An examination of A. J. Ayer's phenomenalist solution to the problem of perception.

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An Examination of A. J. Ayer's Phenomenalist Solution
To The Problem of Perception

By Yinlai Yang

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
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ABSTRACT

This study examines A. J. Ayer's solution to the problem of perception. The problem of perception, as understood by Ayer, is the problem justifying our belief in the existence of those physical objects which it is commonly taken for granted that we perceive. This examination is based on Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*, *The Foundation of Empirical Knowledge*, *The Problem of Knowledge*, and on the article entitled "Phenomenalism." It covers the development of Ayer's ideas concerning a phenomenalist solution to the problem of perception through a process of acceptance, development and abandonment.

The most striking characteristic of Ayer's earlier attempts to solve the problem of perception is that he seeks to defend the common phenomenalist stand, which derives from Berkeley, by the method of linguistic analysis. Though Ayer's version of phenomenalism can be criticized in its technical aspects, the decisive objection to all forms of phenomenalism, as Ayer himself acknowledges, is that the existence of a physical object of a certain sort and the occurrence of certain sense-data cannot be sufficient conditions for each other. This difficulty means that statements about physical objects are not formally translatable into statements about sense-data, and therefore the phenomenalist's programme cannot be carried through.
To my wife, Yingshan, and our son, Du Du
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Introduction

Peter Strawson in an article entitled "Perception and its Objects" points out:

Ayer has always given the problem of perception a central place in his thinking. Reasonably so; for a philosopher's views on this question are a key both to his theory of knowledge in general and to his metaphysics. The movement of Ayer's own thought has been from phenomenalism to what he describes in his latest treatment of the topic as 'a sophisticated form of realism'.

Ayer himself accepts this analysis and replies:

Professor Strawson is right in saying that the problem of perception has always occupied a central place in my philosophical thinking and also that the movement of my thought about it over the course of forty years has been from the phenomenalism of Language, Truth and Logic to what I describe in The Central Questions of Philosophy as a sophisticated form of realism.

To examine Ayer's solution to the so-called problem of perception, we should begin with the question, "What is the problem of perception which Ayer is trying to solve?"

The problem of perception as a problem of philosophy is distinct from the scientific problem of perception. For instance, the problem "what are the actual processes occurring in us and in an object when we perceive it?" is not a philosophical one, but a

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2 Ayer's "Replies", also see Perception and Identity, p.277.
scientific one. Only psychologists, physiologists, etc., are in a position to present a definitive account of the perceptual process which includes the functions and roles of the nervous system, the makeup of physical objects, and so on. Philosophers have been concerned with the epistemological value of perception, that is, how far, if at all, perception can be regarded as a source of knowledge about the world.

Epistemology - the theory of knowledge - is concerned with the origin, nature, extent and certainty of our knowledge. It seems obvious that it is by perception that we are aware of the world around us, so it seems plausible to say that it is by perception that we come to know of the existence and nature of that world. So, in considering our knowledge of the external world the philosopher will want to consider the way in which perception can and does provide us with that knowledge, and the nature, extent and certainty of the knowledge it provides us with.

Generally speaking, perception is the apprehension of ordinary sense-objects, such as trees, houses, chairs etc., on the occasion of sensory stimulation. Perception is distinguished, on the one hand, from sensation (the apprehension of isolated sense qualities) and, on the other hand, from higher ideational processes of imagination, remembering, conception and reasoning. Perception involves the senses, and normally the basis for our belief in the existence of physical objects, but illusions do occur in it. It is natural for philosophers to ask questions like these: what is the object of which we are directly aware in perception? Is there
direct or immediate awareness, and if so, has it special objects? If it has, how are these related to physical objects or parts of them? Do we in fact perceive physical objects at all? Or do we only infer their existence? If we do perceive physical objects, under what conditions do we do so? Does the object play a causal role? In short, we may include all these questions under the category of the problem of perception in the sense of epistemology. Ayer put it in this way:

The problem of perception, as the sceptic poses it, is that of justifying our belief in the existence of the physical objects which it is commonly taken for granted that we perceive."

Why does such a belief need to be justified philosophically? At first glance, there seems to be no harm in saying that our belief in the existence of such things as chairs and tables is founded on the evidence of our senses. However, as Ayer points out, if this talk of evidence is meant to imply that such a belief is always an inference from something else, it begs a disputed question.\footnote{The Problem of Knowledge, London: Macmillan, 1965, p.91.}

Philosophers in the empiricist tradition from Locke onwards have sought to erect an edifice of knowledge on the basis of what Bertrand Russell has called "hard data" - data of which one can be certain.\footnote{Ibid., p.91.} They have commonly agreed that such data are yielded by

\footnote{Bertrand Russell wrote in his Our Knowledge of the External World (1914):
I mean by 'hard data' those which resist the solvent influence of critical reflection, ... The hardest of hard data are of two}
sense-perception; but they also have agreed that data does not include physical objects. So long as this position is to be adopted, a common problem emerges which Russell posed as follows:

Can the existence of anything other than our hard data be inferred from these data?  

Taking the hard data to be securely known, the philosophers of this way of thinking have regarded the existence of physical objects as being relatively problematic.

If it is maintained that we cannot grasp physical objects directly, or that "our access to the objects whose existence is in question must be indirect", we have admitted that there is a gap, of a logically perplexing kind, between the evidence with which we start and the conclusions that we reach or, we can say, a gap between sense-perception and material things. In this sense, the problem of perception can also be interpreted as a problem of accounting for the relationship between direct sense-perception and the indirect existence of physical objects. As a contemporary British philosopher points out:

The problem of perception is to give an account of the relationship of sense-experience to material objects. This has traditionally been seen as logical, a matter of showing how beliefs about objects can be established or

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sorts: the particular facts of sense, and the general truths of logic ... Real doubt, in these two cases, would, I think, be pathological (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1915, p.65).

6 Ibid., p.83.

7 The Problem of Knowledge, p.91.
supported by what we know in immediate experience.⁸

It is natural to hold that only our knowledge of sense-perception is direct, immediate, or by acquaintance; what we know about objects is indirect, derivative, or by inference from what we know directly. The problem is how can we reasonably infer the indirect and derivative things that we think are real from the direct and immediate things that appear to us.

From an historical point of view, philosophers speak endlessly about perception, and they seem to concentrate almost exclusively upon vision. However, if our concern starts from early modern British philosophy and follows its empirical tradition from Locke and Hume onwards, two facts concerning the shaping of the problem of perception, it seems to me, may be clearly seen.

First, it is obvious that the problem of perception, which Ayer attempts to solve, is the problem that most outstanding British empiricist philosophers, from Locke, Berkeley, Hume and Mill to Russell, commonly face.⁹ We call these philosophers empiricists, because they share an important characteristic. As

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⁹ For instance, for Locke, what we directly perceive are ideas; he is then faced with the problem of showing how these ideas are related to physical objects. Berkeley’s contention is that what are called physical objects are nothing other than collections of sensible qualities, but he postulates God as the unobserved cause of our ideas. John Stuart Mill defines matter as "permanent possibility of sensation." The problem then is to show what are the particular features of our sensations that we draw upon for the conception of matter. For further remarks, see Ayer British Empirical Philosophers, pp.18-23.
Ayer put it:

They may differ in the accounts that they give of the nature of sense experience, and still more in the inferences that they draw from them, they all agree that unless it is validly based upon our sense experience we can have no sufficient ground for maintaining any proposition about a matter of fact. And it is for this reason that they are given the title of Empiricists.\(^\text{10}\)

Empiricists concur in giving the leading role to sense-perception in their theories of knowledge. They look to sense-perception, if not as the sole legitimate source of any true belief about the 'external' world, then at least as a final court of appeal which any acceptable theory must satisfy.\(^\text{11}\) The point is that this empiricist position itself necessarily entails that the empiricist always faces the problem of how to judge the place of physical objects in the "final court" of sense-perception.

Second, it is philosophical scepticism that makes the problem of perception distinctive. As we know, the sceptic not only denies that there is a passage between sense experience and physical objects but also emphasizes that there is an impassable "gulf" between them. According to Hume, the passage from experiences to objects rests on "a kind of fallacy or illusion." He asserts "the mind has never anything present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connexion with


\(^{11}\) See *Ayer: Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, London: Counterpoint, 1982, p.3.
objects."\textsuperscript{12} It is the philosophical sceptic who sharpens the problem by showing the impossibility of filling the gap between sense-perception and physical objects. This extreme stand is based on his insight into the limit of our sense-perception. To some extent, we may say that any philosophical attack on the problem of perception is to take a certain kind of attitude to the gap that the sceptic emphasizes, or to give an answer to philosophical scepticism.

Now, I would like to give a brief account of the general ideas of three other solutions or positions to the problem of perception before I focus on Ayer's phenomenalist solution.

In the beginning we typically stand with the comfortable assurance of common sense, which proceeds on the assumption that the world presented to us through sense perception is purely and simply "there". It is there as such, in the exact manner it is sensed, in complete independence of our conscious awareness. This is the so-called Naive Realist theory of perception. According to this theory, the perceptual process is understood to involve a direct and immediate awareness on our part of the real world. There are two kinds of entities in the world, observers and physical objects, and the former are said to perceive the latter. A difficulty the naive realist faces is that it is hard to explain the illusions in our perception. The characteristic of his philosophical position is that he denies, or overlooks, the

existence of the gap between what things seem to be and what they really are. His mistake, if it is one, is that he denies the possibility of questions which can in fact be asked.\textsuperscript{13}

"The natural heir to naive realism is the causal theory of perception,"\textsuperscript{14} Ayer points out. It is to this theory that people most commonly turn when they have been convinced that there are grounds for holding that physical objects are not directly perceived.\textsuperscript{15} According to this position, we do not perceive physical objects directly but indirectly through ideas that represent reality.\textsuperscript{16} The physical objects are themselves unobservable. Their existence is to be inferred from the ideas which they cause, and these ideas, besides being their effects, are to some extent also copies of them. An acute problem is soon raised when we make a further consideration: How do I know that my ideas resemble physical objects? Is reality at all like my idea? How can we know that ideas are caused by the physical objects? The obvious objection to this view is if anything that comes before the mind is, by definition, an idea, then not only have we no valid reason

\textsuperscript{13} See Ayer:\textit{The Problem of Knowledge}, p.125.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p.125.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p.125.

\textsuperscript{16} The first version of this theory was offered by Rene Descartes. He maintained that physical objects were perceived not directly but through the medium of what he calls ideas. John Locke, under Descartes' influence, referred to the objects by which he thought perception was mediated, as simple ideas of sensation. A certain version of the causal theory of perception, in contemporary philosophy, can also be adopted by a kind of sense-data theory, such as H. H. Price's theory of perception(see H. H. Price:\textit{Perception}, Methuen, London, 1932).
for believing in the existence of an object which is not and never could be an idea, but even the conception of such an object must be unintelligible to us.

This objection is substantially the point that a phenomenalist like Berkeley makes. Berkeley's phenomenalism, according to Ayer, is not intended to deny the existence of tables or chairs or stones or trees or stars. What he is denying is that their existence implies the existence of a "material substance", when this is defined in such a way that it becomes an "unknown somewhat" which is not even in principle capable of being perceived.\(^\text{17}\)

Phenomenalism, as a theory of perception, in its early version, asserts that what are called physical objects are nothing other than collections of sensible qualities. In the form in which it is usually held nowadays, it is the theory that physical objects are logical constructions out of sense-data.\(^\text{18}\) In other words, it claims that statements about physical objects can be translated into equivalent statements about sense-data. As Ayer points out that the position which the phenomenalist takes is that

\[\text{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, a set of statements, which refer exclusively to sense-data.}\(^\text{19}\)

Two points should be noted in order to understand what

\(^{17}\) *British Empirical Philosophers* p.19.


\(^{19}\) *The Problem of Knowledge*, p.131.
phenomenalists say about "reducing" or "translating" one kind of statement into another kind of statement. First, the members of statements about sense-data are on a lower epistemological level than the members of statements about physical objects, for the former refers to "harder" data. Second, there is a logical equivalence between two kinds of statements.\(^{20}\)

However, the most distinctive characteristic of modern phenomenalism perhaps is that it emphasizes the problem of perception itself as a linguistic question, so it is enough for its solution merely to refer to the logical relationship between two kind of statements. What concerns the phenomenalist is the meaning of statements, not the facts of statements. For this reason, this modern version of phenomenalism is called "linguistic phenomenalism." As to his attitude to the gap which the sceptic emphasizes, we may say that the phenomenalist seeks to bridge this gap by a reduction of the way things are to the way they seem.

Ayer was one of the founders and enthusiastic defenders of this modern theory of phenomenalism, though he gave it up in his later years. About the problem of the relationship between two kinds of statements, Ayer said:

At one time I thought there could be an equivalence, then I became doubtful of this, and this is one problem of analysis that has occupied me throughout my career.\(^{21}\)

In my thesis, I will focus on Ayer's phenomenalist solution to the problem of perception, examining his standpoints toward

\(^{20}\) See Ayer: The Problem of Knowledge, p.132.

\(^{21}\) Bryan Magee: Modern British Philosophy, p.50.
phenomenalism from beginning to end - a process of acceptance, development and abandonment.

In Chapter One, I will examine Ayer's earliest version of the phenomenalist solution to the problem of perception in Language, Truth and Logic. In Chapter Two, I shall account for how Ayer develops his arguments in The Foundation of Empirical Knowledge. In Chapter Three, I will focus on his own exposition of the reason why he had to abandon the phenomenalist standpoint. Finally, I will summarize the whole movement of his thought, and offer a brief comment.
Chapter One  Thoroughgoing Phenomenalism

- Ayer's Solution to the Problem of Perception in the 
  Language, Truth and Logic

Ayer's phenomenalist solution to the problem of perception is first put forward in Language, Truth and Logic. This book has achieved the status of a classic textbook for explaining the doctrines of Logical Positivism. Its main purpose is to eliminate traditional metaphysics and advance a kind of linguistic-analytic philosophical outlook. Ayer presents his phenomenalist solution to the problem of perception as a "further example" of philosophical analysis, so as to avoid metaphysics. As he writes, "the solution which we shall now give of this 'problem of perception' will serve as a further illustration of the method of philosophical analysis."22 Later, he says that "in the case of the problem of perception, we found that in order to avoid metaphysics we were obliged to adopt a phenomenalist standpoint."23

About this phenomenalist standpoint, he claims with confidence: "We have not to enquire whether a phenomenalist 'theory of perception' or some other sort of theory is correct, but only what form of phenomenalist theory is correct."24


23 Ibid., p.121.

24 Ibid., p.53.
The central idea of his version of the phenomenalist solution to the problem of perception can be stated briefly in his own words:

By defining the notion of a material thing in terms of sense-contents we solve the so-called problem of perception.\textsuperscript{25}

1. Solution: Two Basic Positions

How should we understand this solution?
First of all, it seems to me, we should keep in mind that there are two basic positions in this solution.
First, the starting-point of his solution is empiricist, or we can say that his solution always appeals to "sense-experience". At this point, we shall see that he is carrying on the British empiricist tradition from Locke to Russell. As he asserts in this book:

the view of philosophy which we have adopted may, I think, fairly be described as a form of empiricism. For it is characteristic of an empiricist to eschew metaphysics, on the ground that every factual proposition must refer to sense-experience.\textsuperscript{26}

Although we have not yet discussed Ayer's own form of empiricism, we do know that, as an empiricist, he seeks to reconstruct all knowledge of empirical facts out of the basis of sense-experience. Sense-experience is not only the starting-point from which he raises the problem, but also the basic point with which he solves

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p.27

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p.71.
the problem. Like his predecessors, Ayer seeks to base our knowledge of the external world on our sensations. He claims,

What gives one the right to believe in the existence of a certain material thing is simply that fact that one has certain sensations: for, whether one realizes it or not, to say that the thing exists is equivalent to saying that such sensations are obtainable. It is the philosopher's business to give a correct definition of material things in terms of sensations.\(^{27}\)

Why does he say that philosopher's business is to give a definition of material things in terms of sensation? Here, we have to mention his other basic position.

Secondly, according to Ayer, "the activity of philosophising is essentially analytic."\(^ {28}\) This means that "the philosopher, as an analyst, is not directly concerned with the physical properties of things. He is concerned only with the way in which we speak about them."\(^ {29}\) This position, unlike the first one, makes him quite distinctive from the traditional British empiricists, but is in the fashion of philosophy at the time Ayer wrote.

We know that around the turn of the century a revolution began in Anglo-American philosophy. It has been so influential that it is not uncommon to characterize that time as the "Age of Analysis" in philosophy. "Analysis", "Linguistic Analysis" or "Logical Analysis," as it is variously called, is the central term to characterize this philosophical movement.

Logical Positivism has probably gained wider public

\(^ {27}\) Ibid., pp.50-51.

\(^ {28}\) Ibid., p.51.

\(^ {29}\) Ibid., p.57.
recognition than any other part of the analytic movement. It is a central tenet of Positivism that all metaphysical sentences without exception are meaningless. The analysis of language, for them, is a powerful tool to eliminate metaphysical nonsense. Philosophy, Ayer argues, is nothing but the analysis of language and the exposure of metaphysical nonsense for what it is.

It is natural for Ayer, from the standpoint of linguistic analysis, to regard the problem of perception as a linguistic question. Ayer's account, which asserts this basic position, is clear enough:

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. It is true that writers on perception who set out to describe "the nature of a material thing" believe themselves to be discussing a factual question. But, as we have already pointed out, this is a mistake. The question, "what is the nature of material thing?" is, like any other question of that form, a linguistic question, being a demand for a definition. And the propositions which are set forth in answer to it are linguistic propositions, even though they may be expressed in such a way that they seem to be factual. They are propositions about the relationship of symbols, and not about the properties of the things which the symbols denote.30

Finally, the connection between these two basic positions - empiricism and the analysis of language - is clear. That is, for Ayer, the method of logical analysis is the most effective means through which to achieve the goal of eliminating traditional metaphysics, while at the same time, defending empiricism.

30 Ibid., pp.64-65.
2. Solution: Two Basic Conceptions and a Relation

Why does Ayer treat the problem of perception as a problem of language? Why does Ayer assert that the propositions which are set forth to describe "the nature of a material thing" are merely propositions about the relationship of symbols?

To understand Ayer’s solution technically, we should grasp two important notions, "definition in use" and "sense-content" which come from the two basic positions mentioned above, and we should understand the relationship between a logical construction and its elements, sense-contents.

(1) The Definition In Use

For Ayer, the definition to be used to solve the problem of perception is not the explicit definition of a dictionary, but the definition in use of philosophy. He writes:

From our assertion that philosophy provides definitions, it must not be inferred that it is the function of the philosopher to compile a dictionary, in the ordinary sense. For the definitions which philosophy is required to provide are of a different kind from those which we expect to find in dictionaries. In a dictionary we look mainly for what may be called explicit definitions; in philosophy, for definitions in use.\(^{31}\)

According to Ayer, the distinction between these two kinds of definitions is as follows:

We define a symbol explicitly when we put forward another symbol, or symbolic expression which is synonymous with

\(^{31}\) Ibid., p.59.
The vast majority of the definitions which are given in ordinary discourse are explicit definitions. For example, when we define an oculist as an eye-doctor, what we are asserting is that, in the English language, the two symbols "oculist" and "eye-doctor" are synonymous. And, generally speaking, all the questions that are discussed by logicians in connection with this mode of definition are concerned with possible ways of finding synonyms in a given language for any given term. Ayer writes:

We define a symbol in use, not by saying that it is synonymous with some other symbol, but by showing how the sentences in which it significantly occurs can be translated into equivalent sentences, which contain neither the definiendum itself, nor any of its synonyms.\(^{33}\)

A good illustration of this process, Ayer says, is provided by Bertrand Russell's theory of definite descriptions. This theory indicates the way in which all phrases of the form "the so-and-so" are to be defined. The key point in this theory is that it proclaims that every sentence which contains a symbolic expression of that form can be translated into a sentence which does not contain any such expression. For example, the sentence

The round square cannot exist.

is equivalent to the sentence

No one thing can be both square and round.

And, the sentence

\(^{32}\) Ibid., p.59.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p.60
The author of *Waverley* was Scotch.
is equivalent to a conjunction of the following three sentences:
At least one person wrote *Waverley*,
At most one person wrote *Waverley*,
Whoever wrote *Waverley* was Scotch.

These two examples, Ayer says, "show us how to express what is expressed by any sentence which contains a definite descriptive phrase without employing any such phrase. And thus they furnish us with a definition of these phrases in use." ³⁴ Ayer emphasizes that the effect of this definition on descriptive phrases is indeed to increase our understanding of certain sentences. In the field of philosophy, because of their imperfect understanding of the sentences, some philosophers wrongly assume that definite descriptive phrases are "demonstrative symbols", so they "lapse into metaphysics". ³⁵ The great merit of Russell's theory of descriptions, writes Ayer,

is that it does throw light upon the use of a certain class of expressions in ordinary speech, and that this is a point of philosophical importance. For, by showing that expressions like "the present King of France" do not function as names, the theory exposes the fallacy that has led philosophers to believe in "subsistent entities". ³⁶

Now, Ayer concludes that the purpose of a philosophical definition is to dispel those confusions which arise from our imperfect understanding of certain types of sentence in our

³⁴ Ibid., p.61.
³⁵ Ibid., p.61.
³⁶ Ibid., p.23
language. This need cannot be met by the provision of a synonym for any symbol, either because there is no synonym, or else because the available synonyms "are unclear in the same fashion as the symbol to which the confusion is due."  

(2) Sense-Contents

If we say that the definition in use is the method which Ayer uses to construct material things, sense-contents are the elements in this construction. From his basic position of empiricism, it is natural for him to look for certain immediate data of sense-perception as the basic elements in the construction of material things.

First, let's consider what Ayer means by "sense-contents".

Ayer's concept of "sense-contents" is approximately equal to the notion of "sense-data", which was widely used by the analytic philosophers at the beginning of this century when they described the immediate data of experience. And Ayer himself also used "sense-data" instead of "sense-contents" in his later years. In his autobiography, he writes, "... sense-contents, a term which I borrowed from an early paper of Moore's and used in preference to the current "sense-data". Although Ayer borrowed the notion from Moore, he used it differently. For Moore, sense-contents are something different from the sensation itself, they are the objects

\[37\] Ibid., p.62.

of sensations. Ayer disagrees with Moore's distinction. He claims that

We define a sense-content not as the object, but as a part of a sense-experience. And from this it follows that the existence of a sense-content always entails the existence of a sense-experience.

But we should be careful, writes Ayer,

When we say that a given sense-content or sense-experience exists, we are saying no more than that it occurs. And, accordingly, it seems advisable always to speak of the "occurrence" of sense-contents and sense-experience in preference to speaking of their "existence", and so to avoid the danger of treating sense-contents as if they were material things.

"Sense-content", by Ayer's account, is a neutral word. It is used to refer to the immediate data of sensation. We may say that material things are constituted by sense-contents or constructed out of sense-contents, or in other words, a material thing is reducible to sense-contents. It is consistently held by phenomenalists that to say something about material things is equivalent to or reducible to saying something about sense-contents.

Sense-contents, as the elements of any given material thing, according to Ayer, are not merely actual but also possible. The sentences that refer to sense-contents, contends Ayer, need not


40 See Language, Truth and Logic, pp.139-40.

41 Ibid., p.122.

42 Ibid., p.123.

43 Ibid., p.53.
necessarily express categorical propositions, they may express hypothetical proposition. This is because there can be a hypothetical fact to the effect that, if certain conditions were fulfilled, certain sense-contents, would be experienced. According to Ayer, this fact explains how it is possible for a material thing to exist throughout a period when none of its elements are actually experienced. Therefore, says Ayer, there is indeed no contradiction involved in asserting the existence of a material thing which is never actually perceived.\textsuperscript{44} Here, Ayer would seem to have full confidence in the legitimacy of possible sense-contents. Actually, this is one of the difficulties he found hard to tackle in his later years. I will examine this in chapter three.

(3) The Relationship between a logical construction and its elements

According to Ayer, to say that a material thing is constructed out of sense-contents is not to say that sense-contents are factual parts of material things. This view is simply saying that a material thing is a "logical construction" and sense-contents are its elements, and this is "a linguistic proposition which states that to say anything about a material thing is always equivalent to saying something about sense-contents."\textsuperscript{45} To understand this idea, it is necessary to reconsider the relationship between a "logical construction" and its elements. Ayer's following explanation

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p.141.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., pp.140-41.
clearly explains the nature of this kind of relation, a relation between a symbol and its sign:

To say that a symbol is constituted by signs which are identical with one another in their sensible form, and in their significance, and that a sign is a sense-content, or a series of sense-contents, which is used to convey literal meaning, is not to say that a symbol is a collection, or system, of sense-contents. For when we speak of certain objects, b, c, d, ... as being elements of an object e, and of e as being constituted by b, c, d, ... we are not saying that they form part of e, in the sense in which my arm is a part of my body, or a particular set of books on my shelf is part of my collection of books. What we are saying is that all the sentences in which the symbol e occurs can be translated into sentences which do not contain e itself, or any symbol which is synonymous with e, but do contain symbols b, c, d, ... In such a case we say that e is a logical construction out of b, c, d, ... And, in general, we may explain the nature of logical constructions by saying that the introduction of symbols which denote logical constructions is a device which enables us to state complicated propositions about the elements of these constructions in a relatively simple form.  

Here, we know that the assertion that a material thing, for instance, a table, is a logical construction out of sense-contents is not a factual assertion at all. Ayer repeats

When we refer to an object as a logical construction out of certain sense-contents, we are not saying that it is actually constructed out of those sense-contents, or that the sense-contents are in any way parts of it, but are merely expressing, in a convenient, if somewhat misleading, fashion, the syntactical fact that all sentences referring to it are translatable into sentences referring to them.

From this point of view, there is no question as to whether sense-contents are mental or physical. They are neither, because the distinction between what is mental and what is physical cannot

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46 Ibid., p.63.
47 Ibid. p.123.
apply to sense-contents." It applies only to objects which are logical constructions out of them."48 Ayer writes,

What differentiates one such logical construction from another is the fact that it is constituted by different sense-contents or by sense-contents differently related. So that when we distinguish a given mental object from a given physical object, or a mental object from another physical object, or a physical object from another physical object, we are in every case distinguishing between different logical constructions whose elements cannot themselves be said to be either mental or physical.49

One of the easy ways to understand what Ayer says here, I think, is to think of the metaphor Russell used to explain neutral monism. As Russell pointed out the neutral monist maintains that the distinction between the mental and the physical is entirely an affair of arrangement. The distinction between the mental and the physical is just the same sort of difference as there is between arranging the people in London alphabetically or geographically.50

3. Definition

We have shown that Ayer's solution to the problem of perception is to introduce a definition in use by which each of us 'constructs' material things out of sense-contents. In other words, to answer the question, "What is the nature of a material thing?" is to answer the question, "What are the relations that must hold

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48 Ibid., p.123.

49 Ibid., p.123.

50 Philosophy of Logical Atomism, see Russell's Logical Atomism ed. by David Pears, Fontana\Collins, 1972, p.31.
between any two of one’s sense-contents for them to be elements of the same material thing?" Ayer’s answer to this question is given in following four steps:

The first step is to introduce four preliminary definitions. He defines four kinds of relations that two sense-contents can have to each other: "direct resemblance", "indirect resemblance", "direct continuity" and "indirect continuity":

(1) Two sense-contents directly resemble one another when there is either no difference, or only an infinitesimal difference, of quality between them.

(2) They resemble one another indirectly when they are linked by a series of direct resemblances, but are not themselves directly resemblant.

(3) Two visual, or tactual, sense-contents are directly continuous when they belong to successive members of a series of actual, or possible, sense-fields, and there is no difference, or only an infinitesimal difference, between them, with respect to the position of each in its own sense-field.

(4) They are indirectly continuous when they are related by an actual, or possible, series of such direct continuities.

The Second step is to apply these preliminary definitions to

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52 Ayer emphasizes that since we are unable, in our everyday language, to describe the properties of sense-contents with any great precision, for lack of the requisite symbols, we make "it convenient to give the solution of this problem in factual terminology." (Ibid., p.65).

certain sorts of sense-contents. According to Ayer, one may assert with regard to any two of one's visual sense-contents, or with regard to any two of one's tactual sense-contents, that they are elements of the same material thing if, and only if, they are related to one another by a relation of direct, or indirect, resemblance in certain respects, and by a relation of direct, or indirect, continuity.\(^5^4\) In other words, according to these definitions, no visual, or tactual, sense-content can be an element of more than one material thing.

The third step is to show that these separate groups of visual and tactual sense-contents are correlated. According to Ayer, this may be effected by saying that any two of one's visual and tactual groups belong to the same material thing when every element of the visual group which is of minimal visual depth forms part of the same sense-experience as an element of the tactual group which is of minimal tactual depth.\(^5^5\) However, when Ayer tries to define visual or tactual depth, he says that he has to describe it ostensively because of the lack of a more efficient way. But, since he does so, he admits that he is obliged to mention material things in his description. For instance, we may describe visual or tactual depth by saying that one visual of tactual sense-content has a greater depth than another when it is farther from the observer's body. But human bodies themselves are material things. Ayer complains that we are obliged to mention material things "because

\(^{5^4}\) Ibid., p.66.

\(^{5^5}\) Ibid., p.66.
the poverty of our language is such that we have no other verbal means of explaining what their properties are."\textsuperscript{56}

In the final step, Ayer claims that what is required is "the provision of a rule for translating sentences which refer to the 'real' qualities of material things."\textsuperscript{57} The answer, says Ayer, is that to say of a certain quality of that it is the real quality of a given material thing is to say that it characterises those elements of the thing which are the most conveniently measured of all the elements which possess qualities of the kind in question.\textsuperscript{58} For instance, he explains, when I look at a coin and assert that it is really round in shape, I am not asserting that the shape of the sense-content is round, nor that shape of all the visual, or tactual, elements of the coin is round, "what I am asserting is that roundness of shape characterises those elements of the coin which are experienced from the point of view from which measurements of shape are most conveniently carried out."\textsuperscript{59} If this example is still not very clear, here is another example. I assert that the real colour of the paper on which I am writing is white, even though it may not always appear to be white, because whiteness of colour characterises those visual elements of the paper which are experienced in the conditions in which the greatest

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p.67.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p.66.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p.67.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., pp.67-68.
discrimination of colours is possible.⁶⁰

Now, Ayer says, we can define relations of quality, or position, between material things in terms of the relations of quality, or position, which obtain between such 'privileged' elements.⁶¹

Ayer concludes:

This definition, or rather, this outline of a definition, of symbols which stand for material things is intended to have the same sort of effect as the definition of descriptive phrases which we gave as our original example of the process of philosophical analysis. It serves to increase our understanding of the sentences in which we refer to material things.⁶²

It is worth noting, as many philosophers have pointed out, that Ayer's definition have at least two difficulties.

(1) Although Ayer admits that there is a problem of impurity in factual terminology by which we describe the properties of sense-contents, he still believes that this is the matter of technical details. He blames it on the poverty of language.

However, the real problem is whether it is really possible to specify sense-contents without recourse to material-object language. Let's consider a book. The formula "sense-contents of a rectangular, red, solid-seeming shape on a flat brown expanse" would not differentiate the book from, say, a chocolate box. The temptation therefore is to say "red, rectangular, booklike groups

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.68.
⁶¹ Ibid., p.68.
⁶² Ibid. p.68.
of sense-contents". But then one no longer has an acceptable translation: the translation not only is impure, but seems to be circular.

As one philosopher points out, the language of sense-data actually "is parasitic upon the language of material objects." He seems to me that we have to refer to the object in order to explain which sense-data it consist of. We cannot identify particular objects in purely sense-content terms; we can do this only by reference to a fixed spatio-temporal framework which is itself established by reference to external physical objects.

(2) Although Ayer defined a possible sense-content as one which "would occur if certain specifiable conditions were fulfilled," he does not realize the difficulty of specifying how these certain conditions can be fulfilled, as he clearly realizes in his later years. The two important definitions in his solution, indirect resemblance and indirect continuity, are based on the concept of possible sense-contents.

4. Solution: Significance and Characteristic

This solution to the problem of perception, according to Ayer, has dissolved an outstanding and important philosophical dispute -

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64 See P. F. Strawson: Individuals, Methuen, 1959, Chapter I.

65 Language, Truth and Logic, p.66.
the dispute concerning the relationship of mind and matter. He points out:

There is no philosophical problem concerning the relationship of mind and matter, other than the linguistic problems of defining certain symbols which denote logical constructions in terms of symbols which denote sense-contents. The problems with which philosophers have vexed themselves in the past, concerning the possibility of bridging the "gulf" between mind and matter in knowledge or in action, are all fictitious problems arising out of the senseless metaphysical conception of mind and matter, or minds and material things, as "substances".66

This dissolution exactly illustrates what Ayer maintains - the function of philosophy essentially is the analysis of language. As he claims, since the propositions of philosophy are linguistically necessary, and so analytic, the philosopher's function "is to clarify the propositions of science by exhibiting their logical relationship, and by defining the symbols which occur in them."67 Therefore, according to Ayer, the philosopher, as an analyst, is not directly concerned with the physical properties of things. He is concerned only with the way in which we speak about them.68 As Ayer emphasizes repeatedly:

The proposition 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. Accordingly, we may say that philosophy is a department of logic. For we shall see that the characteristic mark of a purely logical enquiry is that it is concerned with the formal consequences of our

66 Ibid., p.124.
67 Ibid., pp.31-32.
68 Ibid., p.57.
definitions and not with questions of empirical fact.\textsuperscript{69}

For this reason, the real purpose of Ayer's solution, as Ayer himself explains it, is to show that there is nothing in the nature of philosophy to warrant the existence of conflicting philosophical parties or "schools". Accordingly, says Ayer, "we who are interested in the condition of philosophy can no longer acquiesce in the existence of party divisions among philosophers. For we know that if the questions about which the parties contend are logical in character, they can be definitively answered."\textsuperscript{70}

Now, let us briefly examine the characteristics of Ayer's solution in comparison with three other thinkers in the empiricist tradition.

(1) Ayer's contention that "Philosophy is a department of logic", makes us naturally think of Russell's assertion, "the essence of philosophy is logic". As we know, Russell and Ayer shared very similar philosophical interests. To some extent, we can say that Ayer is one of Russell's closest followers. As Ayer himself admits in his later years,

...even in my most positivist period, I've always been mainly interested in the theory of knowledge. I think that philosophy for me always has been a question of searching for proof or for justification - asking the question which runs through British empiricism: 'What ground do we have for these claims to knowledge?' I think this has always been my dominant interest, as it was Russell's, who is the philosopher whom I follow most closely. I believe it can be shown that all Russell's

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., p.57.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., pp.133-34.
philosophy has been based on this quest for reassurance.\textsuperscript{71}

One of the major aspects concerning the problem of the foundation of our knowledge in Russell's early philosophy\textsuperscript{72} is what he calls the problem of our knowledge of the external world, in which the so called the problem of perception is included.\textsuperscript{73}

The main directions Ayer and Russell adopt to try to solve the problem of perception are almost the same, that is, they both try to construct a material thing (or a physical object) out of sense-experience.

Russell's starting-point is to define what he calls "hard data" by which he primarily means "the particular facts of sense and the general truth of logic", then he raises the question: "Can the existence of anything other than our hard data be inferred from the existence of those data?"\textsuperscript{74} His answer is that we can reduce all our other knowledge of external world to hard data by the application of his logical-analytic method, which is actually inspired by an analogous idea in his logicistic interpretation of arithmetic - a natural number $n$ can be identified with the class of all class with exactly $n$ elements. As numbers can be defined as "logical fictions", physical objects can be defined as the class of

\textsuperscript{71} Bryan Magee:Modern British Philosophy, Chapter three, conversation with A. J. Ayer, p.60.

\textsuperscript{72} Here, I mean his philosophical period of Logical Atomism.


\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., p.73.
system of all the possible perspectives, or series of classes of data. Hence, "all the aspects of a thing are real, whereas the thing is a mere logical construction."\textsuperscript{75}

As we have seen in the previous sections, Ayer’s understanding of "logical construction" is almost the same as Russell’s. For both, a logical construction, as a fiction, a symbol, when rightly analyzed, will disappear. In this sense, both believe that to say anything about a material thing (a physical object) is always equivalent to saying something about sense-contents (sense-data).

But, there is a clear distinction between the two philosophers in how each views the nature of the problem.

For Russell, the problem of our knowledge of the external world is one of the oldest factual problems of philosophy. Although the tool he uses to tackle this problem is purely logical, the problem itself is still a metaphysical one. His solution to the problem can also be seen as a necessary step to construct his system of metaphysics - his logical atomism.

On the contrary, as we already mentioned, Ayer sees the problem as a linguistic question, not a metaphysical one. This is not only saying that the method we use to solve the problem is linguistic, but also the problem itself is a linguistic question. Only in this way, according to Ayer, can we thoroughly adopt a phenomenalist position, so as to adhere to empiricism.

Therefore, a distinction between the two philosophers can be seen from their respective attitude towards metaphysics. For

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., p.89.
Russell, his logical method is a tool to construct a new metaphysics, while Ayer rather uses the same tool to eliminate all kinds of traditional metaphysics.

The reason for the different attitudes between the two philosophers toward this problem, I think, consists in their different opinions about the nature of philosophy. Russell sees logic as the essence of philosophy; however, on this basis a certain kind of metaphysics is established. He believes that philosophy should include a certain kind of metaphysical truth. For Ayer, all the propositions of philosophy are linguistically necessary, and so analytic; they contain nothing metaphysical, but only analytical truth.

Although Ayer follows Russell in holding that a physical object is a logical construction out of sense-data, his position concerning the nature of philosophy is not based on Russell, but on Hume. As we have seen above, Ayer's attitude towards philosophy is definitely based on his doctrine of dividing two kinds of propositions, which derived from the same doctrine of Hume's.\(^{76}\)

When Ayer was in his sixties, he was asked to restate the central doctrines of *Language, Truth and Logic* baldly and clearly. "They are very simple," he answered,

They derived very much from Hume. In fact, logical positivism, as its name would suggest, is a blending of the extreme empiricism of Hume with the modern logical techniques developed by people like Bertrand Russell. In outline the main principle that I put forward in the book was that significant propositions can be divided into two

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\(^{76}\) Ibid., p.31.
classes.\textsuperscript{77}

(2) Equipped with modern logical techniques, Ayer baldly claims that his own version of phenomenalism is more thoroughgoing than any other kind of empiricism.

Berkeley and Ayer both are phenomenalists, because, as Ayer points out, they both claim "material things are constituted out of sense-contents" Against Moore's realist criticism saying that Berkeley makes a faulty analysis of sensation through failing to distinguish between the object sensed and the act of consciousness which is directed upon it, Ayer upholds the stand of Berkeley's. He writes,

\begin{quote}
I do not think that this criticism is just. For these acts of sensing, which realists reproach Berkeley for having ignored, appear to me to be completely inaccessible to any observation. ... I believe that he was right to regard these "ideas" as the contents rather that the objects of sensations, and consequently that he was justified in asserting that a "sensible quality" could not conceivably exist unsensed. Accordingly we may allow that his dictum "Ess est percipi", is true with regard to sense-contents.\textsuperscript{78}
\end{quote}

But, according to Ayer, Berkeley "failed to give a completely correct account of the way in which material things are constituted out of sense-contents."\textsuperscript{79} How? Because, Ayer points out, Berkeley misunderstood the relationship between material things and sense-contents. He regarded a material thing as really the sum of its


\textsuperscript{78} Language, Truth and Logic, p.140.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., p.53.
"sensible qualities", that is to say, a real aggregate of sense-contents. Then, it would follow from this understanding that nothing could exist unperceived. "But, in fact," Ayer writes,

we have seen that sense-contents are not in any way parts of the material things which they constitute; the sense in which a material thing is reducible to sense-contents is simply that it is a logical construction and they are its elements, and this, as we have previously made clear, is a linguistic proposition....

We have seen that the distinction between Ayer's phenomenalism and Berkeley's is that, for Ayer, a material thing is to be defined, not as a collection of sense-contents, but as a logical construction out of them. In other words, for Ayer, the only mistake Berkeley makes when he answers the question "What is a material thing?" is that he treats it as a matter of fact, not as a question of language, or matter of linguistic definition. In this sense, Ayer called his own solution a thoroughgoing phenomenalism.

(3) Mach's positivist attitude towards this issue, it seems to Ayer, is also not thoroughgoing. According to Mach's doctrine about the significance of particular symbols, all symbols, other than logical constants, must either themselves stand for sense-contents or else be explicitly definable in terms of symbols which stand for sense-contents. It is plain that such physical symbols as "atom" or "molecule" or "electron" fail to satisfy this condition, so Mach and some positivists regard the use of them as illegitimate. To Mach's position, Ayer responds,

80 Ibid., p.140.
81 Ibid., p.136.
They would not have been so ruthless if they had realized that they ought also, if they were to be consistent in the application of their criterion, to have condemned the use of symbols which stand for material things. For, as we have seen, even such familiar symbols as "table" or "chair" or "coat" cannot be defined explicitly in terms of symbols which stand for sense-contents, but only in use. 82

He repeated: "it must again be emphasized that we are not committed by our logical thesis to any of the factual doctrines which have been propounded by empiricist authors." 83 Actually, as we have seen, he distinguishes his own solution from all other empiricist solutions. As he writes,

For the empiricist doctrine to which we are committed is a 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. 84

As we have seen above, the most striking characteristic of Ayer's solution to the problem of perception compared with the other three philosophers in empiricist tradition is that he seeks to defend the empiricism which derives from David Hume by the method of linguistic analysis.

5. Revision: Position and Method

Can Ayer's empiricist position in solving the problem of perception be justified by his linguistic-analytic method? Can the

82 Ibid., p.136.
83 Ibid., pp.136-37.
84 Ibid., p.122.
traditional problem of perception be solved by merely appealing to "the definition in use"?

Ten years after the first edition of Language, Truth and Logic, in the introduction to the second edition, Ayer seems to feel that his solution was inadequate, and he tries to modify it. However, his basic position remains the same. He still maintains that the empiricist position in this book can be carried out by the linguistic-analytic method. What he does is to state his standpoint in a milder way.

He admits that it was a serious mistake to assert that "philosophical analysis consisted mainly in the provision of 'definitions in use.'"\(^{85}\) Because, in philosophical analysis, "the cases in which this process actually yields a set of definitions are the exception rather than the rule."\(^{86}\) There are other cases of philosophical analysis, he pointed out, "in which nothing even approaching a definition is either provided or sought."\(^{87}\) For example, G. E. Moore suggests that "existence is not a predicate." According to Moore, it makes good sense to say "Most tame tigers growl," but it would be nonsense to say "Most tame tigers exist". Consequently, by pointing out a peculiarity in the use of the word "exist", Moore helps to protect us from a serious fallacy, "so that his procedure," Ayer said, "though different from that which Russell follows in his theory of descriptions, tends to achieve the

\(^{85}\) Ibid., p.23.

\(^{86}\) Ibid., p.24.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., p.24.
same philosophical end." In philosophical analysis, Ayer admits, "what is required is not necessarily a definition." 

The reason why we cannot regard a method of translating statements about material things into observation-statements as the solution to the traditional problem of perception, as Ayer explains after he improves his verification principle in a weaker version, is as follows:

No finite set of observation statements is ever equivalent to a statement about a material thing. 

This is merely a simple fact, but a crucial point to understanding Ayer's modification. Because of this difficulty, according to Ayer, his philosophical analytic method in the solution to the problem of perception should be understood in a more liberal way:

What we can do, however, is to construct a schema which shows what sort of relations must obtain between sense-contents for it to be true, in any given case, that a material thing exists: and while this process cannot, properly speaking, be said to yield a definition, it does have the effect of showing how the one type of statement is related to the other.

To explain his modification, he gives us an example. In the field of political philosophy, one will not be able to translate statements on the political level into statements about individual

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88 Ibid., p.25.
89 Ibid., p.25.
90 Ibid., p.24.
91 See Hempel and Carnap's expositions in Aspects of Scientific Explanation and Testability and Meaning.
persons, for any particular set of statements about the behaviour of individuals cannot be exactly equivalent to "what is said about a State". Nevertheless, Ayer says,

here again it is possible to indicate what types of relations must obtain between individual persons for the political statements in question to be true: so that even if no actual statements are obtained, the meaning of the political statements is appropriately clarified.\textsuperscript{93}

It is obvious that this modification is a kind of retreat from his narrow and strict position of "definition in use" to his mild doctrine of "schema". However, he still persists in one of the his basic positions - the nature of a philosophical proposition is analytic. He explains this standpoint in following way:

A lexicographer also seeks to give information about the usage of words, but the philosopher differs from him in being concerned, as I have tried to indicate, not with the use of particular expressions but with classes of expressions; and whereas the propositions of the lexicographer are empirical, philosophical propositions, if they are true, are usually analytic.\textsuperscript{94}

If philosophical propositions are still analytic, and linguistically necessary, the solution to the problem of perception can only be a matter of language, not a matter of facts.

Can this modification be justified? Can we still say that the solution to the problem of perception is a matter of language according to Ayer’s modification?

Here, we have noticed that there is a difficulty concerning the nature of the solution, or rather a paradox.

On the one hand, according to Ayer, the solution to the

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., p.24.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., p.26.
problem of perception is a matter of language, not a factual question. If we treat it as a matter of fact, we will never really construct a material thing out of certain sense-contents. This is an empirical fact. To overcome this difficulty, according to Ayer, the best way is to treat the problem as a linguistic question.

On the other hand, if the solution does not refer to empirical facts completely, and is merely an analytic proposition, then there is at least a simple linguistic fact that "no finite set of observation statements is ever equivalent to a statement about a material thing." And, most importantly, this linguistic fact cannot be inferred from any analytic or linguistic truth, but obviously can be based on its corresponding empirical fact. This makes his pure linguistic solution impossible. Because the solution itself does refer to the matter of fact, and it cannot absolutely be separated from empirical fact. Can any truth of a statement in a certain language absolutely be separated with a certain empirical fact? This question is similar to the question, Can any proposition in mathematics absolutely be separated from any certain empirical fact? It is worthwhile to have further discussion on this open question.

This difficulty, it seems to me, actually stems from a larger difficulty in Ayer's notion of a philosophical proposition. On the one hand, a philosophical proposition, according to Ayer, should be analytical, like a priori propositions of logic. On the other hand, a philosophical proposition can hardly be treated this way, because it always refers to the empirical facts in a certain way, or on a
certain level.

Ayer indeed feels that this is a serious problem, for he always attempts to find a clear statement about the nature of philosophical propositions, but he never satisfies himself. In his sixties, when he was asked to explain his assertion in Language, Truth and Logic that "the proper task of philosophy was analysis", he admits frankly:

I don't think I was at all clear about what I did think analysis was. ... I think that there are an enormous number of different things which are comprehended under the heading of analysis. ... I don't know - I am rather puzzled by this. I agree that philosophical statements don't fit neatly into any category. 95

If we say that Ayer overcomes this dilemma in his later years, perhaps because he has given up an empiricist dogma - that sharp distinction between two kinds of propositions, empirical propositions and analytical propositions. This is the real reason why he cannot find a clear explanation to the nature of philosophical proposition in his earlier period. His distinction between two kinds of propositions is so extreme and absolute that the proposition asserting this distinction itself - a philosophical proposition, cannot find its own proper place. In this sense, it should be admitted that empirical dogma entails the paradox of empiricism itself.

95 Bryan Magee: Modern British Philosophy, p.50-57.
Chapter Two Linguistic Phenomenalism

-Ayer's defence for his phenomenalist solution to the Problem of Perception in *The Foundation of Empirical Knowledge*

Ayer's second book *The Foundation of Empirical Knowledge* came only four years after *Language, Truth and Logic*. The problem of perception, which, as we have seen, is regarded as an example exhibiting Ayer's view of the nature of philosophical analysis in his first book, is one of the central topics in this book. He began using "sense-data" instead of using "sense-contents", but the meaning of both terms is exactly the same for him. The main task he tries to accomplish in this book, as he himself describes it, is as follows:

I was trying to make what's known as a phenomenalist programme work. I was trying to achieve what I suppose Berkeley and Hume did, in a sense, set out to do, and show that all propositions about physical objects could be exhibited as propositions about sense data.  

His discussion of the problem of perception in this book concentrates on the following three aspects: the introduction of sense-data; the characterization of sense-data; and the constitution of material things in term of sense-data.

1. The Introduction of Sense-data

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Why is it necessary to introduce sense-data as the objects we directly perceive when we try to justify our belief in the existence of material things? To answer this question, it seems to Ayer, another question should be answered first, that is, "Why may we not say that we are directly aware of material things?"

According to Ayer, the answer is provided by what is known as the argument from illusion. This argument, says Ayer, as it is ordinarily stated, is based on the fact that material things may present different appearances to different observers, or to the same observer in different conditions, and that the character of these appearances is to some extent causally determined by that state of the conditions and the observer.97 For instance, a coin which looks circular from one point of view may look elliptical from another; a stick which normally appears straight looks bent when it is seen in water; or to people who take drugs such as mescal, things appear to change their colours. The familiar cases of mirror images, and double vision, and complete hallucinations, such as the mirage, says Ayer, provide further examples. This is not a peculiarity of visual appearances. The same things occurs in the domains of the other senses.

Now, we will consider one of these examples, say, that of the stick which is refracted in water, and see what is to be inferred. It must be assumed firstly that the stick does not really change its shape when it is placed in water. Then it follows that at least one of the visual appearances of the stick is delusive; for it

97 The Foundation of Empirical Knowledge, p.3.
cannot be both crooked and straight. Nevertheless, says Ayer, even in the case where what we see is not the real quality of a material thing, it is supposed that we are still seeing something; and that it is convenient to give this a name. And it is for this purpose that philosophers introduce the term 'sense-datum'. By using it they are able to give what seems to them a satisfactory answer to the question: What is the object of which we are directly aware, in perception, if it is not part of any material thing? Thus, according to sense-data theorists, when a man sees a mirage in the desert, he is not thereby perceiving any material thing; for the oasis which he thinks he is perceiving does not exist. At the same time, it is argued, his experience is not an experience of nothing; it has a definite content.

After completing his exposition of the argument from illusion, Ayer points out:

In considering its validity it is important first to determine whether the question it raises concerning the nature of the objects that we directly perceive is to be regarded as a question of language or as a question of fact. In most cases the philosophers who have made use of this argument have taken it to prove a matter of fact. 

Do the sense-data theorists treat the question as a question of fact? According to Ayer, the argument from illusion is based on certain kinds of assumptions concerning empirical facts. For

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98 Ibid., p.4.
99 Ibid., p.11.
100 In FEK, Ayer at least exposed three kinds of these assumptions when he criticized H. H. Price's proof for the argument from illusion. These assumptions are:
(1) If veridical and delusive perceptions were perceptions of
instance, in the example of the stick which is refracted in water, they assume that the stick does not really change its shape when it is placed in water. This is an empirical assumption, one that could be denied without self-contradiction. This kind of assumption is not logically necessary. If it is to be validated it must be on empirical grounds.

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. We say that the temperature of the water that feels hot to one hand and cold to the other is really uniform, because it is observed to yield a uniform reading on a thermometer.

According to Ayer, the nature of this kind of empirical evidence is that "it is in every instance a matter of our being able to establish a certain order among our experiences."\(^{101}\)

Sense-data theorists thought that the nature of the empirical evidence is sufficient to establish those various assumptions. Ayer objects of different types, they would always be qualitatively distinguishable.

(2) They would not be capable of being ranged in a continuous series.

(3) Material things can exist and have properties without being causally dependent on any observer.

These assumptions, according to Ayer, are taken for granted by H. H. Price to construct his three subsidiary arguments which are to be considered as the further proof for the argument from illusion.

However, to understand Ayer's position and criticism generally, it is enough to grasp his idea from his examples.

\(^{101}\) The Foundation of Empirical Knowledge, p.16.
says, "I wish to consider what would be the position of one who, though he acknowledged the particular facts about our experiences that constitute this evidence, still chose to deny the proposition about material things that these facts are supposed to prove."\(^{102}\) For example, one may imagine his saying that the fact that the shape of the penny still appears the same when the observer returns to his original point of view does not prove that its real shape has been unchanged; for it might be the case that the shape that it originally appeared to have was in reality lost and then regained. How then is one who holds this position to be refuted? Ayer says that "the answer is that so long as we persist in regarding the issue as one concerning a matter of fact it is impossible for us to refute him. We cannot refute him, because, as far as the facts are concerned, there is really no dispute between us."\(^{103}\)

According to Ayer, the disagreement just consists of the fact that he refuses to describe the phenomena in the way in which we describe them. Where we say that the real shape of coin is unchanging, he prefers to say that its shape is really undergoing some cyclical process of change. "In other words, we are not disputing about the validity of two conflicting sets of hypotheses, but about the choice of two different languages."\(^{104}\) If the question concerning the nature of object is to be regarded as a question of fact, which is also the question of truth or falsehood,

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\(^{102}\) Ibid., p.17.

\(^{103}\) Ibid., pp.17-8.

\(^{104}\) Ibid., p.18.
there must be some disagreement about the nature of the empirical facts. But if it is to be treated as a question of language, no such disagreement exists.

The question now is how could we legitimately introduce sense-data as our convenient language? In Ayer's analysis, there are at least two kinds of usage of words like, "perceive", "see", etc. We can use the word "perceive" in such a way that to say of an object that it is perceived does not entail saying that it exists or has the qualities that it appears to have. And there is in fact a correct and familiar usage of words "perceive", "see", etc. in which to say of an object that it is perceived or seen does not carry the implication that it exists or has the qualities that it appears to have. For example, a man will say that he sees a distant star which has an extension greater than that of the earth; but if he is asked to describe what he is actually seeing, he may say that it is a silvery speck no bigger than a sixpence. Although there is no problem so long as one keeps the two usages distinct, Ayer points out, "the important point to notice is that we do not require the two usages in order to describe the fact."\textsuperscript{105} In ordinary usage of our language, we use the phrase "appears to be" instead of "is" when we express the fact one sees a star no bigger than a sixpence. But this usage "has still misled philosophers, as their use of the argument from illusion shows."\textsuperscript{106} Ayer asserts:

In order to avoid these ambiguities, what the advocates

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., p.23.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., p.24.
of the sense-datum theory have done is to decide both to apply the word "see" of any other words that designate modes of perception to delusive as well as to 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 that it appears to have. No doubt they also use these words in other, more familiar, senses. But it is this usage that leads them to the introduction of sense-data.\textsuperscript{107}

Thus, according to Ayer, we arrive at the conclusion that in all cases of perception, the objects of which we are directly aware are sense-data and not material things. This cannot be treated as a statement of fact, but can reasonably be accepted as rule of language. When we adopt this technical terminology, we must realize that it does not in itself add to our knowledge of empirical facts. At best, "it enables us only to refer to familiar facts in a clearer and more convenient way."\textsuperscript{108}

2. The Characterization of Sense-Data

For the sake of brevity, I will summarize Ayer's discussion of the characterization of sense-data in the following points.

(1) The Usage of the Word "Sense-Data"

According to Ayer, the proposition we ordinarily express by saying that person A is perceiving a material thing \( M \), which appears to him to have the quality \( x \), may be expressed in the

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., p.24.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., p.26.
sense-datum terminology by saying that A is sensing a sense-datum s, which really has the quality x, and which belongs to M.\textsuperscript{109}

To explain this translation, Ayer emphasizes, in our ordinary language, it is assumed that the word "perceive", or whatever word may be employed to designate the kind of perceiving that is in question, is being used in such a way that to say that a material thing M is perceived entails saying that it exists. However, in the sense-datum terminology, we do not make this assumption. Therefore, we must say not that s belongs to M but only that A takes it to belong to M, and so allow for the possibility that M does not exist.\textsuperscript{110} From this, Ayer points out, it follows that,

to assert that people actually do experience sense-data need be to assert no more than that such propositions as that I am now perceiving a clock or a pen or a table, in a sense of "perceiving" that does not necessarily entail that these objects exist, are sometimes true.\textsuperscript{111}

Ayer believes that it is clear, not merely that many propositions of this kind are in fact true, but also that we often have good reason to suppose that are. Therefore, Ayer says, I can claim to be using the word "sense-datum" in such a way that there can be no serious doubt that sense-data actually are experienced.\textsuperscript{112}

However, many philosophers who adopt the "theory of sense-data" try to define sense-data in a different way. The definition

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., p.58.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., p.58.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., p.59.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., p.59.
of sense-data that these philosophers commonly give is that they are the objects of which, in sense-perception, one is directly aware.\textsuperscript{113}

Ayer points out that this definition is not illuminating, for there is no accepted meaning of the expression "direct awareness." On the one hand, according to this definition, we ordinarily say that we are directly aware of an object, when our belief in the existence of object does not involve any conscious process of inference. If the expression "direct awareness" is used in this sense, then it will be true to say that we are directly aware of material things, such as chairs and tables and pens. On the other hand, those who define sense-data as the objects of which one can be directly aware maintain that one cannot be directly aware of such objects as tables or pens, because they also maintain that our perception of such things may always delusive.\textsuperscript{114} Furthermore, given the propositional function "A is directly aware of x", it may be asked where are values that will satisfy it? Ayer says the answer is that one has to provide these values by introducing "sense-datum", or some synonymous term. That is to say, the expressions "direct awareness" and "sense-datum" are to be regarded as correlative. Ayer emphasizes that since each of the expressions,

\textsuperscript{113} Ayer writes: by this they must be understood to mean, not that only those objects of which someone is in fact directly aware are to be called sense-data, but rather that the word "sense-datum" is to stand for any object of which it is conceivable that someone should be directly aware. (Ibid., p.59).

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., pp.60-62.
"direct awareness" and "sense-datum", is being used in a special, technical sense, it is not satisfactory merely to define one in terms of the other.\textsuperscript{115}

(2) The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of the Existence of Sense-Data

According to Ayer, Berkeley's principle that to exist is to be perceived can be considered in two aspects: it can be applied to material things, or be applied to sense-data. The results of these two kinds of application are totally different.

In the case of material things, Ayer points out, 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.\textsuperscript{116} In a word, the existence of a material thing is a matter of induction, and is to be determined with reference to possible rather than actual perceptions. Therefore, according to Ayer, that a material thing should actually be perceived is not a necessary condition of the existence of a material thing.\textsuperscript{117}

In the case of sense-data, things are different. "For here the problem is not to elucidate the conventions that govern the use of an existing language, but to formulate conventions for an

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., p.62.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., p.67.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., pp.67-68.
artificial language."\textsuperscript{118} One of the purposes for which we introduce the sense-datum terminology, according to Ayer "is that it should enable us to deal with the problems which arise from the fact that material things can appear to have qualities that they so not really have, and can appear to exist when they do not."\textsuperscript{119} For example, the sentences:

(1a) I am perceiving a brown carpet, which looks yellow to me.

(2a) The drunkard sees animals which are not really there. can be translated into the sentences like:

(1b) I am sensing a yellow sense-datum which belongs to a brown carpet.

(2b) The drunkard sees sense-data which he takes to belong to animals, but which do not really belong to anything.

The advantage of this procedure, says Ayer, is that it makes it possible for us to say that something real is being experienced, even in cases where our perceptions are delusive. But this advantage is sacrificed if we extend the distinction between appearance and reality to sense-data themselves. For this reason, we should not allow any meaning to such sentences as "I am sensing a yellow sense-datum, but it is really brown" or "perhaps the sense-data that I am now sensing do not really exist". Ayer emphasizes that if we treat sense-data as if they were themselves material things or characteristics of material things, the

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., p.68.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., p.68.
terminology of sense-data will be superfluous.\textsuperscript{120} Therefore, he says, we must decide not to admit the distinction between appearance and reality, or veridical and delusive perception, to sense-data themselves. For this reason, Ayer points out, we must make it a sufficient condition of the existence of a sense-datum that it should be actually be sensed."\textsuperscript{121} Later, he adds, "I find it advisable to make it a necessary as well as a sufficient condition of the existence of sense-data that they should in fact be sensed."\textsuperscript{122}

(3) Sense-Data and Incorrigibility

According to Ayer, if one uses the word "knowledge" in such a way that it is essential that the object known should exist independently of knowing it, one cannot say that the awareness of sense-data is itself a kind of knowledge. "But we will still have to say that it involves knowledge." Because, "whenever we are directly aware of sense-datum, it follows that we know some proposition which describes the sense-datum to be true."\textsuperscript{123} But what is the character of this kind of knowledge?

Because it is widely held that when we speak of knowing a proposition which describes a presented sense-datum, we imply that our belief in the truth of such proposition could not conceivably

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., p.69.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., p.70.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., p.71.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., p.80.
be mistaken, such propositions are sometimes called "indubitable" or "incorrigible". Now, a further question is: How can any empirical proposition be indubitable or incorrigible in this sense? We say that an a priori proposition is indubitable because its contradiction is self-contradictory, but this cannot be the ground for asserting that propositions describing presented sense-data are indubitable, "for it is not maintained that these propositions are analytic." Ayer asks, "what other ground can there be for such an assertion?"

The answer, for Ayer, is that an "incorrigible" or "indubitable" proposition is completely verified by the existence of the sense-datum which it describes. "So it is inferred that to doubt the truth of such a proposition is not merely irrational but meaningless."\(^{124}\) Because, says Ayer, it is only significant to doubt when there is a logical possibility of error. If one uses a sentence such as "this is green" merely to designate a present sense-datum, then no proposition is being asserted to the truth of which any further evidence would be relevant. And from this it is concluded, according to Ayer, that all one can properly mean in such a case by saying that one doubts whether this is green is that one is doubting whether 'green' is the correct word to use.\(^{125}\) Therefore, according to Ayer, the only possible mistake I can make in such a proposition is a verbal mistake. For instance, I take "green" as the name of the colour of a sense-datum which should be

\(^{124}\) Ibid., p.83.

\(^{125}\) Ibid., p.83.
"red" in a correct expression. Ayer emphasizes that it is not significant to say that one doubts the truth of such a proposition in any other but a purely verbal sense.¹²⁶ In this sense, we may say that the propositions about sense-data are "indubitable" or "incorrigible".

3. The Constitution of Material Things

(1) The Relationship of Material Things to Sense-Data

The problem of perception, as I mentioned in the introduction, is a problem about the relationship between sense-experience and material things. For sense-data theorists, the introduction of sense-data will serve the purpose of clarifying this relationship.

How about the phenomenalist solution to this problem? As we know, a phenomenalist holds that the term "material thing" is not synonymous with any term or set of terms of sense-data. How does he specify the relationship of material things to sense-data?

On the one hand, according to Ayer, as a phenomenalist, he will claim that it is logically necessary that any situation that in any degree establishes the existence of a material thing should also establish the occurrence of a sense-datum. This is because, as Ayer points out, "we have constructed the sense-datum language in such a way that whenever it is true that a material thing is perceived, it must also be true that a sense-datum is sensed."¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Ibid., p.83.
¹²⁷ Ibid., p.230.
In other words, for a phenomenalist, the introduction of sense-data language is a matter of convention.

On the other hand, a situation which directly establishes the existence of a sense-datum does not conclusively establish the existence of a material thing. Because, as Ayer points out, "it is not wholly a matter of convention that a situation which establishes the existence of a sense-datum should also be evidence in some degree for the existence of a material thing." 128 According to Ayer, the degree to which the existence of the material thing is established will depend upon "certain special features of our sensory experience", "especially upon the nature of the contexts in which they occur." He emphasizes that "whatever the strength of this evidence may be, it will always be logically compatible with the hypothesis that this material thing is not in all respects what it appears to be, or even that it does not exist at all." 129

According to Ayer, it is impossible, by any valid process of inference, to make a transition from what is observed to anything that is conceived as being, in principle, unobservable; all that sensory evidence will be evidence for or against is the possible occurrence of further sense-data still. 130 From this, according to Ayer, it seems to follow that, even though the term "material thing" is not synonymous with any set of terms that stand for

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128 Ibid., p.230.
129 Ibid., p.230.
130 Ibid., p.231.
species of sense-data,

Any proposition that refers to a material thing must somehow be expressible in terms of sense-data, if it is to be empirically significant.\textsuperscript{131}

We know that a common way of expressing this conclusion is to say that material things are nothing but collections of actual and possible sense-data. But Ayer points out that "this is a misleading formula and one that provokes objections."\textsuperscript{132} To reach a correct understanding and to avoid all kind of objections, it must be made clear that the statement that material things consist of sense-data designates not a factual but a linguistic relationship.

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 referred exclusively to sense-data; and the inclusion of possible as well as actual sense-data among the elements of the material things must be taken only to imply a recognition that some of these statements about sense-data will have to be hypothetical.\textsuperscript{133}

The purpose of the phenomenalist analysis is to elucidate the meaning of statements about material things by referring to sense-data. He says, "... a reference to sense-data will provide a general elucidation of the meaning of statements about material things by showing what is the kind of evidence by which they may be verified."\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., p.231.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., p.231
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., p.232.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., p.235.
(2) The General Principle of Constructing the World of Material Things

Now, for Ayer, the question is: What can be certainly done in the way of "analyzing material things in terms of sense-data"? Ayer says:

There are certain general features about the way in which any expression referring to a material thing applies to phenomena that one can profitably undertake to analyze. This is to say, one may be able to explain what are the relations between sense-data that make it possible for us successfully to employ the physical terminology that we do. If I may now use the metaphor of construction without being misunderstood, I can describe the task I am about to undertake as that of showing what are the general principle on which, from our resources of sense-data, we "construct" the world of material things.\(^{135}\)

Actually, the main problem, to Ayer, 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."\(^{136}\) Hume himself interpreted this as a question about the sources of an illusion. He concluded that the belief in the continued and distinct existence of objects was a fallacious product of the imagination. Ayer points out that Hume failed to see "that the relations of 'constancy' and coherence' between 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

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\(^{135}\) Ibid., pp.242-3.

\(^{136}\) See A Treatise of Human Nature, Book I, Part IV, Section ii.
objects."\textsuperscript{137}

But, what precisely are these relations of constancy and coherence? Let's follow Ayer's example to see how he explains and defines these relations.

At the present moment in my visual sense-field, I am perceiving a table covered with paper, and beyond the table a chair, and beyond the chair a section of a book case fastened to a wall. If I now turn aside to look out of the window on my right, these particular sense-data cease to exist, and in their place I obtain a new set of visual sense-data, I am perceiving a garden fringe with trees, and beyond the trees the roof of a cottage, and in the distance a thickly wooded hill. Now, suppose that I reverse the direction of my movements. In that case I shall find "this fragment of my sense-history repeats itself, but in a reverse order." Ayer points out:

There will be a general resemblance between two sections of my experience; so that I shall find not merely that individual sense-data are closely similar to ones that I sensed before, but that they occur in similar contexts. ... And I find also that I am able to obtain any number of 'reversible' series in which a sense-field of this kind occurs, not as an end but as a middle term. In some cases, indeed, the 'reproduction' of a term in such a series is not perfect, for I may have experiences that would ordinarily be described by saying that some particular thing had altered its position, or undergone a change of quality, or even that it had ceased to exist altogether. But all such changes take place within a relatively stable environment.\textsuperscript{138}

Therefore, according to Ayer, these main features of the structure

\textsuperscript{137} The Foundation of Empirical Knowledge, p.244.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., pp.247-9.
of our visual experiences show us the relations of 'constancy' and 'coherence' between our visual sense-data, and they also can be called as the general principles by which we "construct" the material things". The main features giving rise to our conception of material things, for Ayer, can be summarized as follows:

(1) The relations of resemblance between individual sense-data;
(2) the comparative stability of the contexts in which these resemblant sense-data occur;
(3) the fact that the occurrence of such sense-data is systematically repeatable;
(4) the dependence of this repetition upon the movements of the observer.\(^{139}\)

Although, as we have seen, Ayer abstracts these features from his analysis on our actual process of sense-experiences, he still emphasizes that the problem of constructing a material thing out of sense-data "should be viewed as a problem about the reference of words." He says, "what my construction of the physical world amounts to is a very general and simplified description of the main assumptions about the structure of phenomena that are involved in the everyday use of physical terms."\(^{140}\)

The most we can do to the problem of perception, says Ayer at the end of the book, is to elaborate a technique for predicting the course of our sensory experience, and to adhere to it so long as it is found to be reliable. "And this is all that is essentially

\(^{139}\) Ibid., p.359.
\(^{140}\) Ibid., p.263.
involved in our belief in the reality of the physical world."\textsuperscript{141}

Chapter Three Abandoning Phenomenalism

- Ayer's Criticism of Phenomenalism in The Problem of Knowledge and in "Phenomenalism"

Ayer first abandoned phenomenalism in 1947 in the article "Phenomenalism"\textsuperscript{142}. Nine years later, in The Problem of Knowledge, which is regarded as his best book by Ayer himself,\textsuperscript{143} he discusses this topic systematically and restates his position. Because his criticism of phenomenalism in this book is not only clearer but also terser than any other of his works concerning this topic, my examination will mainly follow the arguments in this book. However, I will also discuss some of the arguments in "Phenomenalism".

1. Sense-Data Reconsidered

Although Ayer has come to have second thoughts about phenomenalism and finally rejects it in The Problem of Knowledge, he still maintains the legitimacy of introducing sense-data, and accepts the argument from illusion as the first step to introduce

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., p.274.


\textsuperscript{143} See Bryan Magee: Modern British Philosophy, p.63.
sense-data. According to Ayer, the argument from illusion brings us to the conclusion that, even granting that physical objects may sometimes be perceived as they really are, what is directly perceived is always something else.\textsuperscript{144} It is worth mentioning that he adds his discussion of the case of complete hallucinations in the \textbf{Problem of Knowledge}, when he offers his reasons for accepting the argument from illusion. He writes:

\begin{quote}
Let us take as an example Macbeth's visionary dagger: since we are concerned only with what is possible, the fact that this episode may be fictitious does not matter. There is an obvious sense in which Macbeth did not see a dagger; ... There is another sense, however, in which it may quite properly be said that he did see a dagger; to say that he saw a dagger is quite a natural way of describing his experience. But still not a real dagger; not a physical object; ... If we are to say that he saw anything, is must have been something that was accessible to him alone, something that existed only so long as this particular experience lasted; in short, a sense datum.\textsuperscript{145}
\end{quote}

Since the illusory dagger has an indistinguishably similar appearance to a real dagger and a person could equally claim to "see" either of the two, it must be admitted that what is seen in each case is an "appearance". All that can be legitimately claimed from any particular present perceptual experience is "it seems to me that I perceive it". It is facts of this sort that give rise to sense-data language.

Sense-datum language as a special usage of sensory words makes a considerable departure from ordinary usage. As he did in his previous position, Ayer still maintains that the introduction of

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., p.98.
\end{footnotesize}
sense-data is just to make "a linguistic recommendation". However, the introduction is not "a mere matter of caprice". We make sense-data language as a linguistic recommendation when we introduce a special usage of sensory words like 'hear' and 'touch' and 'see', says Ayer, it is because we feel bound to make it. The introduction is forced by the fact that it alone permits these special usages of sensory words to give an adequate account of what perception is.\textsuperscript{146}

As to the method of introducing sense-data, since in each of the cases (illusory and real) I do perceive something, we can only justifiably claim in such cases to perceive a "seeming-X", and this is precisely what the sense-data terminology was invented to do. For example, according to Ayer, we can convert the sentence "it now seems to me that I see a cigarette case" into "I am now seeing a seeming-cigarette case". He points out,

this seeming-cigarette case, which lives only in my present experience, is an example of a sense-datum. Applying this procedure to all cases of perception, whether veridical or delusive, one obtains the result that whenever anyone perceives, or thinks that he perceives, a physical object, he must at least be, in the appropriate sense, perceiving a seeming-object. These seeming-objects are sense-data; and the conclusion may be more simply expressed by saying that it is always sense-data that are directly perceived.\textsuperscript{147}

It must be admitted, however, says Ayer, that there is "something suspect" about this transition from "it now seems to me that I perceive X" to "there is a seeming-X which I now perceive",

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., p.94.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., p.106.
the latter implying "that there is a seeming-X to perceive". It may be defended, he says, on the ground that the second merely reformulates the first, using a noun form, "a seeming-X", which can replaced by a sense-data term and is more convenient for certain purposes.\footnote{148} But, he warns, "if this is allowed, one must be careful to say nothing about sense-data that cannot be translated back into the language of seeming."\footnote{149}

In spite of these difficulties, he concludes\footnote{150} that it is still possible to frame a language (the sense-data terminology) in which sense experiences can be described by the use of purely qualitative expressions which carry no references to the appearances of physical objects. He says, "such a language would not be very useful, but it could be adequate for the description of any given experience."\footnote{151} There is no reason why one who has invented such a language for recording his own private experiences should not teach it to others; and statements in such a language could be used to describe an illusory experience (e.g. 'Macbeth saw a dagger-like sense-datum') because the sense-datum statement would not imply anything as to the existence of a physical object. Sense-datum language is thus convenient for drawing the distinction between the illusory and the real and to point out the gap between the claim made by ordinary perceptual language and the lesser claim

\footnote{148} Ibid., p.115. \footnote{149} Ibid., p.120. \footnote{150} Ibid., p.123. \footnote{151} Ibid., p.123.
actually covered by the particular perceptual experience, but it is not really necessary. The distinction and the gap can be just as clearly indicated in ordinary language by saying that the particular perceptual experience only justifies the claim "it seems to me", e.g. "it seems to me that I see a dagger", while "I see a dagger" makes a further claim as to the objective existence of the physical objects. Ayer points out that "logically, the sense-datum statement might be true even though any given claim to perceive a physical object were false."\(^{152}\)

However, it must be admitted, Ayer says, that sense-data "are not strictly needed for the formulation of the sceptic's problem."\(^{153}\) There will still be the problem of perception, and there will still be the gap between evidence and conclusion which the sceptic requires. It is the gap between things as they seem and things as they are, and the problem consists in our having to justify our claims to know how physical objects are on the basis of knowing only how they seem.\(^{154}\)

It is interesting to note that in *The Problem of Knowledge* Ayer not only admits that sense-data language is not really necessary for solving the problem of perception but also does not describe the problem as a linguistic problem as he did in *Language, Truth and Logic*.

2. Ayer On the Difficulties of the Phenomenalism

\(^{152}\) Ibid., p.124.

\(^{153}\) Ibid., p.124.

\(^{154}\) Ibid., p.124.
The phenomenalist position on the problem of perception, as Ayer himself put it, "is that 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."\textsuperscript{155} As I mentioned in the introduction, phenomenalism can also be understood as a theory about the relationship between physical objects and sense-data, the theory that everything we want to say about physical objects can be solely in terms of sense-data, the things we "immediately" perceive. The phenomenalist, according to Ayer, always tries to find a logical equivalence between statements about physical objects and statements about sense-data. But this attempt presents the phenomenalist with serious difficulties.

(1) "The first difficulty which the phenomenalist has to meet is that physical objects, unlike sense-data, can exist without being perceived."\textsuperscript{156} A phenomenalist, according to Ayer, "does not deny that there are physical objects, his contention is just that, if there are any, they are constituted by sense-data."\textsuperscript{157} Whether there are any physical objects, for a phenomenalist, is a matter of empirical fact. It is enough for him that there could be physical objects; his problem is then to analyze the statements which refer

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., p.131.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., p.132.

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., p.123.
to them, so as to reduce them to the statements about sense-data. And here the fact that it is possible for physical objects to exist when they are not perceived introduces a complication into his analysis.

This fact, says Ayer, obliges the phenomenalist to hold that the statements about sense-data, into which, according to his programme, statements about physical objects are to be translated, are themselves predominantly hypothetical. The statements about sense-data will for the most part have to state not that any sense-data are actually occurring, but only that in a given set of circumstances certain sense-data would occur. In other words, says Ayer, the majority of the statements will not describe how things actually do seem to anyone, but only how they would seem if the appropriate conditions were fulfilled.

John Stuart Mill's famous position that physical objects can be described as "permanent possibilities of sensation" had always been highly approved by Ayer. Now Ayer admits that "a permanent possibility of sensation is not something that can very well be

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158 Ibid., p.133.
159 Ibid., p.133.
160 For instance, in The Foundation of Empirical Knowledge, when the discussion was concerning the construction of material things in term of sense-data, Ayer says:

An outline of what I take to be the correct view of these matters was given by John Stuart Mill when he spoke of physical bodies 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 the present possibility", presents itself to the mind as permanent, in contrast not solely with the temporary character of each of the sensations composing the group.... (FEK, pp.244-5).
What other kind of picture can be drawn by the phenomenalist then? Ayer writes:

In Plato's myth, the shadows on the wall of the cave, which are all that prisoners can see, are contrasted with substantial objects outside. Phenomenalism seem to leave us with nothing but the shadows.\textsuperscript{162}

However hard this difficulty may be for phenomenalism, "it does not show that their thesis is false."\textsuperscript{163} Phenomenalism may still be right in claiming that statements about physical objects are reducible to statements about sense-data.

(2) However, if we examine the difficulty in question further, another difficulty will soon emerge. As Ayer has said, in the most common case where it is not implied that a physical object is actually being perceived, to describe it is supposed to be wholly a matter of saying how it would appear - that is, what sense-data would be experienced if and only if certain conditions were fulfilled. Here, the conditions are those which are required for the object, if it exists, to be perceptible. But the difficulty is how these conditions are to be specified. Ayer writes,

It is not enough for the phenomenalist to make such vague assertions as that what he means by saying that there is a table in the next room is that if he were there he would perceive it. For his being here is a matter of a physical body's being in a certain spatial relationship to other physical objects, and, on the assumption that to talk about physical objects is always to talk about

\textsuperscript{161} The Problem of Knowledge, p.136.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., p.136.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., p.136.
sense-data this situation must itself be described in purely sensory terms. But it is not at all easy to see how this could be done.\textsuperscript{164}

To specify these conditions, even if one need not mention the observer, says Ayer, one has to locate the situation in which the observations are supposed to be made. One has to describe the setting in which the occurrence of certain sense-data is to be taken as establishing the existence of the physical object; and this description must be purely sensory. Ayer points out that it would seem hardly possible to find a set of "sensory descriptions" which would sufficiently distinguish one place from another. And when it comes to times the difficulty is even more obvious.\textsuperscript{165}

Suppose, to use Ayer's example, that the phenomenalist was asked to translate such a statement as that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 B.C. "How would one set about rendering '49 B.C.' in purely sensory terms?" asks Ayer. To this the phenomenalist may reply that we do in fact succeed in identifying place and times by making observations; we note features of the landscape, look at watches and calendars, and so forth, and these performances in the end consist in our sensing sense-data. However, says Ayer, it does not follow that any description of these sense-data would be sufficient to identify the place or time uniquely; "and so long as no such description is found the phenomenalist's reduction has not

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., p.137.

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., p.138.
been carried out."$^{166}$

In his article "Phenomenalism", Ayer offers a more detailed discussion of the same example. According to Ayer, the reason why we cannot have any such a description by which we can sufficiently identify the place or time uniquely is that Julius Caesar must be "in" my body, that is, he must be having sense-data that are identical with those that are now being obtained "from" my body. He says, resurrecting Caesar, which we are presumably entitled to do since the whole of our story will be hypothetical, we carry him through two thousand years of history, second by second or minute by minute, according to our estimate of the average duration of sense field, and finally bring his wanderings to an end by making him occupy my body. However, Ayer adds, "I cannot believe that when I say that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon in the year 49 B.C. I am implying quite so much as this."$^{167}$

(3) Phenomenalism claims that statements about physical objects are reducible to statements about sense-data. The character of this thesis is logical, and therefore, according to Ayer, it must be submitted to a logical examination. From the point of view of logical connection between two kinds of statements, the difficulties we mentioned above are only special cases of a more general difficulty, which is, according to Ayer, fatal to

$^{166}$ Ibid., p.138. For a more thorough discussion of these difficulties offered by Ayer, see Ayer's Paper on 'Phenomenalism', Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society, 1947-48.

$^{167}$ Philosophical Essays p.158.
phenomenalism. He writes,

If the phenomenalist is right, 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; there must, in short, be a deductive step from descriptions of physical reality to descriptions of possible, if not actual, appearances. And conversely, the occurrence of the sense-data must be a sufficient condition for the existence of the physical object; there must be a deductive step from descriptions of actual, or at any rate possible, appearances to descriptions of physical reality. The decisive objection to phenomenalism is that neither of these requirements can be satisfied.\textsuperscript{168}

This argument can be discussed from two aspects.

Firstly, says Ayer, the denial that statements which imply the existence of physical objects can logically deduced from any finite set of statements about sense-data is often expressed in the form that no statement about a physical object can be conclusively verified.\textsuperscript{169} This means that no matter how favourable the evidence for it, it is always conceivable that further evidence will show it to have been false all along. And from this premise, according to Ayer, it is correctly deduced that no statement about a physical object can be equivalent to any finite set of statements about sense-data.

However, can there be any doubt at all of the present existence of the table at which I am seated, the pen with which I am writing, the hand which is holding the pen? Surely I know for certain that these physical objects exist? And if I do know this for certain, I know it on the basis of my sense-experiences. But,

\textsuperscript{168} The Problem of Knowledge, pp.138-9.

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., p.139.
says Ayer, it must be admitted that my present experiences, taken by themselves, are not sufficient for the purpose: the mere fact that I now seem to see and feel a pen in my right hand does not prove conclusively that either of these objects exists. Only when my present experiences are taken in conjunction with all my past experiences, can it plausibly be held that the evidence is sufficient.\textsuperscript{170}

To illustrate Ayer's point here, let us follow the example he offers in his article "Phenomenalism."\textsuperscript{171} Not long ago, says Ayer, he had a fountain pen that suddenly vanished. At one moment he was looking at it, touching it, writing with it, and the next moment it had disappeared. He could not find it and has never found it to this day. Of course, he does not really believe that it vanished. He believes that there must be some explanation. Perhaps he turned his back on it for an instant, though he does not remember doing so, and somebody crept in and took it. Or, more probably, it dropped somewhere and he has not searched for it hard enough. These beliefs show that we do not take the possibility that there never really was a pen seriously.\textsuperscript{172} We do not take it as a serious

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., p.139.

\textsuperscript{171} \textit{Philosophical Essays}, pp.136-8.

\textsuperscript{172} In "Phenomenalism", Ayer emphasizes, this example shows 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 physical object of a certain sort, further experience may show one to have been mistaken, I was not serious. For when a situation arose which, on the face of it, 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
hypothesis, because the belief that his pen existed is supported by a mass of past experiences.

What bearing does this have on the phenomenalist claim? The example that his pen vanished, according to Ayer, shows that "no single sense-experience, taken by itself, ever proves that a physical object exists." 173 From the bare fact that I am sensing these visual sense-data it does not follow that this is a fountain pen. Nevertheless, says Ayer, the occurrence of these visual sense-data, taken in conjunction with what I remember, fully justifies the statement that this is a fountain pen, would justify it, even if the "fountain pen" were to vanish the next instant. However, says Ayer, "by itself the occurrence of just these sense-data would not be sufficient, but in conjunction with previous experience it is." 174

It is worth noting that Ayer claims in this article that in certain circumstances I might be fully justified in believing in the existence of a physical object, and in such cases the strength of the evidence would lie in the general character of my previous experience. He explains it as follows:

My belief that this is a physical object, and a physical object of a certain sort, is not based solely on the occurrence of sense-data which are manifestations of

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."(p.137).

173 Ibid., p.137.

174 Ibid., p.138.
this: it is derived also from a more general belief that I live in a world of physical objects of which things that look like this are specimens: and this belief is supported by a mass of past experiences.\footnote{175}

However, he pointed out in the same article that although we can say that the occurrence of past and present sense-data may justify us in asserting that the physical object exists, it does not follow that statements about a physical object can be translated into statements about sense-data. Why not? Because it is impossible to discover a finite set of statements about sense-data of which it can truly be said in a particular case that precisely these are necessary.\footnote{176}

For example, says Ayer, you cannot say exactly how much experience, nor exactly what type of experience, a child must have had in order to be fully justified, on the evidence available to him, in saying "this is a ball". It makes no difference whether his general belief in the existence of physical objects is derived from the sense-data he has obtained when playing with rattles or when playing with teddy-bears: it makes no difference whether he punches the ball or strokes it, whether the angle from which he sees it make it appear round to him or oval, whether the light is such that it seems to him to be red or orange. Ayer says, "though you may be able to discover sets of sufficient conditions, you cannot list them exhaustively."\footnote{177} He disagrees with those who say that the

\footnote{175} Ibid., p.138.
\footnote{176} Ibid., p.139.
\footnote{177} Ibid., p.139.
physical object is eternally on probation, so that to try to establish its existence by sense-perception is like trying to fill a bottomless well. According to Ayer, the well can be filled, but there are an infinite number of ways of filling it. This is one reason why it is impossible to translate a statement about a physical object into any finite set of statements about sense-data. Ayer asserts that translation requires that statements of one sort must be necessary and sufficient conditions for statements of the other sort.

In The Problem of Knowledge, Ayer emphasizes again that the occurrence of sense-data cannot be a sufficient condition for the existence of the physical object. Although the example of the pen which suddenly vanished shows the suggestion that certain physical objects may not exist (e.g. "my pen never did exist") is sometimes not a serious hypothesis for us, and although, "it is a hypothesis which, whatever the further evidence, no sensible person would adopt." 178 Ayer writes,

this does not mean that it is formally excluded, that anyone who did adopt it would be contradicting himself. At the present moment there is indeed no doubt, so far as I am concerned, that this table, this piece of paper, this pen, this hand, and many other physical objects exist. I know that they exist, and I know it on the basis of my sense-experiences. Even so, it does not follow that the assertion of their existence, or of the existence of any one of them, is logically entailed by any description of my sense-experiences. 179

For the phenomenalist to succeed, according to Ayer, he must

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178 The Problem of Knowledge, p.141.
179 Ibid., p.141.
be able to show at what precise point the suggested explanation would cease to be merely fanciful and become formally incompatible with the evidence. And crucially, he must be able to produce a specimen set of statements, describing the occurrence in particular conditions of certain specified sense-data, from which it follows logically that a given physical object exists. Ayer concludes, "I do not see how this is to be achieved".\textsuperscript{180}

Ayer points out in \textit{The Problem of Knowledge} that if it is doubtful whether the occurrence of a given series of sense-data can ever be a sufficient condition for the existence of a physical object, it is even more doubtful whether the existence of the physical object can be a sufficient condition for the occurrence of the sense-data.\textsuperscript{181}

We know that in \textit{Language, Truth and Logic}, Ayer like other phenomenalists believes that if certain conditions were fulfilled, certain sense-contents would be experienced, and this explains how it is possible for a material thing to exist throughout a period when none of its elements are actually experienced.\textsuperscript{182} According to Ayer, this point of view is expressed in a rough way by Berkeley when he claims that to say that the earth moves is to say that "if we were placed in such and such circumstances, and such or such a position and distance, both from the earth and the sun, we should

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., p.141.

\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., p.141.

\textsuperscript{182} See \textit{Language, Truth and Logic}, p.141.
perceive the former to move."^183

Ayer exposes the difficulty of specifying the circumstances in purely sensory terms.^184 Setting aside this difficulty, according to Ayer, there is always a more fundamental difficulty. For it might very well happen that when we are placed in such circumstances we do not perceive the earth to move at all, not because it is not moving, but because we are inattentive, or looking in the wrong direction, or our view is in some way obscured, or because we are suffering from some physiological or psychological disorder. We might think that such obstacles could be provided for. Thus we might attempt to rule out the possibility of the observer's suffering from a physiological disorder by adding a further hypothetical to the effect that if a physiologist were to examine him it would seem to the physiologist that his patient's vision was unimpaired. But then, Ayer points out, we should require a further hypothetical to guard against the possibility that the physiologist himself was undergoing an illusion: and so ad infinitum.^185

This is not to say that the fact that some physical object fails to be observed is never to be counted as a proof that it does not exist. On the contrary, it is, under certain conditions, the very best proof obtainable. But it is not a demonstrative proof.^186


^184 See Ayer's example of "Julius Caesar."

^185 The Problem of Knowledge, p.142.

^186 Ibid., p.142.
From the fact that in the specified conditions the requisite sense-data do not occur, it does not follow logically that the physical object in question does not exist. In other words, a certain physical object may exist even though it is not capable of being perceived at present. This means that we have to admit that the existence of a physical object cannot be a sufficient condition for the occurrence of the sense-data.

In both aspects of this argument, as Ayer shows, phenomenalism meets a difficulty which cannot be overcome unless the phenomenalist claim is given up. We must conclude then, says Ayer, that the phenomenalist's programme cannot be carried through. Statements about physical objects are not formally translatable into statements about sense-data.\(^\text{187}\)

In "Phenomenalism", Ayer tries to present a further reason why the phenomenalist's programme does not work. According to Ayer, the phenomenalist was probably setting himself "a task that could not, by its very nature, be satisfactorily fulfilled."

For the language in which we refer to physical objects has its own logic. Now the sensory language to which the phenomenalist seeks to reduce the other must also have its logic, and this logic must be either the same as that of the physical language or different. If it is made the same - if, for example, the phenomenalist allows himself to speak of 'sensibilia' having a continued and distinct existence in space and time - then we are inclined to say that he has not carried out his programme, because these sensibilia are only physical objects, or attenuated physical objects, in disguise. But if the logic of the sensory language is different, then we are inclined to say that the statements which are expressed in it are not perfect translations of the statements at physical level,

\(^{187}\) Ibid., p.144.
just because their logic is different.  

This seems to leave us in a dilemma from which it is not easy to see that he can extricate himself.

In the Problem of Knowledge, Ayer tries to expose the connection between the failure of the phenomenalist programme and the introduction of sense-data. He put it in following way:

That phenomenalism has commanded so strong an allegiance has been due not to its being intrinsically plausible but rather to the fact that the introduction of sense-data appeared to leave no other alternative open.  

As we have seen, according to the phenomenalist, since statements about physical objects can be verified or falsified only through the occurrence of sense-data, they must somehow be reducible to statements about sense-data. Ayer admits that "this is a natural assumption to make, but the result of our examining it has been to show that it is false."  

Although Ayer realizes that there is an unequal logical relation between the two sorts of languages, he has never denied that there is a kind of logical connection between them. He says in the Problem of Knowledge,

the failure of phenomenalism does not mean, however, that there is no logical connection of any kind between the way physical objects appear to us and the way they really are.  

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188 Philosophical Essays, p.165.
189 The Problem of Knowledge, P.144.
190 Ibid., p.144.
191 Ibid., p.144.
This shows that he never gives up the hope of basing the conclusion about 'the way physical objects really are' on 'the way they appear to us'. The problem is still how 'the way physical objects really are' should be grounded on 'the way they appear to us'. According to Ayer, there are still important ways in which phenomenalism is right:

the phenomenalists are right in the sense that the information which we convey by speaking about the physical objects that we perceive is information about the way that things would seem, but they are wrong in supposing that it is possible to say of the description of any particular set of appearances that this and only this is what some statement about a physical object came to.\(^{192}\)

Starting from this positive aspect of phenomenalism he mentions above, Ayer seems to offer a new attempt. He points out, "the solution of the 'problem of perception' 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."\(^{193}\) According to Ayer, although physical object statements make claims that cannot be completely restated in sense-data terms, these claims are something in the nature of a theory with respect to the evidence of our senses; and sense-data statements may therefore function as progressive, but never final justifications of what the physical object statements claim.\(^{194}\) He points out,

The statements which belong to the theory transcend their evidence in the sense that they are not merely re-descriptions of it. The theory is richer than anything

\(^{192}\) Ibid., pp.146-7.

\(^{193}\) Philosophical Essays, p.165.

\(^{194}\) Ibid., p.146.
that could be yielded by an attempt to reformulated it at
the sensory level.\textsuperscript{195}

The statements which are expressed in term of the theory will
function only as means of grouping sense-data and

it will be a contingent fact that sense-data are so
organized that the theory is valid. It may then be
required of the philosophers to make clear in what this
organization consists: that is, to show in a general way
what relations must obtain between sense-data for the
demands of the theory to be met.\textsuperscript{196}

This is an important revision of Ayer’s theory of perception, but
he does not work it out in detail in this book. It remains to be
seen whether this theory will work better than the phenomenalist
programme.

3. Brief Comments

How should we evaluate Ayer’s criticism of phenomenalism?

Firstly, it seems that his exposition, from stating the simple
facts to examining the logical relation between two kinds of
statements, not only is one of the clearest treatments of the subject,
but also a valuable self-criticism of the phenomenalism from the
standpoint of empiricism itself.

However, as I mentioned in the introduction, the hope that we
can fully justify our belief in the existence of physical objects
in terms of our sense-perception comes from the fact that we regard

\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., p.147.

\textsuperscript{196} Philosophical Essays, pp.165-6.
our direct knowledge of sense-perception as the only secure foundation or source of the knowledge about objects. In other words, this justification becomes a problem, only because we look to sense-perception as the sole legitimate source of any true belief about the "external" world.\textsuperscript{197} It must be pointed out that the problem comes from a dogma of empiricism. For empiricism, to justify our belief in the existence of the physical objects, the only thing we can appeal to is our direct knowledge of sense-perception. In this sense, the problem of perception is a problem which empiricism has to meet.\textsuperscript{198}

It is not true that to say that there is never any opportunity for Ayer to give up his stand on empiricism so as to get rid of the puzzle of perception. Actually, in his article "Phenomenalism", it seems to me that he touches one of the crucial points to solve the problem. Let us repeat what Ayer says in that article. He writes:

\begin{quote}
My belief that this is a physical object, and a physical object of a certain sort, is not based solely on the occurrence of sense-data which are manifestations of this: it is derived also from a more general belief that I live in a world of physical objects of which things that look like this are specimens: and this belief is supported by a mass of past experiences.\textsuperscript{199}
\end{quote}

According to Ayer, the strength of the evidence that supports our belief in the existence of physical object lies in "the general

\textsuperscript{197} See Ayer ed:\textit{British Empirical Philosophers}, p.10.

\textsuperscript{198} As Ayer himself points out: "a problem of this sort must arise once it is admitted that our ordinary judgements of perception claim more than is strictly contained in the experiences on which they are based." (\textit{The Problem of Knowledge}, pp.124-5).

\textsuperscript{199} \textit{Philosophical Essays}, p.138.
character of my previous experience". 200

But, what is really the general character of my experience? What nature does it have? Can we say that this kind of general belief can transcend the gap between what things seem to be and what they really are? If yes, to what extent can we say so? To these question Ayer did not offer any further discussion in The Problem of Knowledge.

200 Ibid., p.138.
CONCLUSION

The movement of Ayer's thought about a phenomenalist solution to the problem of perception can be summarised as follows:

In Language, Truth and Logic, Ayer presents a phenomenalist solution to the problem of perception as a "further illustration of the method of philosophical analysis". The philosopher, according to Ayer, is not directly concerned with the physical properties of things; he is concerned only with the way in which we speak about them. From this standpoint, Ayer regards the problem of perception as a linguistic question and claims that "by defining the notion of a material thing in terms of sense-contents we solve the so-called problem of perception." He introduces "definition in use" as the method to construct material things; sense-contents, which are used to refer to the immediate data of sensation, are the elements of this construction. Phenomenalists, no matter what version they subscribe to, commonly claim that to say anything about material things is always equivalent to saying something about sense-perception. Ayer's version of phenomenalism merely emphasizes that this common claim is "a linguistic proposition." The most striking characteristic of Ayer's solution to the problem of perception is that he seeks to defend the common phenomenalist stand, which derives from Berkeley, by the

\footnote{Language, Truth and Logic, p. 27.}
method of linguistic analysis.

Ten years later, in his preface to second edition of the same book, he admits that it was a serious mistake to assert that philosophical analysis consisted mainly of the provision of "definitions in use." He believed that the analytic method used in the solution of the problem of perception should be understood in a looser way. However, Ayer still maintains that philosophical propositions are analytic, and linguistically necessary. And this analytic point of view is still for him the best tool to defend the phenomenalist programme.

In the Foundation of Empirical Knowledge, Ayer tries again to make his phenomenalist programme work by showing that all propositions about physical objects could be exhibited as propositions about sense-data. From the following three aspects, the main idea in Ayer's solution can be clearly exhibited:

(1) Ayer tries to argue that the only correct way to legitimately introduce sense-data is to accept them on the basis of a convenient rule of language, and as carrying no metaphysical implications.

(2) When we introduce sense-data as a linguistic convenience, we introduce a certain usage or terminology, certain sufficient and necessary conditions for sense-data statements and a certain epistemic characteristic, namely incorrigibility.

(3) The relationship between sense-data and material things is not a factual but a linguistic relationship. That is to say, the problem of constructing a material thing out of sense-data should
be viewed as a problem about the reference of words.\textsuperscript{202}

We can call Ayer's phenomenalist stand in this book \textit{linguistic} phenomenalism. This is the most striking feature of Ayer's solution.

In "Phenomenalism" and \textit{the Problem of Knowledge}, Ayer changes his stand and now criticizes phenomenalism. When he reconsiders the admissibility of sense-data, he admits that sense-data language is not strictly needed for "the formulation of the problem of perception", though he still maintains the legitimacy of introducing sense-data. The phenomenalist must maintain that there is a logical equivalence between statements about physical objects and the statements of sense-data. The decisive objection to phenomenalism, according to Ayer, is that the existence of a physical object of a certain sort and the occurrence of certain sense-data cannot be a sufficient condition for each other. This difficulty means that the phenomenalist's programme cannot be carried through. Statements about physical objects are not formally translatable into statements about sense-data.

The failure of Ayer's phenomenalist programme lies in the basic doctrine of phenomenalism itself, that is, in asserting that what are called physical objects are nothing other than collections of sense-perception. No matter whether this doctrine be taken as a statement of fact or as a statement of language, all phenomenalists agree that there is a logical equivalence between statements of physical objects and statements about sense-perception. As we have seen, like Berkeley's phenomenalism, Ayer's modern version of phenomenalism doesn't work either. And this is mainly because the

\textsuperscript{202} See Ayer: \textit{The Foundation of Empirical Knowledge}, p.263.
basic doctrine of phenomenalism does not work at all.

Although the phenomenalists are wrong in supposing that there is a logical equivalence between statements about sense-data and statements about the physical objects, Ayer still maintains that the phenomenalist is right "in the sense that the information which we convey by speaking about the physical objects that we perceive is information about the way that things would seem." This seems to be a more reasonable stand than his phenomenalist position, but, it seems to me, it is still in the fetters of empiricism.

As we know, Kant sees that perception is possible only through the activity of the subject - an activity which he calls "synthesis". This synthesising activity is concerned with making judgements - establishing relations which are objectively valid. Without this discipline of objectivity, there would be no unity of experience, and hence no unity of consciousness, and hence nothing which we could call experience at all.203

Hegel in his *The Phenomenology of Mind* develops Kant's thought about "activity of the subject", and fully describes the different developing stages of human consciousness by defining each of the necessary elements in this cognitive activity. In the course of the actual perception, according to Hegel, I am aware of the "property" (eigenschaft) in the object, a property which is universal, thereby transcending the particularity of the object. The universality in this case satisfies more completely the demands of knowledge. The problem for further analysis is to find the form which the universal

203 Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*, B141-2.
here assumes and to determine the way in which the unity of the object
(the "thing") holds together its essential differences. Being
undetermined by sense, human thought or thinking power transcends
sense-apprehension, and so transcends perception, and compels the
mind to adopt another cognitive attitude in order to apprehend itself.
This new attitude is Understanding.\textsuperscript{204}

For Hegel, there never arises a so-called problem of perception,
only the problem of how can we properly explain the ways and the forms
of our consciousness or thinking power, which always are functioning
throughout our perceptual process. Only through these activities of
subject - the thinking power - can the human mind cross the gap between
"the thing that really is" and "the thing that seems to be". More
importantly, unlike Kant, Hegel emphasizes that the more subjective
function of the human mind, the more objective knowledge it can obtain.
This, I think, is a crucial point in the criticism of every kind of
empiricism.

Man is "not bounded by organs of perception; he perceives more
than sense (tho' ever so acute) can discover".\textsuperscript{205} These words, spoken
by a great poet, a prophet who lived a little while after those who
may be called "early modern British Philosophers", should be as a
new starting-point to reconsider the so-called problem of perception.

\textsuperscript{204} G. W. F. Hegel: The Phenomenology of Mind. tran. by J. B.

\textsuperscript{205} William Blake: "There is No Natural Religion", see The Book
of Urizen, edited and with a Commentary by Kay Parkhurst Easson and
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