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A. J. Ayer (1910–1989)

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Language, Truth and Logic

General character of the book

A. J. Ayer rose to early philosophical fame with the publication in 1936, when he was 25 years old, of what remained his most famous, or infamous, book, *Language, Truth and Logic*. The work is his own version of the logical positivism characteristic of the Vienna Circle (whose meetings he had attended for three months in 1932–3), his outlook being closest to that of their leader, Moritz Schlick. The book is also strongly influenced by the British empiricist tradition, in particular by Hume and Russell. It was something of a bombshell to British philosophers and became for them the paradigm statement of logical positivism, threatening the outlook of some, providing an exciting intellectual liberation for others.

The book opens with the striking statement:

> The traditional disputes of philosophers are, for the most part, as unwarranted as they are unfruitful. The surest way to end them is to establish beyond question what should be the purpose and method of philosophical enquiry. (1946: 33)

So far as philosophy goes, Ayer's concern is to show the meaninglessness of metaphysical theories about a reality beyond the empirical. More generally, he also claims to show that religious statements, as usually now intended, are meaningless, as also are statements of fundamental ethical principle (except as mere expressions of emotion).[1]

To establish the meaninglessness of all such statements Ayer puts forward the verification principle. According to this a statement

> is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express – that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false. If, on the other hand, the putative proposition is of such a character that the assumption of its truth, or falsehood, is consistent with any assumption whatsoever concerning the nature of his future experience, then, as far as he is concerned,

> it is, if not a tautology, a mere pseudo-proposition. The sentence expressing it may be emotionally significant to him; but it is not literally significant. (1946: 35)

Thus a meaningful statement must either be empirically verifiable, or be a tautology, that is, analytic or true by definition.

The passage just quoted is supposed to be a "somewhat vague" formulation of a principle that Ayer proceeds to express more precisely. But actually, since it turned out difficult to find a satisfactory precise formulation, it remains as good a formulation as any.

Since there are two types of meaningful statement for Ayer, the empirically verifiable and the analytic, his account of each of these will be considered in turn.

Empirical statements

Ayer distinguishes between strong and weak verification. A strongly verifiable proposition is one which could be conclusively established by sense experience, a weakly verifiable proposition is one which could be made probable by sense experience. It is too much to demand strong verifiability of a meaningful factual statement (it is doubtful indeed if any proposition is strongly verifiable) and so some form of weak verifiability is the appropriate criterion. Ayer tries to give an exact formulation of this as follows.

> Let us call a proposition which records an actual or possible observation an experiential proposition. Then we may say that it is the mark of a genuine factual proposition, not that it should be equivalent to an experiential proposition, or any finite number of experiential propositions, but simply that some experiential proposition can be deduced from it in conjunction with certain other premises without being deducible from these other premises alone. (1946: 38–9)

The general idea, here, is clear enough. A meaningful empirical statement must be a genuine aid to the anticipation of the experiences we can expect to have under various circumstances (identified in terms of the other experiences then available), though it need not tell us what experiences to expect all on its own. To illustrate his point Ayer gives an example of two questions that might be raised about a painting. (1) Was it painted by Goya? (2) Is the painting a set of ideas in God's mind? People may disagree in their answers to each of these questions, but in the first case they know what kind of empirical evidence would support their claim against that of their opponents, in the latter they do not (1946: 40).

Later in the work, especially in chapter VIII, "Solutions of Outstanding Philosophical Disputes," Ayer shows, or claims to show, how metaphysical questions are all meaningless in much the same manner, unless they are understood, as is often appropriate, as misleading ways of discussing how propositions of a certain type are to be analyzed. (See the section below, "What is the task of philosophy?")

Unfortunately Ayer later discovered that the technical formulation of this revelation of the meaninglessness of metaphysical questions was unsatisfactory. This is because any statement whatever, call it "P," can meet the condition simply in virtue of the fact that its conjunction with "If P, then O" (where "O" is a experiential statement)[2] entails

"O," as "If P then O" does not alone. Thus "God is annoyed," which Ayer would hate to find meaningful, entails an observation statement "You will shortly hear thunder" when conjoined with "If God is annoyed with what you said, you will shortly hear thunder." In his 1946 introduction to the second edition Ayer offered a more complicated formulation, which, however, he had later to concede, fell foul of technical criticisms from Alonzo Church and C. G. Hempel. (See Church 1949 and Hempel 1959.)

If one is not too infatuated with semi-formalization, however, one can, surely, say clearly enough what Ayer was getting at, whether one accepts it or not. Surely the real point of the verification principle, so far as factual (non-analytic) statements go, was this. Such a statement is meaningful to a particular individual if and only if it is possible for either it or its negation to be a practical aid to him in forming correct expectations about what he is liable to experience in the future. If there is no such possibility then it is factually meaningless, however much he may suppose himself to understand it.[3]

If there is a problem, here, it is about what "possible" means, but perhaps it is sufficient that the individual does not utterly rule out its occurring. It is to be noted, however, in this connection, that Ayer is anxious to distinguish practical verifiability from verifiability in principle . Thus, in an intriguingly dated example, "There are mountains on the other side of the moon" was said to be unverifiable in practice but verifiable in principle (an example taken from Moritz Schlick).

An important question is whether the verification principle is intended not only to tell us whether a statement is meaningful or not, but also to tell us what its meaning is. In effect, rather than in actual formulation, Ayer treats it as doing so and surely this is correct. For if a factually meaningful statement must be a possible aid to knowing what experiences to expect under various circumstances then its meaning must lie in the totality of such aid as it is capable of giving. If there is some residue of purported further meaning it would seem that this could be creamed off as an unverifiable statement included within it.

That the verification principle is intended to exhibit the meaning of factual propositions is plain from Ayer's deductions from it concerning the analysis of a whole range of ordinary statements of fact. Thus the verification principle is said to make inevitable a phenomenalist analysis of statements about material objects, since it is only "by the occurrence of certain sense-contents that the existence of any material thing can ever be in the least verified" (1946: 53). It is no good some objector saying that the existence of a physical object is not merely a fact about what sense-contents are available to us, though it is by this that it is verified, for ultimately all that can be verified by facts about sense-contents are facts about sense-contents and the probable truth of what can be inferred from such facts inductively. (See the following section). Ayer, however, like Quine later, eschews talk of meanings as entities, substituting for talk of meanings talk of synonymy (1946: 68) (see QUINE).

Analytic or a priori statements

The other sort of meaningful statements for Ayer were analytic statements. All genuinely necessary or a priori statements are of this type; thus anything like the synthetic a priori of Kant and others is rejected.

One initial point worth remarking is that, while Ayer is clear that, if a statement is empirically meaningful then so are its contraries and contradictory, his assertion that the only two types of meaningful statements are empirical hypotheses and analytic propositions, taken strictly, implies that this is not so in the case of the latter. If so, while "5 + 3 = 8" is meaningful, the proposition "5 + 3 = 9" is not false, but meaningless. How far this is intended is unclear, since Ayer does, in fact, talk of false mathematical statements. (See 1946: 86.)

Ayer's discussion of analytic propositions (in 1946: ch. IV) starts out from the problem which a priori truth is supposed to pose for empiricism (of which his logical positivism is avowedly a species). For empiricism can countenance no claim to knowledge that is not based upon sense experience, and even then what is called "knowledge" is always probable hypothesis rather than absolute certainty.

> Where the empiricist does encounter difficulty is in connection with the truths of formal logic and mathematics. For whereas a scientific generalisation 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 or certain. Accordingly the empiricist must deal with the truths of logic and mathematics in one of the two following ways: he must say either that they are not necessary truths, in which case he must account for the universal conviction that they are; or he must say that they have no factual content, and then he must explain how a proposition which is empty of all factual content can be true and useful and surprising. (1946: 72–3)

Having dismissed the first alternative, that of J. S. Mill, according to which, for example $2 \times 3 = 6$ is simply so well confirmed a statement of fact that we (wrongly) think that it could not have been otherwise, Ayer opts for the view that all a priori and necessary (these are identified) so-called truths are really analytic.

Rejecting Kant's account of analyticity for various reasons, Ayer formulates his own account. This, however, is somewhat shifting. The most definitive formulation would seem to be this:

> a proposition is analytic when its validity depends solely on the definitions of the symbols it contains, and synthetic when its validity is determined by the facts of experience. Thus, the proposition "There are ants which have established a system of slavery" is a synthetic proposition. For we cannot tell whether it is true or false merely by considering the definitions of the symbols which constitute it. We have to resort to actual observation of the behaviour of ants. On the other hand, the proposition "Either some ants are parasitic or none are" is an analytic proposition. For one need not resort to observation to discover that there either are or are not ants which are parasitic. If one knows what is the function of the words "either," "or," and "not," then one can see that any proposition of the form "Either *p* is true or *p* is not true" is valid, independently of experience. Accordingly, all such propositions are analytic. . . . However, when . . . we say that analytic propositions are devoid of factual content, and consequently that they say nothing, we are not suggesting that they are senseless in the way that metaphysical utterances are senseless. For although they give us no information about any empirical situation, they do enlighten us by illustrating the way in which we use symbols. (1946: 78–9)

There are several difficulties with propositions of the type he classifies as both "analytic" and "a priori." On his account, are these propositions not, in effect, statements about how certain symbols are normally used? But if so, they seem to be empirical, since it is an empirical fact that we use words as we do. Ayer tackles this question in his introduction to the second edition. (See 1946: 16–18.) His reply is that, although they are simply the consequences of sticking to a certain consistent use of certain symbols, they do not so much state as presuppose such rules of language. And this, thinks Ayer, explains why they can be surprising. For there are (doubtless infinitely) many consequences of this sort which it requires considerable intellectual power to grasp.

What is troubling about this answer is that while the simpler statements that Ayer calls "analytic" may be thought of as little more than reminders of how we optionally use certain symbols, there are innumerable consequences of such use which follow therefrom in a manner that is not similarly optional. Compare the rules of chess. There is no proper answer, other than a presently irrelevant historical one, as to why the pieces may be moved just as they may, but from this set of optional rules untold consequences follow as to how the game can best be played to win. Or to take a case more to the point, even if the proposition that 7 is 6 + 1 is simply a reminder of the meaning of "7," the proposition that 7 is a prime number is not a reminder of how we use the symbol but a necessary consequence thereof. It is of this latter sort of necessity that Ayer gives no satisfactory account. Or so at least it seems to some of us.[4]

Be that as it may, the general idea is clear, namely that all necessary or a priori truths are really the consequences of an optional use of language and tell us nothing about anything non-linguistic. Nor do they exactly say anything about language, they simply helpfully reflect back to us the character of the language in which our knowledge or beliefs are expressed.

Perhaps Ayer's position is, in effect, that the function of analytic statements is not strictly to say anything but to serve as a kind of verbal drill whereby we reinforce and improve our command of the rules and accepted transformations which give verbal expressions their meaning.[5]

What is truth?

So much for language and logic. What of truth? One might suppose that for Ayer truth would consist in being a reliable predictor of sense experience in the case of empirical propositions, and following from linguistic rules in the case of analytic propositions. Actually, in chapter V Ayer puts forward what has been called the redundancy theory of truth. According to this, the correct account of what "true" means is that it simply emphasizes the assertion of the proposition said to be true. Thus to say that the proposition *that dogs bark* is true is simply to say that dogs bark. Similarly to say that a proposition is false is simply to assert its negation. To say that it is false *that cats bark* is simply to say that cats don't bark.

But how are we to explain occurrences of "true" where the proposition said to be true is not formulated, for example, "Everything he said in the lecture is true"? Ayer's implied answer is that this means "(p)(he said that p implies p)." There is a problem with this answer, into which we shall not enter, in that the variable "p" occurs firstly as a

name variable and secondly as a propositional variable; that is, the first occurrence of "*p*" stands in for the name of a proposition, and its second occurrence for the actual formulation of a proposition.

In the light of this Ayer says that philosophical attempts to answer the question "What is truth?" are largely misconceived. When they have a definite meaning, the question asked is really, "How are propositions *validated*?" The meaning of "validated" is not made clear, but the question seems to mean "What are the criteria we properly use in deciding whether to affirm or deny them?" (Ayer often uses "validate," as it seems to me, to avoid talk of *judging to be true*.) The answer is that analytic propositions are validated by their being consequences of the way we use words, while empirical propositions are validated by the fact that they have been found successful as a way of predicting what we will experience under various circumstances, and are thereby taken as likely to be similarly successful in the future. (See 1946: 99.) If we raise "the problem of induction" associated especially with Hume, as to what right we have to take past experience as a guide to the future, Ayer's answer is, roughly, that to be guided in this way is just what we presently mean by being "rational."

What is the task of philosophy?

If metaphysics is nonsense, and to be abandoned, is there any type of philosophy that is more intellectually respectable? Ayer's positive answer is that the sort of philosophy that is a worthwhile activity is (conceptual) analysis. (See 1946: chs II and III.) And in fact this was what genuinely great philosophers have always been mainly engaged in. Often they have put their questions in the form of "What is *X*?" e.g. "What is matter?", "What is time?", "What is the self?", and there is nothing wrong in this mode of expression, if it is properly understood. Thus understood, these questions are really requests for definitions of some of the very general expressions in our language which either puzzle us or lead to metaphysical nonsense.

The traditional type of definition professes to explicate the meaning of a word by offering some other more complex verbal expression which is its equivalent. Ayer's trivial example is "An oculist is an eye doctor," which tells us that "oculist" and "eye doctor" mean the same (1946: 60). Definitions of this type are for the most part of limited use to philosophy, which is concerned with a more fundamental clarification of what both expressions are meant to stand for. Instead the philosopher requires so-called "definitions in use." (See pp. 60–3.) A definition of this sort is an instruction for translating statements about *X* or *X*s into equivalent statements which have no word or expression referring (grammatically considered) to *X* or *X*s. These are useful when *X*s strike a philosopher as somehow not belonging to the bedrock of reality.

Thus a philosopher might try to answer the question "What is a nation?" by showing how specimen statements about nations can be translated into statements about people. For example, he might seek a way of translating "Britain and Germany were at war from 1939 to 1945" into a complicated statement about how people whose homes were on one part of the earth's surface behaved towards, and were affected by, people whose homes were on another part of the earth's surface. If such a translation of statements about nations into statements about people and land is possible, then a nation may be described as a "logical construction" out of people and land, though it should be

realized that this is not a statement about how two sorts of *thing* are related but between *linguistic expressions*, one of which is supposedly puzzling in a way which the other is not.

Even in such rather obvious cases as that of nations such definitions are usually gestured towards rather than actually formulated. The gesture may be sufficient, however, to show that what the statement about the nations says in a simple, but *misleading* (because it suggests that nations are something over and above persons and land) way, is something which in principle should be sayable in a way that gives us no excuse for being thus misled. As for the difficulty in finding quite satisfactory actual translations, this, it may be suggested, may be because they would have to be impossibly complicated, or because they would have to be precise about details that the statements being explained leave vague. So although war is certainly a matter of people doing things one cannot be precise about just what people must do to be at war. (Cf. 1954: 141–3.)

So the task of philosophy is to point towards definitions in use of expressions that are liable to puzzle us or to suggest that there are things over and above those we actually encounter empirically.

Phenomenalism regarding physical objects

Central to Ayer's type of logical positivism is a phenomenalist view of physical or material objects. According to this, every statement about the physical world is, in principle, translatable into a proposition to the effect that under such and such conditions such and such sensations will or would occur. Thus the proposition that a physical thing exists always means "that, if certain conditions were fulfilled, certain sense-contents . . . would be experienced" (1946: 141).[6]

"Experienced by whom?" one may well ask. The answer would seem to be "by whomsoever it is who is affirming the proposition"; in short, when you affirm it, it tells you what sensations you should expect under such and such circumstances, while when I affirm it, it tells me what sensations I should expect under such and such circumstances. This suggests that each of us gives our own private meaning to the proposition. And in fact the doctrine of the book, without perhaps the author being fully aware of it, is that what counts as the same factual statement has a different meaning for each person, since for each of them the information it provides, if it is true, concerns just their own actual and possible experience. This is disguised, somewhat, by the fact that persons are themselves supposed to be logical constructions out of sensations, though not the same sort of logical construction as physical objects are.

For a person, so far as his conscious mind goes, is, according to Ayer, a logical construction out of those sense-contents that occur in the same sense-fields as do the organic sense impressions of that body. Among the consequences that follow from this is that an individual's survival of bodily death is a meaningless idea, insofar as there can be no organic sensations of his body thereafter. Here Ayer differed from the leader of the Vienna Circle, Moritz Schlick, who thought it perfectly meaningful to suppose that I might verify my own death by having sense impressions as of seeing my funeral from a point of view unoccupied by a human body. (See Schlick 1949: 159–60.)

Propositions about other minds

This leads naturally to the account of our knowledge of other minds presented in *Language, Truth and Logic*, chapter VII. It is likely to be charged, he says in effect, that if I accept the doctrine of that book then I am committed to solipsism, to the view that only I exist, as a conscious individual with my own sense experiences. For the existence of the sense-experiences of other people appears to be, in principle, something that I cannot verify, since my sense-impressions can only be associated with the organic sensations of my own body, not with those of another person. But Ayer rejects this conclusion, contending that each of us must define the existence of other persons, including the sensations that go with the organic sensations of their body, in terms of the behavior on the basis of which I would ordinarily conclude that they were conscious and had sensations.

Thus he held, at that stage, that what "I" (whoever I am) mean when I speak of my own sensations is that such and such sensations actually occur together with the organic sensations of my body, but that when I speak of the sensations of another person I mean that they are behaving, or are disposed to behave, in such and such a way (this being a physical fact ultimately consisting in facts about my sensations as of perceiving their bodies move and make noises etc. of such and such a sort).

This view about what we mean by speaking about the sensations of others, reveals, as Ayer later himself insisted, a peculiar double-take on the whole business of what we mean by what we say (see 1956: 245–7). The official view of *Language, Truth and Logic* is that everyone means by everything they say something about their own sensations. But this is a view delivered as true of every speaker, by Ayer, *qua* philosopher, who, thereby, is clearly supposing that other people have sensations in the same sense as he does (i.e. in a way not analyzable behavioristically) though it is part of the theory that this realist conception of the sensations of others is, for each of us (and that must include Ayer himself) meaningless (see 1946: 141).

Propositions about the past

As strange, or stranger, than this view of the meaning of assertions about the experiences of others is the view that propositions about the past can only be meaningful (because otherwise unverifiable in principle) if they are equivalent to predictions about the kind of so-called historical evidence that would support them. An oddity (we may remark) of this view is that, while empirical knowledge is said to consist in predictions about future experience on the basis of past experience, the fact that the past experiences occurred is itself a prediction of the same essential kind.

The paradoxical character of these conclusions is among the factors which led Ayer away from the precise positions of *Language, Truth and Logic*, though he struggled to remain true to at least the general spirit of the verification principle.

Critique of ethics and theology

One position, however, which Ayer never abandoned was the emotive theory of ethics advanced in chapter VI (see STEVENSON). According to this ethical concepts are pseudo-

concepts, that is, they lack factual meaning. To say that behavior of a certain sort is wrong is not to state anything about it which can be true or false. It is simply to express a feeling. True, there may be ethical statements which include a factual element. If I say “He did wrong to kill the cat,” then, inasmuch as this says that he killed the cat it is meaningful, and true or false. But calling it wrong adds nothing cognitively meaningful. And if I make a statement of pure ethical principle, such as “Suicide is wrong” then this is just as though I held up my hand in horror at the idea of people committing suicide. This has been called (not by Ayer) the “boo-hurrah” theory of ethics. He gave it a milder statement in a later essay (1954: essay 10) pointing out that he was not making a negative value judgment about moral thinking, and, in fact, Ayer was personally and publicly committed to strong liberal principles.

As for religious propositions, statements like “God exists” or “God loves us,” as most people now think that they understand them, they are meaningless. There is no observational test that could be used to determine their truth or falsehood. God is not, as the mountains on the other side of the moon were then, something whose existence is in fact unverifiable, but in principle verifiable. It is worth noting that even if Ayer revised his view that life after death was meaningless he could still put up a good case for saying that the existence of God would remain so, for whatever experiences I might have in some other world, none of them (so Ayer could easily argue) would show that there was or was not a God as sophisticated monotheism describes Him. Of course, if God is conceived of as an enormously powerful being in human form, as depicted in religious paintings, the matter would be different, but a religious sophisticate will say that that is a mere image of a truth which cannot be expressed in sensory terms. At that point Ayer said that he was not an atheist, since “God does not exist” is as meaningless as “God exists.” Later he relaxed this somewhat and was prepared to call himself an atheist on the grounds that no meaning can be given to the proposition that God exists that makes it remotely likely to be true. (See Ayer 1973.)

The future of philosophy

Officially in *Language, Truth and Logic* Ayer regarded the positive task left for philosophy – after the elimination of metaphysics and the final analysis of the statements of everyday life, which a verificationist approach like his had, at least *almost*, finally achieved (see pp. 152–3) – as the analysis of the concepts of science. But this was hardly undertaken in that work, and was never a main concern of Ayer’s (except to some extent in his treatment of probability). His interest was always in those traditional questions of philosophy his radical answers to which we have been discussing, and most of his later work consists in attempts to find more persuasive answers to them in the light of a less extreme form of verificationism.

Later positions

It is unfair to take *Language, Truth and Logic* as being Ayer’s main contribution to philosophy. There is much insufficiently admired later work. At present Ayer is out of fashion and undervalued. He would hardly have ground for complaint at this, scoffer as he was as a young man at his predecessors, but greater justice will be done to him one day.

He is probably right that his best book was *The Problem of Knowledge* (1956). This presents philosophical epistemology (theory of knowledge) as primarily concerned to explain what knowledge is by an examination of skeptical difficulties found in various ordinary claims to possess it. In the process he presents a revised view of such matters as we have considered in connection with *Language, Truth and Logic*, revisions to a great extent already presented in the essays collected in *Philosophical Essays* (1954).

Ayer contends that for someone to know that something is the case, it is required (1) that he feels sure that it is so, (2) that it is so, and (3) that he has the right to be sure that it is so. (See 1956: 34).

Skeptics have raised all sorts of doubts about our right ever to be sure of the truth of any propositions concerning physical objects, other minds, and past events, whether these propositions simply assert that there really are such things or say something more specific about particular cases.

The pattern of skepticism is as follows. A contrast is drawn between the evidence on which such propositions are believed and what they claim to be the case. Thus our evidence for propositions concerning physical objects always consists in facts about our own sense-data, for propositions concerning other minds in facts about the behavior of other organisms, and for propositions concerning past events in apparent memories or records of them.

There are four types of philosophical riposte to such skepticism.

(1) *Naive realism*. This denies that our evidence for the problematic knowledge claims *is* indirect in the manner the skeptic alleges, rather do we have a direct or immediate experience of physical things or other minds or the past (whichever is in question).

(2) *Reductionism*. This analyses the problematic truths into truths about the things which feature in the evidence for them. Thus facts about physical objects are reduced to facts about sense-data and facts about other minds to the behavior of others. The interpretations of such propositions in *Language, Truth and Logic* are paradigm cases of reductionism.

(3) *The scientific approach* (or *causal inference theory*). The problematic propositions are inferred as the causes of the things which are our evidence for them.

None of these approaches is altogether successful. Statements about physical objects cannot be translated into statements about sense-data nor statements about other people's experiences into facts about their behavior. Naive realism simply ducks the problem. And causal realism is vulnerable to the objection that a proper causal inference must be to a reality which we could know about more directly, and thus be able to check that the causal relation between our evidence and what we take it as evidence for really holds.

(4) *Descriptive analysis*. The sting of the problem as the descriptive analyst sees it lies in the fact that we complain that we have not got a way of knowing about these things when it is logically impossible that we should have. For example, the complaint that other minds are closed to us loses its alarming quality when we realize that it is a necessary truth (analytic) that our belief in anything must rest *on our own experience*, so that it is not that we lack some power which it would

even make sense of someone having. Once this is realized, we can be content with a careful description of our normal way of forming beliefs about the minds of others, since this is often as good as it makes sense to wish for. Similarly for the other problems.

Ayer's own favored strategy in each case is the last, that of descriptive analysis. However, it must be said that in the case of the first problem (that of our knowledge of physical objects, always a special interest of his) it is doubtful how far Ayer really means to distance himself from reductionism. For various somewhat technical reasons there can be no actual *translation* of statements about physical objects into if–then statements about sense-data, but the suggestion lingers in the air that somehow there is nothing else for them to *tell us about*. (See Ayer 1956: 131–47 and 1954: essay 8.)

Ayer's approach to the problem of other minds is somewhat different. (See 1956: 243–54.) The obvious account of our knowledge of other minds is that it rests on an argument from analogy (which belongs to the causal inference type of approach listed above). The trouble is that the obviously respectable cases of argument from analogy are where the conclusion concerns the existence of something of the same general kind as things we have encountered more directly (say that there may be life on some distant planet sufficiently analogous to our own). Ayer is still troubled, in effect, by a verificationist scruple about anything in principle unobservable.

At one stage Ayer suggested an intriguing solution. (See Ayer 1954: essay 8, also 1956: 247–9.) When I say of another that he is having a certain experience, what I mean can be analyzed into a statement of the form "A person of such and such a description (e.g. presently standing in a certain position, female, capable in philosophical argument, etc., etc.) is having such and such an experience." Now is it, Ayer asks us, a necessary truth that it is not I myself who answer to that description? If not, and it is conceivable, though profoundly contrary to fact, that I might have done so, then it is also conceivable that I could have verified the proposition directly. (So another's experience becomes more like the other side of the moon – as it seemed to be then – than, say, God.)

There is something that will seem to most people rather suspicious about this solution of the difficulty, but I cannot pursue the matter further. What it does show is that Ayer was never quite sure whether he continued to want statements which are meaningful for me to be ones which in principle I myself could verify, or whether it is only required that some human being, or like creature, could verify them.

On all these topics Ayer developed his position further. *The Central Questions of Philosophy*, in particular, includes some quite novel suggestions on our construction of the physical world, which, unfortunately, we cannot consider here.

Nor is there space here to consider the many other philosophical problems Ayer dealt with in his work. His discussion of probability, for example, does well to insist on some easily overlooked facts about it, e.g. that if statements of probability can only assert how probable something is relative to certain specifiable evidence then there is no way in which we can assert that it is more probable that a proposition based on more comprehensive evidence will be true than will one based on less comprehensive evidence.

(See 1963: 188–98 and 1972: 54–8.) His later more positive view of metaphysics, as conceptual clarification which may improve our way of understanding things, should also be mentioned. (See 1967: essay 5.)

Altogether his philosophy, right or wrong, has admirable qualities to which this account, concentrating as it does, for historical reasons, on *Language, Truth and Logic*, may not have done justice. For one thing, he wrote in philosophical prose of unrivalled excellence. It is thoroughly straightforward and extremely lucid. A passage once understood stays easily in the mind as the basis for what follows as one reads on; there was no need for those irritating numbered propositions at which one must be for ever looking back in much philosophy written today.

Ayer is for now the last great figure in the great tradition of British empiricist philosophy in the line of Hume. Its faults, so far as it is faulty (a matter not considered here), are those of that whole tradition which he may, indeed, have carried forward as well as it ever will be again.

Notes

1 I shall mostly follow the usage recommended in the introduction to the second edition of *Language, Truth and Logic*, according to which any set of synonymous declarative (he says "indicative") sentences is spoken of as expressing a statement, and this statement is said to be a proposition if and only if it is literally meaningful (1946: 8).

2 It is not altogether clear what an experiential statement or proposition is. (Ayer gives no examples here.) Does it report a present experience or observation or does it predict one expected to take place shortly? Ayer's formulation suggests the first, in which case it is rather pointless. Yet that seems to be what Ayer has in mind. In any case, experiential propositions seem very like the ostensive propositions which Ayer had rejected in the original first edition text (1946: 91–3).

3 So much, indeed, is said by Ayer himself, though somewhat as an aside. "For it will be shown that all propositions which have factual content are empirical hypotheses; and that the function of an empirical hypothesis is to provide a rule for the anticipation of experience" (1946: 41, see also p. 151 and *passim*).

It is worth noting that whereas the somewhat similarly minded American pragmatists emphasized the importance of genuine factual knowledge as facilitating our *control* of things, Ayer almost exclusively speaks of prediction and I remember him once arguing (in a seminar) against C. I. Lewis's claim that only an agent, with some control over events, could understand factual statements. (For a rare use of "control" see 1946: 50.)

4 It seems that we must either recognize a non-conventional necessity here, or agree with the idea many find in Wittgenstein that somehow each deduction from a rule is itself ultimately a free decision, or at least one necessary only in the sense of being socially enforced.

5 Compare Stevenson 1945: 68–70. The question was sometimes raised whether the verification principle was synthetic or analytic. Ayer's answer was that it was analytic with reference to the meaning which gives what we call factual statements their point. See introduction, 1946: 15–16.

6 It does not follow that physical things cannot exist unperceived, since their existence consists not in their being perceived but in the fact that if certain conditions were fulfilled they would be. Thus Ayer thinks to distinguish himself from idealism. See 1946: 145.

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