricist leanings of the logical positivists. Carnap for instance, remarking on this "new, scientific method of philosophizing", points out that because, looked at in this way, philosophy no longer attempts to be a "domain of knowledge" in its own right, and, for this reason, "this type of

Again, we can look to the writings of Bertrand Russell to find the basis of this apparently new approach to the function of philosophy. We have already seen that Russell's contribution in Principia Mathematica towards a new logic which was apparently purely formal in character had a great impact on the development of logical positivism. In much the same way, his theory of descriptions,⁶³ did much to establish the analytical character of positivistic philosophy.⁶⁴ One of the main contentions of this theory was that the propositions of ordinary language are often misleading in that they tend to postulate

philosophizing goes strictly hand in hand with empirical science." Rudolf Carnap, "The New Logic and the Old Logic," p. 133.

63

Russell's theory of descriptions, which has become one of the most influential doctrines in contemporary British philosophy, was first developed at length in an article entitled "On denoting" which was published first in Mind in 1905.

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"Russell, in the course of his mathematical inquiries, had already produced an alternative solution to this problem [Can non-existent entities have being?], and a host of similar ones, which, though it has recently come under attack, was for long regarded as a paradigm of philosophy, and which may well be such even if not finally accurate. This solution was first given by Russell in his article 'On denoting' . . ., and was developed in the various statements of his theory of descriptions." J. O. Urmson, Philosophical Analysis, p. 23.

subsistent entities which do not exist. Take, for example, the proposition, 'the king of France is bald', assuming the situation that there is no king of France. The difficulty here is that, in spite of the fact that there is no existent king of France, the form of the proposition seems to imply that some sort of being should be ascribed to him.⁶⁵ The point of Russell's theory is that propositions of this sort are misleading because they seem to be similar to genuine singular propositions, such as, 'the king of England is bald' (given that there is a king of England), where the subject denotes an actual person.⁶⁶ This latter proposition is genuine in that we are able to identify the individual person which the phrase, 'the

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Russell attributes this view to Meinong; "Thus, 'the present king of France', 'the round square', etc., are supposed to be genuine objects. It is admitted that such objects do not subsist, but nevertheless they are supposed to be objects." Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting", Mind, (1905), pp. 482 - 483.

66

"But now consider 'the king of France is bald.' By parity of form, this also ought to be about the denotation of the phrase 'the king of France'". Ibid, p. 483. That is, there ought to be something to which the expression "the king of France" refers.

King of England', denotes. It is precisely on this point that the problem arises concerning 'the king of France'. For the use of this expression as the subject of an apparently genuine proposition seems to imply that there must be something which is denoted by it. The point of Russell's theory of descriptions is that expressions such as 'the king of France', are, in fact, "not names for entities, even though their being used as the subject of sentences makes them look as if they were."⁶⁷ Moreover, this difficulty can be shown to be entirely eliminated by simply reformulating the proposition in such a way so as to remove this ambiguity. Thus, Urmson points out that the proposition 'the king of France is bald', when reformulated, "should read in some such way as 'there is one and only one thing which is king of France and whatever is king of France is bald'.⁶⁸" In this way, the original

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John Passmore, A Hundred Years of Philosophy.
(London: Pelican Books, 1968), p. 227.

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Urmson, Philosophical Analysis, p. 24.

proposition can be altered in such a way that there is no longer any need to concern oneself with the non-existent king of France.

Ayer seems to have accepted Russell's theory as being a paradigm case of the type of analysis to which logical positivism is committed. He uses it, for instance, in Language, Truth and Logic, as a "good illustration" of the way in which philosophy, via analysis can clarify the meaning of propositions by providing an adequate insight into their logical structure. The effect of this sort of analysis (e.g. analyzing 'the round square cannot exist' into 'no one thing can be both round and square') is that it "show[s] us how to express what is expressed by a sentence which contains a definite descriptive phrase [the round square] without employing any such phrase."⁶⁹ In this way an example of logical analysis, which represented to the positivists the new function of philosophy, had already been provided for them by Russell. The theory of definite descriptions was not, to be sure, considered as the only

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Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 61.

possible kind of logical analysis in which philosophers might engage; it was rather thought of as "the way in which all phrases of the form 'the so-and-so' are to be defined."⁷⁰ Accordingly, other forms of propositions ought to be susceptible to different types of analysis. Nonetheless, it has been maintained that this theory was, in fact, generally regarded as the paradigm case of logical analysis, and this was probably due to the fact that it was, perhaps more than any other form of logical analysis,⁷¹ comparatively successful in its task.

If one grants for the moment the viability of this kind of analysis as a philosophical procedure, it seems in order to ask what purpose it serves. Even if one allows the possibility that one can transform propositions of one kind into propositions of another kind without doing any noticeable damage, is there, it might be asked, any good reason for doing it? To these questions the positivists had ready answers, two of which are of special

70 Ibid, pp. 60 - 61.

71 See above, note 64, p. 58.

importance. In the first place, they were able to maintain that the logical analysis of propositions was able to resolve some very fruitless metaphysical disputes by showing that these disputes could be eliminated through the logical transformation of the propositions which have tended to give rise to them.⁷² The theory of descriptions was often used as an example. Through the elimination of a definite descriptive phrase (e.g. the round square), there is no longer any need to expend intellectual energy pondering possible modes of being which might be attributed to the "entities" which are apparently denoted by these phrases. Thus it was generally felt that the problems posed by idealists, realists, and other metaphysically inclined philosophers could be completely resolved through this kind of analysis. Moreover, it was argued that there was a second and perhaps more fundamental role that this form of philosophical activity could play. This function was based essentially on Wittgenstein's dictum that "philosophy aims at the

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See, for example, Ayer's first chapter in Language, Truth and Logic, in which he attempts to rid philosophy of metaphysical speculation.

logical clarification of thoughts."⁷³ The need for this sort of philosophy is based on the discovery of the fact, which Wittgenstein attributes to Russell, that "the apparent logical form of a proposition need not be its real one."⁷⁴ In this way, Ayer and the other positivists conceived that the task of philosophical analysis was, in effect, to lay bare the structure of language by transforming the propositions of ordinary language into propositions which were "more appropriate" so that, through eliminating the misleading character that seems to pervade ordinary language, the "real" structure of language could be shown.⁷⁵ Ayer once again uses Russell's theory

⁷³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus, p. 49 (4.112).

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 37 (4.0031).

⁷⁵ The problem which confronted the logical positivists was that they could not justify the sort of analysis in which they were engaged by any "ulterior motive"; for such a justification would, indeed, be tinged with metaphysics. Thus, in claiming that there was intrinsic value in logical analysis, "they simply denied any ulterior motive and claimed that philosophy was the analysis and clarification of language as such." J. O. Urmson, Philosophical Analysis, p. 117.

of descriptions as an example.

The effect of this definition of descriptive phrases, as of all good definitions, is to increase our understanding of certain sentences It might be objected that he [the author of these sentences] must already understand the sentences in order to be able to define the symbols which occur in them Such an understanding of sentences may be possessed even by those who believe that there are subsistent entities, such as the round square, or the present king of France And in the light of the clearer understanding which is afforded by Russell's definition, we see that this assumption [that the round square denotes a subsistent entity] is false In general we may say that it is the purpose of a philosophical definition to dispell those confusions which arise from our imperfect understanding of certain types of sentences in our language

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In this way it is clear that Ayer, as well as the other members of the positivist movement, tended to accept the view that philosophy consisted primarily in the

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Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, pp. 61 - 62.

activity of logical analysis, a view which itself had developed out of the logical atomism of Russell and Wittgenstein and, through them, the empiricism of Hume.

A fourth point which seems to be fundamental to the basic doctrine of logical positivism and which derives from the root commitment to the empirical criterion of meaning is the rejection of metaphysical propositions as being nonsensical. The principles on which this rejection is based have, for the most part, already been discussed. The principle of verification, which is itself a formulation, as we have already seen, of the positivists commitment to a basic empiricism can be used not only to explain what the meaning of a proposition is but it can also be used to provide a criterion to decide whether a statement has, or has not, any meaning whatsoever. Thus we find that Ayer, in Language, Truth and Logic, devotes the entire first chapter to a rejection of metaphysics which he does, in an apparently dogmatic way, by establishing what he calls "the criterion of verifiability", the purpose of which is to provide a rule for ascertaining whether or not any given proposition is "genuine"; "we say that a sentence is factually significant [genuine] to any given person if, and only if, he

knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express" ⁷⁷ Thus, it is clear that Ayer, in formulating this criterion, has paved the way for the rejection of a great deal of the history of philosophy, as well as many current philosophical positions, not on the grounds that they are false or irrational, but on the grounds that the statements that express these positions (e.g. "the absolute enters into, but is itself incapable of, evolution and progress" ⁷⁸) are one and all completely devoid of meaning.

Now it has been argued that Ayer and those other philosophers who have espoused the principle of verification have, not without a certain amount of malice of forethought, set out in an almost dogmatic way to rid philosophy of certain types of metaphysical speculation, and have, towards the fulfillment of this end, manufactured, as it were, a principle which satisfied their needs. ⁷⁹

77
Ibid, p. 35.

78
This example is used by Ayer in Language, Truth and Logic, p. 36.

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This seems to be the position that Urmson and others take. In what follows, it is not my intention to

The tendency to think of the verification principle in this light is, in Ayer's case, magnified by the fact that Ayer begins his exposition of the main doctrines of logical positivism by employing it in this way. For this reason, one is given the impression that positivist philosophy as a whole hinges in some way on this criterion and that the whole body of doctrine is deduced from this as a geometric system is deduced from its axioms. Yet this criticism is somewhat misleading. For while it is true that many of the arguments against the tenability of Ayer's criterion of verifiability are on very good ground, it is, nonetheless, worth remarking that there is a sense in which the criterion of verifiability is, rather than the first principle of logical positivism, simply the logical concomitant of the empiricism to which Ayer

dispute the fact that it was, indeed, in an attempt to render metaphysics impotent, that the logical positivists drew on the principle of verification. It is, in fact, quite clear that Ayer, for instance, makes this kind of use of the principle in the first chapter of Language, Truth and Logic. The point to be made here, however, is that, historically at least, the principle of verification was developed as a criterion of meaning, which, having been developed, was also seen as a "clear criterion for delimiting scientific knowledge from metaphysics, an objective the Vienna Circle has been devoted to from the very start." See Victor Kraft, The Vienna Circle, p. 33.

and the other positivists had committed themselves. This fact may be more clearly understood when it is realized that the principle of verification was originally developed by the logical positivists essentially as a rule for determining the meaning of any given proposition, and, only secondarily, a criterion for establishing what propositions have any meaning at all. Thus, Ayer's "criterion of verification" which is admittedly designed to promote the rejection of metaphysics is, in a sense, merely a corollary of the empirical criterion of meaning, i.e., the view that the meaning of a statement is its method of verification.

In this way, it can be argued that the principle of verification represents, for Ayer, an attempt to assess in some way the meaning and validity of "factual propositions." For the point that Ayer attempts to make in Language, Truth and Logic is, as we have seen, that "every empirical hypothesis must be relevant to some actual, or possible, sense experience." The reason for this, as we have also seen, is the very pragmatic one that it is the purpose of any factual proposition to provide "a rule for the anticipation of experience", and such rules can

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only be based on the data of experience. For this reason, metaphysical propositions which are, by definition, unrelated to experience, can have no factual content, and are, therefore, without meaning. All of this leads to the conclusion that the principle of verification is the logical result of an initial commitment to a radical empiricism which is derived, in its essence, from the philosophy of Hume. Indeed, it has already been noted that Ayer was convinced that many of the ideas that he had developed in his early works were derived ultimately from Hume's thought. Consider, for instance, Hume's well-known suggestion concerning the book of philosophy which lacks either mathematical or experimental reasoning: "commit it then to the flames. For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion".⁸¹ "What is this", Ayer remarks, "but a rhetorical version of our own thesis that

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Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 41.

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David Hume, An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding, ed. C. W. Hendel. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1955). p. 173.

a sentence which does not express either a formally true proposition or an empirical hypothesis is devoid of literal significance?"⁸²

From the foregoing, it is clear that Ayer, in spite of a number of differences, accepted, in the main, the philosophical tenets of logical positivism. This movement, which was, as we have seen, basically motivated by the desire to reconcile philosophy with science, was constructed on the framework of empiricism - a philosophical doctrine which seemed on the one hand to guarantee the scientific character of all factual knowledge by reducing it to the hard data of sensory experience and, on the other hand, to provide the basis for an analytical philosophical activity through the development of logic. To this extent, positivism was indebted to Hume. Now it has already been mentioned that the positivists generally and Ayer in particular did not accept, in their entirety, the epistemological doctrines which had been handed down by Hume. In particular, while they were almost all inclined to accept his views on causality and on induction,

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Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 54.

they almost unanimously ignored his theory of perception.⁸³
 Yet this raises a difficulty. For it has been argued
 that Hume's theory of perception and his theory of the
 external world are the logical consequence of the same
 epistemological principles that gave rise to his theories
 of causality and induction.⁸⁴ That is, it can be argued
 that it is a logical contradiction to maintain any one
 of these theories and reject the other. And since Ayer
 has committed himself to a basic empiricism which he
 explicitly admits derives from Hume, and since we are

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 See below, p. 83.

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 Consider, for example, the following position
 taken by W. T. Jones, in which he is examining the
 relationship between Hume's arguments on causality and
 the principles to which these arguments relate: "Hume's
 conclusion, granting his premises, is inevitable. If
 every idea is a distinct, individual fact ('entirely
 loose and separate') there can be no necessary connection
 between ideas. That is all there is to it. The long
 argument was necessary, not to prove Hume's case, but
 to convince his readers." And again, concerning the
 existence of the external world: "Hume's case against the
 external world amounts merely to pressing home the
 consequences of the representative theory of perception."
A History of Western Philosophy. (New York: Harcourt,
 Brace & World, 1952). p. 780., & p. 774.

concerned with developing Ayer's theory of perception, it is therefore necessary, at this point, to briefly inquire into the epistemological principles which are developed in Hume's writings. This investigation involves three steps: first, an outline of the basic epistemology defended by Hume; secondly, a discussion of the doctrine of causality and induction as they relate to these principles; and finally, a similar inquiry into his theory of perception.

It has been said of Hume, by one well-known commentator, that "he is impressed, as no philosopher before him had been, by the interrupted and fragmentary character of human sense experience."⁸⁵

. . . I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement
 The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, repass,

glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.

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Nor do these various perceptions have any intrinsic relation the one to the other. To blink one's eyes, to look away momentarily, produces a gap in the apparent continuum of perceptual experience. In this sense the continuity that one attributes to a prolonged sense perception is, in fact, made up of the occurrence of a great number of discreet perceptions. For each perception is wholly distinguishable from every other; and because it is distinguishable, it is also "separable", and, for this reason, "may be conceived as separately existent, and may exist separately, without any contradiction or absurdity."⁸⁷ Thus, the "furniture" which Hume ascribes to the human mind is made up primarily of what Hume calls

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David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 252 - 253.

87

Ibid. p. 634.

"perceptions", each of which is conceived of as a "distinct
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existence."

In both the Treatise and the Inquiry Hume begins by outlining the nature of human perceptions: ". . . we may divide all the perceptions of the mind into two classes or species, which are distinguished by their different degrees of force and vivacity." The one of these, the more forceful, he calls impressions, while the other he refers to as ideas.⁸⁹ The nature of the relationship which obtains between these two kinds of perceptions can be explained by noting that "all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones."⁹⁰ More precisely, it is contended by Hume that

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Ibid. p. 636. Again, it is the fragmentary nature of one's perceptions which Hume emphasizes. Conceiving each as a "distinct existence" has the effect of making one think of his perceptions as epistemic monads, as it were, each being essentially unrelated to the other.

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Hume, Inquiry, p. 27.

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Ibid., p. 28.

a comparative examination of our ideas leads inevitably to the conclusion "that all our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent."⁹¹ Hume also divides impressions into two kinds, "those of sensation and those of reflexion." Impressions of sensation are thought of as the original perceptions of the mind from which all others, including impressions of reflexion and simple and complex ideas, ultimately derive. For example, an impression of heat or cold can produce an idea that corresponds to it. This idea, "when it returns to the soul", may be the occasion of an impression of reflexion, for instance, of desire or aversion. It is thus clear that for Hume, all of the perceptions of the human mind, no matter how far removed they seem to be from the regions of sense experience, are derived one and all from simple sense impressions, which arise "in the soul originally, from unknown causes."⁹²

91 Hume, Treatise, p. 4.

92 Ibid, pp. 7 - 8.

One conclusion that one might reasonably draw at this juncture is that Hume is strongly committed to a fundamentally atomistic kind of empiricism; atomic because perceptual knowledge is conceived of as somehow constructed on the basis of discreet, atomic, perceptual units which are themselves considered as "original"; empiricist because these basic units are presented as the data of sensory experience. In addition, there is a clear subjective character to Humean empiricism; in themselves, perceptions not only do not necessarily incur each other but they also in no way refer to anything beyond themselves. Now it is true that a number of those who have commented on the philosophy of Hume have arrived at the conclusion that, in spite of appearances to the contrary (i.e. what Hume says in the opening sections of both the Inquiry and the Treatise), he was not, after all, a psychological atomist; that is, he did not really mean that every idea, simple or complex, could be ultimately reduced to a simple sense impression which would itself be incapable of being so analyzed. In suggesting, however, that Hume was

indeed an atomist, it is no part of our intention to enter into this controversy. Rather, what is being maintained here is that, regardless of what stand one might take concerning Hume's so-called "psychological atomism", it is clear from his writings that he regards perceptual experience as atomic units in the sense that they are discreet, that is, completely unrelated in any real way with any other perceptions.⁹⁴ Whether all of these perceptions are, or are not, reducible to the simple impressions of sensation is an entirely different question. And the proof that Hume's epistemological position is atomistic in this more limited sense is evident in that, as we shall shortly see, the resolution of many of the major philosophical difficulties which arise in his writings presupposes the view that one's perceptions possess this monadic character.⁹⁵

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That is, no perception can be fully identical with any other and, for this reason, each one can be thought of as a "distinct existence." As such, each perception can be thought of as an atomic or monadic unit. This has no real bearing on the problem of how these perceptions may be derived. See above, p. 75 Note 88.

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See above, p. 72, Note 84.

Hume's analysis of causation is a case in point. It depends on his view that, however much we may tend to think that a real continuity obtains between our perceptions, "no one event intrinsically refers to any other."⁹⁶ Yet, in spite of this intrinsic independency of our perceptions, there is in fact a certain "uniformity" present to experience, a uniformity which would be lacking were there not, says Hume, "some bond of union among them [one's perceptions], some associating quality, by which one idea naturally introduces another." And there are, he decides, three such qualities, one of which is causality.⁹⁷ Why is it, he asks, that we tend to relate certain objects together, considering one of them as a cause and the other as an effect? The answer to this is that, in addition to the continuity and contiguity which obtains between objects of this sort, it is generally felt that there is a necessary connection that irrevocably

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"One event follows another, but we can never observe any tie between them." Hume, Inquiry, p. 85. See also A. J. Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 47.

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Hume, Treatise, pp. 10 - 13.

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binds them together. And yet, when one examines the case closely, one can find no justification for this belief: "in all single instances of the operation of bodies or minds there is nothing that produces any impression, nor consequently can suggest any idea, of power or necessary connection."⁹⁹ For conceiving all of our perceptions as "distinct existences", they none of them refer, in any intrinsic way, to any other. And yet we do, Hume points out, find that there is a most persistent tendency of the human mind to ascribe such a relationship between certain objects under certain circumstances. How can this tendency be explained? Hume's reply to this question is that we believe that such a necessary connection exists and this belief is primarily the result of the tendency of the imagination to fill in the "gap" that separates our distinct perceptions:

It appears, then that this idea
of a necessary connection among events
arises from a number of similar instances

98 Ibid. p. 77.

99 Hume, Inquiry, p. 89.

which occur, of the constant conjunction of these events; nor can the idea ever be suggested by any one of these instances surveyed in all possible lights and positions. But there is nothing in a number of instances, different from every single instance, which is supposed to be exactly similar, except only that after a repetition of similar instances the mind is carried by habit, upon the appearance of one event, to expect its usual attendant and to believe that it will exist. This connection, therefore, which we feel in the mind, this customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant, is the sentiment or impression from which we form the idea of power or necessary connection.

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This position is, Hume admits, an "extraordinary" one; but he apparently did not feel that this constituted a serious objection to it. For given the epistemological status of the perceptions which underly this view of causation there is not, it appears, any other alternative except to take the view that the idea of necessary connection is nothing but the result of the activity of the

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Ibid, p. 86.

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imagination and is therefore a fiction.

This brings us to the more crucial question of Hume's theory of the external world. This question is important, not only because it provides valuable insight into Hume's own epistemology, but also because the problem it deals with is essentially the same as the problem of perception as Ayer defines it in The Problem of Knowledge.¹⁰² Hume finds that in this instance, as was the case with causality, the belief in question, in this case the belief in the continued, and the distinct and external existence of objects, is grounded on a disposition of the mind rather than on any information provided by sense perceptions themselves:

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The term "fiction" is interesting in that it has almost a technical status in Hume's philosophy. It generally refers to a notion that is produced by the imagination in relation to an impression or idea, but is not properly, i.e. rationally derived from either of these. A fiction is also sometimes considered as an obscure notion and it is in this way distinguished from an object of belief which is a livelier notion. See Hume, Treatise, p. 254.

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See A. J. Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 91.

That our senses offer not their impressions as the images of something distinct, or independent, and external, is evident; because they convey to us nothing but a single perception, and never give us the least intimation of anything beyond. A single perception can never produce the idea of a double existence, but by some inference either of the reason or imagination. When the mind looks farther than what immediately appears to it, its conclusions can never be put to the account of the sense; and it certainly looks further, when from a single perception it infers a double existence and supposes the relations of resemblance and causation between them.

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Again the argument rests on the fact that, for Hume, our perceptual experiences, rather than being regular and continuous and without interruption, are, in fact, quite irregular and interrupted "in the manner of their appearance." If, for instance, one closes his eyes momentarily and then re-opens them, he will find that this "new perceptions resemble perfectly those, which formerly struck

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 Hume, Treatise, p. 189.

the senses."¹⁰⁴ It is, indeed, precisely this resemblance between perceptions which are actually distinct, together with their constancy, that produces in the imagination "a propension to unite these broken appearances by the fiction of a continued existence."¹⁰⁵

It has already been noted that, in at least a very general way, Hume exercised a most important influence over Ayer. The extent of this influence becomes even clearer when we examine Ayer's views of Hume's assessment of causation. In this matter Hume had attempted to show that there was, between distinct events, no necessary connection that could explain their apparent relationship and, in doing so, he is credited with providing a foundation for a more scientific analysis of causal relationships; as Ayer points out,

He [Hume] realized that the question whether a given causal proposition was true or false was not one that could be settled a priori And in answering this question he

104 Ibid, p. 204.

105 Ibid, p. 205.

showed, I think conclusively, first that the relation of cause and effect was not logical in character, since any proposition asserting a causal connection could be denied without self contradiction, secondly that causal laws were not analytically derived from experience, since they were not deducible from any finite number of experiential propositions, and, thirdly, that it was a mistake to analyze propositions asserting causal connections in terms of a relation of necessitation which held between particular events, since it was impossible to conceive of any observation which would have the slightest tendency to establish the existence of such a relation.

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And, as we have already seen, the essential epistemological reason that one cannot establish such a relation between events is Ayer's general acceptance of Hume's rather monadic view of the nature of our perceptual experiences; that is, the view that "no one event intrinsically refers to any other."

This brings us to a rather difficult problem which can only be briefly outlined at this point. One of the most puzzling features of the descendant - ancestor

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Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 54.

relationship that has obtained between contemporary empiricists and Hume is the apparent disregard many of the former had shown towards some of the doctrines which had accompanied, in a seemingly coherent way, the original formulation of what has been called the "empiricist hypothesis."¹⁰⁷ "Why", asks a noted commentator, "have they [Hume's theory of perception and his theory of the external world] been so neglected, even by those modern empiricists who in other matters regard Hume as their master?"¹⁰⁸ There are, of course, a number of possible answers to this question: one may, for instance, simply take the view that Hume's positions on matters such as perception are not as relevant to contemporary philosophical interests as are his views on causation and induction; one may argue, as Ayer apparently does, that the theories which are acceptable can be interpreted in such

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This expression is taken from Bertrand Russell, Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits, p. 195.

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H.H. Price, Hume's Theory of the External World, p. 1.

a way that they in no way rely on, or are necessarily related to, those philosophical theories which are considered as unnecessary or even untenable. ¹⁰⁹ There is, however, another possibility which ought to be taken into consideration in regard to this problem. One might suggest that at least one motivation which accounts for the apparent neglect of some of Hume's positions, notably

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Ayer claims, for instance, that in spite of the fact that he has derived his basic empirical standpoint from Hume, he is not committed to all of Hume's doctrines; ". . . our empiricism is not logically dependent on an atomistic psychology, such as Hume and Mach adopted, but is compatible with any theory whatsoever concerning the actual characteristics of our sensory fields. For the empiricist doctrine to which we are committed is the logical doctrine concerning the distinction between analytic propositions, synthetic propositions, and metaphysical verbiage; and as such it has no bearing on any psychological question of fact." This apparent disavowal of certain "factual" positions which had been defended by Hume on the grounds that his own doctrine is simply a logical one, crops up repeatedly in Ayer's writings, and is of special importance in connection with Ayer's theory of perception. One of the major aims of this dissertation will be to attempt to show that, in introducing his doctrine of 'logical empiricism', Ayer is re-introducing through the back door as it were, the very same "atomistic" doctrines which he is attempting to part with. See A. J. Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 122.

that of perception of the external world, is the fact that these positions, though they were derived from the generally accepted "empiricist hypothesis", led to conclusions which were considered by Ayer and indeed many other contemporary philosophers to be repugnant. That this is at least one of the underlying reasons for his rather casual dismissal of Hume's theory of perception is made clear when Ayer, in The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, notes that "he [Hume] came to the conclusion that the belief in the continued and distinct existence of objects was a fallacious product of the imagination,"¹¹⁰ Ayer then proceeds to develop a theory concerning the nature of the external world which, though apparently consistent with the strictures outlined in the "empiricist hypothesis", neatly circumvents the scepticism to which Hume himself was seemingly drawn. The implication to be stressed here is not so much the historical one that Ayer has chosen to reject some of Hume's positions, notably his view concerning one's perception of the

¹¹⁰
Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge,
p. 243.

external world, but the logical one that, however subtle one may be about it, it is clearly impossible to draw from a single premise, or set of premises, contradictory conclusions.

On the subject of perception then, Ayer must from the very beginning find himself in a kind of philosophical quandary. He has, clearly enough, accepted in a general way Humean empiricism, even though he was not particularly willing to succumb to the scepticism which Hume, at least, felt was entailed by it. Yet, at the same time, it is, as was noted above, clearly impossible to reconcile the views that the principles of empiricism both do and do not entail a scepticism with regard to our knowledge of the existence of the external world. For this reason, one must bear in mind that, in any attempt to analyze Ayer's theory of perception, one should be aware that he is setting out to do, on the basis of principles which are apparently derived from Hume, what Hume was himself unable to do. ¹¹¹ It is not, I hope, premature to suggest that it is largely due to his failure to bring about such a

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That is, Hume, while he was aware of the fact that his position seemed to be at odds with common

reconciliation in his earlier works that Ayer is forced, in his more mature writings, to engage in a reappraisal of his earlier views on perception. In any case, it should be remembered that Ayer and the other positivists, while they did, in a general way, accept the empiricism of Hume, their acceptance did not amount to a wholesale subscription to his doctrines. Thus, while Humean empiricism served in one way to strengthen logical positivism, by providing an epistemological basis for the merging together of philosophy and science, and thereby enabling philosophy to apparently circumvent a two thousand year tradition of philosophical problems, it created, in another way, another set of philosophical problems. And not the least among these is the problem of perception.

It has not been the intention of this very brief enquiry into Hume's philosophy to fully explicate or criticise any of the doctrines that have been considered. Rather, the purpose of this study is merely to show that

sense, could discover no reason for abandoning his rather paradoxical position. See Treatise, p. 633.

Hume's views of perception and of our knowledge, or lack of knowledge, of the external world are not only consistent with the epistemological principles to which he subscribes, but that they are demanded by them, in much the same way as were his views on causality. For, however else one might wish to view the essential import of the contribution which Hume made to the development of modern philosophy, it is clear that his theory of knowledge generally and his theory of perception in particular can be seen to turn on the point that, properly speaking, the only kind of philosophical analysis for which there is any sort of rational justification is one which is not only based upon the evidence of our perceptions, but is also confined within the limits of these perceptions.¹¹²

Thus the question of whether there is, apart from these perceptions, an external world to which they correspond, is one which cannot even be raised. One may only, given

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Again, given the essentially monadic nature of one's perceptions, there can never be any rational justification for going beyond these perceptions.

its essential knowability, raise the question of why it is that the human mind tends to affirm the existence of such an external world.¹¹³ And it is clear from the very beginning of his discussion that such an explanation can in no way amount to justification, in a rational sense, of our belief in this world.

For thereare, according to Hume, only two kinds of reasoning to which one could allude in search of such a justification: to arguments based on demonstrative reasoning and those based on matters of fact.¹¹⁴ If however, one conceives, as Hume does, all perceptions as "distinct existences", it becomes perfectly intelligible to suppose that the existence of one perception in no way implies the existence of anything beyond it. If therefore, no necessary relation can be established between one's perceptions and an external world, our belief

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See Hume, Treatise, p. 187.

114

"All reasonings may be divided into two kinds, namely, demonstrative reasoning, or that concerning the relations of ideas, and moral [or probable] reasoning, or that concerning matter of fact and existence. David Hume, Inquiry, p. 49.

in this world cannot be justified by demonstrative reasoning. Similarly, it is evident that no reasoning based on matters of fact, i.e. sense perceptions themselves, can be used in this case because it is to precisely these perceptions, each one distinct and complete in itself, that such reasoning refers. The atomic or monadic character of one's perceptions renders, therefore, such a justification impossible. In this way the principles of empiricism led Hume to a rather sceptical conclusion - the existence of the external world is unknowable.

It is against this background that one must understand the historical meaning of those "philosophical problems" associated with "our knowledge of the external world" to which Ayer refers in the Preface to The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge. For having rejected the sceptical conclusions which are characteristic of Hume's position, Ayer must face the problem of constructing a theory of perception which is at one and the same time consistent with the principles of empiricism and yet one which overcomes the inherent scepticism traditionally associated with these principles. Ayer's early attempt to handle this problem is found primarily in The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge and, to a lesser extent, in Language ,

Truth and Logic and a number of articles which were published prior to 1947.¹¹⁵ And it is to these writings that we now turn in an attempt to assess his resolution of these problems.

115 Notably "The Terminology of Sense-data", published in Mind in 1945 and "Phenomenalism", which appeared in the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society in 1947.

CHAPTER II

The Early Solution: Phenomenalism

The development of a theory of perception within the confines of the basic tenets of Humean empiricism was by no means a practice which originated with Ayer. Nor was the problem, that of somehow devising a theory of knowledge which rationally justifies our belief in the existence of the external world, a novel one. Indeed, the question of providing a realistic analysis of one's so-called 'perceptual experience' is generally recognized as one of the key problems in the development of recent British philosophy. One can, in fact, derive the essence of the problem directly from Descartes' Meditations.¹ While the origin of the more recent treatment of the difficulty is not easy to pin down, it is I think, safe to suggest, that in the case of

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Here Descartes, on the basis of certain unusual characteristics which had attended some of his sensory experiences, points out the naivete of our natural acceptance of the existence of the external world: "All this makes me recognize sufficiently well that up to now it has not been by a valid and considered judgment, but only by a blind [and rash] impulse, that I have believed that there were things outside of myself and different from my own being which, through the organs of my senses or by whatever other method it might be, sent into me their ideas or images [and impressed upon me their resemblances]." The Meditations Concerning First Philosophy, p. 96.

this problem, as in many others in recent British philosophy, the general form that it took can be traced back to the writings of Russell, and in particular, to Our Knowledge of the External World. In this book, Russell attempted to develop a theory of perception on the empiricist view that the "sole basis" of our knowledge of the external world derives from the immediate objects of sense [which] depend for their existence upon physiological conditions in ourselves" ² And, given the derivative character of our knowledge of the external world, one is immediately confronted with a very perplexing problem: "Can the existence of anything other than our own hard data be inferred from the existence of those data?" ³ This is, of course, not

² Russell, Our Knowledge of the External World, p. 55. The lectures in this book were originally published in 1914.

³ Ibid, p. 61. Russell's formulation of the problem of perception is based on his distinction between "hard" and "soft" data: "I mean by 'hard' data those which resist the solvent influence of critical reflection, and by 'soft' data those which, under the operation of this process, become to our minds more or less doubtful. The hardest of hard data are of two sorts: the particular facts of sense, and the general truths of logic". Russell goes on to point out that "certain common beliefs are undoubtedly excluded from hard data"; and, among these, he mentions the belief "that sensible objects in general persist when we are not perceiving them". Thus one is presented with the problem of somehow justifying this belief. See pp. 60 - 61

much more than a reformulation of the problem which had earlier been developed by Hume: since all of our perceptions have only a momentary existence, how is it possible to explain our belief in the continued and distinct existence of objects?⁴ Thus, Russell had, in effect, simply re-introduced the Humean problem of perception in a somewhat different caste.

Ayer, in Language, Truth and Logic, had taken a rather dim view of the problem as a whole. After all, is not the philosopher who attempts to concern himself with such problems trespassing the confines of strict logical analysis and plunging into the obscure and forbidden world of metaphysics? It is, Ayer argues, a "complete mistake" to take the position that, "unless one can give a satisfactory analysis of perceptual situations, one is not entitled to believe in the existence of material things."⁵ For, to even take up the problem, one must assume that a material thing is a different kind of

⁴ See Chapter 1, p. 82 - 84.

⁵ Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 50.

"substance", as it were, than the sense impressions which we directly perceive. It is clear, however, that such a position, since it could in no way be demonstrable on empirical grounds, is fundamentally nonsensical in character. It is true, Ayer admits, that it "happens to be impossible in an ordinary European language to mention a thing without appearing to distinguish it generically from its qualities and states."⁶ Does this, however, amount to a justification for distinguishing the thing itself from these various qualities and states (i.e. sense impressions)? The answer to this is clear: since there is no empirical evidence which, even in the most remote sense, could be construed as suggesting such a distinction, it must follow that the problem of perception, as it was formulated by Russell and others, is nothing but a pseudo-problem, incapable of rational response.

This leaves Ayer in a rather curious position. For, it is difficult to see how, on the basis of his epistemological empiricism, he can maintain the view

⁶
Ibid, p. 51.

that there is no distinction between sense impressions on the one hand and external objects on the other. Yet he is, apparently, maintaining just this position. And this would seem to leave him with only two alternatives: he may either assume the view that one directly perceives material things, that is, external objects having a distinct and continued existence; or he may take the position that one directly perceives only one's private and momentary sense-data and thereby accept, as Hume apparently did, the conclusion that the existence of external objects is not rationally warranted. For if it is assumed that there is no rational or empirical basis for the distinction between sense impressions or external objects, there seems to be no other alternative but to say that all of the objects of perceptual experience are either sense impressions exclusively or material things exclusively. The difficulty here, and indeed the difficulty which Ayer faced in developing his early theory of perception, derives from the fact that he does not wish to accept either of these alternatives.⁷ Thus,

⁷ That is, Ayer, like Russell, does wish to maintain that there is some kind of distinction between sense impressions and physical things. However, and this

the problem of perception has not been completely circumvented; it has simply reared its head in another way. If one assumes that Ayer, like Russell, would wish to maintain some kind of differentiation between sense impressions and physical objects, then it seems incumbent upon him to show why such a problem as that posed by Russell should not be brought to bear.

For it was certainly the case that Russell's treatment of the problem in Our Knowledge of the External World gave rise to a debate which has carried on up to the present time. And one of the more apparent results of this debate was the development of what has come to be known as the sense-data theory of perception. Russell himself and many others, such as G. E. Moore, C. D. Broad, and H. H. Price, produced an abundance of literature which served not only to popularize the sense-data theory, but also to engender a strident opposition from a number of philosophers somewhat more inclined towards realism. The

will be clarified in the course of this Chapter, his aim is to develop this distinction in such a way so that the problem of perception, as it was formulated by Russell, does not arise from it.

theory largely concerned the nature of the immediate objects of perception and, in an attempt to proffer an explanation of these, a number of different terms were employed - sense-datum, sensum, sensible appearance, sense impression, and so on. These terminological differences should not, however, veil the fact that in each case the meaning of the term was similar in at least two important respects: first, the sense-datum, etc. was always regarded as the immediate object of perception; and secondly, it was generally considered to be distinct, in some fundamental way, from an ordinary physical object.⁸ Hence, the problem of perception as it presented itself to many sense-data theorists was, as Prof. Broad had pointed out, "to reconcile the supposed neutrality, persistence and independence of a physical object with the obvious differences between its various sensible appearances to different observers at the same moment, and to the

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One exception to this view is what Broad calls the "Multiple Relation" theory of perception which has been maintained by Moore and others. According to this theory, since the sense-datum is part of the "surface" of the physical object, there is a sense in which it is not distinct from the physical object. See below, p. 104, Note 13.

same observer at different moments between which it is held not to have undergone any physical change."⁹

One might, of course, raise an objection against the entire problem: the distinction between things (as they are) and the so-called appearances of things seems to provide no real or insuperable difficulty for most people; Why, one might ask, should such a problem be posed in the first place? To this sort of objection, the sense-data theorists had a ready answer; in order to justify the consideration of such a problem one need only pause to consider those 'facts' about perceptual experience which lie at the root of the difficulty.¹⁰ Consider, for example, a penny (which is assumed to be round) which has the appearances of being elliptical; suppose further, that on changing one's perspective with respect to this object,

⁹
C. D. Broad, Scientific Thought. (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trabner & Co. Ltd., 1923), p. 234.

¹⁰
It is interesting to note that these "facts", which concern the illusory nature of perceptual experience, are fundamentally the same as those referred to by Descartes in the Meditations. See above, p. 95, Note 1.

one experiences a number of perceptions, each distinct from the other and none of them identifiable with the penny as it really is, i.e. round. What then, is one perceiving in this case? It cannot be the thing itself since the penny is round and the objects which are perceived are not. One must say then that the immediate objects of perception are the appearance of things. "And what I call a sensible appearance", Prof. Broad points out, "is just a general name for what I have been describing."¹¹

The basic argument is, then, that the very nature of our perceptual experience is such that one must grant some kind of 'reality' to appearances as well as to the objects which allegedly lie behind them; for, "a complete inventory of the universe must mention the one [the sensum] as well as the other [the physical object]."¹²

On the basis of this epistemological standpoint, it is not difficult to see that one of the major problems that must be dealt with in some way by the sense-data

¹¹ Broad, Scientific Thought, p. 236.

¹² Ibid, pp. 242 - 243.

theorists is that of explaining the relationship which obtains between the sensum or sense-datum on the one hand, with the physical object on the other.

This question, however, assumes that a world of distinct physical objects exists, and such an assumption is open to challenge. For, if one takes it for granted that, in all cases, the immediate objects of perception are sensory appearances, are there any rational grounds at all for believing that there is something that lies behind these appearances?¹³ There was, I think, a certain amount of general agreement that if such a justification was forthcoming it could not be based on a process of logical inference. For the existence of any finite number of sense-data can never provide the basis for inferring the existence of any other objects.¹⁴ In general, the

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G. E. Moore attempts to avoid this problem by taking the position that the sense-datum is part of the surface of the material thing. On this supposition, every perception of a sense-datum, being at the same time a perception of part of the surface of a material thing, provides direct evidence in favour of the existence of material things, cf. G. E. Moore, "Visual Sense-Data" in Perceiving, Sensing and Knowing, ed. R.J. Swartz. (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co. Ltd., 1965), pp. 130 - 131.

14

The following statement by Broad is, I think,

position taken by many sense-data philosophers was to tacitly admit that they could not provide such a justification, and then to simply proceed with an analysis of the relationship between sense-data and physical objects as if such a justification were not needed. To find an example of this point of view, one might again turn to the writings of C. D. Broad:

We shall not then attempt to prove the existence of a world of such entities having the constitutive properties of physical objects; for, if this can be done, I at any rate do not know how to do it. But we shall point out those facts about our sensa and their

typical in this respect: "Further, it is false logically to suppose that the existence of a physical world in general could be inferred from the existence of our sensa, or from anything that we know about their intrinsic properties or their mutual relations. I suppose that the existence of sensa is a necessary condition, but it is certainly not a sufficient condition, of my belief in the existence of the physical world. If there were no sensible appearances to me, I suppose that I should not judge there to be any physical reality. But, on the other hand, there is nothing in my sensa to force me logically to the conclusion that there must be something beyond them, having the constitutive properties of physical objects. The belief that our sensa are appearances of something more permanent and complex than themselves seems to be primitive, and to arise inevitably in us with the sensing of the sensa. It is not reached by inference, and could not logically be justified by inference." Broad, Scientific Thought, pp. 267 - 268.

groupings which specially fit in with the view that sense are various partial and fleeting appearances of relatively permanent and independent things.

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It is not difficult to see that this view would hardly be sufficient to placate the detractors of the sense-data theory. No matter how many 'facts' are adduced to vindicate the claim that the direct objects of perception are sense-data, and not physical objects, the fact that this theory places under a shadow of doubt one's almost instinctive acceptance of the existence of an external world was, in the judgment of many, enough to warrant its condemnation. Furthermore, the sense-datum, conceived of as an entity of sorts, which had, according to Broad, "been overlooked by most plain men and many philosophers",¹⁶ was considered by many to be a spurious

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Ibid, p. 269.

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Ibid, p. 248.

addition to an already very complex universe.¹⁷ And perhaps most damaging of all was the fact, admitted by some sense-data theorists themselves, that the problem of showing that the existence of an external world can be adequately founded on the data of sense, was never satisfactorily resolved.¹⁸ It is, of course, not my intention to engage in a criticism of these theories. It should, however, be clear that even the proponents of the sense-data theory were aware of the fact that there were some loose ends which had yet to be resolved; and perhaps the most nagging loose end was that of justifying one's belief in the existence of the external world.

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See, for example, W. F. Barnes' article entitled "The Myth of Sense-data" in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, XLV, (1944-1945), p. 100. Here Barnes points out that, since sense-data are "fictions", it is possible to attribute to them any qualities that we please.

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This is exemplified in Broad's view that the existence of the external world cannot be "proved". While it may be argued that such a proof is not required, that people simply "know" that there are physical objects, it is still the case that, on the assumption that one directly perceives only sense-data, the existence of these objects becomes problematic. In this sense, it is incumbent upon the sense-datum theorist to provide such a proof.

This brings us to a consideration of Ayer's theory of perception. It should be remembered, at the outset, that unlike Russell, Broad and even Price, Ayer was not, in putting forward a sense-data theory, breaking any new ground. Had The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge simply re-iterated the views already presented in great detail by the others, it is doubtful that it would have received the attention that it did. It is, however, made patently clear by Ayer, that his purpose in writing the book was not simply to present a sense-data theory as such, but was "to resolve the philosophical problems which are commonly brought under the heading of 'our knowledge of the external world'." ¹⁹ Looked at in this way, it would seem clear that Ayer's theory of perception is, in fact, an attempt to tackle the problem, which had arisen out of the sense-datum theory, of demonstrating some intelligible relationship between sense-data on the one hand and external objects on the other.

Ayer introduces the sense-data theory in an almost apologetic manner. He begins by acknowledging that "it does

¹⁹ Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. vii.

not normally occur to us that there is any need to justify our belief in the existence of material things." And, to further establish the view that he is not prepared to depart from normality, he adds that, in spite of the fact that he is aware that our senses sometimes deceive us, "this does not lead me to believe that my own sense perceptions cannot in general be trusted, or even that they may be deceiving me now."²⁰ In short, Ayer assumes the standpoint of common sense; he, in the same manner as most other people, rarely, if ever, feels the need to question the existence of the familiar objects which surround him.

Nonetheless, it is a fact that many philosophers do adhere, and not, Ayer points out, without convincing reasons, to the position that "such objects as pens or cigarettes are never directly perceived." It is important to note that in general the motivation for this view is

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Ibid, p. 1. In saying this, Ayer is assuming the position of "common sense." And, as we shall see, it is this realistic tendency, the inclination to accept the view that one does, in fact, perceive "real" objects, which drives Ayer to abandon his early theory of perception.

not based on an inherent scepticism concerning the existence of external objects; for most of those philosophers who claim that one never perceives these objects do, in the main, "allow that our belief in the existence of material things is well-founded" And here, of course, one must raise the question, what is it then that is directly perceived? To this Ayer responds that "it is now customary to give the name 'sense-datum'" to whatever it is that is perceived.²¹ Thus, sense-datum is, by agreement, that which is 'directly' perceived, or the object of 'immediate' acquaintance.²² The view that sense-data rather than material things are the immediate objects of perception is, according to Ayer, generally formulated on the basis of what he calls the argument from illusion. One can distinguish at the outset two different kinds of illusory experience: those instances in which objects appear to

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Ibid, p. 2.

22

Ayer attributes the coining of the term, 'sense-datum', together with a general definition for it, to Russell: "I believe that the word 'sense-datum' was first used as a technical term in philosophy by Bertrand Russell: and he defines sense-data as objects of acquaintance." A.J. Ayer, "Phenomenalism" in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, XLVII, (1947-48), p. 163.

have characteristics which they really do not have, i.e. qualitative illusions; and those cases, such as hallucinatory experiences, in which objects are perceived which do not really exist, i.e. existential illusions.²³ We may begin with an examination of qualitatively delusive experiences.

There are, Ayer claims, at least three elements that characterize qualitatively delusive perceptions which, upon analysis, tend to give rise to the view that material objects are never directly perceived. The first is based on the allegation that illusory and veridical perceptions are qualitatively indistinguishable. One might take, for example, the well-worn illusion of the stick which, when partially submerged in water, appears to be bent, although it is, in fact, straight. The problem arises when one

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Ayer's discussion of "the argument from illusion" in The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge is based primarily on observations concerning qualitative illusions. His discussions of existential illusions, and their significance with respect to the argument from illusion can be found in "The Terminology of Sense-data" in Mind, LIV, (1945), pp. 285 - 312, and also in The Problem of Knowledge, pp. 98 - 104.

attempts to compare the illusory perception of the bent stick with what Ayer calls the corresponding veridical perception of the stick. For, when one examines these perceptions, "it is pointed out that there is no intrinsic difference in kind between those of our perceptions that are veridical in their presentation of material things and those that are delusive."²⁴ There is, one finds, in the perceptions themselves, no peculiar and distinguishing characteristics that belong to either those that are veridical or only those that are delusive. Indeed, it has been pointed out that, if such characteristics were present, it would be impossible, in a strict sense, for any perceptions to be illusory for they would delude no one. How then, one may ask, can an illusory perception of this kind be described? Since the stick is not really bent, but only appears to be, it would seem reasonable to suppose that whatever it is that is being perceived, it is not, at least in the case of an illusion, a material thing.²⁵

²⁴ Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, pp. 5 - 6.

²⁵ See, for example, H. H. Price, Perception. (London: MacMillian & Co. ltd., 1961), p. 31: "The

How then are we to describe what it is that is being perceived? It is, according to Ayer, precisely for this purpose "that philosophers have had recourse to the term 'sense-datum'.²⁶" And since there is no qualitative distinction between an illusory perception, in which it seems reasonable to suppose that the physical object is not being directly perceived, and a veridical perception, it would seem to follow that, even in the latter case, the direct object of awareness is not a physical object, but is rather a sense-datum.

A second argument adduced to support this view is that a series of perceptions, some of which are delusive and others veridical, "may form a continuous series both with respect to their qualities and with respect to the conditions in which they are obtained."²⁷ By way of an

difficulty is that there is no qualitative difference between normal sense-data as such and abnormal sense-data as such. Indeed, the whole trouble about abnormal sense-data is precisely that they simulate normal ones. Otherwise it would not even be possible for us to be deceived by them; they would be strange, but they would not be illusory."

²⁶
p. 4. Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge,

²⁷
Ibid, p. 8. Also see Price, Perception, p. 32.

example, Ayer mentions an observer approaching an object from a distance. At first, the object appears smaller than it is, and in this respect the observer's initial perceptions are delusive. It is assumed, however, that the series of perceptions terminates in one that is veridical. The argument here is that the qualitative difference between the first veridical perception and the last illusory perception is the same as the difference between any two equally proximate illusory perceptions. The point of noting this characteristic is to show once more that veridical and illusory perceptions are qualitatively indistinguishable and, in much the same manner as before, this tends to reinforce the argument that, in all cases, the immediate objects of perception are sense-data rather than material things.

The third argument, based on qualitatively illusory perceptions, is hinged on the fact "that all of our perceptions whether veridical or delusive are to some extent causally dependent both upon external conditions, such as the character of light and upon our own physiological and psychological states."²⁸ On this view, it is shown that

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Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge,
p. 9.

the character of all perceptions depends on certain facts (in visual perception, the colour and intensity of the light source, the condition of the observer's eyes, nervous system, etc.) which have in themselves no direct relation to the physical objects in question. A white object will, for example, if seen through glasses which are tinted green, appear green, and must, therefore, be classified as a delusive perception. Again, the argument purports to show that it is impossible on the basis of an examination of our various perceptions to distinguish between those of them which are delusive in this sense and those of them which are veridical. Thus, it is deemed reasonable to assume that, in all cases, that of which one is immediately aware in sense perception is a sense-datum.

In addition to those arguments which are based on qualitatively illusory perceptions, one might add another based on such existentially delusive perceptions as hallucinations. The example which Ayer uses is the case of Macbeth's vision of a dagger which is assumed not to exist. In this case, the illusion consists "not in investing a real physical dagger with some quality or qualities that it did not really possess, but in imagining

that a physical dagger was there at all".²⁹ And, on the assumption that the dagger was itself not really present, i.e. that it did not exist, it does seem reasonable to raise the question, what was it that Macbeth saw? The fact that he was able to describe it does seem to indicate that he saw something; and it does not seem inappropriate to refer to what he saw as an appearance of a dagger or, to express the same thing, to say that he saw a sense-datum. "If we are to say that he saw anything", Ayer points out, it can be argued that "it must have been something that was accessible to him alone, something that existed only so long as this particular lasted; in short, sense-datum".³⁰ And, to continue the argument, since the delusive character of the hallucination depends on its being indistinguishable from a veridical perception, may it not be argued that in all cases that which is perceived is a sense-datum.

Taken collectively, the arguments from illusion are

²⁹ Ayer, "The Terminology of Sense-Data", p. 299.

³⁰ Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 98.

presented by Ayer as a comparatively strong case in favour of the view that the immediate, or direct, objects of perception are not material things themselves, but are the appearances of material things, or sense-data. At the same time, Ayer points out that the arguments are premised on certain suppositions concerning the nature of the material things in question: "It is held to be characteristic of material things that their existence and their essential properties are independent of any particular observer."³¹ Here, indeed, is the crux of the argument. As Broad had pointed out, the assumption of the "neutrality, persistence and independence of a physical object" as contrasted with "the obvious differences between its various sensible appearances" lies at the very heart of the problem of perception.³² Moreover, if one does not grant this assumption and chooses instead the position that it is possible to maintain that the immediate objects of perception are material things, it would seem, on the

³¹ Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. 10.

³² See above, p. 101.

basis of the argument from illusion, that one would be compelled "to attribute to material things such mutually incompatible properties as being at the same time both green and yellow, or both elliptical and round."³³ And this, it is assumed, involves one in a contradiction; for, is it not contradictory to say, for example, in the case in which one person perceives an object to be red while another perceives it to be green, that the object itself can be both red and green? Similarly, in the case of an existential illusion, one would seemingly be caught up in a like contradiction on the assumption that any given material object, e.g. Macbeth's dagger, which is perceived, might not, in fact, exist. And since the position that material things may possess contradictory qualities, or even not exist at all, has been rejected by most sense-data theorists, they have been led to the conclusion that if we have any knowledge at all of material things, it "must be obtained through the medium of sense-data, since they are the only objects of

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Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge,
p. 14.

which, in sense perception, we are immediately aware."³⁴

With this, Ayer seems to arrive at the critical problem concerning the nature of the relationship which obtains between sense-data and material objects. For, it seems reasonable to ask, what, if any, knowledge of the external world can be gleaned from perceptual experiences which are private and momentary and are, by definition, perceptions which are not to be identified with material things? The point of the problem is, I think, reasonably clear. It is fundamentally the same problem as the one created by Hume, and reformulated by Russell in Our Knowledge of the External World - that of explaining or justifying one's apparently natural belief in the existence of the external world.³⁵ And the reason that the problem of perception, as it seems to arise here, and the problem of the existence of an external world, as it does arise in the writings of Hume, are the same, is that the sense-datum, which is at the root of the present problem is

34
Ibid, p. 11.

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See above, pp. 96 - 97.

epistemologically equivalent to Hume's 'perception' which, as has already been noted, eventually led him to become philosophically sceptical about the distinct, and independent and continued existence of physical objects.

It is, perhaps, necessary to clarify the meaning of the expression 'epistemological equivalence' as it is used in this context. Such a clarification is not necessary simply to establish that there is a relationship of sorts between the sense-data theory on the one hand and Hume's theory of perception on the other. For, it is generally accepted that the sense-data theory is representative of a more or less empiricist theory of perception and further, that the empiricism in question derives essentially from Hume. This, however, seems to leave the nature of the relationship between the two theories somewhat ambiguous. And this ambiguity is in no way removed by the fact that Ayer, in Language, Truth and Logic, had attempted to dissociate himself from certain epistemological positions which Hume had espoused. Notably, he rejected the so-called 'psychological atomism' which is often attributed to Hume.³⁶ This gives rise to the problem; for what the

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See, for example, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 122: ". . . and we have already made it clear that

expression 'epistemological equivalence' is intended to convey is the view that, in general, the sense-datum and Hume's perception are equivalent in the sense that they both are used to represent atomic or monadic units of perceptual experience.³⁷ For the "occurrence" of a sense-datum is, for Ayer, an event which is intrinsically unrelated to any other perceptual event.³⁸ And from this, it follows that on the basis of any given perceptual experience, nothing can be inferred except that experience

our empiricism is not logically dependent on an atomistic psychology, such as Hume and Mach adopted, but is compatible with any theory whatsoever concerning the actual characteristics of our sensory fields. For the empiricist doctrine to which we are committed is a logical doctrine . . . and as such it has no bearing on any psychological question of fact."

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It has already been noted that it is a disputed question whether Hume himself believed that sense perceptions were atomic in the sense that they all derive from simple sense impressions. It was also shown however that, leaving aside the question of the derivation of perceptions, Hume's perceptions, whether simple or complex, were conceived by him to be one and all atomic or monadic in the sense that they were, each of them, unrelated to any other. It is in this sense that sense-data are epistemologically equivalent to Hume's perceptions. See above, Chapter 1, pp. 77 - 78.

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Ayer unequivocally speaks of sense-data as events: "It is true that I have been speaking of sense-

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 itself. In short, like Hume's perceptions, sense-data are conceived of as 'distinct existences', implying nothing beyond themselves. It is in this sense, insofar as they are thought of as discreet events, that the perceptions of Hume and the sense-data that Ayer describes are epistemologically equivalent. And in the same manner that the monadic and fragmentary character of his perceptions compelled Hume to take up the problem of the very existence of external objects, it would seem that Ayer too, must face up to this same difficulty.

data as 'objects' rather than 'events'. But to every sense-datum, conceived of as an object, there corresponds the event of its occurrence; and the statements that are made about sense-data as objects could all be expressed in terms of these events." He concludes that "on this basis it is possible to effect a general transition from the terminology of sense-data, as objects, to the terminology of sensible events." The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge. p. 177. The point here is that the "occurrence" of a sense-datum, conceived of as a "sensible event", is, like any other event, unrelated to any other: "No one event intrinsically refers to any other." See Chapter 1, pp. 84-85.

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 This, as Russell has noted, is the inherent contradiction in empiricism. Empiricism, he claims is self-refuting because it cannot go beyond perceptual experience. See above, Introduction, p. 12, Note 20.

To this problem, Ayer puts forward a rather peculiar response. There are, indeed, two elements to his reply, each of which bears careful consideration. He first attempts to show that the argument from illusion does not necessitate the conclusion that the direct objects of perception are not material things but sense-data. And secondly, having apparently demonstrated that the sense-datum theory is not needed to account for the relevant perceptual 'facts', he then proceeds to reintroduce this same theory in such a way so as to attempt to avoid those serious difficulties, such as the problem of justifying our belief in the existence of the external world, which have plagued many sense-datum theorists who have based their views on the argument from illusion.

The first part of Ayer's argument consists then in simply denying the necessity of the sense-datum theory. This denial does not, however, in any way imply that Ayer finds reason to disagree with any of the factual positions which have been put forward and defended by these philosophers. As a consequence of this, Ayer is not prepared to challenge the sense-data theorists' analysis of the phenomenon of illusion as such. Therefore, in this sense, Ayer is willing to accept all of the factual observations

adduced by these philosophers concerning the nature of illusory experience. The position that Ayer takes is to argue that, in spite of the factual veracity of the premises of the argument from illusion, the conclusion that one perceives sense-data rather than material things is not logically entailed by these premises.

In order to understand Ayer's reasoning on this point, it is necessary to bear in mind what one might call the logical pattern of the argument from illusion. In brief, the argument is this: an examination of the phenomenon of illusory experience leads to the conclusion that, in at least some cases, physical objects are not directly perceived; and, since an examination of these illusory perceptions indicates that they are qualitatively indistinguishable from those which are allegedly veridical, one is led to the conclusion that there are no cases of perception in which physical objects are directly perceived. It is concluded therefore, that in all instances of perception, that which is perceived is, by default as it were, a sense-datum. Now without questioning the truth of any of the factual statements on which this argument rests, there are, according to Ayer, two steps in the argument which rely upon questionable suppositions.

Ayer's first objection is directed against the view that, assuming that there are some cases in which the direct object of perception is a sense-datum, it follows that it must be true that in all cases sense-data are the immediate objects of perception. Ayer's point is that all of these arguments rest upon certain "subsidiary arguments" which, upon analysis, can be demonstrated to be uncertain:

In the first place, when one examines the subsidiary arguments which are supposed to prove that what we perceive when our perceptions are veridical cannot be generically different from what we perceive when they are delusive, and finds that each of them rests upon a premise that is open to question. It is taken for granted that if veridical and delusive perceptions were perceptions of objects of different types, they would always be qualitatively distinguishable; or that they would not, in respect of their qualities and the conditions of their occurrence, be capable of being ranged in a continuous series; or thirdly, that material things can exist and have properties without being causally dependent on any observer.

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Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge,
p. 12.

The question is, can these premises be taken for granted? In reply to this, Ayer makes the point that "each of these assumptions can be denied without contradiction."⁴¹ For, it is at least logically possible, that two wholly distinct objects could be indistinguishable in character. Therefore, if these suppositions are to be justified, the burden of proof must fall upon some empirical argument. And on this point, Ayer's tactic is simply to deny that there is any empirical evidence which can be adduced in their support. In the case of a continuous series of perceptions, for example, the fact that the qualitative difference between any two illusory perceptions is the same as the difference between the last illusory perception and the first veridical one, is not an empirical proof of the contention that the object of a veridical perception must be reckoned to be the same kind of object (sense-datum) as that of an illusory perception. And unless it can be demonstrated that such empirical proof is forthcoming, it is possible to maintain that there are cases in which the object of perception is a material thing. This argument is intended to hold even

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That is, there is no logical or a priori reason why material things cannot be conceived of as qualitatively the same as sense-data.

in the case of the last supposition, that one can never directly perceive a material thing because all perceptions are "causally dependent" on the observer. The position of causal dependency would lead to the conclusion that one never directly perceives material things only if it "be made a matter of definition that material things should be causally independent of any process of observation."⁴² And however strongly affixed such a belief might be in one's mind, there is not, nor can there be, an empirical evidence to substantiate it. Failing such evidence, it falls within the bounds of legitimate possibility that a material thing can be such that it is causally dependent on being observed.⁴³

⁴² Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. 13.

⁴³ Indeed, Ayer points out that if one assumed that causal dependency implied that what was perceived was not a material thing, it would follow that "such objects as pens, and books and tables, as they are ordinarily conceived, could not in virtue of this definition any longer be counted as material things. And it was with objects such as these that the argument which the definition is supposed to save is primarily concerned." Ibid, p. 13.

If one assumes that the argument from illusion does not necessarily entail the view that it is always the case that one directly perceives sense-data and not material things, it still remains to ask whether it proves that there are ever any instances in which one would be mistaken in believing that the object perceived was a material thing. Consider, for example, the case of the perception of the penny which appears elliptical. If the penny is, in fact, round, does it not follow that the elliptical appearance which one might perceive cannot be the penny itself and is, therefore, sense-datum? Now it has already been pointed out that whatever strength this argument has, it derives from the supposition that it involves a contradiction to say of a penny that it can be both round and elliptical.⁴⁴ And it is precisely this view that is challenged by Ayer:

But here it may be objected that these contradictions cannot, in fact, be derived from the nature of our perceptions alone. If from one standpoint I see what appears to be a round coin and then, subsequently,

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See above, p. 118.

from another standpoint, see it as elliptical, there is no contradiction involved in my supposing that in each case I am seeing the coin as it really is. The supposition becomes self-contradictory only when it is combined with the assumption that the real shape of the coin has remained the same.

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Let us assume that one has a perception A (of a round penny) and then, later on, a second perception B (of a penny which appears elliptical). The position that Ayer takes is that it involves a contradiction to say that the object perceived in B is the same as the object perceived in A only if it is assumed that what was perceived in A has not undergone any change and it is in an attempt to avoid "these alleged contradictions", that some philosophers have taken the view that "we immediately experience sense-data which are not parts of material things . . ."

But suppose, Ayer suggests, that "we choose rather to deny the supplementary assumptions which are required for

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p. 14. Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge,

the contradictions to result."⁴⁶ Again, since it does not involve a contradiction to deny these assumptions, Ayer argues that any evidence which could be taken to justify them must be empirical.

What then is the nature of the empirical evidence on which they rest? The answer is that it is in every instance a matter of our being able to establish a certain order among our experiences. We say that an object seen in a looking glass is not really in the place in which it appears to be because, when we go to that place, we find that there is no such object there to be seen or touched. We say that a penny which appears to have a different shape when it is seen from a different angle has not really changed its shape because, when we return to our original point of view, we find that it looks the same shape as it did before.

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Are these arguments, however, sufficient to justify the conclusion that there are some instances in which material

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Ibid, pp. 15 - 16.

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Ibid, p. 16.

objects are not perceived? Imagine a person who "acknowledged the particular facts about our experience that constitute this evidence", who still maintains that all perceptions are perceptions of material things. Could not this person, in spite of the evidence, maintain for example, "that the fact that the shape of the penny still appears to be the same when the observer returns to his original point of view does not prove that its real shape has been unchanged" And the reason that this is not proved by the evidence is that one can still hold that "it might be the case that the shape that it originally appeared to have was in reality altered and then regained." This, of course, does not, nor is it intended to, prove that the penny in question does, in fact, continually change its shape in relation to the position of the perceiver. The point that Ayer intends to make here is that there is no logical or empirical evidence sufficient to prove that these admittedly peculiar changes do not take place. Failing this evidence, it is at least possible to maintain, in spite of the fact that the penny appears in some perceptions to have

a different shape than it has in others, that all of these perceptions are perceptions of the same material thing. And, extending this argument to all other putative instances of illusory perception, Ayer adds that "I have no doubt that by postulating a greater number of material things and regarding them as being more variable and evanescent than we normally do, it would be possible to deal with all other cases in a similar way."⁴⁹

This seems to leave one in a rather uncomfortable position. For, even if one accepts Ayer's argument that it is always possible to maintain that in every instance of perception that which is perceived is a material thing, it does not follow from this that only material things are perceived. What follows is simply that one cannot prove, either on logical or empirical grounds, that they are not. Nor, on the other hand, is it possible to prove that even the limited claim of the sense-datum theorists that some, at least, of one's perceptions are perceptions of sense-data, is not correct. What follows is simply that one cannot prove that it is. In this way, Ayer presents us with an

apparently irreconcilable dispute. The question is: Can this dispute be resolved?

To this question Ayer produces a rather peculiar response: there is, in the end, no way of resolving this dispute simply because there is no dispute; for in order to reach such a resolution, it would be, from the point of view of the sense-datum theorist necessary to somehow refute the view of the person who maintained that all perceptions are perceptions of material things. Yet, as Ayer points out, it is not difficult to see that the person who holds this position cannot be refuted because, "as far as the facts are concerned, there is really no dispute between us." And the reason why there can be no factual dispute between the sense-datum theorist on the one hand and the so-called naive realist⁵⁰ on the other is that, in developing the latter's position, "it has been assumed that he agrees with us about the nature of the sensible appearances; and", Ayer adds, "no evidence of any other kind is or can be

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The expression 'naive realism', as it is employed by Ayer, refers generally to the position that all cases of perception, even those which are illusory, are perceptions of physical objects. Price had maintained that the "naive realist" maintained "two theses: (I) that in the case of visual and tactual sense-data 'belonging to' means 'being

available."⁵¹ The position of one who maintains that one always perceives material things, as it is developed by Ayer, does not entail the rejection of any of the facts which have been adduced in support of the sense-datum theory. As Ayer has taken great care to show, both positions are based on the same factual evidence; and this being the case, it is not possible for there to be a factual difference between them.

It still remains to account for what difference there is between these two positions. For even if one accepts the view that it is not a factual one, there must surely be some kind of disagreement between a person who claims that we perceive material things and one who does not. In an attempt to proffer an explanation on this problem,

part of the surface of'; (2) that perceptual consciousness is knowing that a sense-datum is a part of the surface of a material thing." See Perception, p. 66. While this is a more technical definition of naive realism, it is clear that it must be the case that all instances of "perceptual consciousness" are perceptions of material things. The point here is that while Price thinks naive realism is untenable, Ayer is making a case for its tenability simply on the grounds that it can be formulated in such a way that it cannot be logically or empirically disproved.

⁵¹ Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, pp. 17 - 18.

Ayer claims that the naive realist engages in a different interpretation of the facts at hand; or, to use Ayer's words, "he refuses to describe the phenomena in the way in which we describe them." In the case, for example, "where we say the real shape of a coin is unchanging, he prefers to say that its shape is really undergoing some cyclical process of change." Thus, in the end, the dispute becomes merely a question of linguistic preference: "in other words", says Ayer, "we are not disputing about the validity of two conflicting sets of hypotheses, but about the choice of two different languages." And while it may be possible to demonstrate, on other grounds, that the one language is "superior" to the other, this could in no way establish the truth or falsity of either. For such disagreement must be factual in character; and, Ayer points out, "in this case, no such disagreement exists."⁵²

Ayer is thus led to the conclusion that "in order to account for our perceptual experience, it is not necessary to maintain that any of our perceptions are delusive." It is true that there are certain empirical facts concerning

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Ibid, pp. 18 - 19. (my emphasis)

the nature of these perceptual experiences which lend a goodly amount of credence to the sense-datum theory. However, the point of the above argument was that these facts can be reconciled with the view that the immediate objects of perception are always material things, "provided that one makes suitable assumptions about the constitution and behaviour of the material things in question."⁵³ And this is a crucial point. For it would certainly seem that the set of assumptions needed to maintain the position that in even delusive perceptions that which is perceived is a material thing, are far from obvious. Take, for example, the case of a so-called existential delusion - that of Macbeth's hallucinatory vision of the dagger. For even, assuming the dagger does not exist, if one grants Ayer the position that Macbeth is perceiving something, what assumptions concerning the "constitution and behaviour of material things" is required in order that that something might be called a material thing? Surely, one might argue, if it is proper to call something a material thing, it must

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Ibid, p. 19.

follow from this that the thing in question exists. To this objection, Ayer points out that it rests on a "misunderstanding" of a "perfectly correct and familiar usage" of the term "perceive." And it is this usage which Ayer has in mind when he says, "I am using it here in such a way that to say of an object that it is perceived does not entail saying that it exists in any sense at all."⁵⁴ Given the legitimacy of this usage, it then becomes possible to interpret even the existential illusion which Macbeth suffered as a perception of a material thing.⁵⁵ In this way, Ayer reaches the general conclusion that the argument from illusion does not necessarily entail any form of the sense-datum theory; and the reason for this is that it is possible to maintain that in all cases what is directly observed is a material thing, "provided that it is allowed that what is

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Ibid, p. 21.

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"And though it may be empirically false, it is never self-contradictory to say of a physical entity that it is seen, or otherwise perceived, in this sense, and that it does not exist." "The Terminology of Sense-Data", p. 300.

'directly observed' may not, in fact, exist, and that it⁵⁶ may not really have the properties it appears to have".

This is, indeed, a rather curious argument. In his attempt to circumvent the problem of perception as it was formulated by Russell, Ayer has hit upon the rather ingenious scheme of denying the necessary difference between appearance and reality which has, since the time of Hume, formed the basis of the problem. The question is can the difference be eliminated by simply ignoring it" Surely one could argue that the expression 'material thing', as it is ordinarily understood, implies that the material thing in question is a real entity of some sort. And, this being the case, does it not follow that to say of something that it is a material thing and, at the same time, that it does not exist, involves a contradiction? This line of argument was taken up, for example, by Mr. C. Lewy in a discussion of Ayer's view that it is quite possible to refer to⁵⁷ Macbeth's dagger as a material thing. In his response

⁵⁶ Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. 234.

⁵⁷ cf. C. Lewy, "The Terminology of Sense-Data", Mind, LIV, (1946), pp. 166 - 169.

to Lewy's argument, Ayer simply reiterates his position concerning the double meaning of 'perceive': "For while where a physical entity is said to be perceived, it is possible to describe the physical entity in a way which implies that it exists, it is also possible to describe it in a way which leaves the question of its existence open."⁵⁸ And in this sense, while it may be a curious position, it is maintained that it is 'legitimate' to say of a real physical thing that it is perceived and that it does not exist.

In order to understand why it is that Ayer develops this rather unusual notion of a material thing, it is necessary to bear in mind precisely what it is that is giving rise to the question. It has already been repeatedly noted that Ayer regards this position as simply one way, among others, of interpreting certain facts concerning the nature of one's perceptual experiences, all of which are accepted by both the sense-datum theorist and the so-called

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A.J. Ayer, "The Terminology of Sense-Data" reprinted in Philosophical Essays. (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1965), p. 84. This quotation is taken from a note, added to this publication of the article, which did not appear in Mind in 1945.

naive realist. More important still is the fact that it is assumed, in either case, that the root 'fact' on which both of these theories is based is the perceptual experience itself. In this sense, Ayer, like Hume, attempts to derive an analysis of the material world on the basis of an analysis of his perceptions. Indeed, the reason which is given by Ayer to explain the view that one might refer to all one's perceptions as perceptions of material things is the fact that, in examining one's perceptions, nothing can be found which would warrant positing a factual distinction between sense-data on the one hand and material things on the other. To make his point, Ayer is asking us as it were to imagine ourselves to be "having a perceptual experience" which would normally be considered illusory in some way, say of a stick which appears bent in the water, and consider whether this perception should be called a material thing or whether it should be called something else, i.e. sense-datum. Or again, suppose that one is having a sensation, or a perception, or a perceptual experience, of what one would normally call a house; is it legitimate, one might ask, to refer to what we perceive as a material thing? Ayer's response here is affirmative; that is, it is affirmative only if it is assumed that the house of which one is aware

might not really exist, that is, if it is assumed that it might only exist as a sensation, or a perception, or a perceptual experience. In this sense, it might be argued that Ayer is defining 'material thing' in a purely perceptual sense. And for this reason, there is a sense in which the question of the existence, that is the real existence, of material objects has not been even considered. For Ayer, as for Hume, it seems that the only 'given' element in sense perception is the perception itself. Since these perceptions are in fact the sole basis for all of our empirical judgments, it would seem to be impossible to go beyond these perceptions.

This seems to imply that Ayer's resolution of the traditional problem of perception may well only amount to a questionable attempt to close the gap between the sense-datum and the material thing by interpreting 'material thing' in such a way that it becomes a sense-datum. Indeed, it has already been noted that the sense-datum, conceived of as the immediate object of perception, is epistemologically equivalent to the Humean perception in that they both refer to the basic units of perceptual experience as being atomic

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or monadic in character. In much the same manner, one could argue that a material thing, at least according to Ayer's explanation, is epistemologically equivalent to a sense-datum. For to say of it that it is perceived but does not really exist is simply to conceive of it as a perception of some sort; and a sense-datum is nothing but a description of perception.

In any case, after apparently showing that the sense-datum theory is not necessary to explain one's perceptual experiences because it is not necessarily entailed by the argument from illusion, Ayer proceeds to introduce it in another way. The reason why Ayer does deem it advisable to reconsider the sense-data theory is that, while it is true that there is a "perfectly correct and familiar usage" of the term "perceive" which does not entail the existence of whatever it is that is being perceived, "there is also a correct and familiar usage of the word 'perceive', in which to say of an object that it is perceived does carry the implication that it exists."⁶⁰ The cumulative effect

59 See above, pp. 120-122.

60 Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. 21.

of these two "correct and familiar" usages of the term "perceive" is, as Ayer says, not without an air of understatement, that there is an "ambiguity" in the term as it is ordinarily used. And the point of this is that the sense-datum theory may be re-introduced, not as a new factual theory of perception but rather as an attempt to somehow resolve this ambiguity:

In order to avoid these ambiguities, what the advocates of the sense-datum theory have done is to decide both to apply the word 'see' or any other words that designate modes of perception to delusive as well as veridical experiences, and at the same time to use these words in such a way that what is seen or otherwise sensibly experienced must really exist and must really have the properties which it appears to have.

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On this definition, it follows that one "cannot then say, in the case of a delusive perception, that what is experienced is a material thing; for either the requisite material thing does not exist, or else it has not got the requisite property." At the same time, one can refer to what is

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Ibid, p. 24.

perceived as a sense-datum. Again Ayer emphasizes that this re-introduction of the sense-datum theory does not imply that he "is putting forward a new hypothesis which could be empirically verified or refuted". It, he says, is more correct to say that he is "simply recommending a new verbal usage".⁶² In the end, Ayer's argument in

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The notion that the use of sense-data is simply an alternative way of speaking about one's perceptual experiences is undoubtedly derived by Ayer from G. A. Paul's article entitled "Is There a Problem About Sense-Data" which was published in the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Suppl. Vol. XV, (1936). The point that Paul made in the article is that the "discovery" of the sense-datum is, in fact, not a factual discovery at all, and philosophers have erred in assuming that in speaking about sense-data, that they "were in some way nearer to the facts". What they have done is to draw a false conclusion from the distinction between the way objects "look" or appear, and the way in which they actually are: "They have the idea that in some sense when a physical object looks red to someone then something really is red, i.e., that there really are in such cases two objects, one which looks red and one which is red, and that somehow the one which is red has generally been overlooked and its existence has now for the first time been recognized". To properly understand the meaning of 'sense-datum', Paul suggests, one must bear in mind that "its use is connected with the use of certain words that are in ordinary language, eg. "looks", "appears", "appearance", . . ." etc. Thus when an object which is really round "looks" elliptical, it is possible to say that one perceives an elliptical sense-datum, if one means by 'sense-datum' nothing more than the way the object "looks" or "appears". Thus, Paul states, one does not "discover" the existence of sense-data in the way in which a scientist

favour of re-introducing the sense-datum theory as an alternative language to the physical object language is that "it is useful for us to have a terminology that enables us to refer to the contents of our experiences independently of the material things they are taken to present".⁶³

While this revised version of the sense-datum theory does appear to overcome some of the problems which would arise as the result of an assumed factual difference between sense-data and material things, it does, at the same time, seem to create some difficulties of its own.

might discover a hitherto unknown entity, to use his example, the fovea of the eye. Nonetheless, the use of sense-data is legitimate as an alternative way of speaking about the way in which objects appear, although Paul is careful to point out that "I wish to deny that in order to give a complete and accurate account of any perceptual situation it is necessary to use a noun in the way in which "sense-datum" is used, for this leads to the notion that there are entities of a curious sort over and above physical objects which can "have" sensible properties but cannot "appear to have" sensible properties which they have not got". See pp. 67 - 69.

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p. 26. Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge,

Two of these are of special interest. One concerns what might be called the superfluous character of the sense-datum language. If one accepts Ayer's suggestion that it is both possible and reasonable to hold the view that all perceptions are perceptions of material things, it is clearly possible to give a description of all perceptual phenomena in terms of material objects alone. It would thus seem to be incumbent upon Ayer to give some kind of explanation of why one should bother to introduce the sense-datum language at all. In general, Ayer's justification of his sense-datum theory is that it helps to increase one's understanding about "the nature of physical objects":

What is the point of introducing the sense-datum vocabulary? The idea is that it helps you to learn something about the nature of physical objects, not indeed in the way in which science does, but that you can come to understand better what is meant by propositions about physical objects, what these propositions amount to, what their 'cash value' is, by restating them in terms of sense-datum. That is, the fact that you can restate them in this way, if you can, tells you something important about them.

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If this is an argument in favour of adopting the sense-datum theory, it is certainly a very puzzling one. Surely Ayer does not mean to imply that by restating physical object statements in terms of sense-data, one will increase his understanding of physical objects themselves. It is difficult, for example, to understand how restating the proposition "I see a dog", in some such form as, "I see a brown and white sense-datum", measurably add to one's stock of knowledge concerning the nature of dogs. Nor is it any more evident that such a restatement contributes anything of great value to one's understanding of the physical object statement in question. The problem is that while Ayer says that restating these propositions in terms of sense-data tells us something "important" about them, he seems very reluctant to tell us what it is about them that is revealed in this way.

Even if one should grant some degree of credence to these arguments, it is not difficult to see that they are far from compelling. And there is I think an explanation for this: if one assumes that there is no factual difference between sense-data and material things, it can be argued that the introduction of sense-data is something for which there can be, by definition, no compelling reason.

Ayer's revitalized sense-data theory is intended to differ from traditional sense-data theories in one important way: it is intended to be entirely non-metaphysical in character.⁶⁵ In refusing to conceive of the sense-datum as a metaphysical entity, Ayer is able to neatly circumvent the problem of justifying our belief in the existence of the external world, a problem which plagued those traditional sense-data theorists who, like Russell, conceived of the sense-datum as the basic unit of perception. For, according to Ayer, to refer to what is perceived as a sense-datum is not, as it was to Russell, to deny that it is a physical thing. It is rather simply to "decide" to describe whatever it is that is perceived using the terminology of sense-data. The implication, however, of this attempt to avoid the pitfalls of metaphysics, is that Ayer has manoeuvred himself into a position with respect to the theory of sense-data such that there can be, by definition, no rational justification for undertaking the programme of restating all or any of the statements of the so-called

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This is of course essential if Ayer is not to violate the implications of his own criterion of verifiability. See Chapter 1, pp. 66 - 67.

physical object language in terms of sense-data. And this is due to the fact that it is impossible to imagine such a justification for this programme that does not in some way rest upon an understanding of the sense-datum as a more basic, and hence more important, perceptual entity than the more familiar material objects that inhabit the external world. Given this assumption, the sense-datum theory might be justified on the grounds that it is thus able to provide a more basic insight into the nature of perceptual experience. The difficulty here however is that any justification of this sort is inevitably metaphysical in character, and is therefore untenable in the context of Ayer's refusal to admit of a factual distinction between material objects and sense-data.

Yet Ayer himself seems to come very close to providing just this kind of metaphysical justification for the sense-datum theory when he points out that "if you talk in terms of sense-data you are somehow getting deeper than if you are content to talk as we all do in every day life, in terms of physical objects".⁶⁶ One looks, however,

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Ayer, "Phenomenalism", p. 177.

in vain to discover precisely what it is that is more deeply penetrated by the sense-datum terminology. Another suggestion is that the sense-datum language is a better "instrument" for certain "special purposes" of the philosopher.⁶⁷ Ayer suggests, for example, that "in philosophizing about perception . . . it is useful for us to have a terminology that enables us to refer to the contents of our experiences independently of the material things they are taken to present".⁶⁸ Yet, in the light of the way in which Ayer does, in fact, develop the sense-data theory, it is difficult to give much credence to this argument. For since the whole point behind the introduction of sense-data as a linguistic convenience was to eliminate the factual distinction between sense-data and physical objects, it could be argued that the introduction of this admittedly strange language would prove misleading, rather than useful,

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Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. 28. See also, "The Terminology of Sense-Data", pp. 87-88. Here Ayer argues that while it is possible to define what is directly perceived in other ways, "it does not meet the purpose which philosophers who have used the term 'sense-datum', or some equivalent term, have intended it to fulfill".

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Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. 28.

in that it would tend to reinforce the traditional view that sense-data are factually different, i.e. different entities, from physical objects.⁶⁹ For this reason, Ayer must find himself in a very difficult position; having put forward the view that there is no factual distinction between the physical object and the sense-datum, it must follow that whatever can be said in the sense-datum language can also be said, and with equal precision, in the physical object language. To claim that the one language is capable of making even one statement which the other cannot would be indicative of a factual difference between them. Thus, given the adequacy of the more familiar physical object language to describe all perceptual experiences, it follows that there neither is, nor can there be, any compelling reason for the introduction of the sense-datum language.

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See W. H. F. Barnes, "The Myth of Sense-data", p. 110. This argument is used by Barnes against Ayer's theory: "The sense-datum language would be a most misleading translation of our ordinary language if it resulted in our saying that the drunkard's pink rats were real, as this is precisely what the ordinary way of stating the matter denies. If what it states is that there really do appear to the drunkard to be pink rats, then it states the matter no better than ordinary language. In view of the doubt as to which, if either, of these two things it is supposed to assist us in saying, it seems to be decidedly inferior to ordinary language".

It may be argued here that the fact that Ayer has not provided, nor can he provide, a rational justification for the introduction of the sense-data theory is not, in itself, an argument against the viability of such a procedure. For, it does not follow from the fact that there is no good reason to do something that it is not possible to do it. And this is, one must suppose, a valid enough position to take. One could, for instance, look upon the rather arduous task of restating the statements of ordinary language into the terminology of sense-data as a kind of intellectual challenge, a gigantic cross-word puzzle as it were, the accomplishment of which may at least produce a measure of satisfaction: "The naive realist is not", Ayer says, "in error. Naive realism is not a false theory of perception: it is a refusal to play this sort of game".⁷⁰ Ayer goes on to say that, in this refusal, the naive realist is "missing something" in that "he is not getting to the root of the matter". Again, one must simply argue that the main point which characterizes Ayer's revitalized sense-datum theory is that there is no "root" which the sense-

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Ayer, "Phenomenalism", p. 177.

datum language can get at and which the language of the naive realist (the physical object language) cannot. One can, as Ayer suggests, play the game but it is, in the end, only a game. And in this sense, while it does seem that the fact that there is no justification for the introduction of the sense-datum theory, in the sense that there is no compelling reason for introducing it, does not eliminate the possibility of carrying out such a procedure, it does, on the other hand, seem to underline the philosophical poverty of Ayer's revitalized sense-datum theory.

There is, moreover, a second objection which can be levelled against this version of the sense-datum theory which, is, I think, rather more serious. This concerns not so much the justification of the sense-datum theory as such, but rather the viability of Ayer's view that one can interpret sense-data as simply an alternative way of referring to whatever it is that one directly perceives. We have already noted that Ayer manages to avoid the traditional problems associated with a sense-datum theory by resolutely maintaining that there is no factual dispute between those who maintain that what we perceive are sense-data and those who maintain that what we perceive are material things. And his ability to defend this view rests on the assumption that the sense-datum theorist and

and the naive realist are working with the same facts. The former is simply using the word 'perceive' in its perfectly familiar sense such that it follows that if something is perceived it must exist; while the latter is using the same term in its equally familiar sense such that if an object is perceived it does not follow that it exists or that it actually has the qualities which it appears to have. Now apart from the fairly obvious linguistic objection that there are not two equally familiar and correct usages of the term 'perceive',⁷¹ and that it does not seem to make much sense to speak of seeing something which does not exist,⁷² Ayer's argument is open to question on the ground,

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Austin devotes a good deal of verbiage to a criticism of this position; cf. Sense and Sensibilia, pp. 87 - 102. The upshot of Austin's argument is that there are not two equally "familiar and correct" usages of 'perceive'. He points out that, far from being correct and familiar, to use 'perceive' of objects that do not exist, constitutes a special meaning of the term which arises only in exceptional circumstances. His point is that "such stretchings of ordinary words in exceptional situations certainly do not constitute special senses, still less 'correct and familiar' senses, of the words in question". So much, as far as Austin is concerned, for Ayer's two meanings of the word 'perceive'. See p. 97.

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See above, p. 138.

indicated above, that the qualifications concerning the "constitution and behaviour" of material things, which are introduced to make the reconciliation between sense-data and material objects possible, have the over-all effect of transforming the physical object into a disguised sense-datum; and, for this reason, the so-called material object language has nothing whatsoever to do with material objects.

One can, Ayer has said, maintain that one always perceives material things if one is willing to assume that there may be at least some instances in which the material things which one perceives do not exist or do not have the qualities which they appear to have. Thus, if one perceives a tree, or a house, or a bus, he is free, according to Ayer, to make the statement that he perceives a tree, or a house, or a bus, provided that he is willing to simultaneously qualify the statement by adding that whatever it is that is perceived may only be an appearance of a house, etc., and indeed might not even exist at all. In short, one is free to assume the position that one can perceive material things only if one is willing to qualify the meaning of 'material thing' to the point where it becomes identical with the meaning of the term 'appearance'. In this sense, Ayer can maintain the view that Macbeth

perceived a dagger (physical object) only if it is assumed that the dagger perceived is a non-existing dagger, i. e. an appearance of the dagger. The point here is that even in the case of an existential illusion, when it becomes necessary to say that the physical object which is perceived does not exist, there must be something which does exist; otherwise, the question of the existence of the physical object could never arise at all. And what it is that does exist is nothing but the appearance of the thing. Indeed, it is this appearance, the so-called phenomenon, which comprises the "facts" to which both the sense-datum theorist and the naive realist refer in developing, as Ayer contends they do, their different languages. Moreover, to say, as Ayer does, that every sense-datum both must exist and have the qualities which it appears to have is simply to identify the sense-datum with the "fact" of which it is supposed to be a description.

This is an important point. For, while Ayer is very careful to point out that the sense-datum theorist and the naive realist are not engaged in a factual dispute, he seems to avoid discussing the nature of the facts in question. And the reason for this is, I think, that in every case the facts in question turn out to be identifiable in all

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their details with sense-data. Again it should be remembered that in order to bring the material object language into line with these facts, Ayer found it necessary to amend the "constitution and behaviour" of physical objects. And the net result of this amendment is, as Austin puts it, that we must imagine "that material things are much spryer than we've been giving them credit for - constantly busy, from moment to moment, in changing their real shapes, colours, temperatures, sizes and everything else".⁷⁴ In other words, the physical objects to be found in Ayer's amended physical object language have simply taken on the characteristics of sense-data.

In this way, it can hardly be said that Ayer's revitalized sense-data theory is simply linguistic or verbal in character. For the facts with which the theory is concerned, those which are assumed from the very beginning, are

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This is, I think, true by definition. If one assumes that sense-data (a) must exist when perceived and (b) must possess the qualities they appear to have, it must follow that they are both in terms of their existence and their qualitative characteristics identical with the "facts" of which they are supposed to be a description.

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Austin, Sense and Sensibilia, p. 58.

nothing but facts about sense-data. Indeed, this view is pointed out very clearly by Austin in Sense and Sensibilia:

. . . I should like to point out the highly interesting fact that his [Ayer's] way of 'proving' that the whole issue is purely verbal actually shows (what I am sure in any case is quite true) that he does not really regard it as verbal at all - his real view is that in fact we perceive only sense-data. . . . It is not, he says, (surprising as this may seem) a question of fact whether a penny, or any other 'material thing', does or does not constantly change its shape, its colour, its size, its location - here indeed we can say whatever we please. Where then are 'empirical facts' to be found? And Ayer's answer is quite clear - they are facts about sense-data, or as he puts it, 'about the nature of sensible appearances', 'the phenomena'; this is where we really encounter 'the empirical evidence'. There are in his view - his real view - no other 'empirical facts' at all. The hard fact is that there are sense-data; these entities really exist and they are what they are; what other entities we may care to speak as if there were is a pure matter of verbal convenience, but 'the facts to which these expressions are intended to refer' will always be the same, facts about sense-data.

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Ibid, pp. 59 - 60.

The conclusion which Austin derives from these observations is that Ayer has all along "really been completely convinced by the very arguments [illusion] that he purports to 'evaluate' with so much detachment". And there is, he adds, "little doubt that this is owing to his wholesale acceptance of the traditional, time-hallowed, and disastrous manner of expounding them"⁷⁶. In this way, Austin places Ayer squarely in the tradition of Russell, Broad, and those other sense-datum theorists who conceived of the sense-datum as a unique and novel entity.

Now whether or not Austin is right in his implied criticism of the sense-datum theory as such is not, for the present at least, in question; however, he does seem to be correct in his view that, from the very beginning, Ayer has taken the existence of sense-data for granted. Indeed, it is for this reason that Ayer was compelled to introduce the afore-mentioned qualifications concerning the nature of material things; and the effect of these qualifications was, as has already been pointed out, to re-define the meaning of 'material thing' in such a way that it becomes epistemolo-

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Ibid, p. 61.

gically equivalent to that of 'sense-datum'. Nor does Ayer's reply to Austin's objection, "that I was not operating within our ordinary conceptual scheme but considering a revision of it", overcome this difficulty.⁷⁷ It tends, in fact, to corroborate Austin's claim that the empirical facts upon which this alleged revision was to be based were one and all facts about sense-data. For why, one might ask, should one step outside of what might be called the 'ordinary' conceptual scheme and propose such a peculiar way of conceiving material things except to render one's doctrine of material things consistent with the so-called "empirical facts" in question? Ayer himself has admitted that such a revision is necessary to avoid the problem of introducing a factual distinction between sense-data and material things. For there would seem to be only two possibilities: either material things are nothing but sense-data, in which case there can be no factual distinction between them; or material things are not sense-data, in which case there must be a factual distinction between them. It seems impossible to

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A. J. Ayer, "Has Austin Refuted the Sense-datum Theory?", Synthese, XVII, (1967), p. 133.

maintain, though this is, admittedly, precisely what Ayer is attempting to do, both the view that material things are not sense-data and the view that there is no factual difference between them. And the proof that Ayer has been unable to defend this position is the fact that, in order to explain the relationship between the sense-datum language and the physical object language so as to avoid the problems entailed by admitting of a factual distinction, he was compelled to amend the meaning of 'material object' in such a way that material things become entirely indistinguishable from sense-data.

In any case, it should now be clear that when Ayer comes to consider the characteristics of sense-data, the criterion which will govern his judgments, since it cannot be factual, can only be based on the alleged usefulness of the characteristics in question. Two of the basic characteristics of sense-data have already been noted: first, if they are perceived they must exist; and secondly, they must have the qualities they appear to have. In attributing to sense-data these two characteristics, Ayer advances no real argument beyond the fact that certain philosophers have "decided" to look upon sense-data in this

way in order to more adequately distinguish the meaning of a sense-datum from that of a material thing.⁷⁸ The fact that sense-data possess these two characteristics leads, however, to two more problems: Can sense-data exist when they are not being perceived? and, Can they have characteristics other than those that they appear to have? In answer to the first question, Ayer attempts to show that while the principle esse est percipi is untrue when applied to material things, it is true when applied to sense-data. He begins by pointing out that "the criterion by which we determine that a material thing exists is the truth of various hypothetical propositions asserting that if certain conditions were fulfilled we should perceive it".⁷⁹ And, since one's past experience affords "a good inductive ground for believing" that in certain situations (if I were standing in a certain place, facing a certain

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The justification for this view is, as we have seen, based on the alleged two "correct and familiar" usages of the term 'perceive'.

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Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. 67.

direction) certain perceptions (e.g. of my house) would be obtainable, it is legitimate to refer to these "objects" as material things. That is, we are justified in believing that these things continue to exist when we are not perceiving them simply on the grounds that even if the conditions which are necessary for their being perceived are not fulfilled, our past experience provides us with an inductive basis for assuming that if these conditions were met, the perception in question would "occur". It is thus legitimate to maintain that the existence of material things does not depend on their being perceived, and for this reason, the principle esse est percipi is not applicable to them.

This principle does however apply to sense-data, although Ayer is once more insistent that this distinction is linguistic only, and one is, if one so desires, free to adopt another convention. ⁸⁰ Nonetheless, if one does take

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Ayer does admit that some philosophers have, in fact, assumed that sense-data might not exist even when they are perceived. And here, he points out, "it may be argued that this is simply a question of an alternative specification of the rule of the sense-datum language, and that they are free to adopt such a convention if they wish". Ayer does not argue against this view as such; he simply maintains that there is no point in it: "But the

the position either that sense-data can exist without being perceived or that they can have qualities which they do not appear to have, there is, says Ayer, not only "no advantage" in this view, but there is also the added disadvantage that the sense-datum will itself be "sufficiently⁸¹ like" a material thing "to be a ready source of confusion". For this reason, Ayer contends that it is advisable, for the sake of convenience, to "make it a necessary as well as sufficient condition of the existence of sense-data that they should in fact be sensed"⁸². It is proposed, therefore, that the immediate object of perception is always a sense-datum, and never a material thing; and that the sense-datum when perceived must exist and have the qualities that it appears to have; and, on the same grounds, it is further

answer is that by adopting this convention they come to treat sense-data as if they were themselves material things; and in that case the terminology of sense-data becomes superfluous". Ibid, p. 69.

81
Ibid, p. 71.

82
Ibid.

proposed that sense-data be defined in such a way that they cannot exist except when they are sensed, nor can they have any properties that they do not appear to have.⁸³ All of this seems to rest on the assumption, which there seems to be no good reason to deny, that "there is no point in talking about sense-data at all unless we adopt rules for the use of this technical term that are different from the rules we already follow in speaking about material things".⁸⁴ And this problem can apparently be overcome if one uses the term 'material thing' to refer to objects which can exist when they are not being perceived, and the term 'sense-datum' to refer to objects which exist only when they are being perceived.

One of the difficulties with this sort of an analysis of the nature of the characteristics of sense-data is that it seems to lose a good deal of its steam as soon as one becomes aware of the more or less arbitrary

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Concerning the question of whether sense-data can have qualities which they do not appear to have, see "The Terminology of Sense-data", pp. 303 - 308.

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Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. 73.

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way in which it is formulated. Nonetheless, since Ayer does seem to arrive at the conclusion that there is some sense in which sense-data are different from material things, it does seem appropriate to consider the nature of the relationship which must obtain between them. In order to more clearly grasp the way in which they are related, it is first advisable, Ayer points out, to understand how they are not related:

The problem of specifying the relationship of material things to sense-data . . . is apt to be obscured by being represented as a problem about the inter-relationship of two different classes of objects. There is, indeed, a sense in which it is correct to say that both sense-data and material things exist But it would not be correct to infer from this that there really were both material things and sense-data, in the sense in which it can truly be said that there really are chairs as well as tables, or that there are tastes as well as sounds. For whereas, in these cases, the exis-

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This is the case in the sense that, beyond saying that sense-data should be defined so as not to be confused with ordinary material things, Ayer never really shows why it is "convenient" to speak of them in this way.

tential propositions refer to different empirical "facts", this does not hold good in the case of sense-data and material things.

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Indeed, this is simply a restatement of what we have already seen; since the sense-datum and the material object describe the same identical facts, they cannot be conceived of as distinct entities.

Nonetheless, one of the reasons why there is such a tendency to conceive of sense-data and material things as different kinds of reality is that, when sense-data theorists have raised the question how, on the basis of the knowledge of sense-data alone, can one have any knowledge of material things, "the usual answer has been that one can justify beliefs about the existence and character of things outside sense-data by means of a causal argument . . .".⁸⁷ According to the causal theory of perception, the objects of perception (sense-data) are

86
Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge,
p. 229.

87
Ibid, p. 172.

held to be caused by other objects and these other objects, which are themselves never perceived, are called material things. This position is, according to Ayer, a conclusion which is generally drawn from four premises: (1) every event has a cause; (2) sense-data are events; (3) sense-data are not, "for the most part", caused by any intrinsic mental activities, volitions, etc.; and (4) sense-data⁸⁸ are not caused by one another.

Ayer begins his analysis of the causal theory of perception by "admitting the validity of the second and⁸⁹ third stages of the argument". The first step, however, which is referred to as the principle of determinism is, apparently, open to question. The main idea, Ayer suggests, behind the principle of determinism is the notion "that events in some way compel one another to occur", that is, that there is a "necessary connection" between certain⁹⁰ events, the one being the cause and the other the effect.

88
Ibid, p. 176.

89
Ibid, p. 177.

90
Ibid, p. 183.

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This argument can be formulated in a number of ways,
 but all of them seem to amount to the view that there is,
 in addition to the events themselves, a connection of some
 kind which binds them together: ". . . one event is, as
 it were, 'glued' to the other". Ayer's position here,
 together with its derivation from Hume, is clear:

Now, for my part, I have never observed
 this peculiar linking of events, and
 I am disposed to doubt whether anyone
 else has ever, in fact, succeeded in
 observing it. But the point is that,
 even if it were observable this would
 not in any way diminish the force
 of Hume's contention that we cannot
 have demonstrative knowledge that any
 proposition, affirming a 'causal law',
 will hold for other instances than
 those from which it was actually
 derived.

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One example which Ayer examines is the view that
 one can explain the connection between cause and effect by
 referring to an "active tendency", present in an object,
 according to which that object may produce an effect. Thus,
 the bow is said to cause the movement of the arrow because,
 when bent, it is "actually tending to unbend". The con-
 nection then, between cause and effect, can be explained
 by referring to this active tendency which is somehow in-
 herent in the object which is the cause. This, Ayer refers
 to as the "animistic" notion of necessary connection,
Ibid, pp. 187 - 188.

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Ibid, pp. 192 - 193.

Here one is again confronted with the implication of Ayer's view that "no one event intrinsically refers to any other". Indeed, Ayer points out, again echoing Hume, that any attempt to analyze the cause-effect relationship as one of a necessary connection between cause and effect simply begs the question. For to hold that every event has a cause demands that one assume precisely what it is that he is trying to prove. The point that Ayer wishes to make is that the belief that there is a "necessary connection" between cause and effect cannot be derived from what is, in fact, observed. What then is the cause of this belief? Ayer's suggestion is that its explanation must ultimately be traced back to "a primitive superstition, according to which external things are incorporated with human beings into a society whose laws are prescribed and enforced by supernatural agency".⁹³

This does not, of course, imply that Ayer is ready to abandon causality. The point which he attempts to make, on the basis of the principle of verification, is that "if there is to be any reason for believing in the universal

law of causation . . . it must be based upon our actual⁹⁴ observations of the concurrences of sensible events".

The problem here is that a physical object, thought of as the cause of a "sensible event", is not itself a sensible event. And this, Ayer suggests, is precisely what "constitutes the fatal objection to all forms of 'the causal theory of perception'"; for, "it is characteristic of all of the theories that are commonly brought under this heading that the causes of what is actually observed are assumed themselves to be, in principle, unobservable". And this, Ayer points out, "is to extend the use of the concept of causality beyond the field of its significant application".⁹⁵ How then is one to account for the existence of sense-data? "To the question, what are the causes of sense-data in general? there can indeed be no significant answer. For it does not make sense to postulate a cause of phenomena as a whole".⁹⁶ And this is the case because, as we have

94

Ibid, p. 217.

95

Ibid, p. 221.

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Ibid. See also Hume's Treatise, p. 7. Here Hume mentions that sense impressions arise "from unknown causes".

already seen, the principle of verification makes it clear that no proposition which refers to an object which is not, in principle, capable of empirical observation, can be factually significant.

This brings us back to our original question; if the relationship between sense-data and material things cannot be thought of as a cause-effect relationship, nor indeed, any relationship between two distinct entities, how is it to be conceived? The theory which Ayer develops to explain the nature of this relationship is the doctrine of phenomenalism which he describes as "the theory that physical objects are logical constructions out of sense-data".⁹⁷ The difficulty here, Ayer points out, is that this doctrine has been subject to some grave misinterpretations; it has been assumed, for instance, that "a material thing is supposed to consist of sense-data, as a patchwork quilt consists of different coloured pieces of silk". This sort of objection, however, usually rests on the mistaken assumption that there is some kind of factual difference between sense-data and material things. And this misunder-

⁹⁷ Ayer, "Phenomenalism", p. 163.

standing can be cleared up once it is realized that the kind of "logical construction" involved must be of a purely linguistic character: "What is being claimed is simply that the propositions which are ordinarily expressed by sentences which refer to material things could also be expressed by sentences which refer exclusively to sense-⁹⁸data". In fact, not only can material object statements be expressed in terms of sense-data, they must be expressible in terms of sense-data. For, as has already been noted, a sense-datum is to be used to stand for whatever is, in fact, observed. And since propositions are factually significant only if they express something which is susceptible of empirical verification, it follows that "any proposition which refers to a material thing must somehow be expressible in terms of sense-data, if it is to be empirically significant".⁹⁹ In general then Ayer's position is that the relationship between sense-data and material things is that material things are logical constructions out of sense-data, in the sense that propositions

⁹⁸ Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. 232.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 231.

about material things are, in principle at least, capable of being reduced to propositions which refer "exclusively to sense-data".

If one is to consider material things as being "constructed" out of sense-data, it still remains, however linguistic this construction may be, to consider how it is that the construction takes place. The main problem here, Ayer suggests, "is that of answering Hume's question why it is that 'we attribute a continued existence to objects even when they are not present to the senses; and why we suppose them to have an existence distinct from perception'¹⁰⁰". Hume, it is pointed out, arrived at the conclusion that "the belief in the continued and distinct existence of objects was a fallacious product of the imagination", since positing the existence of such objects amounted to "an entirely unwarrantable reduplication of the perceptual world", which was supposed to consist, in its entirety, of one's perceptions. Nonetheless, Ayer points out, Hume was mistaken: "What he did not see was that the relations of 'constancy' and 'coherence' between

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Ibid, p. 243.

sense-data in which he discovered the source of this supposed illusion could themselves be taken as definitive of the continued and distinct existence of objects".¹⁰¹ On this assumption it is quite possible, in the manner of John Stuart Mill, to regard physical objects simply as "permanent possibilities of sensation"

He explains very well how it is that 'a group of sensations', which are mainly 'conceived in the form of present possibilities', 'presents itself to the mind as permanent, in contrast not solely with the temporariness of one's bodily presence, but also with the temporary character of each of the sensations composing the group; in other words, as a kind of permanent substratum, under a set of passing experiences or manifestations'; and how it is that 'we learn to think of nature as made up solely of these groups of possibilities, and the active force in nature as manifested in the modification of some of these by others'; while 'the sensations, though the original foundation of the whole, come to be looked upon as a sort of accident depending on us, and the possibilities as much more real than the actual sensations, nay, as the very realities of which

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Ibid, p. 244.

these are only representations,
appearances, or effects!.

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Once, however, it is realized that material things are themselves nothing but a certain order or resemblance which obtains between our several sense-data, there is no longer any reason to conceive of material things as a "reality" which lies behind the data that we perceive. For all material things can be analyzed into actual sense-data (those which one is presently perceiving) and possible sense-data (those which, on the basis of past experience, one expects to perceive).¹⁰³

Thus the "construction" of the physical world is, for Ayer, the task of showing in what sense the "constancy" and "coherence" which characterize sense-data enable one to regard different sense-data as elements of the same thing. Ayer's view is that the "grouping of sense-data"

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Ibid, pp. 244 - 245.

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The notion of a possible sense-datum is, admittedly, a strange one. It is, Ayer allows, "hard to see how anything could be composed of so shadowy a being as a possible sense-datum". Nonetheless, this problem can be resolved if it is recognized that the

in order to "form" physical objects is "governed by four main conditions":

I hold, then, that the main features of the structure of our visual experience which give rise to our conception of material things are, first, the relations of resemblance between individual sense-data; secondly, the comparative stability of the contexts in which these resemblant sense-data occur; thirdly, the fact that the occurrence of such sense-data is systematically repeatable . . .; and fourthly, the dependence of this repetition upon the movements of the observer.

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The upshot of all this is that propositions which refer to physical objects are made possible because the "occurrence" of sense-data is, in fact, governed by the afore-mentioned conditions. It is because a number of sense-data resemble

relationship between physical objects and sense-data is "not a factual but a linguistic relationship". To say that material things are constructed of possible as well as actual sense-data implies only that some material object statements, when translated into sense-data statements, "will have to be hypothetical". Ibid, p. 232.

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Ibid, p. 259

each other in a certain way, or because it is possible for one to cause the recurrence of these sense-data, that one attributes them to the same material thing and one says of that material thing that it has an existence which is continued and distinct. And it is in this sense that every physical object proposition is "constructed" on the basis of sense-data.

The problem here, however, is to determine in what sense Ayer's treatment of physical objects differs from that of Hume. Hume's position, it will be recalled, was that one's belief in the existence of material objects was derived from the constancy and coherence which characterized certain of our perceptions and that, since these perceptions were all of them "distinct existences", this belief was, in the end, without rational warrant. In saying that these characteristics "give rise to our conception of material things", could it not be argued that Ayer is saying much the same thing as Hume? And, this being the case, will not he too be forced to reject material objects as "the fallacious product of the imagination"? The way in which Ayer attempts to get around this difficulty is to suppose, not that the resemblance between our perceptions gives rise to the belief in material things as a

distinct kind of reality, but that the distinct and continued existence of material things means nothing more than the resemblance or the constancy or the coherence which obtains between certain sense impressions. Indeed, Ayer has already admitted that a proposition cannot significantly refer to an object which is, in principle, unobservable; the qualitative similarities between sense-data are, however, observable, and if one takes these, as Ayer does, "as definitive of the continued and distinct existence of objects", that is, if one chooses to define continued and distinct existence in terms of these similarities, then an empirically significant material object language, "constructed" on the basis of sense-data, becomes perfectly possible.

On this basis then the problem of perception, as it was conceived by Ayer, was radically different from that which was envisaged by Russell. For Russell, having assumed that material things were different entities than the sense-data which were the objects of immediate perceptual apprehension, the problem was, as we have already seen, that of showing whether "anything other than our own hard data can be inferred from the existence of those data"? Ayer, however, in redefining material things in such a way so that they do not factually differ

from sense-data, has attempted to bridge the "gap" between sense-data and material things which gave rise to Russell's problem in the first place. Once it has been established that the difference is merely a linguistic one, that material object propositions and sense-data propositions differ only in that they represent different ways of referring to the same perceptual experience, the problem of perception, conceived of as the problem of explaining the relationship between sense-data and material objects, is nothing more than finding a way of "translating" sentences of the one type into sentences of the other type: "The problem of giving an actual rule for translating sentences about a material thing into sentences about sense-contents, which may be called the problem of the 'reduction' of material things to sense-contents, is the main philosophical part of the traditional problem of perception".¹⁰⁵ Indeed, this is the "programme" of phenomenalism, and the feasibility of this programme rests, in the end, on the assumption that the physical object statements and the sense-datum propositions are equivalent in the sense that "a proposition which

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Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 64.

is expressed by a sentence referring to a material thing can equally well be expressed by an entirely different set of sentences, which refer to sense-data".¹⁰⁶

The difficulty with this position is that it seems to lose much of its credibility when the implication of the redefinition of the term 'material thing' are brought to the fore. As we have already seen, the novel character of Ayer's sense-data theory is largely the result of his assumption that material things are sense-data in disguise, that they are, in effect, simply names to be attached to a certain way of interpreting one's "perceptual experiences", which are entirely made up of "phenomena" having the same characteristics as sense-data. The question is: Is there any rational warrant for such a peculiar definition of 'material thing'? While it does, to be sure, enable Ayer to circumvent a knotty philosophical problem, the identification of the existence of external objects with certain qualities of private and momentary sense-data is more than mildly repugnant to those who abide, even in the most limited way, by the criterion of ordinary usage. There

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p. 223. Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge,

certainly must be some limit to what can rationally be said; indeed, one is inclined to agree with Austin that Ayer's method of definition in this case is arbitrary and therefore unwarranted: "If we allow ourselves this degree of insouciant latitude, surely we shall be able to deal - in a way, of course - with absolutely anything".¹⁰⁷ Austin's point seems to be that, while it is possible to assign any meaning to any word, such definitions are both trivial, in the sense that the meaning thus assigned is thus "outrageous" in terms of the way in which the term is ordinarily used.¹⁰⁸ While this represents, in a sense, no more than a feeling that there is something "pretty astonishing" about Ayer's position, Austin's criticism of Ayer does have the merit of pointing out the fact that Ayer, in seeking to avoid the pitfalls of the traditional

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Austin, Sense and Sensibilia, p. 58.

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Austin does admit that the word 'material thing', since it is a philosophical term, has, strictly speaking, no ordinary meaning. And this being the case, he does allow that philosophers can, "within reason", use the term as they like. Ibid, p. 62. Nonetheless, I think it can fairly be argued that to identify a material thing, as Ayer has done, as a logical construction out of actual and possible sense-data, is to trespass even broad limits.

problem of perception, has created a position in which, for all intents and purposes, there are no material things. That is, Ayer's "material things" do not exist, and something that does not exist is not - in any real sense - a material thing.¹⁰⁹

Now one might argue that, leaving aside certain cases of what Ayer calls existential illusion, Ayer is quite willing to grant existence of material things. The problem here, however, is that the existence to which one must refer in all cases is nothing but the existence of sense-data. Consider, for example, Ayer's view that the continued and distinct existence of objects can be defined in terms of certain relations such as resemblance which, in fact, obtain between sense-data. The point to be made here is that the "existence" of these objects must be accounted for in some way. What does it mean then to say of a

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Austin himself declines to comment on Ayer's peculiar notion of the existence of material objects and in this, I think, he misses a major point of criticism. He does have one remark which concerns existence but its intention is rather vague: "Exist, of course, is itself extremely tricky. The word is a verb, but it does not describe something that things do all the time, like breathing, only quieter - ticking over, as it were, in a metaphysical sort of way". Ibid, p. 68, note 1.

material thing that it exists? Simply that certain sense-data have been observed to resemble each other in a certain regular and predictable way,¹¹⁰ and on the basis of the regularity of these resemblant sense-data, one is led to expect that under similar circumstances, one could again obtain a sense perception which would be, when compared to one's earlier perceptions, qualitatively similar to it. In this sense, the existence which one normally attributes to physical objects is, according to Ayer, rather than being something that belongs to them as it were, simply a characteristic resemblance which happens to be found in certain sense-data. Thus to say of a physical object that it exists or, for that matter, that it does not exist, is merely to say that one's sense-data have or have not certain resemblant characteristics. In this way, "existence", as it is used by Ayer in relation to physical objects, refers only to sense-data. And while such a doctrine might be strange, in the sense that one normally assumes that when he is talking about physical objects that there

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That is, they resemble each other according to the four criteria mentioned above. See p. 177.

is something there that exists, it is nonetheless perfectly consistent with the view that material objects are, in fact, nothing but sense-data.

The implications of this position are, to use Austin's expression, "pretty astonishing". A thing can, for example, gradually cease to exist over an extended period of time. No matter how familiar an object may be, it is always possible that future perceptual experience may force one to deny the existence of that object altogether. For, if the "existence" of an object is nothing more than the constancy and coherence between certain sense-data, any future perceptual experience which nullifies the said constancy and coherence must, at the same time, nullify the existence of the object. This is, according to Ayer, simply a case of existential illusion:

For we may say that the occasions where a perception is held to be existentially delusive are those in which the form or the context of a sense-datum would lead one to assume that it belonged to a group of sense-data of the kind I have been describing, whereas, in fact, one's expectation of being able to sense further members of the group would not be

capable of being fulfilled.

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What this amounts to is the view that since the reason why one supposes material things to exist in the first place can be attributed to certain characteristics of sense-data, it is possible to maintain the position that "existence" means nothing more than having these characteristics. Thus, if a familiar object is not perceived in its accustomed epistemic environs - if, for example, a certain building is no longer perceived to be in its usual place - then its previous existence, assuming no other explanation is forthcoming, must be assumed to be an illusion. Once one has taken it for granted that "existence" is merely a function of the relationship of sense-data, the existence of anything ceases when the relevant relationship between one's sense-data ceases to be observed.

The upshot of all of this is that Ayer has, perhaps unwittingly, gone one step beyond Hume; for while Hume was compelled, because of his epistemological

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Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, pp. 263 - 264.

commitments, to doubt the existence of material objects, Ayer has, in effect, eased this doubt by denying the existence of physical objects altogether.¹¹² While the fact that Ayer's theory of perception is thus totally at odds with common sense, and on this ground alone is open to a number of objections, the objection which I would like to raise at this point is that this is precisely what Ayer does not want. Indeed, if Ayer were prepared to deny the common sense belief in the existence of physical objects, his theory of perception, while it might undoubtedly be wrong, would nonetheless be internally coherent and consistent. But this is the difficulty; Ayer is too much of a realist himself to abandon this belief: "I have no doubt whatsoever that I really am perceiving the familiar objects, the chairs and table, the pictures and books and flowers with which my room is furnished; and I am therefore satisfied that they exist".¹¹³ Indeed, one of the

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Austin suggests this when he points out that Ayer differs from Hume in maintaining that "there are only sense-data", as opposed to Hume who maintained that there are both sense impressions and external objects. Sense and Sensibilia, p. 61.

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Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p. 1.

main points of this analysis of Ayer's sense-data theory has been to show that it is best understood as an attempt to reconcile this belief in the existence of objects such as tables and chairs with the philosophical view that the objects of direct observation are always sense-data. And in the end, it is evident that this attempted reconciliation fails because, to achieve this end, Ayer was forced to redefine the existence of the external world in terms of sense-data, and on the basis of this redefinition, material objects simply ceased to exist, at least in the normal, every day sense which Ayer himself had taken pain to uphold.

Nor was it long until Ayer himself became aware of this difficulty. The first indications of an uneasiness about this position are evident in an article entitled "Phenomenalism" which was published in 1947. For while, according to his sense-datum theory, the existence of material things must be wholly dependent upon the "occurrence" of certain relevant sense-data, the implications of this view began to prove unpalatable even to Ayer:

. . . not long ago I did have a fountain pen that suddenly vanished. . . . Of course, I do not really believe that it vanished But still less do I believe that it never was a pen What I say

is: 'there must be some explanation . . .'. And from this I conclude that when I said, as I often have in the past, like other philosophers, that however strongly one's sense-data may support the hypothesis that one is perceiving a material object of a certain sort, further experience may show one to have been mistaken, I was not serious. For when a situation arose which . . . supported this view, I did not interpret it in that way at all. I did not even seriously consider the possibility that what I had for so long been taking to be a pen never really had been a pen. Neither do I think that I am peculiar in this respect. I think that the explanation that it never really was a pen is one that, in the circumstances, nobody would consider seriously.

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It would be certainly wrong to infer from this anecdote that Ayer was ready to scotch the phenomenalist's hypothesis that material things can be treated as logical constructions out of sense-data. Indeed, while he admits there must be some modifications concerning the nature of the relationship between sense-data on the one hand and material

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Ayer, "Phenomenalism", pp. 172 - 173.
 (my emphasis).

objects on the other, he seems at this point, generally optimistic that the phenomenalist has "the makings of a satisfactory answer" to the problem of explaining the existence and nature of the physical object language.¹¹⁵

In this sense, it may be argued that Ayer's own reservations concerning some of the implications of his theory merely indicate an uneasiness about certain features of the theory which he feels can be overcome.

Nonetheless, Ayer's early theory of perception does, in large measure, turn on the view that there is, between sense-data and material objects, no factual difference; and this, as we have already noted, gives rise to the peculiar view that the existence of material things must be regarded as a function of certain resemblant qualities between diverse sense-data. Yet to suggest, as Ayer does, that one could not "seriously" entertain the view that a familiar object never did exist on the ground that the "occurrence" of certain relevant sense-data are not forthcoming, surely amounts to a contradiction of this position. The existence of an object either is, or

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Ibid, p. 196.

is not, entirely dependent upon, and defineable in terms of, qualities that characterize one's sense-data. Clearly the position which he espouses in The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge is that they are. Indeed, the view that physical objects are logical constructions out of sense-data in the sense that it is possible to entirely rewrite physical object propositions into propositions which refer exclusively to sense-data presupposes this position. For if it were not the case that material objects, both with respect to their qualities and to their existence, were entirely dependent on the characteristics of sense-data, the so-called phenomenalist's "programme" of translating statements of the one kind into statements of the other, is in great jeopardy.

And yet, the clear implication to be derived from Ayer's anecdote concerning his vanishing pen is that the existence of a material thing can be, and in fact is, known, even when the occurrence of the relevant sense-data would indicate that it should not be known. Certainly this shift must have some important repercussions concerning the nature of the phenomenalist's "programme". Ayer, not without a tinge of understatement, admits them when he points out, in "Phenomenalism", that statements about

physical objects "may not then be capable of being reproduced exactly as statements about sense-data; that is, it may not be possible wholly to rewrite them as statements about sense-data".¹¹⁶ And this, as far as Ayer is concerned, is good enough; the phenomenalist's "programme" can be carried out if one is satisfied with a translation which does not "exactly" duplicate the material object language; that is, if one is satisfied with what Ayer calls a "weak" form of phenomenism. The difficulty here, however, is that the assumption upon which the programme is based, that material things are nothing but logical constructions out of sense-data, is no longer the case. By admitting the existence of material objects in a real, rather than in a phenomenal sense, Ayer has introduced a distinction between material things and sense-data which is, in a word, factual. And this poses a problem. If the objects of immediate perceptual experience are always sense-data, and material objects are factually distinct from the sense-data which are perceived, how is it possible to justify

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Ibid. (my emphasis)

one's belief in the existence of these external objects?

Here we find ourselves inexorably drawn back to our starting point - to Hume. For whether or not one wishes to accept Ayer's view that the phenomenalist's "programme" can be salvaged in a weaker form, it is clear that the theory of perception, developed in Ayer's early writings, which is based on the assumption that there is no factual distinction between sense-data and material things, has been dealt a crucial blow. Once the factual distinction has been introduced, and it has been my contention that Ayer has reintroduced it in the interests of common sense, the theory collapses; and the existence of this world again falls behind a curtain of doubt. The problem is, how is this doubt to be resolved? This becomes, for Ayer in his later writings, the problem of perception, the solution of which he suggests in "Phenomenalism", "may be to treat our beliefs about physical objects as constituting a theory, the function of which is to explain the course of our sensory experiences".¹¹⁷

This, indeed, marks the beginning of the development of Ayer's later theory of perception to which we will now turn our attention.

CHAPTER III

The Problem Reformulated

An analysis of what I have been referring to as Ayer's "later" theory of perception presents certain complications that do not seem to attend a similar treatment of his earlier writings. In one sense, this is simply due to the fact that his later views on perception are, in my judgment, far more subtle than those to be found in The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge. There is another sense, however, in which the more difficult nature of these mature writings can be attributed to the fact that, both in style and in content, they reflect an historical philosophical context which is at considerable variance with that of logical positivism. Indeed, the publication of The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge in 1940 represented, to some extent, the end of an era. The kind of reductive analysis which had been espoused during the pre-war period quickly lost a good deal of its influence¹ and, as Ayer himself has

¹ Urmson, for example, gives as a part of the raison d'être for the publication of Philosophical Analysis the fact that "many younger students of philosophy, brought up in the newer ways, have but the vaguest idea about how their philosophical methods evolved from the

come to admit, it has "now rather gone out of fashion".²

This shift in the philosophical context within which Ayer proposes to develop a more refined theory of perception is evidenced in the different way in which he approaches the discussion of the nature of philosophy itself. Ayer's inquiry into the nature of philosophy turns out to be, not surprisingly, a discussion of the method of philosophy, because "it is by its methods rather than its subject matter that philosophy is to be distinguished from other arts or sciences".³ What, then, is the method proper to philosophy? It does not, Ayer contends, normally consist of formal demonstration, i.e., it is not deductive. This is the method which belongs to mathematics and logic.⁴ Nor is the philosopher interested

older methods". See J. O. Urmson, Philosophical Analysis, p. viii.

² Ayer, Philosophy and Language, p. 15.

³ A. J. Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 1.

⁴ Ibid.

primarily in the kinds of proof found in the "descriptive sciences". The statements made by the descriptive scientists are factual statements, statements which are capable of being "tested by observation", while the statements that a philosopher is interested in making "are neutral with respect to particular matters of fact".⁵ Having denied these activities, namely formal demonstration and factual assertion, as being in any way fitted for philosophy, what remains might at first glance seem so barren as to leave philosophy itself on the verge of atrophy for want of something upon which to nourish itself. For if the philosopher engages in making neither factual statements nor logical demonstrations, what is left?

What remains, according to Ayer, is the rather more humble task of deciding how these facts or states of affairs are to be described.⁶ Yet surely it may be objected that the scientist, or the mathematician, or even the

⁵ Ibid. This statement is difficult to reconcile with the view stated on the same page that "philosophers make statements which are intended to be true . . ." Can a statement be both true and factually neutral?

⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

ordinary man is quite capable of describing what he experiences without the aid of a specialist. It is not, nor should it be, the task of the philosopher to say what it is that other people sense or feel or think. Rather it is, according to Ayer, the purpose of the philosopher to focus his attention upon certain expressions with which he is already familiar "in order to give an analysis of their meaning".⁷ In brief, philosophy is concerned with language in an analytic way.

In explaining how this method works, Ayer begins by insisting on the distinction between "the use of an expression and the analysis of its meaning".⁸ Consider, he says, "the case of knowledge"; the verb 'to know' has any number of usages: one can know a person or a place; one can know in the sense of being able to recognize or distinguish; one can know a subject, such as geometry; or one can know in the sense of comprehending or appre-

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Ibid.

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Ibid. See also Philosophy and Language, In this short work, Ayer gives a detailed examination of this distinction.

hending a fact as being true. Now all of this - an examination of the various usages of an expression - is no doubt a helpful, and even a necessary, requirement for the analysis of knowledge, "but it is not sufficient", Ayer points out: "the philosopher who has this information may still ask what is knowledge? and hesitate for an answer"⁹.

What the philosopher must do, according to Ayer, is to carefully examine all of the ways in which the expression 'to know' is used in search of a "common feature" which will bind all these usages together. Sometimes, he says, an expression is always used in a common way, for example, 'red'. In other cases, however, and here he draws upon Wittgenstein's famous analysis of the expression 'game',¹⁰ the similarity between the various usages is not

⁹
Ibid, p. 3.

¹⁰
L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967). See Part I, Sections 66 - 67: "I can think of no better way to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances' And I shall say, games form a family".

at all evident.¹¹ In these cases, the resemblance is not "as straight forward", that is, one to one. There is, Wittgenstein had said, no single element and therefore no one definition that applies to all games. Some are contests; some require skill; some are played merely for diversion; some involve a number of people while others, such as solitaire, only one; some are played according to rules, while others are not; and so on. Games, Wittgenstein concluded, have no one to one relationship with each other, no common feature, but rather "form a family".

Wittgenstein had used this method to rid philosophy once and for all of essences. There is, he argued, no meaning for the word 'game' apart from the particular way in which it is used and this applies equally well to most other expressions: "For a large class of cases - though not for all - in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of the word is its use in the language".¹² Precisely what exceptions

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Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 5.

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Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, Part I, Section 43.

Wittgenstein had in mind here are, unfortunately, difficult to determine, although in his book, The Philosophy of Wittgenstein, Pitcher maintains that "it is clear that he regards the exceptions as trivial and unimportant".¹³

Regardless of the accuracy of this statement, it is clear that from the point of view of philosophical analysis, Wittgenstein did intend the identity of use and meaning generally. The criterion, then, according to which one uncovers the meaning of a term, is the criterion of usage.

For Wittgenstein, the identification of meaning and usage represents a fairly clear departure from the doctrine of meaning in the Tractatus and it would seem safe to say that it has since become one of the cardinal principles of contemporary British philosophy. In the Tractatus, Wittgenstein had indeed recommended a form of analysis: that of analyzing complex proposition into basic, 'atomic' propositions.¹⁴ But the later Wittgenstein and (especially) his ardent followers soon saw that this

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G. Pitcher, The Philosophy of Wittgenstein. (Garden City, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1964), p. 249.

14

Ibid, p. 53. " . . . Wittgenstein's conception of what a proper analysis of a proposition is . . . [is]

was an awkward process that yielded little and, as Strawson puts it, this form of analysis, begun so brilliantly by Russell, "began in the end to seem a little queer".¹⁵

The fact was that logical analysis was somehow resisted by ordinary language: simplification was achieved at the expense of sense.¹⁶ And so, Strawson says, "for the old, limited and theory ridden program of analysis, we are to substitute a different aim: that of coming to understand philosophically puzzling concepts by carefully and accurately noting the ways in which the related linguistic expressions are actually used in discourse".¹⁷ Thus Wittgenstein's notion of the identification of usage and meaning (whether he intended this to be the case or not is, in this context,

that the analysis of a proposition about a complex consists of propositions about its constituent parts and of propositions which describe it completely".

¹⁵ P. F. Strawson, "Construction and Analysis", The Revolution in Philosophy, A. J. Ayer et al. (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1956), p. 100.

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 103 - 104.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 104.

beside the point) was to become the first article in the Credo of contemporary British philosophy.

The difficulty here is that the nature of the relationship between Ayer and ordinary language philosophy is somewhat ambiguous. On the face of it, he is simply rejecting the view that has been attributed to Wittgenstein that it is the essential role of the philosopher to consider¹⁸ the ways in which various terms are used. There are, however, certain ambiguities here. Having apparently made the point that the philosopher can go beyond use and ask what is the meaning of knowledge?, Ayer proceeds, as we have already seen, to inquire "whether the different cases in which we speak of knowing have any one thing in¹⁹ common". The difficulty is that while Ayer seems on the one hand to reject the criterion of usage in a fairly explicit way, he seems on the other hand, in his own

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It is questionable, of course, whether this view can be correctly attributed to Wittgenstein. Nonetheless, Pitcher seems to ignore the "exceptions" to the usage criterion.

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Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 3.

analysis of knowledge, to use this criterion. Does this imply that Ayer is, in spite of himself engaging in philosophical analysis according to Wittgentstein's maxim that the meaning of a proposition is its use? That is, is Ayer after all a linguistic thinker?

While it is true that there are many methodological similarities between the investigation carried out in The Problem of Knowledge and the kind of treatment one would expect from an ordinary language philosopher, it must be again pointed out that these resemblances tend to conceal the rather basic differences involved. What linguistic analysis attempts to do, and this has already been noted with reference to Strawson, is to clarify ambiguities associated with certain expressions by noting the ways in which these expressions are actually used. Hence, an expression which has a number of usages, and this would seem to be the case with virtually all philosophically puzzling expressions, will have a number of meanings. In this sense, the quest for meaning is redundant - there is no meaning apart from use. Hence, there is a very real sense in which meaning plays no significant part in ordinary language philosophy. For this reason, ordinary language,

having survived the crucial test of constant usage,²⁰ has become the criterion of philosophical analysis.

For Ayer, on the other hand, the very ambiguity which various terms, such as 'knowledge', exhibit seems to stem from the fact that they are used in a variety of ways. How can an expression which has so many various usages be anything but philosophically perplexing? Either these usages are in no way related to each other and perplexity must give way to despair or there is some common feature or meaning in terms of which the various usages can be understood. Thus, Ayer accepts Wittgenstein's notion that games form a 'family' as a "good analogy", but rejects his conclusion that they have no common feature: "if things resemble one another sufficiently for us to find it useful to apply the same word to them, we are entitled to say, if it pleases us,²¹ that they have something in

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Strawson, "Construction and Analysis, p. 103.

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" . . . if it pleases us . . .": It is not clear precisely what the epistemological status of this condition is, if it is indeed, a condition at all. It is typical of many of the statements in The Problem of Knowledge in the sense that by its use, Ayer is able to both make a general philosophical assertion and, at the same time, appear not to be doing so. As a result he comes dangerously close to saying nothing at all. The point

common",²²

This brings us, in an admittedly circuitous way, to the question of perception. For perception is a kind of knowledge and, therefore, if one is to adequately engage in a discussion of the nature of perception, it would seem advisable to consider beforehand, from a more general point of view, the nature of knowledge itself. This approach recommends itself not simply because there is a relation between Ayer's theory of knowledge generally and his theory of perception, but also because his discussion of the nature of knowledge, and its relation to a variety of types of propositions, provides a pattern according to which he will attempt to resolve "the problem of perception". It is, indeed, in understanding how this pattern is developed

here is that this statement, as with many others in the books, is qualified to the extent that any attempt to deal with it must, to some degree at least, be interpretive. Such interpretation is, however, not necessarily arbitrary; for, in this instance, it is quite clear from the context of the argument that Ayer is putting forward the position albeit in a rather roundabout way, that the meaning of the various usages of an expression derive from a "common feature"; and this is the case whether or not anyone derives any pleasure from this fact.

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Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 3.

in relation to claims to knowledge generally, that one finds the key to the understanding of Ayer's later theory of perception: therefore, in the first instance, Ayer's definition of knowledge itself and its relation to Ayer's general view on the nature of philosophy will be explained; secondly, his analysis of how it is that we know the truth of a priori propositions, basic propositions and inductive statements will be considered; and finally, his attempt to resolve the problem of perception on the basis of certain conclusions drawn from these aforementioned considerations will be examined.

It has already been pointed out that a definition of 'knowledge' must be based on the "common features" which characterize all instances of knowledge. The question is, what are the 'common features of knowledge? The first point to bear in mind is that, generally speaking, for Ayer, knowledge is always "knowledge that something is the case",²³ or, more simply, that to know something is to know a fact. This does not seem to be evidently true in all cases of knowledge, as, for example, in the case of a dog

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Ibid, p. 7.

knowing how to do things. Ayer feels, however, that if one is willing to extend the use of the expression "knowing facts", one can, by a kind of reductive analysis, show these usages to be reconcilable with the view that knowledge is always knowledge that something is the case. At any rate, it is this kind of knowledge, wherein one might expect to find the expression 'knowing that', that is of primary interest to Ayer.

The original question, however, remains: What is knowledge? By attempting to show that all knowledge is factual, this question has not been answered; it has rather been reformulated: What does it mean to 'know that something is the case'? For Ayer, this involves distinguishing knowing something from such 'activities' as believing, doubting, imagining, and so on, something to be the case. It amounts to discovering those conditions, both necessary and sufficient, which must obtain in any instance in which one is properly said to know something. Ayer then proceeds with an analysis of knowledge and concludes that there are three conditions that must be present: ". . . first that what one is said to know to be true, secondly, that one be sure of it, and thirdly that

one should have the right to be sure".²⁴ Each of these can be considered separately.

That 'what is known be true' seems to be logically entailed from the view that knowledge is always knowledge that something is the case. One can know that the sun is shining only if it is the case that the sun is shining. In other words, one cannot know that which is not. For this reason, it follows that all knowledge is, by definition, true. Therefore, truth, i.e. that what is known actually is the case, is a necessary condition for know-
²⁵ledge.

That what is known be factual is not, however, a sufficient condition for knowing. It may be that something is the case, for instance that the sun is now shining outside, but one might not be sure of it. In this instance, at least, one only believes and does not know that the sun

²⁴ Ibid, p. 34.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 7. " . . . it is . . . a fact of ordinary usage that what is known, in this sense, cannot but be true".

is shining. Hence, we must attach a second condition to our definition of knowing: that of being sure that what one knows to be true is true.²⁶ Does knowledge then consist in "a special state of mind" or "a conscious feeling of conviction"? Ayer's answer to this is categorically no. He engages in a rather lengthy discussion of this point but his position seems to come down to the fact that "it is possible (logically) to be completely sure of something which is in fact true, but yet not to know it".²⁷ The reason for this seems to be that one can be completely sure of something which is in fact not true and if this is the case, it cannot be said that he knew it, but only that he believed it. Thus, to be completely sure that something is the case may be a sufficient condition for belief, but not for knowledge. For this reason, Ayer

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Ibid, p. 25. "To discover that there need be no difference, in respect of being sure, between knowing and believing, we need only look at cases in which it turns out that someone does not know what he thought he knew. Very often the reason for this is that what he thought he knew is false. Consequently, he could not have known it, he only believed it."

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Ibid, p. 29.

maintains the position that "there cannot be a mental state which, being as it were directed towards a fact, is such that it guarantees that the fact is so".²⁸

According to Ayer, the reason that a person can fulfill both of the above-mentioned conditions, that he is sure that something is the case and that it is in fact true, and still not fulfill the requirements for knowledge is that "the circumstances may be such that one is not entitled to be sure".²⁹ Knowledge only arises when what one knows meets "the standard required for knowledge", although, Ayer admits, "it is not at all easy to determine exactly what these standards are".³⁰ Leaving aside, for the moment, the very difficult questions as to whether these standards are achievable and, if so, what they are, it is presumably clear enough that the person who can justify his conviction that something is the case by some

28
Ibid, p. 15.

29
Ibid, p. 29.

30
Ibid.

present or past experience has a greater claim to knowledge than the person who can supply no such justification for this conviction.

This latter condition seems to be regarded by Ayer as sufficient for knowing. If one can sufficiently justify his conviction that something is the case, then he can be said to know it. It is important here to be clear about what Ayer is doing when he analyzes something like knowledge in this way. He begins, as was mentioned earlier, with the expression 'to know' as it is ordinarily used. But during the course of his analysis and in his attempt to find some common feature that would bind these various usages together, he clearly shows that he is not willing to be bound within the confines of ordinary usage or even, perhaps, common sense.³¹ What he has done is to work out the logical implications of the expression 'to know that something is the case'. Regardless of how the

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Ayer's view that philosophy ought not to be unduly slavish with respect to the dictates of common sense seems quite clear from the following remark made about H.H. Price: "I hope it will not be thought impertinent if I say that one of his great virtues as a philosopher is that he does not suffer from an over-dose of common sense". Philosophy and Language, p. 1.

word is commonly used, if one is willing to accept that 'knowledge' always refers to knowledge of facts, then this does seem to entail that one could be said to know something only if what is known to be the case is true, that one is sure of it, and that one has the right to be sure of it, i.e. that one's convictions meet the requirements or standards of knowledge.³² What then are the requirements of knowledge? What are the standards which one must meet in order that he might have, in Ayer's words, the right to be sure that he knows something to be the case? Before these questions can be meaningfully asked, Ayer must first face another: Is it possible to establish any standard of knowledge that can be satisfied? The view that this is an impossibility is, according to Ayer, the position of scepticism.

Philosophical scepticism, admittedly, represents a peculiar point of view and needs to be clearly distinguished from other forms of doubt which Ayer labels "scientific".³³ The philosophical sceptic, for example,

³² Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 34.

³³ Ibid, p. 35. Scientific doubt is here considered

raises doubts about our ability to know the past and our awareness of the experiences of other minds. Even our present perceptions are suspect: it is doubted whether the objects we perceive really exist. In general, philosophical scepticism does not, Ayer maintains, simply point out that there are instances when we do not have enough evidence to satisfy a given standard of knowledge; it rather states that there can be no instance of knowledge in which we can be entirely immune from doubt. The possibility of error is always present and, for this reason, the standard of evidence which would justify a claim to knowledge cannot conceivably be met.³⁴ Ayer is willing to concede that this form of the sceptic's argument, "so indiscriminating in its scope", seems absurd on the grounds that it is only in reference to what one does in fact know that one can meaningfully speak of deceptive sensory experience: "A perception is called illusory only by contrast with

to be a challenge to a "recognized method of proof" on the basis of one's experience of matters of empirical fact.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 36.

other perceptions which are veridical".³⁵ He goes on to point out, however, that the sceptic is still free to maintain that "even granting that it makes no sense to say that all our perceptions are delusive, any one of them still may be".³⁶ Given a perceptual experience, the perception itself can be taken to neither wholly justify nor, at the same time, to wholly refute the claim of the sceptic. And this is the point. If the sceptic cannot be refuted, it always remains possible that he is right - that no claim to knowledge is ever justified.

Now the basis of any claim to knowledge, i.e. the standard which presumably gives one the right to be sure, is, according to Ayer, "either that the statement is self-evident, or that its truth is directly warranted by our experience, or that it is validly derivable from some other statement or set of statements of which we have the

³⁵ Ibid, p. 37. This argument can also be found in Gilbert Ryle's Dilemmas. (Cambridge: University Press, 1964). See p. 95.

³⁶ Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 38.

right to be sure".³⁷ This criterion, however, is based on two distinct forms of knowledge, both of which have been challenged by the sceptic: first, that it is possible to know the truth of some statements immediately, either intuitively (a priori statements) or from experience (basic propositions); and secondly, that there is a reliable method of derivation according to which we can securely know the truth of statements which are not self-evident (statements about other minds, the past, and physical objects).³⁸

The manner in which Ayer puts forward the sceptic's argument against each of these kinds of statements and the way in which he attempts to challenge the claim of the sceptic in these cases merits careful consideration since the problem in which we are chiefly interested, that of perception, will be dealt with by Ayer according to a

37 Ibid, p. 40.

38 This distinction tends to become somewhat weakened in the light of the technique which Ayer develops in order to answer the objections of the sceptic.

pattern which he establishes in these other cases. His discussion of a priori propositions, though brief, is perhaps most illuminating. There are, he says, some philosophers who wish, "like Leibniz, to put all true statements on a level with those of formal logic or pure mathematics". And the reason for this is that the "truths of logic"³⁹ seem to exhibit an indubitable character which might be construed as a means of providing factual statements with a logically unassailable base.⁴⁰ However, it is Ayer's view that it is just for this reason that a priori statements are unassailable (i.e. they cannot be denied without self-contradiction) - they are totally devoid of factual content: "In demanding for empirical statements the safeguard of logical necessity, these philosophers have failed to see that they would thereby rob them of their factual content". In other words, it is

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This expression itself seems to supply an argument in favour of the indubitable character of a priori statements. While Ayer does not make use of this expression in the present context, it does slip in later on in The Problem of Knowledge. See p. 46.

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Ibid, p. 41.

possible to say of a priori statements that they are "certain" because they cannot be denied, and they cannot be denied because they are "not descriptive of anything that happens".⁴¹

Yet, even if it is true that a priori statements are certain in the sense that they cannot be denied without self-contradiction, "it does not follow", says Ayer, "that they are immune from doubt". And the reason that this is the case is that "it is possible to believe an a priori statement to be true when it is not".⁴² This is, it must be admitted, a rather awkward position. Ayer seems to want to maintain that a statement can be both a priori, and therefore certain, and false. He does not, unfortunately, develop this position in any detailed way; there are no examples and it seems somewhat difficult to conceive of a

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Ibid, pp. 41 - 42. This view is basically the same as that expressed in Language, Truth and Logic. See ch. IV, pp. 71 - 86.

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Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 42. The fact that nowhere in The Problem of Knowledge does Ayer explain, in a precise way, what an a priori proposition is makes it difficult to give a clear account of his meaning. He seems however, to indicate that these statements are devoid of factual content, and this harkens one back to the view developed by Russell: "A proposition such as 'Socrates is a man, and all men are mortal, then Socrates is mortal', is true in virtue of its form alone.

statement that is certain and logically necessary and, at the same time, not true.⁴³ In the end, Ayer seems to rest his case on the view that it is possible (logically) to doubt anything and that a doubt, no matter how unreasonable it may be, can, if one so desires, be "maintained indefinitely".⁴⁴ Such a doubt is, Ayer admits, "not serious" in view of the fact that the sceptic who maintains

Its truth, in this hypothetical form, does not depend upon whether Socrates actually is a man, nor upon whether in fact all men are mortal; thus it is equally true when we substitute other terms for Socrates and man and mortal. The general truth, of which it is an instance, is purely formal and belongs to logic. Since it does not mention any particular thing, or even any particular quality or relation, it is wholly independent of the accidental facts of the existent world and can be known, theoretically, without any experience of particular things or their qualities and relations". See Bertrand Russell, Our Knowledge of the External World, pp. 51 - 52. If this is the case, however, it is difficult to see in what sense an a priori proposition could be false since it "is true in virtue of its form alone".

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Ayer does say of logically necessary propositions that "such statements are, indeed, unassailable, in the sense that, if they are true, there are no circumstances in which they could have been false". The Problem of Knowledge, p. 42. Once more, however, this seems to beg the question of what circumstances there could be which would render such a statement false. Unfortunately, Ayer does not consider this question.

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Ibid, p. 43.

it is doubting in such a way that no matter what the evidence, "nothing is going to count as its being resolved". For one simply extends the doubt to any of the attempts to resolve it. However, "to say that it is not serious is not to logically exclude it: there can be doubt as long as there is the possibility of error". And, Ayer goes on to say, "there must be the possibility of error with respect to any statement, whether empirical or a priori, which is such that from the fact that someone takes it to be so, it does not follow logically that it is so".⁴⁵

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This, of course, is the difficulty: Can there really be doubt about the truth of a proposition that is both necessary and certain? Russell, for one, seems to think not: "The hardest of hard data are of two sorts: the particular facts of sense and the general truths of logic. The more we reflect upon these, the more we reason exactly what they are, and exactly what a doubt concerning them really means, the more luminously certain do they become. Verbal doubt concerning even these is possible . . . Real doubt, in these two cases, would, I think, be pathological. At any rate, to me they seem quite certain, and I shall assume that you agree with me in this. Without this assumption we are in danger of falling into that universal scepticism which . . . is as barren as it is irrefutable".

This passage is interesting in that it sets out in plain terms the structure of empiricism. From this point of view the truths of logic can be doubted only if one is willing to risk the security of philosophy itself. These truths, at least for Russell, provide the grounds for a theory of knowledge; they, along with "the particular facts of sense", make up the foundation upon which the structure is erected. To whatever extent they are doubted, to that

Curiously enough, Ayer seems to think that the difficulty here arises from the fact that philosophers have too readily assumed that because a priori propositions are certain, it follows that "they can be certainly known". This view, however, is the result of "confusion"; one "knows" a priori statements, "not because they are certain, but because they are true and because we may be entitled to feel no doubt about their truth"⁴⁶. On this view, however, the following problem seems to present itself: How does one distinguish between a true a priori statement and a false a priori statement? i.e., according to what criterion is one "entitled to feel no doubt about their truth?" In

degree the entire structure is weakened. For this reason the truths of logic and the facts of sense must be considered indubitable; if they can be doubted at all, such a doubt must be considered pathological. See Bertrand Russell, Our Knowledge of the External World, p. 60.

In The Problem of Knowledge, however, Ayer seems to be taking the position that even granting the necessary and certain character of a priori propositions, it is still possible to doubt their truth. Nor is this doubt merely psychological or pathological. These propositions say something and what is said is not necessarily true. Thus, it is possible to really doubt the truth of an a priori proposition.

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Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 43.

an attempt to overcome this difficulty, Ayer says that it is necessary, ultimately, to make "an appeal to intuition"; one must, at some point, claim to be able to "see" the validity of such a proposition. How then, one might ask, can one's vision of or intuition of the validity of this kind of statement be justified? Only, says Ayer, when "one is judged to have taken every reasonable step towards making sure" that the proposition is true; having done this, it seems safe to say that one's claim to knowledge is "legitimately made". If the claim to knowledge is legitimately made, i.e., if one has taken every precaution to ensure that whatever it is that the statement claims "to be so" is so, and having, therefore, claimed the right to be sure, does it then follow that the a priori statement to which this claim refers is true? Apparently not. Or at least it is not necessarily true; for even if one satisfies these requirements, this is, Ayer says, "still logically consistent with one's being in error". In this sense, a claim to knowledge which is "legitimate" in the afore-mentioned way is "satisfied" only on the condition that the statement in question be true. And this seems to bring the argument back to its beginning; for how, it could be asked, can one decide whether or not an a priori statement is true in order that he might judge whether his claim to

to knowledge is, or is not, satisfied?⁴⁷

By way of a conclusion to this somewhat obscure and circular line of argumentation, Ayer points out that a priori statements, in spite of the fact that they are necessary and certain, are not necessarily or certainly true. Since they do maintain that something is the case, in fact necessarily and certainly the case, it is always logically possible that whatever it is that is being maintained is not so.⁴⁸ This curious position, which he develops in The Problem of Knowledge, seems to amount to the idea that it is possible for an a priori proposition to be necessary (indeed, it must be necessary) and at the same time to be false.

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Ibid, pp. 43 - 44.

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Ibid, p. 44. "Thus, if the quest for certainty is simply a quest for knowledge, if saying that a statement is known for certain amounts to no more than saying that it is known, it may find its object in a priori statements, though not indeed in them uniquely. If, on the other hand, it is a search for conditions which exclude not merely the fact, but even the possibility, of error, then knowledge of a priori statements does not satisfy it. In neither case is the fact that these a priori statements may themselves be certain, in the sense of being necessary, relevant to the issue".

Now from the very outset, this presents itself as a rather unusual position.⁴⁹ Ayer's ground for maintaining it seems to be based, in the end, on the rather unhappy view that, given the desire, one can doubt anything, a point of view which, as we have already seen, Ayer himself does not consider to be "serious". Nevertheless, he still maintains that in some way this doubt is real in the sense that as long as it is present, the possibility of error remains. And yet, in what sense is this kind of possibility real? To what kind of error would a necessary and certain proposition be susceptible? To account for this possibility, Ayer produces the rather curious argument which we have already seen: if, he says, someone, presumably confronted with an a priori proposition, takes "it to be so, it does not follow logically that it is so". Thus, the key to Ayer's explanation lies in his view that an a priori proposition makes some kind of a claim - it claims that something "is so". This being the case, it must remain possible that what it maintains is false and

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Russell, as we have seen, maintained that doubt concerning the truth of such a proposition could be merely 'verbal'. See above, p. 219, Note 45.

one can, therefore, doubt it. One difficulty with this argument is that it is not explained how any proposition could necessarily and certainly claim something to be the case which is not the case. The fact that Ayer produces no example of an a priori proposition which manages to accomplish this end (indeed, in the entire discussion in The Problem of Knowledge, he produces no examples of any kind of a priori propositions) is, perhaps, a sign that the argument is not beyond dispute. The statement that ". . . it is possible to make mistakes in mathematics or in logic" seems to have little bearing on whether or not what the principle of identity, for instance, says is true or false.⁵⁰ Does it make sense to say of a principle such as this that if it is true, there are "no circumstances"⁵¹ in which it could be false? What conceivable circumstances

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Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 42. "But from the fact that a priori statements, if they are true, are unassailable in this sense, it does not follow that they are immune from doubt. For . . . it is possible to make mistakes in mathematics or in logic".

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Once it is assumed that a statement is true in virtue of its form alone, this would seem to imply that there could be no circumstances under which this statement could be false.

could render the law of identity to be false? Once more, Ayer is somewhat hesitant in explaining these difficulties, and since the rather meagre information that he does provide leads, as we have seen, in a curious circular direction, a brief examination of the more definitive treatment given to a priori propositions in Language, Truth and Logic seems to recommend itself.

In this earlier work, Ayer had admitted that these propositions do pose a problem for the empiricist because, unlike the statements of science which are always open to dispute, it was generally agreed that propositions of logic and mathematics were "necessary" and "certain".⁵² There are, he claimed, two ways in which the empiricist can deal with these statements: he can, in one way or another, treat them as epistemologically equivalent to the statements of science; or "he must say they have no factual

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See Language, Truth and Logic, p. 72. "Where the empiricist does encounter difficulty is in connection with the truths of formal logic and mathematics. For whereas a scientific generalization is readily admitted to be fallible, the truths of mathematics and logic appear to everyone to be necessary and certain. But if empiricism is correct, no proposition which has a factual content can be necessary for certain".

content", in which case, he must be able to explain how such propositions can be "true and useful and surprising".⁵³

The first of these is the approach which Ayer attributes to John Stuart Mill. According to this view, the principles of logic and mathematics are "inductive generalizations based on an extremely large number of instances". And this apparently accounts for the general belief that such propositions are necessarily and universally true.⁵⁴ Ayer chooses to reject Mill's position, although in doing so, he does admit that "we are obliged to be somewhat dogmatic". Nonetheless, it is Ayer's contention that, having seen the correct position clearly stated, one will be able to see that Mill's position is "discrepant with the relevant logical facts".⁵⁵

And the relevant logical facts are, according to Ayer, that the necessity and certainty which are generally

53 Ibid, pp. 72 - 73.

54 Ibid, p. 74.

55 Ibid, p. 75.

accorded to a priori propositions belong to them, not because of an empirical generalization, but because propositions of this kind are analytic or tautologous. By an analytic proposition, Ayer means a statement the validity of which "depends on the definitions of the symbols it contains".⁵⁶ Thus, the proposition 'either some ants are parasitic or none are', is an analytic proposition; once its terms (symbols) are understood, its validity must be accepted.⁵⁷ Such a proposition is necessary because to deny it would involve self-contradiction;⁵⁸ "And this is the sole ground of their necessity". Furthermore they are certain because no empirical observation can ever "confute them". The reason for this, according to Ayer, is that a priori propositions have no factual content: "they do not make any assertion about

56
Ibid, p. 78.

57
Ibid, p. 79. See Chapter 1, p.

58
Ibid, p. 84. "As Wittgenstein puts it, our justification for holding that the world could not conceivably disobey the laws of logic is simply that we could not say of an unlogical world how it would look".

the empirical world".⁵⁹ Thus, according to the position taken in Language, Truth and Logic, the a priori propositions of logic and mathematics are necessarily and certainly true in the sense that, having no factual content whatsoever, there are no conceivable circumstances in which these propositions could be false.⁶⁰

Even on the basis of this brief analysis, it seems clear enough that the position which Ayer develops in

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Ibid. Ayer also says of a priori propositions: "They none of them provide any information about any matter of fact. In other words they are entirely devoid of factual content. And it is for this reason that no experience can confute them". See Also A.C. Ewing, The Fundamental Question of Philosophy. (New York: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1962), p. 11. "The laws of logic must be known a priori or not at all". Ewing seems to conceive of these laws as what is produced in the mind when it is not thinking about any matter of fact.

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Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 84. "And just as the validity of an analytic proposition is independent of the nature of the external world, so it is independent of the nature of our minds. It is perfectly conceivable that we should have employed different linguistic conventions from those which we actually do employ. But whatever these conventions might be, the tautologies in which we recorded them would always be necessary. For any denial of them would be self-stultifying". It seems clear from this text that Ayer here regards a priori propositions as unconditionally true.

The Problem of Knowledge represents some kind of a departure from his earlier views on a priori statements. Moreover, it seems evident that the strength of Ayer's earlier position depended largely on the view that these propositions are lacking in factual content; they do not really say anything. This view does have the advantage of accounting for the certainty of such propositions in that, considered in this way, they must be immune from doubt; since these propositions assert nothing, there is nothing to doubt. It seems then consistent with Ayer's own line of argumentation to hold that only what is asserted (or denied) can be doubted. This being the case, one can doubt the truth of an a priori proposition only if it asserts something, that is, only if it has factual content. And yet, in The Problem of Knowledge, it is precisely on

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Ibid, pp. 86 - 87. "Having thus shown that there is no explicable paradox involved in the view that the truths of logic and mathematics are all of them analytic, we may safely adopt it as the only satisfactory explanation of their a priori necessity To say that a proposition is true a priori is to say that it is a tautology. And 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". Here the truth of a priori propositions clearly seems to rest on the fact that they are tautologies and, as such, they make no assertions that could be doubted.

this issue that Ayer's usually lucid explanatory style seems to abandon him. He does indicate that the grounds for doubting this sort of proposition rests on the fact that what it claims "to be so" is not necessarily "so"; but one reads on in vain for further enlightenment on this point.

Yet the basic difficulty seems clear enough. The basis for the certitude accorded to a priori propositions is, in this context, that they have no factual content: they are held to be certain because they cannot be refuted, and they cannot be refuted because they do not make any assertion about what "is so" or "is not so" that could be refuted. And this view, that propositions of this sort have no factual content, has not, as we have seen, been abandoned in The Problem of Knowledge.⁶² What Ayer does in this work is to distinguish between the necessity and certainty of a priori propositions on the one hand from the truth of these propositions on the other. In this way, he is still able to maintain that a priori propositions are necessary and certain; and, at the same time, the necessity

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See above, p.

and certainty of these propositions is consistent with their being false. The falsity of these propositions, however, seems to indicate that they are, at least in some way, factual in character. If one doubts a proposition, what is it that one is doubting? What one doubts, according to Ayer, is whether what a proposition states to be so is so. In this way, Ayer, in The Problem of Knowledge, seems to be infusing into a priori propositions a certain facticity which renders them dubitable. A very confusing situation indeed!

Here Ayer is entrenched in a dilemma which he and all other empiricists have inherited from Hume; How can an empiricist explain away those statements or propositions that cannot reasonably be identified with statements descriptive of "matters of fact" and which are, at the same time, undeniably true?⁶³ The answer which Ayer gave to this problem in Language, Truth and Logic has already been noted. Apart from any other drawbacks which it may have had, the position put forward there had at least the

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It was for this reason, Victor Kraft pointed out, that the logical positivists came to regard the truths of logic as being devoid of factual content. See Ch. I, pp. 20 - 21.

virtue of dealing squarely with the problem. Moreover, it was generally consistent with the tenets of logical positivism to which, as we have already seen, Ayer was deeply committed. And this is the difficulty. Having given what seems to be, at least within the limits of logical positivism, a clear and adequate explanation of the nature of a priori propositions, why does Ayer choose to modify it in The Problem of Knowledge?

The significance of this development may be partially understood to represent, albeit in a very minor way, a movement towards a more unified theory of knowledge. Although he is far from explicit, it seems clear enough that Ayer is putting forward a position according to which our knowledge of these statements, or at least our knowledge of the truth of them, is ultimately grounded on experience and, further, that they are known to be true only when, in the light of one's own investigation, one comes to grasp or just "see" their validity. Again, however, we are led back to the same difficulty: Ayer is not prepared to abandon the view that such propositions
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are necessary and certain.

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Thus the distinction, insisted upon in Language, Truth and Logic, between the empirical statements on the

Nonetheless, Ayer is clearly intent on showing that the truth of no proposition, even an a priori proposition, can be logically immune from doubt. The ground for accepting the truth of such a statement is reckoned to be the same as the basis which would justify a claim to knowledge in any other case; one can legitimately claim it to be true only if one has "the right to be sure" of its truth. Thus, Ayer is, in effect, robbing these propositions of their a priori character; for to say that the truth of a proposition must be validated by some experience (even intuition) tends to violate the basic nature of an a priori truth as a truth "of pure reason" which is valid "independently of all experience".⁶⁵

In the final analysis the rather obscure reasons which underlie Ayer's attempt to treat a priori propositions in this way can be brought more sharply into focus

one hand and those of logic and mathematics on the other, is still maintained in The Problem of Knowledge. To allow this distinction to totally break down would seem to tend to force Ayer into considering the propositions of logic as empirical propositions, and this in turn would lead him back to Mill's position - the very position which he seems much intent upon avoiding.

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Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 87.

when it is realized that, by throwing doubt upon these statements, a pattern is established according to which the sceptic's objections to the validity of knowledge on all levels can be answered. It is, he has said, possible (logically) to doubt the truth of propositions which are necessary and certain. However, since these propositions, when properly understood, are in fact known to be true, it is clear that such a doubt cannot be seriously maintained. After all, the suggestion seems to be, can one reasonably claim that the principle of contradiction is false? Evidently not, or at least not seriously. Here, Ayer seems to be saying, is a paradigm case in which a doubt has been legitimately raised (is this necessary and certain proposition true?) and resolved. One could, of course, perpetually suspend such propositions in a state of doubt but this is, Ayer maintains, "merely to pay lip-service to human fallibility".⁶⁶ The point that Ayer is trying to make is that, given the demand for absolute certitude, there are no statements which can fulfill all of the requirements. In this sense, the sceptic is right: "There

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Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 43.

can be doubt so long as there is the possibility of error". If he wishes, the sceptic can exercise his right to doubt wherever such a possibility exists and, assuming that one can only justify a claim to knowledge when it is no longer conceivable to maintain such a doubt, it seems to follow that, under these conditions, no claim to knowledge could ever be justified.

So the sceptic is victorious; but it is, says Ayer, an "empty victory". It is empty because the sceptic has set up conditions which, though logically viable, cannot possibly be satisfied.⁶⁷ In this way, Ayer develops his technique for dealing with the sceptic's position: he shows first that there is nothing wrong (logically) with the sceptic's argument; but he then goes on to show, or at least imply, that it will be evident to the sensible person that such conclusions cannot really be taken seriously. In this way Ayer is banking on the fact that no one will really question the validity of these propositions. This being the case, while the sceptic's doubt cannot be shown to be false, it can be seen that he over-

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Ibid, p. 73. "Not that the sceptic's argument is fallacious; as usual his logic is impeccable. But his victory is empty. He robs us of certainty only by so defining it as to make it certain that it cannot be obtained".

extends himself. Ayer thus places the sceptic in the dilemma that if he chooses to win the battle, he must lose the war.

Apart from a priori propositions, there is another class of statements which Ayer calls 'basic propositions' which have also been held to be indubitable. Once more, Ayer seeks to challenge this assertion. The main point of Ayer's argument is that in recording our immediate perceptual experiences, it is possible to make factual, as well as verbal, mistakes; and this being the case, it does make sense to maintain that one can doubt the truth of such statements. Russell, it will be recalled, had maintained that errors in reporting "the particular facts of sense" could be only verbal. To deny this, he maintained, would be to shake the very foundation of empirical knowledge.⁶⁸ Yet this is precisely what Ayer does:

In any event it is common ground that one can misdescribe one's experience. The question is only whether such misdescription is always to be taken

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See above, p.219, note 45. "In a later work, Russell makes use of Ayer's expression: I have borrowed the term 'basic proposition' from Mr. A. J. Ayer". Bertrand Russell, An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth. (London: Pelican Books, 1962), p. 130.

as an instance of a verbal mistake.
 My contention is that there are
 cases in which it more plausible to
 say that the mistake is factual.

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And from this it follows that "there is no class of descriptive statements which are incorrigible".

This, however, presents another problem. If a sense experience must serve as the verification of any statement which describes it, and this statement in its turn supports "the truth of some more far-reaching statement", and if one can factually misdescribe these basic experiences, does it not follow that the shadow of scepticism must fall over all empirical knowledge? Once the foundations have been shaken, will not the structure collapse? Once more Ayer replies in the negative: "There is no reason to doubt that the vast majority of our experiences are taken by us to be what they are; in which

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The "cases" to which Ayer refers are those in which one might be in doubt about how to describe a certain "matter of fact" that is given in sense experience and, this being the case, it would seem possible to maintain that in attempting to describe it, one could "presumably also come to the wrong decision." The Problem of Knowledge, p. 69. In cases such as these, it is Ayer's contention that the mistake would be factual and not merely verbal.

case they do verify the statements which are construed⁷⁰ as describing them". Here, as before, Ayer is contriving to meet the challenge of the sceptic by allowing him full rein and trusting, apparently, that he will soon tire of the game. The result of this is that the sceptic's argument loses its subtlety and becomes, though still logically plausible, somewhat crude. It becomes crude in that it attempts to indiscriminately cast doubt upon statements which, at least in most instances, one knows to be true.

The main villain in the piece, says Ayer, is the philosopher's ideal of certainty, the view that a statement cannot be known to be true unless it is logically indubitable. If this premise is accepted, one will be "bullied" into accepting the sceptic's conclusions. And this is true of both a priori and 'basic' propositions:

The upshot of our argument is that the philosopher's ideal of certainty has no application. Except in the cases where the truth of a statement is a condition of its being made, it can never in any

circumstances be logically impossible that one should take a statement to be true when it is false; and this holds good whatever the statement may be, whether, for example, it is itself necessary or contingent. It would, however, be a mistake to express this conclusion by saying, lugubriously or in triumph, that nothing is really certain. There are a great many statements the truth of which we rightly do not doubt; and it is perfectly correct to say that they are certain. We should not be bullied by the sceptic into renouncing an expression for which we have a legitimate use. Not that the sceptic's argument is fallacious; as usual his logic is impeccable. But his victory is empty. He robs us of certainty only by so defining it as to make it certain that it cannot be obtained.

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Having thus established the pattern according to which the sceptic's argument can be met, Ayer proceeds

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The exception which Ayer has in mind is the statement 'I exist'. Such a statement is, he admits, logically indubitable, but is also, at the same time, "degenerate": "It is degenerate in the way that the statements which are expressed by such sentences as 'this exists' or 'this is occurring now' are degenerate The work is all done by the demonstrative It approximates, therefore, to a gesture or an ejaculation. To say 'I exist' or 'this is occurring now' is like saying 'Look!' or pointing without words". Ibid, p. 52.

straight to the problem of induction:

This problem can be set out very simply. Inductive reasoning is taken to cover all the cases in which we pass from a particular statement of fact, or set of particular statements of fact, to a factual conclusion which they do not formally entail. The inference may be from particular instances to a general law, or proceed directly by analogy from one particular instance to another. In all such reasoning we make the assumption that there is a measure of uniformity in nature; or, roughly speaking, that the future will, in the appropriate respects, resemble the past. We think ourselves entitled to treat the instances which we have been able to examine as reliable guides to those that we have not. But, as Hume pointed out, this assumption is not demonstrable; the denial that nature is uniform, to whatever degree may be in question, is not self-contradictory.

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Once again, the sceptic is encouraged to invoke what might be called the law of the possibility of error. It would seem that no attempt to deal with the problem of induction can avoid the conclusion that in any form of generalization

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Ibid, p. 77.

there must be some kind of an assumption (e.g. uniformity of nature), an assumption for which there can be no logical guarantee.⁷³ By pointing out this logical deficiency which inhibits any inductive generalization, one can, it seems, place in jeopardy the whole of scientific method and, to the extent that it depends on its method, the whole of science itself. Accordingly, it is clear that the solution to the problem of induction must rest on the justification of one or another of these assumptions. And this is the difficulty: it does not seem, according to Ayer, that such a justification is forthcoming. The assumption, it would appear,⁷⁴ is condemned to remain just that - an assumption.

Must one then, faced with this argument, seriously entertain a sceptical doubt concerning the conclusions of science, many of which conclusions we are told, depend

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Ewing echoes this view: "The whole use of induction is, indeed, to enable us to infer what we have never observed. Therefore, some a priori principle about the world is required if induction is to be justified". The Fundamental Questions of Philosophy, p. 53.

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Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 80.

ultimately on inductive inference? The answer is, of course, no. All that the sceptic proves is that there exists no criterion or standard which can serve to justify the scientific method. But this does not necessarily imply that there can be no inductive knowledge; to say this would, in effect, declare induction to be irrational. However, and this is Ayer's main point, the inductive method could be considered irrational "only if there were a standard of rationality which it failed to meet". And the great merit of the sceptic's argument is precisely that it shows that a standard or criterion which could either justify or refute the inductive process must be sought in vain: "When it is understood that there logically could be no court of superior jurisdiction, it hardly seems troubling that inductive reasoning should be left, as it were, to act as judge in its own cause".⁷⁵ In short, the problem of induction resists solution because there is no problem. In doubting its validity, the sceptic has erred in much the same way as he did with regard to a priori statements. His objection can, it is true, be maintained indefinitely, but there is no good reason to regard it as serious.

The force of Ayer's argument seems to depend on one's regarding one's knowledge of a priori propositions, of 'basic' propositions, and finally of knowledge arrived at inductively as being paralleled cases; in every instance there is no way of logically refuting the sceptic's argument. However, this should not, Ayer points out, lead us to accept his conclusions. Logically necessary propositions present us with a particularly obvious example: one can know them to be true and, at the same time, know them to be corrigible. From this, it follows that there is at least one case in which there is a statement which is not indubitable which can be known to be true. For one could not seriously maintain that the truth of the principle of contradiction, for example, cannot be known. Nor is this simply a case of justifying our knowledge by referring it to a criterion; at some point one simply sees that the proposition in question is true. Since the problem of induction seems to exhibit the same basic pattern, Ayer's approach is to use his earlier technique to, if not solve, at least eliminate the difficulty. For in all these cases, the 'problem' arises because the sceptic does not face the facts; the criterion of truth which he demands cannot, Ayer

admits, be met. The possibility of error always remains. ⁷⁶

This brings us to a rather difficult question: if it is admitted that there is no valid criterion of truth which can serve to justify all claims to knowledge, how then is one to judge if he has, indeed, satisfied the sufficient condition for knowing, i.e. that he has the right to be sure? In dealing with our knowledge of a priori propositions, Ayer became, as was already seen, involved in what appeared to be a rather desperate tail-spin. In the end, one must just see that a proposition is true and this is, apparently, testament enough to its validity, provided of course that this intuition is "legitimately made". With respect to basic propositions, it may at first seem that the criterion that is supposed to satisfy one's desire to be sure might simply be the data of experience. And, in a certain sense, this is true. At the same time, it is clear that Ayer does not regard the data of experience as a logically sufficient basis for a

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It should be remembered, however, that this is the whole basis of the sceptic's argument, i.e. that the possibility of error is always present.

claim to knowledge on the grounds that even the most basic of these propositions are not indubitable. Moreover, as has already been seen, most of the statements with which Ayer is concerned go beyond what could be immediately justified by experience even if these more primitive statements were indubitable. The point here is that in his attempt to bridge the gap between believing and knowing, Ayer is clearly attempting to avoid using a criterion of truth. This is in itself puzzling: the gap is evidently there; on the basis of what, it may be asked, is it being crossed? To this question, Ayer seems to supply no answer.⁷⁷

Having dealt with the sceptic's argument in these cases, Ayer proceeds to examine "a special class of cases in which the problems created by the sceptic's logic are not so easily set aside".⁷⁸ What is peculiar about these statements is that "we appear to end with statements of a

77 This question is considered in detail in Chapter IV. See pp. 292 - 296.

78 Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 81.

different category than those with which we began". It is in the discussion concerning these propositions that the question of the existence of external physical objects arises. According to Ayer's analysis, the sceptic's argument involves four steps which lead him ultimately to his conclusion that the knowledge that we claim to have of physical objects cannot be justified. The first step consists in showing "that we depend entirely on the premises for our knowledge of the conclusion"; that is, one has no direct awareness of, or knowledge of, physical objects. From this, it follows that if there is such knowledge, it must be indirect. Secondly, the relationship between the premises (what we are directly aware of) and the conclusion (the existence of physical objects) cannot be deductive, i.e. no description of any sense experience, or any number of sense experiences, leads to the conclusion that physical objects exist. Thirdly, the sceptic maintains that one's knowledge of these entities cannot be inductive. For even if one assumes the legitimacy of the inductive process, since no sense observations could be made to 'test' this sort of conclusion, and since induction can only be profitably used with regard to occurrences which one could, at least in principle,

observe, it follows that there can be no inductive knowledge of the existence of physical things. The final step is simply a conclusion drawn from the first three: "The last step is to argue that since these inferences cannot be justified either deductively or inductively, they cannot be justified at all", i.e. one cannot know physical objects.⁷⁹

There are, fittingly, four major rejoinders to this argument, each one consisting, Ayer says, in a denial of "a different step in the sceptic's argument".⁸⁰ The first of these is naive realism, the view that physical objects are "directly perceived". This view attacks the first step in the sceptic's argument, but is considered deficient by Ayer in that, even if it is true, it does not really offer any explanation of "how one knows". One such explanation, and this is the second way of answering the sceptic, is reductionism, a view which, though logically compelling, has, Ayer admits, continually led to paradoxical conclusions. This position involves rejecting the second

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Ibid, pp. 82 - 84.

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Ibid, pp. 85 - 90.

step in the sceptic's argument by maintaining that it is possible to move deductively from private experience to existing objects.⁸¹ Thirdly, there is what Ayer calls the Scientific Approach; here the third step of the argument is denied for it is argued that it is possible to legitimately move from "one level to another inductively".⁸² The final method, towards which Ayer himself seems to be inclined,⁸³ is called descriptive Analysis. According to this

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This seems to be very close to Ayer's earlier position, the view that physical objects are logical constructions out of sense-data.

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For example, see Bertrand Russell, Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits, p. 198. Here Russell seems to adopt an argument similar to this when, after recognizing the problem of the gap between what one experiences and the external world, and noting the unfortunate solipsistic consequences which must befall those who fail to traverse it, he attempts to avoid them by developing a doctrine of "probable inference": "A 'probable' inference . . . is one in which, when the premises are true and the reasoning correct, the conclusion is nevertheless not certain but only probable in a greater or lesser degree"

"I shall, broadly speaking, accept as valid any inference which is part of the accepted body of scientific theory, unless it contains some error of a specific kind."

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The use of the term "Descriptive Analysis" is somewhat ambiguous in that Ayer does not, so far as I know, use it again in The Problem of Knowledge. In fact, it is not entirely clear whether or not his attempt to "justify" our knowledge of physical objects is, in fact, an example of it: "Here we should expect to find an application

method, none of the sceptic's premises are rejected: it is agreed that one does not know the existence of physical objects either deductively or inductively; nor does one know them immediately or directly. However, the conclusion which the sceptic reaches on the basis of these premises is rejected because "no justification of these procedures is either necessary or possible". And in this way, it should be possible to resolve the problem of perception.

For the problem of perception consists, as has already been mentioned, in justifying the belief that most people have in the existence of physical objects. Ayer begins his discussion by posing this question:
 "Are physical objects directly perceived?"⁸⁴ He does not, however, answer the question immediately. Rather, a discussion ensues in which Ayer, assuming the standpoint of a disinterested observer, gives a preliminary examination

of the fourth and last of the epistemological methods described in Chapter 2, the method of Descriptive Analysis. But whether we do find it, I am not sure". See H.H. Price, "Professor Ayer on the Problem of Knowledge", Mind, Vol. 67, (1958), p. 441.

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Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 91.

of the views which have been put forward by some sense-data theorists. For, he points out, it is striking that in spite of the fact that one ordinarily speaks of what he perceives as a physical object, a great number of philosophers have maintained that, while the data of sense can be taken as "securely known", the existence of physical objects must be regarded as "relatively problematic".⁸⁵

It is in this context that the 'problem of perception' arises. The point of contention is, at least in the beginning, whether what is experienced is a physical object or a sense datum. Nonetheless, and here Ayer reiterates the position which he developed in The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, these disagreements are not in the least indicative of any factual differences. The reason for this is that no matter what it is we think we perceive, we all of us perceive the same events; "the philosopher who thinks that he perceives physical objects does not for that reason expect anything different to happen from what is expected by one who believes that he directly perceives sense-data". And this, says Ayer, must be the case because no "experiment can settle the

issue between them". And, presumably, if the dispute was factual, it ought to be susceptible of experimental resolution.⁸⁶

This should not, however, conceal the fact that there is an important issue here, about which there has been fundamental disagreement, factual or not. The main problem concerns the qualitative distinctions which have obtained between sense-data on the one hand and physical objects on the other. Disagreement on this point is fundamental inasmuch as physical objects are held to be endowed with certain "properties" that are not shared by the data of sense. The most important of these, says Ayer, is publicity: "If anything perceptible is properly to be called a physical object, it must at

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This is, of course, reminiscent of the view which Ayer put forward in The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge. Nonetheless, I think that it may reasonably be objected that the two language hypothesis is tenable only on the assumption that they are logically equivalent. If, for instance, one regards physical things as logical constructions out of sense-data, it is possible to conceive of a physical object language and a sense-data language between which there are no factual differences. But if one rejects this view, as Ayer does in The Problem of Knowledge, the argument no longer seems to hold. There is, after all, a fairly evident difference between an object that does, and an object that does not, exist; and it would not seem unfitting to refer to this as a factual difference. See below, Chapter IV, pp. 287 - 290.

least make sense to say of it that it is perceived by different people and that it is, for example, touched as well as seen". This characteristic, as well as certain others, such as "having a more than momentary duration", are not generally considered to be characteristic of "hard data".⁸⁷

If, then, one takes it for granted that what is perceived is a sense-datum, that is, it is private and exists only during the moment in which it is perceived, it would seem to follow that physical objects are never perceived, a position with little to recommend it if one assumes, with Austin, the standpoint of 'common sense'. This leads to an obvious difficulty which Ayer, still assuming the role of a detached observer, attempts to face. If it is granted that in positing sense-data as the objects of perception, these theorists "are making a considerable departure from ordinary usage", it would seem to follow that they must have, or think they have, a good reason for

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Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 92. It is interesting to note that there is no explicit mention here of the "existence" of physical objects which becomes, in the end, the crucial issue. See below, pp. 257-259.

doing so; "this is not for them a mere matter of caprice: if they make the recommendation, it is because they feel bound to make it". While it is admittedly unusual, the sense-data theory has "somehow forced itself" upon certain philosophers; "The question is why it should be thought that this is so".⁸⁸

This question leads to a lengthy discussion of the major reasons which have led these philosophers to consider something like the sense-data theory in the first place. Once more, on examining these reasons, "we find that they mainly rest on what is known as the argument from illusion." Ayer educes two forms of this argument. The first derives from the general characteristics of qualitative illusions.⁸⁹ It is known, for instance, that the appearances of things vary: a coin, for example, will appear elliptical from one perspective, round from another. Since the coin clearly cannot be both round and elliptical, it would seem that at least one of these must

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Ibid, p. 94.

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Ibid, pp. 95 - 98.

be a "deceptive appearance". It follows from this, apparently, that there are at least some instances in which a physical object is not directly perceived. And, since one cannot qualitatively distinguish veridical perceptions from those which are illusory, at least on the basis of the perceptions alone, it is contended that what is immediately perceived is never the physical object, but "always something else".

An even more forceful argument seems to be provided by the possibility of complete hallucinations. Once more, the example taken is that of "Macbeth's visionary dagger"⁹⁰. For this would seem to be a case in which an alleged physical object is perceived "which is not there at all". In this case, it seems clear that Macbeth's vision could not have been of a physical object as such, for it was, Ayer points out, "accessible to him alone". From this it follows that the object of an hallucinatory perception, since it is not a physical object, must be a sense-datum. And, the argument runs, since there is nothing in the "character of the experience"

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Ibid, p. 98.

according to which it could be differentiated from "the experience of seeing a real physical object", it would seem "reasonable to hold" that all the objects of perceptual experience are sense-data.

Convincing as these arguments are, they are not, Ayer says, conclusive; for, it is still possible to maintain that the immediate objects of perception are physical objects. There are, however, in the light of the afore-mentioned arguments, certain conditions that must be attached to this view:

We must be prepared to say that we do not always perceive things as they are; that sometimes we see them only as they were, and sometimes as they neither are nor were; that what we see, or otherwise perceive, may not exist, or else that we may think that we are perceiving something when we are not in fact perceiving anything at all; and that the physical objects which we do perceive may owe some of their properties in part to the conditions which attend our perception of them.

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If these provisions are granted, it is, Ayer says, not "excessively uncomfortable to hold the position of naive

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Ibid, p. 104.

realism"; the provisions add only "a little sophistication".

It is at this point in the discussion of the problem of perception that Ayer, finally abandoning this role as historian, enters into the fray by proposing to develop the sense-data argument "in a simpler but also more effective way".⁹² He allows that in describing what one perceives, one usually makes "a stronger claim that the perception itself can cover". The example to which he refers is the statement, "I see a cigarette case", which is supposed to be a description of a "visual experience". It is possible, however, that such an experience may be an illusion; hence, in the interests of precision, one ought to make a more cautious statement: "It seems to me that I am seeing it". This second statement is less risky in that it does not "carry the implication that there is a cigarette case there".⁹³ The second proposition can now be converted into a third: "'I am now seeing a seeming

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Ibid, pp. 104 - 106.

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That is, it is less risky in the sense that it does not imply that the object in question exists.

cigarette case' and this seeming cigarette case, which lives only in my present experience, is an example of a sense-datum". Ayer then goes on to apply this principle generally to all perceptions, whether veridical or delusive. In every case, it can at least be said that a "seeming object" is perceived; "This conclusion may be more simply expressed by saying that it is always sense-data that are directly perceived".⁹⁴

The key step here is the first one. How can it be said that in perceiving something one merely describes "the content of [his] present experience", and that in referring to this experience as though it was of a physical object, one is asserting "more than is strictly warranted by this experience"? The answer to this seems to be that in referring as we do to the objects of experience as

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Even at this point, Ayer seems unwilling to look upon these "seeming objects" as any thing but a linguistic convention: "The danger is", he says, "that these private objects, brought into existence as a matter of literary convenience, become independent of their origin". See The Problem of Knowledge, p. 120. This is, however, not altogether true; for, as I hope to show, sense-data or "seeming objects" are not brought in simply as a matter of convenience, but rather force their way into Ayer's theory of knowledge. See Chapter IV, pp. 304 - 306.

physical objects, for example, that I am now perceiving a piece of paper, there is, beyond the assertion that one is having a perception of a piece of paper, the implication that "there is a piece of paper there".⁹⁵ And it is precisely this implication that Ayer is anxious to avoid: "The experience which I am trying to find words for would be the same whether the piece of paper were there or not".⁹⁶ The justification for this seemingly unusual position is, as has usually been the case, the possibility of illusion. It is at least possible, as in the case of an hallucination, that the object in question does not really exist at all. The point is that there is nothing in the nature of the experience itself that can serve as an indicator in the question of an object's existence. For this reason, Ayer maintains that any accurate interpretation of the 'contents' of one's perceptual experiences must be such that "the existence of the physical object which appears to be referred

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Ibid, p. 110.

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Ibid, p. 111.

to remains an open question".⁹⁷

For this reason, Ayer contends that the contents of one's present perceptual experience can best be described in the language of seeming, or appearance. And the argument for this is, once again, that the evidence seems to indicate that there is a "gap" between things as they seem to be and things as they are; that in our "ordinary judgments about perception", one goes beyond what is "strictly contained in the experiences on which they are based".⁹⁸ Here, as elsewhere, it is not entirely clear just how strongly Ayer is willing to push this claim; but in the end, in spite of the fact that he recognizes that this position can be challenged on many grounds and is not without its difficulties, he allows the continuing possibility of illusion to force this view upon him.⁹⁹ In this

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Ibid.

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Ibid., pp. 124 - 125.

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Ibid., cf. pp. 115 - 125. Here Ayer considers some objections to the introduction of sense-data, and especially concerning the step from "It seems to me that I perceive x" to "There is a seeming-x which I perceive". The objections, most of them derived from Ryle, amount to the view that the notion of sensing sense-data is repugnant to common sense. Nonetheless, Ayer rejects these

way, Ayer is able to bear up under the difficulties, often linguistic ones, which must inevitably attend the view that a perceptual statement consists in describing merely the contents of one's experience; for he concludes that "the tendency in our discussion is to show that it must be upheld".¹⁰⁰ For this reason, one must be prepared to maintain that in any perceptual experience, what is perceived is not the thing itself but an appearance of the thing. And it might further be added that the nature of this appearance or 'seeming object' or sense-datum, as was the case with Hume's "perception", is such that the real existence of the object perceived must remain "an open question". The problem is and this is, indeed, simply a restatement of the original problem of perception, can this "open question" be resolved?

In his earlier writings, it will be recalled, Ayer had attempted not to bridge but rather close the gap between sense-data and material objects through the doctrine

arguments on the ground that the possibility of illusion demands something like the sense-data theory whether such a theory is consistent with ordinary language or not.

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Ibid, p. 125.

of phenomenalism, the view that material things are "logical constructions out of sense-data"¹⁰¹. Here again, he is forced to turn his attention towards this problem. The phenomenalist doctrine, in effect, resolves the problem by reducing statements about physical objects to statements about sense-data: "Every empirical statement about a physical object, whether it seems to refer to a scientific entity or to an object of the more familiar kind that we normally claim to perceive, is reducible to a statement, or set of statements, which refer exclusively to sense-data"¹⁰². The difficulty that one encounters here, and which Ayer has come to realize, is that a physical object, thus reduced to a sense-datum, would seem to lose many of the characteristics that are normally held to belong to physical objects. For it is, as we have already seen, characteristic of sense-data that they are private and therefore dependent upon the perceiver. Thus, if one

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See Chapter II, pp. 172 - 174.

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Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 131.

maintains that physical objects are merely logical constructions out of sense-data, it would appear that one must reconcile himself with the rather unhappy conclusion, which most philosophers are anxious to avoid, that these objects cease to exist when they are not being observed. For what, short of Berkeley's God, could prevent it?

To this problem Ayer is able to provide his stock answer. It can, he says, be maintained that unperceived objects exist on the assumption that "in a given set of circumstances certain sense-data would occur".¹⁰³ In other words, an object could be said to exist unperceived on the grounds that it could be being perceived. Here, Ayer is falling back on the argument, which he first developed in Language, Truth and Logic, that material things are constructed out of both actual and possible sense-contents.¹⁰⁴

103

Ibid.

104

Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 66. "So when it is said that a material thing is constituted by both actual and possible sense-contents, all that is being asserted is that the sentences referring to sense-contents . . . are both categorical and hypothetical".

Thus, if one is willing to adopt the notion of possible sense-data, and this is certainly a questionable hypothesis, there is a sense in which this very noticeable crack in the argument can be papered over, however unevenly.

Even granting this, however, Ayer is no longer prepared to defend phenomenalism, at least in its traditional form; for there is, he comes to admit, a "decisive objection" which can be levelled against it. According to the thesis of phenomenalism, it should be the case that "the existence of a physical object of a certain sort must be a sufficient condition for the occurrence, in the appropriate circumstances, of certain sense-data" And furthermore, "there must be a deductive step from the descriptions of actual, or at any rate possible, appearances to descriptions of reality". And Ayer's position in The Problem of Knowledge is that "neither of these requirements can be satisfied".¹⁰⁵ He maintains this on the basis of the seemingly obvious conclusion that "it does not follow that the assertion of their existence [physical objects] . . . is logically entailed by any

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Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, pp. 138 - 139.

description of my sense experiences".¹⁰⁶ Once the "gap" between things as they are and things as they seem is granted, the phenomenalist's "programme", that of constructing a set of rules for the purpose of reducing physical object statements to statements about sense-data, is doomed to failure.¹⁰⁷

This seems to leave one's knowledge of physical objects on much the same footing as knowledge of the truth of a priori propositions, inductive inferences, and the rest. In rejecting the view that material objects are logical constructions out of sense-data, it would seem that Ayer has committed himself irrevocably to the rejection of the assumption that there can be a logical connection of this nature between sense-data on the one hand and external physical objects on the other.¹⁰⁸ This should

106

Ibid, p. 141.

107

Ibid, p. 144. "We must conclude then, if my reasoning is correct, that the phenomenalist's programme cannot be carried through. Statements about physical objects are not formally translatable into statements about sense-data".

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Ayer does maintain that there must be some kind of logical connection on the grounds that it is "logically impossible for appearances to fool all the

not, of course, be taken to mean that Ayer has become disenchanted with logical analysis as a fruitful approach to the resolution of many philosophical difficulties. The admission is rather, that from an epistemological point of view, the use of the term 'physical object' as descriptive of the contents of one's experience is never wholly logically justifiable (the perception might be illusory) in much the same sense as the truth of an a priori statement is never quite indubitable (it could be a false a priori statement).

The basic problem still remains: if one's sense perceptions do not logically entail the existence of physical objects, are "physical object statements" ever justifiable? Or are we, on the other hand, forced to accept Hume's conclusion that the existence of external physical objects is unknowable? It is Ayer's view that, in spite of the logical difficulties, one's perceptual experience does afford a sufficient basis for affirming the existence of material things. The difficulty is that it is not a logically indubitable basis. Nevertheless,

people all the time", though he does not, fortunately, rest his case on this rather curious argument. Ibid, pp. 144 - 146.

to speak of physical objects may still be held to be a valid way of "interpreting" one's sense experience: "One way of expressing this conclusion would be to say that in referring as we do to physical objects we are elaborating a theory with respect to the evidence of our senses". What is especially characteristic of this theory is that it is "richer" than the sense experiences that give rise to it. ¹⁰⁹ Thus, the reasons for accepting the existence of physical things are very much like those which have been given for the acceptance of the inductive process:

The reason why our sense experiences afford us grounds for believing in the existence of physical objects is simply that sentences which are taken as referring to physical objects are used in such a way that our having the appropriate experience counts in favour of their truth.

110

Again it seems that the sceptic is correct. There is, as an investigation of the problem of perception has demonstrated, a "gap to be overcome". Moreover,

109

Ibid, p. 147.

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Ibid, pp. 147 - 148.

there is no way in which this gap can be bridged for it is always the case (argument from illusion) that the statement which expresses my perceptual experience in physical object terms could be false. There can be, therefore, no logical solution to the problem of perception. However, and here the pattern which had been developed earlier becomes evident, one does in fact affirm, on the basis of one's perceptions, the existence of things. It is true, Ayer will admit, that the truth of this affirmation can be questioned but, on the basis of one's own observations, "there comes a stage at which the suggestion that certain physical objects may not exist ceases, in the light of one's experience, to be a serious hypothesis"¹¹¹.

This is all very well, but there is still the nagging problem of explaining at what point and, indeed, for what reasons one is justified in claiming that something that seems to be actually is. The structure of the argument seems clear enough. Ayer has presented us with

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Ibid, p. 140. The implication here is that there is a point at which the "sensible person" will simply tire of the sceptic's game.

four cases: a priori statements, basic propositions, the problem of induction, and the problem of perception; each one, in its own way, represents a "claim" to knowledge which may be legitimately doubted. That is, the doubt is legitimate in the sense that it is logically conceivable that whatever it is that is claimed to be the case is not the case. However, Ayer claims that it is evident that at some point the doubt, if it is needlessly perpetuated, can no longer be regarded as "serious", and that in thus maintaining it, one is merely paying "lip-service to human fallibility". The question still remains: How does one know when the point of knowledge has been reached? Ayer does not, unfortunately, deal directly with this question. It seems that, on the basis of one's own experience, one simply "sees" that the point of knowledge of the existence of physical objects, one sooner or later reaches the point in which to doubt that a certain object exists "is a hypothesis which, whatever the further evidence, no sensible person would adopt".¹¹²

In developing this line of argumentation, Ayer

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Ibid, pp. 140 - 141.

seems to be relying to a large extent on the rather uncertain assumption that the problems connected with 'justifying' the 'claims' found in these various types of statements are logically equivalent. Consider first his explanation of the truth of an a priori proposition. At some point, he says, one can just "see them to be valid." And it does seem reasonable enough to say, although this in no way amounts to an explanation of these propositions, that they are evident and cannot be "seriously" doubted. However, can one's perception of physical objects, even looked at from Ayer's point of view, be considered to be a parallel case? Ayer seems to argue that it is, that sooner or later the "sensible person" will reach the "stage" where he could not reasonably doubt their existence. Yet surely there is a crucial distinction here, a distinction which must inevitably follow from the epistemological position which Ayer himself has undertaken to defend. For while it may be claimed that one has an immediate awareness of the truths of logic, there is no experience of physical objects whatsoever, direct or indirect. ¹¹³ As we have

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See above p. 257.

already seen, the objects of perceptual experience are, in all cases, held to be entirely private, in that their existence is dependent upon the observer.¹¹⁴

In this way, Ayer is still faced with the difficulties he has inherited from Hume: there seems to be no way of getting around the fact that, in terms of the empiricist nature of the sense-data theory, a physical object, i.e. an object that exists independently of the perceiver, is a metaphysical object. The strictures inherent in his own epistemological assumption demanded this conclusion from Hume¹¹⁵ and, logically, the same would seem to be required of Ayer. The idea of explaining the epistemological movement from a perception to an existing thing as though the thing was simply a 'richer' perception certainly seems problematic. For, if one means, as Ayer surely does, that physical objects exist (by themselves), then it is difficult to conceive of such an object as an enriched percept.

In any case, it should be clear that Ayer's

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Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 92.

115

See Chapter I,

attempt, in The Problem of Knowledge, to devise a pattern according to which the sceptic's objections to claims of knowledge on all levels, especially that of perception, is not without its difficulties. It is toward a consideration of these that we shall now turn our attention.

CHAPTER IV

The Path to Scepticism

It remains then, in this final Chapter to determine whether or not Ayer has been successful in warding off the sceptic's attack; for once it has been granted that there is a 'gap' between things as they seem and things as they are, the existence of the latter becomes, in Ayer's words, "relatively problematic". The problematic nature of external objects derives from the fact that since they cannot, in principle, be perceived, nor can their existence be arrived at through any process of inference, it may be disputed whether they exist at all. The sceptic does not, of course, claim that external objects do not exist; he merely asserts that it is not possible to know that they exist. For if such knowledge is obtainable, one's knowledge of the existence of external objects ought to be demonstrable; failing this, the sceptic maintains that it may be argued that the existence of these objects is unknowable and, therefore, suspect.

This is once more, a restatement of the Humean dilemma. The difficulty, as we have seen, derives from the conjunction of two premises: first, that the immediate objects of perception are never external objects but always

something else, i.e. sense-data, "seeming objects", etc., and secondly, that it is impossible to derive a knowledge of the existence of these objects on the basis of the perceptual knowledge that one does, in fact, have. On the assumption that all empirical knowledge either itself is, or is logically related to, what we immediately perceive, these two premises together seem to yield the conclusion that one can have no knowledge of the existence of external objects. To show that this argument is, in fact, not true, is precisely what Ayer means by the problem of perception.

Ayer's response to this problem, in The Problem of Knowledge, is not to refute the sceptic but, rather, to allow him full rein. There is, he admits, a "gap" between what it is that we perceive and external physical objects; moreover, there is apparently no way in which this gap can be bridged. There are, in logic, no means available by which one can securely move from the knowledge of sense-data to the knowledge of physical objects. However, and this seems to be the crux of Ayer's argument, the selfsame problem applies to virtually every other kind of knowledge as well. Between the necessity of an a priori proposition and a knowledge of its truth, between an experience and the truth of the proposition which describes that experience,

between observations and the general propositions which are derived from these observations, there is a similar "gap" which cannot be traversed by logic alone. In this way, Ayer attempts to turn the table on the sceptic; to doubt one's ability to know physical objects is tantamount to doubting one's knowledge of the truth of a priori propositions. And such an objection cannot, Ayer says, be seriously maintained. If the sceptic's argument is taken seriously, there is, it seems, no knowledge whatsoever; but, Ayer suggests, it is plainly evident to the "sensible person" that there is such knowledge (one does not, after all, "seriously" doubt the truth of a priori propositions). Therefore, according to Ayer, it may be concluded that the sceptic's challenge, while it cannot be countered on logical grounds, is, in the end, not "serious" and may, for this reason, be rejected.

Nonetheless, it has already been noted that Ayer's position is itself not without difficulties, both logical and epistemological. The first, and perhaps the most evident of these, concerns the logic of his argument. For it may be argued that, if one accepts the facts of perceptual experience as Ayer has presented them, it must follow that it is not possible to justify our knowledge of external

objects on the basis of one's perceptual experience. Indeed, A. P. Griffiths has put forward just such a position: "We must in all honesty say . . . not merely that a sceptical problem [perception] has not been solved, but that a sceptical doctrine appears to have been established; for it seems that there is an incoherence at the root of all claims to perceive"¹.

The problem here is that Ayer admits that no logical process is capable of bridging the gap between sense-data and physical objects; nor, because physical objects are, in principle, incapable of being observed, can any amount of empirical observation provide a justification for such a claim. In this way, Ayer seems to have demonstrated that one's claim to have knowledge of the existence of physical objects is justified on neither logical nor empirical grounds. And this is the point: apart from logic and empirical observations, there seems to be nothing else to which Ayer can appeal in order to provide such a justification. Here one need only refer back

¹ A. P. Griffiths, "Ayer on Perception", Mind, Vol. 60 (1960), pp. 496 - 497.

to Ayer's claim, made in Language, Truth and Logic that he, like Hume, divides all "genuine propositions" into two kinds: those of logic and mathematics and those which refer to "matters of fact".² And this seems to exhaust all of the possibilities. For this reason, since claims to the knowledge of external objects are neither logically nor empirically justifiable, it would seem to follow that they are not justifiable at all.

One might, of course, argue that a lengthy interval of time separated the publications of Language, Truth and Logic and The Problem of Knowledge and that, in the later work, Ayer was no longer quite so restrictive in his legislation concerning the meaningfulness of propositions. This, however, is a rather doubtful argument. For the tendency of Ayer's later position is to show that the sceptic is quite correct in asserting that propositions which represent claims to knowledge of external objects are not wholly justified, either empirically or logically. And from this point of view, it would seem to be the case that such propositions are not susceptible of rational

² See Introduction, p. 11.

justification. This being the case, it follows that the argument presented by Ayer, rather than answering the challenge of the sceptic, simply plays into his hands.

This sort of criticism may itself be considered misleading on the grounds that it is no part of Ayer's intention to respond to the sceptic's challenge by providing a justification for one's alleged knowledge of physical objects. On the contrary, it may be claimed that one's knowledge of these objects cannot be justified because it does not need to be justified; the problem of perception is not, strictly speaking, a logical problem at all. Once the fact that no logical justification of perceptual knowledge should be expected, the problem of perception may be considered resolved. For the problem arises, according to Ayer, because the sceptic expects too much and, because of this, his demand for a logical justification of our knowledge of the external world is itself unjustifiable. This is, indeed, a promising argument and it is, I think, the point of view which Ayer wishes to defend. Nonetheless, it does not seem to overcome the logical objection. The reason for this is simply that Ayer has constructed the problem of perception in the first place in such a way that such a justification is demanded. Once it is assumed

that one never has any perceptual experience of the external world, then the existence of that world becomes, in Ayer's own words, "open to question". That is, the belief in the existence of this world must remain without rational warrant unless some reasons can be adduced which attest to its existence; and these reasons, whatever they might be, are precisely what is meant here by justifying one's claim to know the external world.

The problem which arises as the result of the logical "gap" separating things as they are from things as they seem itself develops as the by-product of Ayer's epistemological commitment to the phenomenalist view of the character of perception. And this view, to which Ayer has always been inclined, derives from the fact that the continuing possibility of illusion provides a clear indication of the inferential character of one's perceptual judgments:

What the argument from illusion does clearly establish is the humdrum conclusion that there is not a perfect coincidence between appearance and reality. It shows that if we were always to take appearances as it were at their face value we should sometimes go wrong and, what is important here, we should

go wrong predictively. When we misidentify an object or misjudge its properties, or misperceive its status . . . , we issue a draft on our further experiences which they fail to honour. But this again implies that our judgements about perception are, in my sense, inferential.

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From this it is clear that Ayer considers the immediate objects of perception to be 'appearances' or 'seeming objects' which, though they may, through some process of inference, give rise to an awareness of physical objects, cannot themselves be identified with ordinary physical objects. And the reason for this, once again, is "that our judgments about perception go beyond the data on which they are based".

This view, that all perceptions are perceptions

3 A. J. Ayer, "Has Austin Refuted the Sense-Datum Theory", in Metaphysics and Common Sense. (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1967), p. 138.

4

Ibid.

of appearances or sense-data, is itself based on the further assumption that in every perceptual experience it must be the case that "something is directly apprehended".⁵ By "directly apprehended", Ayer seems to mean that in every case of perception there must be something which is perceived as it is.⁶ Thus, to use Ayer's example, in the perception of a cigarette case, it is held to be evident, even if the cigarette case does not exist, that something is "directly apprehended". And what is so apprehended is a "seeming cigarette case", the existence and characteristics of which there can be no reasonable doubt. Once it is maintained that, in every perceptual experience, there is some object which is directly perceived, then the sense-datum theory, or something very much like it, seems to become inevitable. For if it is assumed that, (a) in every instance of perception

⁵ Ibid, p. 141.

⁶ It seems reasonably clear that, in saying that something is "directly" perceived, Ayer means that it is perceived "as it is", i.e. veridically. It is, perhaps, indicative of the atomistic tendency in any phenomenalist analysis of perception that it should be assumed that perceptual knowledge may only be explained in terms of certain sensory impressions which are simply given as they are.

there is something which is "directly apprehended" and,
 (b) that the argument from illusion provides an inescapable
 argument which shows that there are at least some cases
 in which a physical object cannot be "directly apprehended"
 (i.e. perceived as it is), then it must follow that in those
 cases the object which is "directly apprehended" is not a
 physical object and is, by default, a "seeming object" or
 a sense-datum:

For if he (the sense-data theorist)
 can make good his initial step,
 that in any case in which anything
 of whatever kind is perceived, some-
 thing is directly apprehended, or, as
 I prefer to put it, that every
 statement which claims perception
 of a physical object is founded on
 an experiential statement, and if
 he chooses to use the term 'sense-
 data' to refer to the 'objects'
 which figure in experiential
 statements, he will already have
 established the conclusion that
 every perception, whether veridical
 or delusive, involves the sensing
 of sense-data.

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This brings us, once again, to the question of the

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 A. J. Ayer, "Has Austin Refuted the Sense-
 Datum Theory?", p. 141.

relationship between physical objects on the one hand and sense-data on the other. For the existence of physical objects, if they are never perceived, cannot be taken for granted. Nor can it be resolved by simply arguing that the existence of physical objects is inferentially based on sense-data. It remains to consider the nature of the inference in question. The view which Ayer had put forward in The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, the doctrine of phenomenalism, was that the inference in question was logical. On this view, it was argued that all physical object propositions could be "translated" into propositions which refer to sense-data or, to use Ayer's more recent expression, "experiential propositions". And, this being the case, there can be no problem of perception because, since the propositions in question are intertranslatable, there is, in effect, no "gap" which separates them.⁸ Nonetheless, there is, Ayer has come to admit, a "decisive objection" which may be levelled against this doctrine:

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Thus, in The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, Ayer attempted to explain one's knowledge of the existence of physical objects by assuming that their "existence" can be reduced to the relations of constancy and coherence which characterize the occurrence of sense-data. See above, Chapter II, pp. 183 - 185.

once the phenomenal character of perception has been recognized, it becomes clear that no number of perceptions of sense-data can be used in order to infer the "existence" of physical objects. And from this, together with the assumption that physical object propositions do carry the implication that the object in question does, in fact, exist, it follows that statements about sense-data cannot be "wholly rewritten" as statements about physical objects. Consequently, the theory of phenomenalism must be abandoned.

The implications of this, are, of course, extensive. The rejection of phenomenalism entails that one must scotch the notion that the relationship between sense-data and physical objects is susceptible of a purely logical explanation. For it implies, as Ayer himself has pointed out, that one's judgments about physical objects are "richer" than the experiential propositions on which they are based: this, he says, "can be formulated succinctly by saying that whereas statements which refer to physical objects are always in some measure proleptic, experiential statements are not".⁹ And, this being the case, the "gap", which has

⁹ A. J. Ayer, "Has Austin Refuted the Sense-Datum Theory?", p. 141.

traditionally separated physical objects from the sense-data which are held to be the objects of direct awareness, looms larger than ever. Once more we are forced back to the problem of perception: How is it possible to justify our belief in the existence of objects which are, in principle, beyond our province of perceptual competence? Does it not follow that if something is not immediately known, nor is knowledge of it deriveable from what is, in fact, immediately known, that it is simply not knowable at all?

One view which Ayer has put forward in a number of places in order to head off this kind of objection is that it tends to be misleading in the sense that it treats the "gap" between sense-data and physical objects as though it represented a factual difference between distinct kinds of entities. And this, Ayer argues, is not the case; there is intended to be no factual distinction between those propositions which refer to sense-data, and those which refer to physical objects. To promote this view Ayer puts forward a number of closely related arguments. He maintains, in the first place, that the sense-data theorist and the naive realist, i.e. the philosopher who maintains that one directly perceives physical objects, both refer in their

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arguments to the same identical empirical facts.

Neither the one nor the other educes one shred of empirical evidence which would serve to distinguish them. From this it is supposed to follow that there can be no factual distinction between sense-data propositions and physical object propositions. It is further argued that, since no facts can be found which would favour the one theory over the other, there could be no "experiment" which could settle the dispute between them.¹¹ The difference then, must be considered as a purely linguistic one: the difference between the two views can be explained as two different ways of referring to or interpreting the same body of empirical fact. If this argument is true, it would seem to follow that, since the difference between sense-data and physical objects is not factual in nature,

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This, it will be recalled, is one of the arguments put forward by Ayer in order to defend the view that the sense-datum language is nothing more than a linguistic alternative to the physical object language. By assuming that the sense-datum language expresses the same "facts" as the language of common sense, it is argued that there is no factual difference between them. See above, Chapter II, pp. 133 - 135.

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A. J. Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, op. cit., p. 93.

that the "gap" between them, is itself not indicative of a factual difference between them. Thus, it may be argued that, on the assumption that there is no factual difference between sense-data propositions and physical object propositions, it is not incumbent upon the sense-data theorist to provide a justification for one's perfectly normal belief in the existence of the external world.

Ayer, especially in his earlier works, seems to place a good deal of weight on this argument. It is, however, even in these works, a rather doubtful piece of reasoning and, in the light of his rejection of the doctrine of phenomenalism, it becomes, I think, untenable. Indeed, it has already been noted that the two-language hypothesis, i.e. the view that the sense-data language and the physical object language are not factually distinct, involves at least two important difficulties: First, it necessarily becomes the case that one or the other of the languages will be superfluous,¹² and, secondly, it requires that one

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The reason for this, as was pointed out earlier, is that, in taking away from sense-data any characteristics that would really distinguish them, i.e. factually distinguish them, from physical objects, Ayer also seems to be abandoning any compelling reason there might be for formulating the sense-data language in the first place. See above, Chapter II, pp. 146 - 151.

make certain assumptions about the "constitution and behaviour of material things" that are not entirely justifiable. And these assumptions, as we have seen, amount to a wholesale conversion of physical objects into sense-data. If, it seems, one is willing to assume that physical objects have the same characteristics as sense-data, then it is not difficult to defend the position that there is no factual distinction between them. The argument against this position is, of course, that there seems to be no good reason why one should make this assumption.¹³

Even granting this assumption, however, the rejection of the doctrine of phenomenalism would seem to entail the rejection of the two-language hypothesis. For while it is not inconceivable that two entirely distinct languages should, in fact, be descriptions of exactly the same empirical evidence, such a possibility rests on the

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I refer here to the fact that, in order to achieve a view of physical objects that makes them factually indistinct from sense-data, Ayer was forced to convert, as it were, physical objects into sense-data, a position which is hardly consistent with the view that Ayer is apparently seeking to defend, that is, that the sense-data theory is reconcilable with the common-sense belief in the existence of physical objects.

further assumption that no matter what the circumstances, the two languages ought to be entirely interchangeable. That is, there should be no state of affairs that can be described in the one that cannot be described in the other. If, for example, there is even one case in which there is for a physical object proposition no logically equivalent sense-data proposition, then it must follow that the physical object language, taken as a whole, factually differs from the sense-data language, taken as a whole. And the reason for this is that the two-language hypothesis works on the assumption that both of the languages are equivalent in the sense that anything that can be described in the one language, can, in principle, be described in the other. Otherwise, it cannot be legitimately claimed that the languages are interchangeable; and if they are not interchangeable, they must be held to be factually different in the sense that the one language is capable of expressing something which the other can not. And whatever it is, that is expressible in this way, must be that according to which the two languages factually differ. ¹⁴

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See above, Chapter II, pp. 150 & 151.

The essential reason, however, which lead Ayer to abandon the doctrine of phenomenalism as a theory according to which one might explain the relationship between sense-data and material objects, was precisely the discovery of the fact, which could hardly be ignored, that there is at least one characteristic of material objects which cannot, even in principle, be derived out of statements which refer to sense-data; and this is the fact that in any statement about a material object, it is normally implied that the material object in question exists. Yet the hard fact is, and it is a fact that Ayer does come to accept, that it is, in principle, impossible to derive, on the basis of any number of sense-data propositions a proposition which asserts the external and independent existence of an object. Put in factual terms this indicates simply that, on the basis of any number of observations of sense-data or "seeming objects", it is not possible to logically derive a knowledge of the existence of material things. This being the case, it seems clear that there is at least one fact about material things, namely, their existence, which cannot be expressed in the language of sense-data. And to the extent that the two-language hypothesis is hinged upon the assumption that

both languages are capable of expressing the same facts, then it follows that there is a factual difference between them.

This leads to the conclusion that Ayer cannot coherently maintain that, in introducing sense-data as a linguistic alternative to the physical object language, he is not claiming to have discovered an entity which has, hitherto, been ignored by most philosophers. Indeed the whole point of the phenomenalist analysis of perceptual experience is to demonstrate, on the basis of the argument from illusion, that one does not perceive physical objects, but rather appearances, or sense impressions, or sense-data, or "seeming objects", which are taken to be the objects of perception. And to the extent that they are taken to be the true objects of perceptual experience, they are entities of a sort; they are entities in the sense that they are conceived to have at least a perceptual existence; they are entities in the sense that the entire physical world, either logically or hypothetically, is constructed out of them; and they are entities in the sense that they are not logically interchangeable with physical objects.

All of this tends to reinforce the initial argument that Ayer's doctrine of perception is, in some fundamental way, incoherent. His difficulties appear to

arise from the fact that he seems intent in arguing in two directions at the same time. On the one hand, it seems clear that, from an epistemological point of view, he is generally committed to the view, which he explicitly derives from Hume, that the objects of perceptual experience are sense-impressions or sense-data; that is, to perceive something is to observe, as it were, a private, momentary event, which event is intrinsically unrelated to any other. On the other hand, he is not, unlike Hume, entirely prepared, even philosophically, to abandon his common sense belief in the continued existence of the external world.¹⁵ Thus, he has attempted to demonstrate that it is possible to reconcile one's belief in the external world with the view that the objects of "direct apprehension" are sense-data on the assumption that the existence of physical objects can be derived, in some way, from sense-data. The problem is that it is not at all evident that such a position is tenable. Indeed, our preliminary examination of the logical structure and the epistemological

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This is, indeed, evident from the fact that in spite of the gap that separates physical objects from sense-data, Ayer, in The Problem of Knowledge, is clearly intent on justifying this very belief in the existence of the external world.

basis of Ayer's arguments which attempt to accomplish this end seem to indicate that it is not. At the very least, it is clear that the relationship in question cannot be assumed; and it is not clear that it has been explained.

This brings us to an analysis of Ayer's treatment of the Problem of perception which is developed in The Problem of Knowledge. For it may be argued that, in this work, Ayer has produced an argument which does, in fact, justify ones belief in the existence of the external world and, at the same time, overcome the aforementioned objections. For the objections which have thus far been leveled at Ayer's position have for the most part, been directed against the logic of the argument. They have demonstrated that, on the assumption that one has no direct perceptual knowledge of physical objects, it is logically impossible to derive a knowledge of the existence of these objects on the basis of what it is that we do perceive. Ayer however, rather than rejecting or criticizing this argument, chooses to accept it. The sceptic, he says, is quite correct. There is no logical framework which can be constructed which would serve to bridge the "gap" which separates physical objects from sense-data. Thus, from a logical point of view, the

problem of perception is insoluble. In spite of this, the sceptic is wrong. While his logic is, as Ayer says, "impeccable", his argument misses the mark because the problem of perception is not a logical problem at all. For the fact is, says Ayer, that one's claim to perceptual knowledge are based on experience. And while it is true that one's belief in the existence of a physical object goes beyond what is contained in his immediate perceptual experience and is, therefore, to some extent, theoretical with respect to the evidence of one's senses, there is a "stage" at which, in the light of one's experience, to further doubt the existence of an object becomes "a hypothesis which, whatever the further evidence, no sensible person would adopt".¹⁶

What Ayer seems to be presenting here is a doctrine according to which probability lies at the basis of truth. In any given perceptual experience, even in Macbeth's hallucinatory vision of the dagger, the experience

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There is, however, some evidence that in his more recent statements which bear on the problem of perception, Ayer has moved away from this position in the sense that he is beginning to treat the whole problem as being epistemologically irrelevant. See below, pp.314-315.

itself is such that "it counts in favour" of the existence of a physical object. In the light of one's further experiences (observing the objects at different times, from different points of view, under different conditions) it becomes, on the assumption that the later perceptions reinforce the earlier experience, increasingly probable that these perceptions are perceptions of a physical object.. Now it is quite clear that, even if this suggestion is true, no number of relevant favourable experiences can logically eliminate the possibility that some future experience will occur which might contravene the conclusions drawn from past experience. And from this it would seem to follow that, on the basis of perceptual experience, one could never claim to have the "right to be sure" of the existence of a physical object. And yet Ayer's argument is precisely that, in spite of the logical possibility of error, there is some point at which one can claim the right to be sure; and, this point having been attained, one can maintain that this belief in the existence of external objects is "justified." Furthermore, he argues that once this point has been achieved, no future experience, even if it is inconsistent with the past, can

ever serve to eradicate this justification.¹⁷ The idea here is that, on the basis of an accumulation of sensory experiences, one's belief in the existence of the external world becomes a knowledge of the existence of the external world. Each successive relevant experience is, as it were, a span in the bridge which links the private world of sense-data with the public world of physical objects, the last link being an inference based upon and justified by these several sense experiences. And the inference in question is not a logical inference but it is rather a natural inference, a kind of inference found in all levels of knowledge which takes place when the "sensible person", on the basis of his own experience, "sees" that something, though it is only logically probable, is, in fact, true. For in spite of the logical inadequacy of the data of sense as a basis for our perceptual judgments, it is still a fact that we all of us do make true perceptual judgments about the existence of physical objects.

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A. J. Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, op. cit., p. 141. This, of course, was the point of Ayer's rather peculiar anecdote concerning the vanishing pen; see above, pp. 188 - 189.

And that, it seems, is that.

In this way it seems possible to argue that Ayer's later theory of perception is capable of overcoming the objections of logical and epistemological inconsistency. For these objections, as we have seen, are premised on the view that propositions which refer to physical objects must be justified by some process of logical inference and, since no such inference is forthcoming, they cannot be justified at all. For this reason it has been claimed that Ayer's doctrine of perception plays into the hands of the sceptic in that he defends the position that all physical object propositions are, from a logical point of view, incoherent. Ayer's answer to this objection is that these perceptual claims can be considered incoherent only if the inference from sense-data to physical objects is confined to logical inference. Once, however, it is realized that in all claims to knowledge, even in the case of the knowledge of the truth of a priori propositions, there is a natural, non-logical, inference, by virtue of which one sees that something is true, it must be the case that either all knowledge is incoherent, a view which he rejects, as we have seen, as being "not serious", or there is no reason to suppose that the same sort of inference may not serve as a basis for justifying perceptual

claims. And in this way, Ayer argues, the problem of perception may be resolved.

Nonetheless, even if one does allow that Ayer's position is not incoherent in the sense that it does not prove the sceptic's argument, it is, I think, possible to show that it is untenable on other grounds. For it may be objected that, in order to resolve the problem of perception, Ayer has been forced to employ what amounts to a criterion of truth; and further, it may be argued that the criterion of truth which serves this purpose is one which, because of the implications of the sense-data theory, is necessarily ruled out on epistemological grounds. The reason for this may be somewhat clarified when it is recalled that the problem of perception is, as it were, sub-problem of the more generic problem of knowledge. And the problem of knowledge is, to a large extent, concerned with the "legitimacy" of knowledge: for knowledge, as we have seen, is "the right to be sure" and the challenge of scepticism is fundamentally the position that there are no instances in which this right ought to be granted:

And this being so, it turns out that the questions which philosophers raise about the possibility of knowledge are not all to be

settled by discovering what knowledge is. For many of them reappear as questions about the legitimacy of the title to be sure. They need to be severally examined; and this is the main concern of what is called the theory of knowledge.

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The point which Ayer is attempting to make is that there is an important distinction between knowledge and true belief, a distinction which is based on the fact that a legitimate claim to knowledge is said to have satisfied certain "recognized criteria" or some standard of proof which the belief has not. In this way the sceptic's argument against the possibility of knowledge "is directed", Ayer says, "not against the way in which we apply our standards of proof, but against these standards themselves".¹⁹

In a general way then, the distinction between knowledge and belief can be maintained only on the assumption that there is a criterion according to which one can

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Ibid, p. 34.

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Ibid, p. 33.

establish his right to be sure; in short, the justification of knowledge demands the establishment of a criterion of truth. In the case of perception in particular, this would seem to imply that one's belief in the existence of physical objects can be justified only when some such criterion has been satisfied. Failing this, it would seem that the sceptic is right; one's belief in these objects is never fully justified and, for this reason, their actual existence must be held in doubt. For even if one grants Ayer the view that the truth of sense-data propositions can be known, the introduction of the epistemological "gap" between sense-data and physical objects places the existence of the latter in doubt. In this sense, the "gap" can be bridged, and the doubt erased, only by virtue of some criterion which facilitates the transition from true sense-data propositions to true physical object propositions.

It is, therefore, somewhat surprising to find that Ayer, in his discussion of the problem of perception, seems nowhere to put forward such a criterion. His only response to the problem seems to be that, while there is no logical standard or criterion which can justify it, the "sensible person" will, in the light of his own experience,

eventually come to a knowledge of the existence of physical objects. And this knowledge is justified when the maintenance of doubt no longer makes sense, or, to use Ayer's own words, when it should not longer be regarded as a "serious hypothesis." Again, however, one is brought back to the problem that since it is not, nor can it be, evident, on the basis of one's perceptual experiences, when this stage has been reached, it is, in principle, impossible to bridge the "gap". For even if Ayer's claim, that every perceptual experience "counts in favour" of the truth of a physical object proposition is true, any finite set of complementary sense-data is still consistent with the physical object proposition, which is derived from this data, being wrong. This being the case, under what circumstances does one acquire the "right to be sure" of the truth of such a proposition and, thereby rightfully claim a knowledge of the existence of physical objects? To this question, Ayer can only appeal, once again, to the fact that for the "sensible person", there is a point at which such a doubt simply ceases to be "a serious hypothesis" and gives way to knowledge. It is still possible, of course, to perpetuate the doubt but Ayer himself is convinced, and seems to think that any other sensible person will be convinced, that it does not

represent a serious threat against the legitimacy of perceptual judgments.

In putting forward this position, Ayer is, I think, making a fairly evident appeal to 'common sense' as it is embodied in the so-called "sensible person"; for it is clear that he is attributing some kind of judgmental ability to this person which is evidently lacking in the sceptic. It is clear, moreover, that the difference, whatever it is, is neither empirically nor logically based; in refuting the sceptic, Ayer makes no appeal to any fact which is not taken into account by scepticism. In fact, the difference between them seems to amount to no more than the fact that the sceptic lacks the sense on the basis of which the "sensible person" justifiably stakes his claim to knowledge. And in this way, it seems reasonable to conclude that Ayer is, in the end, resting his case on common sense, in that for the "sensible person" there is, strictly speaking, no problem about the existence of physical objects. This conclusion is, Ayer admits, "unremarkable"; for it really amounts to no more than a blunt and simple assertion that, in spite of the argument of scepticism, a claim to knowledge based on common sense can be fully justified. Indeed, the point of the argument

presented in The Problem of Knowledge was simply that of "making the way clear for its acceptance":

It may well be thought that such an answer could have been given at the outset, without so much ado. But here, as so often in philosophy, the important work consists not in the formulation of an answer, which often turns out to be almost platitudinous, but in making the way clear for its acceptance.

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And this work consisted, as we have seen, in showing that while it is logically feasible to doubt the truth of a priori propositions etc., it does not make sense to perpetuate this. And, in much the same way it is argued that it does not make sense to perpetuate a doubt concerning the existence of physical objects when, from the point of view of one's common sense inference on the basis of perceptual experience, one is clearly entitled to be sure of the existence of these objects.

Nonetheless, Ayer's position is, I think, seriously deficient in one important sense. His difficulty lies in the fact that, in order to resolve the problem of perception,

he is appealing to precisely that form of knowledge, i.e., common sense knowledge, which is held to be questionable in the first place. For Ayer is not simply touting common sense knowledge; he is rather employing it, as it were, as a criterion of truth. And the reason a criterion of truth is required is, it will be recalled, that the existence of the external world, is, for the sense-data theorist, problematical. There is a "gap" there, and the justification of perceptual judgments demands that this "gap" somehow be bridged. The argument which I have presented here is that Ayer has used 'common sense' or the so-called "sensible person" in order to bridge this "gap"; he has, in effect, used the "sensible person" as a sort of homo ex machina to account for the validity of our perceptual judgments. In effect, Ayer has presented us with this problem; on the assumption that one never directly perceives a material object together with the further assumption that one cannot, on the basis of what one does perceive, logically arrive at a knowledge of the existence of physical objects, how is it possible to justify our belief in their existence? To this question, he has, in the end, simply appealed to common sense. And, it is this appeal which is ruled out on epistemological grounds. In saying this it is no part

of my intention to malign the position that there is a common sense knowledge of the existence of material objects; indeed, Ayer may be quite right in maintaining that there is. The difficulty is that, whether this knowledge exists or not, it cannot be used to "justify" our belief in the existence of these objects; for the belief in the existence of physical objects is itself a common sense belief. In this way, Ayer's argument, as it is presented in The Problem of Knowledge, is seriously inconsistent in the sense that the criterion of truth to which he appeals in order to resolve the problem of perception is a form of knowledge which, legitimate though it may be, itself requires justification. It may very well be true that the "sensible person" knows that physical objects exist and that knowledge may indeed be justified; nevertheless, once the "gap" between things as they seem and things as they are is established, common sense knowledge becomes suspect. It thus makes no sense to appeal to this form of knowledge to bridge the gap; to do so amounts to employing common sense to justify itself.

From the point of view of the "sensible person" the very problem of perception is an artificial problem. This person can indeed be said to know the truth of

physical object proposition, not because he is able to escape the sceptic's argument, but rather because he does not doubt the existence of physical objects in the first place. He may, to be sure, question the validity of this or that statement but the nature of common sense knowledge is not such that it involves questioning the legitimacy of perceptual judgments in principle. Once the legitimacy of such judgments is itself put to the question, then the limits of common sense knowledge have already been transcended. And this is precisely what the introduction of sense-data demands. For, as we have seen, the argument from illusion implies that there is, between the world which is the object of common sense knowledge and the "seeming objects" or sense-data that are perceived, a "gap" which puts the very existence of the common sense world in question. In this way, the "problem of perception" is a problem that arises as the result of certain epistemological commitments, which commitments the "sensible person" does not make. The question of the existence of external objects is for this person an artificial question; since he does not doubt its existence, he need not feel bound to "justify" his belief in it. Ayer, on the other hand, having accepted the basic epistemological implications

of the argument from illusion is forced to justify his belief in the existence of this world. His attempt to do this, by an appeal to common sense, is untenable simply because this sort of knowledge is already held to be suspect on epistemological grounds.

In the end, it seems that the chief criticism that can be directed against Ayer's later theory of perception as it is developed in The Problem of Knowledge, is its fundamental inconsistency. His theory there amounts to an attempt to reconcile the epistemological implications of the sense-data theory with the general common sense belief in the knowability of the external world. The difficulty is that one of the clear implications of the sense-data theory is that the external world, if it exists at all, is unknowable; it can neither be perceived nor can its existence be derived from what we do, in fact, perceive. From this it is clear that Ayer cannot meet the sceptic's challenge, not because he is in any way personally committed to the sceptic's conclusions, but because the sense-data theory, to which Ayer is still firmly committed, is itself a kind of scepticism. The sense-data theory begins, by virtue of the argument from illusion, by placing one's common sense knowledge in

doubt. Having taken this step, Ayer seems to have passed an epistemological point of no return; and this is the over-riding impediment against any attempted union between sense-data and common sense.

In concluding this chapter, I should like to remark on some statements which Ayer has recently made²¹ which bear on the problem of perception. In general, the context within which these statements appear concerns the question what is, that is, what is it that forms "the ultimate furniture of the world"? The importance of these

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Since the publication of The Problem of Knowledge, Ayer has not published a major work which has been primarily concerned with the problem of perception. He has, however, in some recent books and articles, begun to develop some new approaches to the problem. Taken together, these several statements amount to an admittedly tentative, but nonetheless suggestive, position which tends to bear out the thesis which has been developed in this paper: that the sense-data theory inevitably leads to some form of scepticism concerning the knowability of the external world. Of special interest in this respect are the following recently published works: The Origins of Pragmatism. (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1968); See especially the section entitled "What Must There Be?", pp. 329 - 336. "Metaphysics and Common Sense", "Has Austin Refuted the Sense-Datum Theory?" and "What There Must Be", all published in Metaphysics and Common Sense, (London: MacMillan & Co., 1969); Russell and Moore: The Analytical Heritage. (London, MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1971).

remarks is two-fold: in the first place, they necessarily lead to a consideration of whether or not it can be known that physical objects really exist, whether they, in fact, actually form a part of this "furniture", a question directly related to the problem of perception; and secondly, the statements which Ayer makes in this context are revealing in the sense that it may be argued that they indicate that the sceptical position concerning the knowability of the external world, which, it has been argued, has always been present in an implicit way in his theory of perception, has finally begun to surface.

His starting point is a distinction, taken from Carnap, which may be drawn between internal and external questions of existence. Internal questions are defined as those which arise "within the framework of a conceptual system and are settled by the application of the criteria which the system supplies"²². Suppose, to use Ayer's example, that one should raise such a question as to whether there is a Greek god of the Underworld. The answer to this question, when it is treated as an internal question of existence, will be dependent upon the conceptual

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Ayer, "What Must There Be?", p. 49.

framework within which it is asked. Thus from the point of view, of, say, physics, it is clear that the answer would have no meaning. If however, the same question were raised within the context of mythology or literature, the reply would be affirmative. And this, Ayer points out, applies to all questions of existence when they are treated in this way:

Now if we raise very general questions like 'Are there physical objects?', 'Are there numbers?' 'Are there fictitious characters?' and treat them as internal questions, the answers to them are always obvious, either obviously yes or obviously no, according as the conceptual system does or does not make provisions for them.

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In this way questions of existence can be answered, not in an absolute sense, but in relation to a conceptual theory which does, or does not, include the objects in question.

In this context, the problem of perception, the problem of the existence of physical objects, can be

most easily resolved. For it can be answered affirmatively or negatively in relation to the criteria for existence which are contained, either implicitly or explicitly, within the conceptual framework in which the question is asked. Indeed such objects can be taken either to exist or not to exist according as whether the assumption of their existence does or does not contradict the assumptions of the relevant conceptual framework; "Thus," Ayer points out, "the statement that there are physical objects is analytic, relative to the language of common sense". The reason for this is that "the assumption that there are [physical objects] is part of the framework in which our observations have to be fitted"²⁴. There may, however, be other languages, such as that of physics, which are contained within other conceptual frameworks in relation to which the assumption that there are physical objects is inconsistent. In these cases, the answer to the question concerning their existence will obviously be negative. In general then, the existence of physical objects may be decided internally on the basis of criteria which are

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Ibid, pp. 51 - 52.

assumed by the conceptual theory in question; and, Ayer points out, "The point remains that once the criteria have been settled the question whether they are satisfied is internal to the relevant discipline".²⁵

This procedure, however, still leave the actual existence of physical objects open to question. For even if it is granted that the existence of physical objects is analytic relative to the language of common sense, which language in turn expresses a certain conceptual framework, say that of naive realism, the actual existence of these objects is still predicated on the truth of the conceptual framework in question. In other words, the question of the existence of physical objects may be interpreted externally as well as internally. In general, external questions differ from internal questions in that they do not arise "within a given conceptual or linguistic framework,²⁶ but as questions which bear upon the framework itself". Thus, in relation to the question of the existence of physical objects, it may be claimed that such objects do

25
Ibid, p. 50.

26
Ibid.

exist, relative to the language of common sense, provided that it is legitimate to make use of that language in the first place. And this leads to the problem of determining how it is that one decides whether or not any given "conceptual framework" and, subsequently, the language which is used to express that framework, is legitimate.

One view, which Ayer attributes to Carnap, which has been used to deal with this question is that it simply comes down in the end to a question of policy.²⁷ While it is true that the acceptability of some conceptual frameworks must be ruled out on the grounds of the principle of verification, it is still the case that there are an indefinite number of possible frameworks, such as that of common sense, which serve a multitude of purposes. This being the case, "we are free", it may be argued, "to employ any form of language that we find useful, no matter what sort of entities it refers to". According to this view, it is, in the end, impossible to decide whether or not any given conceptual framework is, in fact, true; one can only determine what sort of language is useful for

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Ibid.

one's purposes and in turn opt for the conceptual framework of which that language is an expression. In this way, on the assumption that the language of common sense is suited to the purposes of what might be called "ordinary discourse", then it is legitimate to use that language within that context. And further, since the language of common sense itself presupposes the existence of physical objects, it follows that it is legitimate to maintain the existence of such objects for the same pragmatic reasons.

Ayer seems to react very favourably towards the distinction between internal and external questions of existence; he is however in disagreement with Carnap on the pragmatic solution to the question of the validity of external questions. His argument seems to amount to the view that Carnap's position misses the essential importance of making the distinction in the first place:

I don't think it is just a matter of declaring a preference for a certain sort of linguistic framework. I think the position is rather that one may find it convenient to talk about all sorts of things -- propositions, numbers, states, mythological entities, and yet not want to regard oneself

as committed to a belief in
their existence.

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The point which Ayer wishes to make here is that it is legitimate to raise questions about the existence of things, for instance about the existence of external objects, only so long as it is understood that, in every instance, "the criteria for existence will all be internal".²⁹ In this way, it seems possible to consider the question of the existence of any given object without going beyond the framework within which the question of its existence is raised. One can, to use Ayer's expression, "talk about" physical objects of common sense without being in any way "committed to their existence".

This, however, still leaves the question of the actual existence of these objects open to question; for even granting that it is possible to talk about them without being committed to their existence, it still seems

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Ibid, p. 52.

29

Ibid, p. 58.

reasonable to raise the question whether physical objects really exist? but it is precisely this question which Ayer now declares to be inadmissible; for the question can only be answered from within the conceptual framework in which the question is asked. Thus, "The question whether such and such a thing exists will always be construed as a question whether such and such a function is satisfied" This, however, appears to be the only context within which questions concerning the existence of physical objects are admissible:

. . . What we shall not do is go on to raise ontological questions about what satisfies the functions. When we have shown . . . how experiential statements are related to physical statements, we shall have done all that is required in these domains. We are not obliged to find a sense for such meta-physical questions as whether . . . physical objects form part of the ultimate furniture of the world. They will simply not be admissible.

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The position which Ayer is taking here seems to be that it is legitimate to concern oneself with the existence of physical objects so long as one confines this consideration to the limits of the conceptual framework in terms of

which such objects have meaning. Whether these objects actually exist, whether they "form part of the ultimate furniture of the world", is a question the answer of which demands an ontological commitment which Ayer is apparently not prepared to make.

What then, is one to do with the problem of the reality of physical objects? Ayer's response to this question is apparently that it is not necessary to do anything about them. For this is a question of what, in fact exists and is, as such, an ontological rather than an epistemological question. And it is precisely on this point that such questions are inadmissible; there is, according to Ayer, no necessary connection between epistemology and ontology: "to put it succinctly, I see no reason to assume that epistemological and ontological priority necessarily go together"³¹. This being the case, it would seem quite in order to maintain, as Ayer apparently does, that "the question what there is . . . is very largely independent of what is known in terms of what." Thus what is at stake here is a kind of philosophical division of labour between epistemology on the one hand and

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Ibid.

ontology on the other. Epistemological questions seem to be limited to those which can be resolved according to the criteria already made by the conceptual framework in question. Accordingly, from a purely epistemological point of view, questions concerning physical objects are legitimate only within a certain conceptual framework. To put that framework itself to the question, to ask whether these objects really do exist, is to transcend the limits of epistemological inquiry and to enter the nebulous domain of ontology: and, while Ayer does not, as he did in Language, Truth and Logic, here argue that such questions are entirely devoid of meaning, he does indicate that "we are probably better advised not to admit them".³²

In view of the amount of time that Ayer has devoted to finding an answer to precisely these questions, this is a surprising statement. Indeed, it seems especially so when it is realized that his views concerning the nature of the relationship between physical objects and sense-data have not substantially changed from those presented in

³²
Ibid, pp. 62 - 63.

The Problem of Knowledge: "I still adhere to what might be described as a very weak form of phenomenalism, in the sense that I think that the physical system of common sense can be represented as a theory with respect to a primary system of qualia . . . " ³³ At the same time, however, it may be argued that the inadmissability of the question of the real existence of physical objects is a natural conclusion to be drawn from any form of phenomenalism. For, on the assumption that physical objects are theoretical constructs out of sense-data, there would seem to be, on the basis of this data, no way in which the actual existence of these objects could be inferred. The reason for this is that it implies that Naive Realism, i.e., the common sense view of the world, must be looked upon as a theory which although it is entirely derived from the data of perceptual experience, is not, in its entirety, reduceable to those experiences:

When I speak of the world, I am speaking of what is represented by the true propositions of the theory. The theory is indeed

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Ibid, p. 58.

reached by generalizing and extrapolating from the data of human experience, but it is not just a summary of these data. It contains no predicates that are not cashable at the experiential level, but it does not carry the implication that they are actually cashed in every instance in which they are exemplified.

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The point here is that while it is, or at least it ought to be, possible to explain physical objects in terms of these data, it is not possible to infer their existence in this way.

The reason for this can be more clearly seen when it is realized that the common sense theory of the world is only one of an indefinite number of possible theories which can, and in fact, are, derived from the self-same sense-data. Of these alternative theories, the only one to which Ayer seems to give much credence is that of

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A. J. Ayer, The Origins of Pragmatism, pp. 330 - 331. And the reason that the theory, even though it is based on the data of experience, may not be "cashable at the experiential level", is that "our judgments of perception go beyond the data on which they are based". See also "Has Austin Refuted the Sense-Datum Theory?", p. 138.

"physical" or "scientific realism", the view that the real objects which furnish the world are not physical objects such as tables and chairs, but are rather atomic particles, electrons or other "scientific" entities of some sort.³⁵ There are indeed, he points out, a number of cogent arguments in favour of these two theories; the common senses view, as its name would apply, has in its favour the fact that it seems to represent a comparatively safe, "middle of the road" position which is neither overly abstract, as is the physical realist theory, nor is it overly fragmentary as is the traditional phenomenalist theory. Physical realism, on the other hand, has science working in its favour, and, from this point of view, is not nearly so "naive" as the common sense picture of the world.

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Ayer, "What Must There Be?", p. 60. "What I call physical realism is not the only conceivable alternative to naive realism - we could, for example, take space-time points or regions as the only existent individuals and there are other possibilities - but it is the only alternative that most people would consider seriously. It consists in awarding the ontological palm to the entities, the atomic particles or whatever, which figure in physical theories."

What is important here, however, is the fact that these theories are considered by Ayer to be such that the one cannot be reduced to the other; they are, therefore, rival theories about what it is that really exists and, as such, "they compete for the same regions of space":

We can reconcile saying that there is a table here with saying that there is a group of electrons here, because there are independent ways of testing both statements, and these sets of tests can both be satisfied. But if we are constructing a picture of the world, I do not see how we can consistently think of this area both as being exclusively occupied by a solid, continuous, coloured objects and as being exclusively occupied by a group of discontinuous, volatile, colourless, shapeless particles. We have to choose.

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And this is the difficulty. For if, as Ayer points out, one attempts to choose between these two theories, i.e. to state which of them represents, as it were, a true "picture of the world", it becomes clear that such a choice cannot be made. And it cannot be made because each of the

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Ibid, p. 61

theories, within the limitations of its own conceptual framework, is as viable as the other. Indeed, both the theory of naive realism and the theory of physical realism simply represent distinct ways of interpreting the same sense-data of sense-qualia; they are, for this reason, both theoretical constructions which can serve as alternative candidates for pictures of the real world. But to choose between the two, to ask which of them is the true picture, is to request an ontological judgment for which there is no perceptual basis. Both are theoretical constructions of the same perceptual data; they represent, not different facts but simply different ways of looking at or arranging the facts of perceptual experience. And this, for Ayer, is the crucial point. There is nothing in the data of perceptual experience that could serve as the basis for making such a choice. Indeed, it is for this reason that Ayer says of such ontological questions as 'Do such things as tables and chairs really exist', that "we are probably better advised not to admit them".

This does not, Ayer admits, imply that such questions cannot be raised at all. The point is rather that there is no way, on the basis of one's sensory experiences, that these questions can be conclusively

answered. For this reason, to choose in favour of any ontological picture of the world, for instance, that the world is furnished by such objects as tables and chairs, is little more than a decision to look upon the world in a certain way: .

But if we admit them [questions about the real existence of physical objects], then in answering them we are not straightforwardly reporting what there is, but deciding what there is to be. We are, if you like, expressing a normative judgment. To say: this is what God sees, is to say: this is how we ought to look at the world.

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Thus, it is possible to opt for the position that the world is, in fact, made up as the common sense view would describe it. The problem is that this is simply a "decision" to look at the world in this way. There are, indeed, other decisions that could be made; one could, as has already been pointed out, embrace the position that the world is such that what really constitutes it are atomic particles or whatever. Again, the point that Ayer

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Ibid, p. 63.

seems intent upon making is not that these positions are not, each in their own way, viable, but rather that these are one and all theoretical positions, the ultimate truth or falsity of which cannot be determined by that which is the basis of all epistemological judgment, that is, the data of sense.

This, however, simply reintroduces the question of sense-data or sense-qualia; for sense-data are held to be that out of which these various ontological theories are constructed and, for this reason, are, at least in an epistemological sense, considered to be more "primitive" than such theoretical constructs as table and chairs. This being the case, could it not be argued that sense-data, i.e. the content of perceptual experience, represents for Ayer "what really is?" If sense-data exist, and if they are at the root of all perceptual theories, must not they become the prime candidates for ontological honours within Ayer's universe? To this question, Ayer's answer is quite clear:

After all, the only point of having an ontology is to obtain a viable picture of the world, and this is something that qualia are not equipped to furnish. The E-language game is too rudimentary. So far as anything can be, qualia

are pre-theoretical, and as we are now construing it, the question what there is comes up for decision only with respect to theories, in the special sense in which any system that allows one to distinguish between what is real and what is not real is a theory.

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The point here is that the question of the existence of anything, e.g. a physical object, from an external point of view, that is, the question of what is, is one that applies only to theories, which theories are taken by Ayer to be the various ontological pictures of the world. For this reason, Ayer seems to imply that sense-qualia, being "pre-theoretical", have no ontological status whatsoever. They are rather pictured as the epistemological stuff out of which these various theories are made. They have, in this way, an "epistemological priority" over

38

Ayer, The Origins of Pragmatism, p. 335.

It will be noticed that Ayer has made a terminological shift in some of his recent writings of perception. Thus, sense-data have become à la William James, sense-qualia, while the sense-data language is sometimes referred to as "the E-language", i.e. the experiential language. This does not, however, amount to a major epistemological shift in that sense-qualia, not surprisingly, turn out to be essentially the same as sense-data. See below, p. 329 - 330.

over theoretical constructs and, for precisely this reason, since they are not themselves theoretical, they cannot be considered to be "substantial entities." Moreover, given the ontological neutrality of the data of sense, together with the assumption that the question what is is concerned only with the ontological status of certain theories, then it seems clear that it cannot be argued that the universe is actually constructed out of sense-data.

What then, of the existence of physical objects. Indeed, as we have already seen, the question of the existence of anything can be looked at in two ways: the one, internally - in relation to a given conceptual framework; and the other, externally, as a question of what really is, of what really constitutes the universe. Thus, from the point of view of common sense, the answer to the question is clearly affirmative. If, however, one wishes to ask whether or not physical objects really inhabit the universe the answer is that it is not possible, on the basis of one's perceptual experience to determine whether they do or not. And the reason for this is that these objects are, in fact, theoretical constructs, the existence of which is not entirely justified by our sense-data. One can, if one so desires, "decide" that such

objects do (or do not) exist. This, however, seems to have no bearing on the epistemological status of our more primitive sense-data.

There are two points of criticism which I would like to bring to bear on this position. The first has to do with the distinction which Ayer draws between epistemology and ontology; the second concerns the implications of this position with respect to scepticism. It is, I think evident that Ayer has attempted, in these later writings, to resolve the question of the existence of the external world by placing the whole problem in a kind of philosophical limbo. Moreover, his attempt to shelve the question in this way rests, to a large extent, on the distinction which he draws between questions of epistemology, which concern what is known in terms of what, and those of ontology or metaphysics, which are concerned with what, in fact, is. Indeed, once this distinction has been drawn, once the data of sense have been granted ontological immunity, so to speak, then the question of existence can be seen to apply only to those theories or pictures of reality which are constructed out of this data. Indeed, Ayer argues, the fact that sense data have no ontological status is evident from the fact that the data themselves

unlike the common sense view of the world, do not represent a theory in the sense that they do not represent a picture of the world. Once the distinction is granted, the question of what is becomes, from an epistemological point of view, unimportant. Nonetheless, Ayer's position here is not without its own difficulties, two of which, it would seem, render it untenable: for it may, in the first place, be argued that the distinction which Ayer makes between epistemological and ontological questions is arbitrary and without justification; and secondly, it can be shown that any form of phenomenalism, including the "weak" variety outlined by Ayer, does in fact present a picture or theory of what really is and, for this reason cannot be held to be "pre-theoretical".

I has already been noted that Ayer's argument in favour of the distinctions between epistemology and ontology is based on the view that physical objects are theoretical in a sense in which sense-data or sense-qualia are not. The reasoning behind this seems to be that physical objects are interpretations of sense-data which are, in some sense, simply given; indeed, it is pointed out that "We could not intelligently opt for the ontology of naive or even scientific realism, if the assumptions which are

carried by the common sense view of the world were not vindicated by our experience".³⁹ And it is just these more primitive experiences which Ayer means by sense-data. The question remains, however, whether the data of sense is, in fact entirely non-theoretical in character? Ayer describes sense-qualia as being "visual or other sensory patterns" which "a person is able to pick out as a recurrent or potentially recurrent feature of his sense-experiences . . . "⁴⁰ They are, moreover, presented to us in a comparatively organized fashion: "Since my qualia have, as it were, to present themselves as being candidates for physical objects, I have to conceive of the phenomenal field in which they occur as being already fairly highly organized."⁴¹ In addition, sense-qualia are discrete or particular, each being distinct from the other spacially or temporally.⁴² They are, in effect,

39

Ibid.

40

Ibid., p. 309.

41

Ibid.

42

Ibid., p. 311.

discrete units of perceptual experience, Hume's sense-impressions under a new guise.

The point of this however is not so much that Ayer is still clinging to the epistemological presuppositions which he derived from Hume, but rather that his sense-data or sense-qualia clearly represent an interpretation of the nature of perceptual experience. In this sense, they represent a theory of what it is that is known, i.e. a description of what the real objects of perception are. And this being the case, it becomes clear that the sense-data theory is a rival theory of both naive realism and physical or scientific realism. They all of them, the sense-data view no less than any of the others, represent theories on what it is that really inhabits the universe. The sense-data theory differs from the others, not because it involves no ontological commitment, but because it involves an ontological commitment to what is intended to be an epistemological entity. It is, in effect the view that the real universe is the perceptual or phenomenal universe and what really exists there are a quantity of discrete perceptions of phenomena, that is, sense-data.

It is for this reason that it is quite possible to point out, in spite of Ayer's protestations to the

contrary, that the view that physical objects are constructed (either logically or theoretically) out of sense data does represent a picture or a theory of what the world really is. Indeed, D. M. Armstrong has already stated what it is quite clearly:

Ayer seems to be completely wrong here. There is a picture associated with phenomenalism, a picture which is inevitable, and a picture which seems a good reason for abandoning the doctrine, the picture is this: the physical world consists of the sense impressions that percipiants have, and nothing else at all.

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Nor is it possible to escape the strictures of his ontological commitment by granting to sense-data a kind of epistemological priority, thereby removing them from the realm of ontology. For the net result of this move is simply to declare, as it were, that the world, i.e. the real world, is nothing but the world of perception. Everything else, including the so-called world of common

43

D.M. Armstrong, Perception and the External World. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 55.

sense must, therefore, be construction of some sort, the existence and character of which must ultimately refer back to the data of sense, which data is held to be that which really inhabits this perceptual universe. In this sense, it is clear that any form of phenomenalism is, in fact, a theory of what is; indeed it is simply the theory that, as Armstrong has pointed out, "the physical world consists of the sense-impressions that percipients have, nothing else at all."

More important, however, are the implications of this position with respect to the problem of perception; for whether or not one takes the position that Ayer is, in fact, putting forward a rival ontological position to that of common sense, it seems evident that belief in the existence of physical objects is a belief for which there can be, in the end, rational warrant. This does not, of course, mean that there is no way, on the assumption of the priority of sense-data, to speak about physical objects; indeed, it is clearly intended that, as theoretical constructions out of sense-data, physical objects may continue to be of epistemological significance. It is, in fact, even possible to consider the existence of these objects; that is the question of their existence may be

considered as long as "the criteria of existence will all be internal". If, however, one is concerned with the real, "full-blooded", existence of physical objects, there is, on the basis of the data of perception, no possible answer to the question. For these objects contain more than the data on which they are based; and what it is that they seem to have that cannot be explained in terms of that data is existence. The point here is that, given the epistemological priority of sense-data, together with the fact that it is not possible to derive the existence of these objects on the basis of sense-data, it is clear that there is no way at all to determine whether the so-called external world does, or does not, exist.

One can, to be sure, "decide" that the world of physical objects does, in fact, exist; this decision, however, is itself nothing more than a "normative judgment", a statement of how one ought to look at the world. The point to be made here is that this judgment is considered by Ayer to be normative precisely because there is no rational justification for it. And the reason for this is quite clear; once it has been granted that the objects of perception are sense-data rather than physical objects, the existence of the latter demands, as it were, some

sort of rational justification. The difficulty however, is that any such rational justification must be based upon what it is that is in fact perceived; and this is sense-data. In other words, to resolve the problem of perception it is necessary to draw upon that which has created the problem in the first place; indeed, there is nothing besides sense data to which one could appeal in an attempt to establish the existence of physical objects. Thus, once Ayer grants that the existence of physical objects cannot be explained in terms of sense-data, it is clear that there can be no rational justification for our belief in their existence.

The upshot of all this is that Ayer, in spite of his attempts to reconcile his theory of perception with the common sense view of the world, has inevitably been drawn back to the sceptical position which had been maintained by Hume. For Hume the sceptical conclusions which followed upon his own epistemological presuppositions were ones which even he, himself, found difficult to accept. Nonetheless, accept them he did, not because they became any more palatable to him, but simply because the logic of his own position inexorably led to them. Similarly, Ayer, having accepted in the sense-data theory the basis of Humean

epistemology, has, perhaps a little more reluctantly, allowed himself to be led along the same path. For Ayer, as for Hume, the physical world has become a metaphysical world of which there can be no knowledge.

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