The basic elements of the philosophy of Alfred J. Ayer.

Robert M. Montague
University of Windsor

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd

Recommended Citation
https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/6282
THE BASIC ELEMENTS
OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF

ALFRED J. AYER

Submitted to the Department of Philosophy of
Assumption University of Windsor in Part­
ial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Robert M. Montague, C.S.B., B.A.

1957
INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI Microform EC52461
Copyright 2008 by ProQuest LLC.
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest LLC
789 E. Eisenhower Parkway
PO Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
APPROVED BY:

R.G. Miller, C.S.B.
(Rev. R.G. Miller, C.S.B., Ph.D.)

P.J. Swan, C.S.B., Ph.D.

Mary Manley, Ph.D.
(Mary Manley, Ph.D.)
I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to the members of the Department of Philosophy, Assumption University of Windsor, for their interest in my work during my graduate studies. I owe Reverend E. C. Garvey, C.S.B., Ph.D., the head of the Department, a special acknowledgement for his encouragement and many considerations. I am most particularly indebted to Reverend R. G. Miller, C.S.B., Ph.D., the director of the thesis, for having first interested me in Alfred J. Ayer, and above all, for his constant patience and guidance during the months the thesis was being planned and written - factors which contributed greatly to its timely completion. I must express my thanks to Reverend P. J. Swan, C.S.B., Ph.D., and to Miss Mary Manley, Ph.D., for their having so painstakingly read the thesis in preparation, and for the several recommendations they have offered. Grateful thanks are due also to Mrs. A. G. Broy who, with care and despatch, typed the completed work. I am beholden to the Library staff, to Mr. David Thompson, and to many others who have assisted in the many and varied matters involved, directly or indirectly, in this modest undertaking.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. THE LIMITATION OF KNOWLEDGE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE NATURE OF THE &quot;GIVEN&quot;</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE PROBLEM OF INDEBTLABLE PROPOSITIONS</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. THE AIM AND METHOD OF PHILOSOPHY</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I intend to investigate the essential factors in the widely influential philosophical position of Alfred J. Ayer. These factors are five in number; first, the rejection of metaphysics; second, the nature of sense-data; third, the dimensions of language; fourth, the doctrine of incorrigible propositions; and finally, the aim and method of philosophical enquiry. While each of these factors will be treated separately, each will, at the same time, be so handled as to bring out its integral place in a complete philosophical system.

These factors will be discussed from a purely doctrinal point of view for the purpose of arriving at a clear presentation and understanding of Ayer's own position. To achieve this there will be no evaluation of his philosophical position in the light of any other philosophy. The historical evidence required first, to locate Ayer among his contemporaries, and secondly, to show the ultimate sources of his philosophical position, will be restricted to this introduction.

Alfred Ayer is a contemporary British philosopher who is presently Grote Professor of the Philosophy of Mind and Logic at University College, London. His philosophic thought is based on one of the more recent movements within the school of empiricism, namely logical positivism. 1

Logical positivism originated with the Vienna Circle. The Circle was made up of a group of philosophers and mathematicians of the empiricist tradition who in 1922 began to meet regularly in Vienna for the purpose of discussing such problems as the function of philosophy in the analysis of the propositions of science. It grew into a definite movement within the decade and spread rapidly to universities on the Continent, to Oxford and Cambridge in the United Kingdom, and to universities in the United States. As a movement the Vienna Circle was very short-lived, but its ideas and their eventual penetration into diverse walks of life live on today through such men as Ayer with a more widespread influence and popularity than ever before.

Ayer contacted logical positivism as a young man at Oxford. His notable contribution to the movement has been through his writings in which, to use the words of J. H. Paton, "he exposed the nature of logical positivism, ... in all its naked horror, and he did so with a plausibility worthy of John Stuart Mill at his best." Its "naked horror" alludes, not so much to what Ayer says, but to what, as a consequence of his doctrine, he contends cannot so much as be said at all. The thesis of logical positivism is that a properly clarified language may validly express only empirical knowledge, thus invalidating all statements of a supra-empirical character, be they ethical, metaphysical, or supernatural.

3 Ibid., p.72
Ayer's philosophical background can be very simply traced. He himself tells us that, while he is in closest agreement with the Vienna Circle, his views "derive from the doctrines of Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein, which are themselves the logical outcome of the empiricism of Berkeley and Hume."\(^5\) As to the Russell influence, Ayer agrees with him on some points and takes issue with him on others. For instance, Russell was the first to introduce the "sense-data theory" to which Ayer subscribes in principle. On the other hand, Ayer takes strong exception to Russell's "theory of resemblance". A further point of difference is that he does not make use of Russell's mathematical logic for philosophical analysis. Russell's influence is not as fundamental a one as that of George Berkeley and David Hume, particularly the latter.

Just as experience was the measure of all knowledge and belief for Hume,\(^6\) so it is for Ayer. The division of perceptions into "impressions" and "ideas" in Hume's doctrine called for his division of propositions into those concerning "matters of fact" and those concerning "relations of ideas" according to Ayer's interpretation. With respect to the propositions, Ayer made a similar division. The "relation of ideas" propositions for Ayer comprise the "a priori" propositions of formal logic and mathematics. The "matters of fact" propositions comprise propositions of empirical facts.\(^7\) The "a priori" propositions are analytical, while the latter are synthetic ac-

---

\(^5\) Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p.31


\(^7\) Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p.31
According to the Kantian division which Ayer adopts in part.

Although Ayer retains the same division of propositions which he ascribes to Hume he does not retain the Humean elements of cognition in the pattern Hume does. For Ayer "impressions" alone are sense-experience, whereas "ideas" are not perceptions at all, as they are for Hume. In Ayer's doctrine "ideas" are non-existent. This latter interpretation of "ideas" is due to a combined influence of two strange bed-fellows, Berkeley and Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein's influence was linguistic. His thesis was that philosophical analysis was nothing other than an analysis of the relation of language to experience. This notion was a guiding principle in Ayer's formation. As to Berkeley, Ayer claims that the former correctly discovered that material things must be definable in terms of sense-contents, or sense-data, and not the other way around as Locke would have it. Berkeley maintained against Locke that material things were constituted out of sense-contents, and not sense-contents out of material things. The Berkeleyan principle that esse est percipi does not apply to the perception of material things, as Ayer understands it, but does apply to the percep-

---

8 Ibid., p.78
10 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.53
tion of sense-data in as much as it is only of a sense-datum that we can
be directly aware. What this means to a logical positivist is that
material things do not exist at all. While Ayer agrees with Berkeley's
criticism of Locke, he does not accept Berkeley's account of the way in
which material things are constituted out of sense-contents. He finds his
solution through the Wittgenstein principle, having rejected Berkeley's on
the grounds that it is idealistic.

Ayer's acute appraisal of the inconsistencies spotted in the doc­
trine of other empiricists and the independent conclusions he arrives at,
as a result of his consistent logic, brings out his original thought. A
positive instance of Ayer's originality is his own solution to the problem
of the substantival ego which has been a perplexing one to the empiricists
from Locke down. Even Hume, the prototype of wholehearted empiricists,
despaired of the answer. As we shall see, Ayer's solution is decidedly
different from all others and he feels that his doctrine bridges the
Humean dilemma of a mind connecting distinct existences.

My reasons for selecting Ayer as the subject of this thesis were
based on the evident leadership he has and is exercising in the contem­
porary schools and journals of philosophy. The impact of Ayer's logical

---

12 Alfred J. Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, 
13 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.112
& Co., 1956) p.225
positivism is so pronounced today in university circles that Gustav Bergmann asserts that "A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*, (London, 1936) and *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, (London, 1940) have almost the status of textbooks." In his *Contemporary Philosophy*, Frederick Copleston, S.J. remarks that Ayer's writings have exercised a widespread influence, especially among university students. He observes that his clear style has been responsible for what he calls the "positivist mentality." He contends this "positivist mentality" is "far more widespread than the positivist philosophy considered as a system of thought. It seems, then, true to say that the neopositivism of the Vienna Circle was infused into the analytic movement . . . largely through the influence of Professor Ayer . . ."  

Aside from the influence of his books, Ayer's philosophical positions are constantly the subject of numerous articles in the contemporary journals of philosophy. This is an indication of his prominence among philosophers. For example, over the past ten years sixty-seven articles have appeared on logical positivism and philosophical analysis in the important quarterly *Philosophical Review*, over half of which show Ayer's influence. In the journal *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Ayer's influence is notable in almost all of the twenty-five articles deal-

---

18 *Philosophical Review*, Vols. LVI - LXV
ing with analysis in its last two volumes. Ayer himself is an editor of and writer for the journal *Analysis* published six times each year at Oxford. The fact that Ayer has been chosen to write the important chapter on the Vienna Circle in the recently published *The Revolution in Philosophy* is a conclusive indication of the leadership he wields in the philosophical field. He was called upon to write the opening chapter entitled "What is Communication?" in *Studies in Communication*, a major publication of the Communications Research Centre, London University, which clearly shows his influence outside the field of philosophy as well.

In his *Scholasticism and Politics* Jacques Maritain has devoted one full chapter to an analysis of logical positivism, and asserts the enormous effect it is having on modern culture and civilization. Mr. Maritain himself explicitly states that the reason he has spoken of the ideas of this school is that they "... characterize rather well the average state of mind which, ... will no doubt prevail among scientists and, especially, among popularizers of science, with which we shall have to deal for some time to come." Obviously Mr. Maritain sees the necessity of looking seriously and thoroughly into the position and consequences of logical positivism. This seems in complete conformity with Pope Pius XII's exhortations set forth in the encyclical *Humani Generis;*

19 *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vols. XV - XVI*

Now Catholic theologians and philosophers, whose grave duty it is to defend natural and supernatural truth and instil it in the hearts of men, cannot afford to ignore or neglect these more or less erroneous opinions. Rather they must come to understand these same theories well, both because diseases are not properly treated unless they are rightly diagnosed, and because sometimes even in these false theories a certain amount of truth is contained, and finally because these theories provoke more subtle discussion and evaluation of philosophical and theological truths. 21

21 His Holiness Pope Pius XII, Humani Generis, (New York: Paulist Press, 1950, tr.), p.5
I
LIMITATION OF KNOWLEDGE BY LINGUISTIC RULES

In the opinion of Alfred Ayer, the traditional disputes of philosophers are indicative of a lack of suitable purpose and method in philosophical enquiries. It is his contention that, were the aim and method of philosophy properly established, there would be an end to the unwarranted and unfruitful disputes which beset philosophy. Thus would be achieved that unity so necessary among philosophers.¹

In the conviction that he is able to achieve this unity, Ayer sets himself to the task. The first step which he feels assured will lead him to the discovery of philosophy's aim and method is to criticize the claims of metaphysicians regarding the possibility of having knowledge "of a reality transcending the world of science and common sense."²

He selects this matter as the primary subject for investigation because he considers it to be crucial to the manifestation of his own philosophical position on the aim and method of philosophy.

Ayer observes that many philosophers, now and in the past, have maintained the possibility of knowing a transcendent reality.³ He advances the claim that those who make such metaphysical assertions do so,

²Ibid., p.33
³Ayer has the Rationalists principally in mind, especially
not at all because of any conscious desire on their part to go beyond experience, but only because of errors committed in logic, errors which have resulted in the false conclusion that there is a transcendent reality. By attacking the possibility of knowledge of any reality beyond sense-experience, it is taken for granted by him that all other metaphysical disputes which presuppose a transcendent reality will be conveniently disposed of at the same time.

It is at once clear that Ayer's attitude towards any claim for the possibility of a transcendent reality is antagonistic. For, from what premises, he asks, are the propositions of metaphysicians deduced? He insists that their propositions should begin, as all men's begin, — with the evidence of the senses. On the strength of this principle, Ayer sceptically enquires what valid process of reasoning can possibly induce anyone to arrive at a concept of a transcendent reality. No inference, in his opinion, concerning either the properties, or the existence, of a supra-


4 As we shall see, on page 10, what Ayer means by "errors in logic" does not refer to errors in formal logic. The philosophical analysts have given a new meaning to logic. They speak of the logic of language which embodies rules for the standardized linguistic reference to experience.

5 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.33

6 Ibid., p.33

7 Ibid., p.33

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
empirical reality, is valid from empirical premises. This is the empiricist postulate to which he subscribes. It is this empiricist assumption which will rule his position on each problem.

It is noted by Ayer that there have been many philosophers, such as Descartes, Leibnitz and Spinoza, together with those who have continued their Rationalist tradition, who held that metaphysical assertions are not due, even materially, to the evidence of the senses, but that an intellectual intuition is adequate for all metaphysical statements. He represents such a metaphysician as saying:

... he was endowed with a faculty of intellectual intuition which enabled him to know facts that could not be known through sense-experience.

As Ayer expresses his own position, he judges that he is not striving to overcome this traditional Rationalist metaphysics merely by criticizing the way in which it is arrived at. Rather, he says, it is to be overthrown through a criticism of the actual statements that make up metaphysics.

The uniqueness of the positivists' attack on metaphysics is considered by them to lie in this very approach as superior to any used in the past.

For example, Ayer strongly believes that his own denouncement of what he

---

10 *Ibid.*, p.34
11 "The positivists' flavour of their thought comes out most strongly in their hostility to metaphysics. Metaphysics, which they construed as covering such allegedly philosophical enterprises as the attempt to describe Reality as a whole, or to find the purpose of the universe, or to
calls metaphysical utterances, will be deduced from what he considers to be the rule which establishes the liberal significance of language. It will not be derived from any psychological approach - which he notes others have employed in the past.\textsuperscript{12}

By using his own approach Ayer will come to his own conclusion that metaphysics, in its attempts to describe a so-called transcendent reality, is committed to the production of nonsense. In his own mind, he is assured that there is no such thing as metaphysics of any kind, nor does he anticipate having this preconception altered in the course of his critique of metaphysical statements.

In stressing the merits of his method over preceding ones, Ayer is merely saying that the proper approach for disposing of metaphysics is not to attempt a refutation of its claims to exist as a science, since to him it has no such claim. Instead, he is saying, take the metaphysical assertions which are wrongly assumed by metaphysicians to be factual, and judge each one of them separately on its own merits to discover whether it stands up to the rule which allows for the literal significance of factual statements, his insistence being that this is the only way by which metaphysics can be successfully overthrown. For it does not follow that a metaphysical assertion is not true simply by arguing that the metaphysician has ventured illogically into a non-empirical world, regardless of whether reach beyond the everyday world to some supra-sensible spiritual order, was condemned by them not as being unduly speculative, or even as being false, but as being non-sensical." Alfred J. Ayer, "The Vienna Circle", The Revolution in Philosophy, (London: MacMillan & Co., 1956), p.74

\textsuperscript{12} Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.35
he holds his premises to be based on experience, or on some false intellectual intuition. Ayer supports this view on the grounds that a false premise does not necessarily indicate that the statement of the conclusion following upon it is false.\textsuperscript{13}

It is Ayer's consistent position that the validity of any statement must be able to stand, not in terms of the premises upon which it claims to have been constructed, but whether it can itself conform to the conditions under which alone a sentence can be literally significant.\textsuperscript{14}

Ayer foresees that his condemnation of metaphysics could be taken by some to be a re-working of the anti-metaphysical grounds of Kant, under another label. But he insists that such is not the case.\textsuperscript{15} For one thing, in his estimation, Kant belongs to that class of critics which he opposes at the level of method. Furthermore, he holds it for certain that Kant never proved what he himself is able to prove about metaphysics. For he considers Kant's deposition of metaphysics to be, if not ineffectual in its results, at least defective in the way it was done. For as Ayer understands Kant, the latter held:

...that the human understanding was so constituted that it lost itself in contradictions when it ventured beyond the limits of possible experience and attempted to deal with things in themselves.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus, Ayer observes, Kant felt his arguments for the impossibility of a

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p.34
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p.35
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p.34
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p.34. The Kantian position against a transcendent metaphysics is stated briefly in the preface to the 2nd. edition of
transcendent metaphysics were a "matter of fact" rather than a "matter of logic".\textsuperscript{17}

The matter of fact which Ayer alludes to is that, after having made a psychological analysis of human powers, Kant concludes that the mind is, as a matter of fact, incapable of grasping anything but appearances. Whereas, Ayer, on the other hand, claims no psychological analysis precedes his similar conclusion. So it is not a matter of fact, but a matter of logic, by which metaphysics is attacked. Reaching a transcendent reality on a factual basis, in Kant's opinion could not be done, for our mind was in fact devoid of the powers of penetrating beyond the phenomenal world.\textsuperscript{18}

Ayer realizes that in spite of this, Kant nonetheless asserted that real things beyond the limits of sense-experience can be thought of as existing, but that our knowledge cannot reach those real things.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{The Critique of Pure Reason:}

"For we are brought to the conclusion that we can never transcend the limits of possible experience, though that is precisely what the science is concerned, above all else, to achieve. This situation yields, however, just the very experiment by which, indirectly, we are enabled to prove the truth of this first estimate of our a priori knowledge of reason, namely, that such knowledge has to do only with appearances, and must leave the thing in itself, as indeed real 'per se', but not as known by us." I. Kant, The Critique of Pure Reason, (New York; Humanities Press, 1950), Preface 2nd ed., Norman Kent Smith ed. p.213

\textsuperscript{17} Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.34

\textsuperscript{18}"He asserted, not that our minds could not conceivably have had the power of penetrating beyond the phenomenal world, but merely that they were in fact devoid of it." Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.34

\textsuperscript{19}"Thus it does indeed follow that all possible speculative
Ayer is strongly critical of Kant's psychological way of opposing metaphysics. This is indicated by two pointed questions. First, if it is possible to know only what lies within the bounds of sense-experience, how can one be justified in asserting that real things exist beyond it? Secondly, how can one tell what are the boundaries human understanding cannot pass, unless one has succeeded in passing them himself? This interpretation of Kant's method is valuable for our understanding of Ayer's doctrine. Not only does it illustrate Ayer's method, but it also reveals him as a more thoroughgoing empiricist than Kant was. Ayer's conscious determination to have it so discloses the distinctive temper of logical positivism.

For this criticism of Kant, Ayer is indebted to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who played a major part in Ayer's philosophical thought. It is a principle of Wittgenstein's that in order to set a limit to thinking one must know the knowledge of reason is limited to mere objects of appearance. But our further contention must also be borne in mind, namely, that though we cannot know these objects as things, we must yet be in a position at least to think them as things in themselves; otherwise we shall be landed on the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears."

I. Kant, The Critique of Pure Reason, Preface, 2 ed., p. 27

20 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p. 34

21 Ludwig Wittgenstein was a philosophical analyst who lived near Vienna at the time the Vienna Circle was being formed in the early '20's. He was never a member of the Circle, but his work Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus "set the pattern which at least in the early days, the Vienna Circle followed", according to Ayer, "The Vienna Circle", The Revolution in Philosophy, p. 70. He later went to Cambridge where, along with Bertrand Russell, he became the dominant influence in the Cambridge School of Philosophical Analysis. The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus is a work aiming at the conditions required for a logically perfect language. Its fundamental thesis is that in order that a certain sentence should assert a certain fact there must, howsoever the language may be constructed, be something between the structure of the language and the structure of the fact. He holds that there should be an ideal language having an exclusive one-for-one relation between the symbol and the fact. But this relationship does not in any case imply an intrinsic connection between facts and language.
have to think both sides of the limit. This principle Ayer uses to object to Kant's overstepping the limits he himself laid down. Now, Ayer also, in laying down a rule of literal significance, imposes a limitation on knowledge and excludes metaphysics thereby. This he freely acknowledges. He insists, nonetheless, that the principle of Wittgenstein's cannot be levelled against him. In fact, he feels he is, in his own way, being faithful to and supporting Wittgenstein's views in attacking metaphysics. Ayer's argument is that he does not assume or postulate any barrier whatsoever to human knowledge after the manner in which he feels Kant does. For he maintains that he, on the other hand, deduces the impossibility of transcending the limits of possible sense-experience, not from a psychological assumption of the human mind, but rather he deduces that impossibility from the rule which, in his opinion, determines the literal significance of language.

Apparently Ayer is willing enough to limit knowledge, as did Kant, provided it be clear that he does so on different grounds. Just as his reason for invalidating Kant's manner of establishing the limit is due to Wittgenstein's influence, so too his reason for limiting it in the way he does is drawn from the same authority. Wittgenstein concludes that since a limit cannot be drawn to thinking, then we can and must draw the limit in language. The reason he gives for not being able validly to set a

---


limit to knowledge itself is that, to do so, involves the impossible task of having to think what cannot be thought.

Drawing a limit only in language enables Ayer to make the arbitrary ruling that words can only be used when they apply to sense-experiences. Such a linguistic limitation classifies any use of words not referring to sense-experience as nonsense. A word will have the significance that Ayer imposes upon it, and the norm of his imposition will be sense-experience. Ayer never expressly says why his norm is such as it is, but it is clear that, in order to accept Wittgenstein's formula, he must first have accepted the empiricists' postulates. The practical aspects of this principle of language calls for as precise a relationship as possible to be worked out between the words used and the diverse contents of sense-experience to which they refer. This is a cardinal feature of the logic of language which is central to logical positivism. And it is to this that Ayer is referring when he claims how he, as a "matter of logic" in contrast to Kant's "matter of fact", will make a transcendent metaphysics impossible.

Many people fail to understand the nature of language as Ayer sees

24 "What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak therefore one must be silent.

The book (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus) will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather - not to thinking but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking, we should have to be able to think both sides of the limit. We should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought.

The limit can therefore only be drawn in language, and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense." L. Wittgenstein, Tractatus etc., Preface, p.27
it. And it is due to this failure on their part, he argues, that they quite readily make sentences which are literally nonsensical without ever realizing it. Such unwitting tendencies are the occasions for those "errors in logic" that Ayer speaks of by which the metaphysician finds himself, without desiring it, beyond the limits of experience.

Many metaphysical assertions are due to what Ayer terms "the infection of the primitive superstition" that to every real name a single real entity corresponds. And so, those who think this way arrive at the supposed entity through falsely assuming a necessity to distinguish logically between the thing itself and its sensible properties. In view of the fact that we do use the word "its", for instance, in referring to appearances we form the impression that we are distinguishing between the appearance and the thing to which it refers. Ayer sees this as but one of the accidents of linguistic usage; whereas the fact of the matter is that this seeming relation of sensible appearance to the thing itself is nothing more than the relationship of one appearance to another. Ayer contends that logical analysis will make this clear. It is by

25 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.44
26 See p.2, note 4
27 "The metaphysician does not intend to write nonsense. He lapses into it through being deceived by grammar, or through committing errors in reasoning, such as that which leads to the view that the sensible world is unreal." Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.45
28 Ibid., p.42
29 Ibid., p.42
30 Ibid., p.42
being misled in such ways as this, through what Ayer calls the superficial grammatical features of his language, that the metaphysician wrongly assumes that natures exist.  

What we have done, up to this point, is to see how Ayer intends to eliminate metaphysical disputes from philosophy in order to prepare the way for establishing the aim and method of philosophical enquiries. Further, we have caught a glimpse of the central relation between the denial of metaphysical utterances, on the one hand, and the establishment of aim and method in philosophy, on the other. The preoccupation with the validity of factual statements indicates the direction which his conception of philosophical enquiry will take, and what the type of unity consequent upon it will be.

Having taken such a firm stand on factual statements, Ayer is aware of the necessity of justifying his position. In point of fact, Ayer realizes that he must set forth some criterion for determining what are factual statements. The notion that genuine factual statements could be established by means of the rule for literal significance was thought at first to have been clear enough in principle. It promised to be a simple procedure.  

It seemed clear that all one had to do was to accept or reject statements on the basis of the rule. But when attempts were made to state the rule, obstacles arose. It had originally been presupposed that, since the revered empiricist postulates favoured only sense-experience,

---

31 Ibid., p.42
32 Ibid., p.35
they would be directly productive of a thoroughly sound criterion, both in
principle and in practice. However, those same postulates stood in the way
of the results Ayer would have liked his criterion to produce. For, in the
process of arriving at a statement of the criterion, the matter became
more than just an anti-metaphysical one, since the problem of having any
conclusive knowledge whatever was seriously raised as well. 33

Before proceeding to its solution we must realize that the criter-
on is but one factor of an integrated philosophical doctrine which we have
set out to explore. Consequently, its solution is intimately bound up with
Ayer's doctrine as a whole. The criterion is a subordinate and dependent
method belonging to the more general aim and method in philosophy. It is
simply one of the stages of his methodological procedure involved in philo-
sophical enquiry. It ranks first only in application, in as much as it
indicates what statements are eligible for philosophical analysis. But it
is not first in doctrinal importance. By reason of the fact that it has
its origins in more fundamental postulates it is inseparable from them.
The question of its definitive formulation must always be relative to the
solution of the more basic things. That is to say, it must conform to the
conditions laid down by them. For that reason we must proceed now to a
consideration of those more basic tenets that we may ultimately show both
the solution of the criterion and the aim and method of philosophy of
which it is a part.

33 "But even for the Vienna Circle philosophical problems did not dis-
appear so easily. The old perplexities of what is called the theory
of knowledge came out again as soon as there was a question of decid-
ing exactly what was meant by a statement being verifiable." Ayer,
"The Vienna Circle", The Revolution in Philosophy, p.30
II
THE NATURE OF THE "GIVEN"

Ayer's criterion is demanded by and develops out of his basic empiricist assumptions. The absolutely basic starting point of his philosophy is not his criterion for determining factual propositions. In order to see how this is so it is necessary to explain two basic points; first, what Ayer holds a matter of fact to be, and second, when he considers a statement describes a matter of fact.

With respect to the first point, since Ayer's position on what a matter of fact is involves his sense-data theory, it is necessary at this stage to consider the essential factors in that theory. As to the second point, a thorough understanding about when a statement describes a matter of fact is contingent upon the sense-data theory as well. And so while we shall first show the matter of fact element of the sense-data theory, the explanation of the way in which facts are described will be forthcoming as the presentation of the theory proceeds. In this chapter we will take up the first point.

Since the criterion is concerned with facts we must know what Ayer considers facts precisely to be. When Ayer speaks of facts he means

---

1 It should be borne in mind that while the terms "sentence", "statement" and "proposition" may appear to be mutually interchangeable according to Ayer's use of them, they actually are not in every respect. He uses each of them in the particular meaning he has given to it. For him a "sentence" is a form of words grammatically significant, but not necessarily having what he terms "literal significance" or "literal meaning" - a metaphysical assertion would be a case in point. An indicative sentence, whether literally meaningful or not, expresses a "statement". A
only empirical facts. There are no other kinds of facts. "And we may explain", says Ayer, "that we give the name 'empirical fact' to whatever can be factually observed." We have now to see what this statement involves in detail. In his own special sense of "object" Ayer assumes the first directly observed object is sense-data. For him sense-data are the self-evident starting point of knowledge. There is nothing else to which they can be referred for verification, since they are the first object of perception. All else is referred to them. They are that of which the knower is immediately aware in a sensation, or, a sense-perception. This awareness is referred to generally as sense-experience. Any single sense-experience which one is having is made up of sense-fields. Those things which constitute that sense-field in a particular instance are called sense-contents, or sense-data. Ayer defines a sense-datum "as anything that is the constituent of a sense-field."

statement which is literally meaningful is a "proposition". That is to say, a proposition is a sub-class of the class of sentences.


3 "I can therefore claim to be using the word "sense-datum" in such a way that there can be no doubt that sense-data actually are experienced. In following this procedure, I shall, I think, be giving to the word "sense-datum" the meaning that the philosophers who have adapted the "theory of sense-data" have, in general, intended it to have, ... And the definition of sense-data that these philosophers commonly give is that they are the objects of which, in sense-perception, one is directly aware." Ibid., p.59

4 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.66

To say that a sense-datum is a constituent of a sense-field does not imply, according to Ayer, that a sense-datum is a kind of object of knowledge which is achieved by a mental act distinct from the object. To speak of mental act when referring to knowledge of sense-data could raise the whole problem of a knowing subject, of an external object, and of an act of knowing, none of which Ayer accepts. Such notions are invalid according to him. The principal basis for this opinion is that Ayer claims there is no empirical evidence whatsoever from which there could be established the notion of a "mind" as something distinct from and supporting mental events said to proceed from it. Ayer holds that "because it is assumed that every activity must have its special organ, a mythical entity is brought in to do the work." To avoid the assumption would be to avoid the needless faculties.

He holds all the five major factors which he deems constitute a realist theory of knowledge, namely, 1) the person who thinks, 2) the faculty with which one thinks, 3) the process itself, 4) that there are images which are a medium of knowledge, and, 5) that an external object of thought is identified with the images, to be untenable. For he takes them to be five assumptions which merit the term mythical. And so the

---

6 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.122
8 Ibid., p.5
9 "For if it is assumed that every activity requires an instrument to set it going, then the instrument will itself require a further instrument, and so "ad infinitum", while if we do not make this assumption there is no need for the faculties in the first place." Ibid., p.17

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
term "object", when used to refer to a sense-datum, does not stand for an external thing. Ayer maintains that whenever one sees a physical object one just perceives a seeming-object, as he puts it, for "these seeming objects", he says, "are sense-data; and the conclusion may be more simply expressed by saying that it is always sense-data that are directly perceived."  

Such a notion considers a sense-datum to be merely the simple occurrence of a sensation which in itself implies nothing. It is neither referential nor intentional. No definition of sense-data then, as he understands it, entails the analysis of sense-data for, being basic, they are unanalysable. The expression "directly aware", used in the definition, must not be taken to suggest by inference that there is a reality that goes beyond the immediate sense-data themselves, - since sense-data are not a means, in a vicarious sense, by which we know reality, even though their awareness is a condition of knowledge.  

It is emphatically stated that sense-data are themselves reality: "For to say that an object is immediately "given" is to say merely that it  

---

10 Ibid., p.25  


12 "And indeed, if it is essential to knowledge that the object known should exist independently of the knowing of it, I have implicitly denied that our awareness of sense-data is a kind of knowing, for I have made it a necessary and sufficient condition of the existence of sense-data that they should in fact be experienced." Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, pp.78-79
is the content of a sense-experience, and we are very far from maintain-
ing that our sense-experiences have no real content, . . . ." 13

The advantage of the sense-data theory is that it makes no distinc-
tion between real and apparent characteristics of sense-data. 14 According
to Ayer, our awareness of sense-data is not the descriptions, or images of
a sensible reality, but sense-data are the immediate reality itself. This
position is what must be held by Ayer, once he asserts that the "objects"
of which we are directly aware are sense-data. The reason is that, rather
than treat of our perceptual appearances in terms of "mind" or "material
things", he has chosen to use sense-data as the units for describing our
experiences. This decision commits one into a reverse procedure from what
one could normally expect, for one must now ask how such conceptions as
"mind" and "material things" and "physical space" are analysed in terms of
sense-data, rather than the other way round. 15 Ayer does not consider
such a decision on his part to be wholly arbitrary, since it conforms
more to the characteristics of the "given" of which we are directly aware.

Although Ayer speaks of sense-data as being "reality", to his way
of thinking one cannot correctly say that sense-data "exist" however. To
use the word "exist" when referring to sense-data must, in his opinion,

13 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.121
15 "If we agree to say that the objects of which we are directly
aware are sense-data then we are deciding to treat them and not minds or
material things as the units in terms of which we are to describe our
perceptual experiences. The question, therefore, that we must ask is not
how sense-data are to be incorporated into the categories of mind or
matter or whereabouts they are to be located in physical space, but rather
be used with the same precaution as the word "object" is used of them, in view of the implications of what a false inference could suggest, that is, the inference that they were the appearance of things. For that reason Ayer warns that:

\[\ldots\text{it seems advisable always to speak of the "occurrence" of sense-contents and sense-experiences in preference to speaking of their "existence", and so to avoid the danger of treating sense-contents as if they were material things.} 16\]

As to the background or origin of this "occurrence", the problem cannot be raised at all in Ayer's consideration. Consequently, he offers no reason as to why any sense-data should ever occur. They simply occur. And beyond that, no single one of the sense-data has any intrinsic connection with another. Hence, there is no causal relationship between one sense-experience and another. 17

Even though Ayer insists on the direct awareness of sense-data as the first "given", he does not find it a difficult matter to explain why or how people do think in terms of "material things". He assures us that he himself really "believes" in objects like "tables" and "chairs", and he is satisfied that they really "exist", even though we do not experience them, for they are not the content of a sense-experience. 18 One of his

---

16 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.123

17 "But the reason why I do not take it (cause and effect) into account is simply that this idea of necessary connection has no counterpart at all in the observable facts." Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p.183. See The Problem of Knowledge, p.217

consistent claims is that our "beliefs" in the reality of such things as "tables" and "chairs" have nothing to do directly with empirical facts of sense-data. The prevalence of delusive perceptions is evidence for him that what we directly experience is always a sense-datum and never a material thing.  

According to his understanding of it, our thinking of things in terms of being material is based on an assumption that is a consequence of the way in which we make use of sense-data. This belief in material things is not due to the nature of our perceptions, but due to an attitude of mind based on past experiences. "Belief" is a term Ayer uses to explain an attitude one has towards a thing without being completely sure of it. Being sure does not mean having subjective confidence for Ayer, but having conformity of facts to experience with or without the subjective feeling. When one is sure in this sense, one has knowledge as distinct from belief. To have "belief" in the "reality" of "material things", and not to be properly apprised that it is an indirect perception only, regardless of how assured one feels of it being right, is to misconceive such perceptions of material things as being directly perceived in fact, and so, to lack the surety required for true knowledge.

Ayer notes that it is characteristic of our beliefs in "material things" that their existence and properties are independent of any particular observer. We make this assumption, says Ayer, on the supposition

19 Ibid., p.9
20 Ibid., p.7
21 Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p.13
that material things continue the same whether they are observed by one person or another, or not observed at all. That is, for instance, a "table" appears differently to one who is facing it from the front, than it appears to one who is experiencing it from an end view. Yet both refer to it as "this table here". Those who assume that the direct objects of our experiences are "material things" say that both persons are experiencing the same thing. Whereas the truth of the matter is, Ayer would say, each one is experiencing his own sense-data.

The whole difficulty with the "material thing" mode of referring to sense-data is, from Ayer's standpoint, that so much of what we say is illusive. That is, we can refer to a coin as being circular, but, according to the appearance it may present, it is really elliptical when its surface is tilted. Ayer proposes that the use of direct sense-data reference enables one to avoid the inevitable illusion. It is preferable to refer to the experience directly as it appears, and not to a material thing. There is no illusion about the objects we immediately experience since they are sense-data themselves. Sense-data, for Ayer, are not in any case material things. The occurrence of a particular sense-datum cannot be justified in terms of anything other than itself - being a self-evident "given", - whereas the knowledge of the properties of "material things" must be justified through the medium of sense-data. 22


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
It would seem then that "material things" or "physical objects" are always dependent in every respect upon sense-data. In addition, when it comes to expressing the sense-data themselves, it is found, by Ayer, that sense-data also have a dependence on "physical objects". By referring to an experience of anything, how could one succeed fully in making oneself understood about it in terms of sense-data alone? That is, how could one, for example, express the appearance of a rose without in some way indicating that it was a rose one was experiencing? Such a term would have to be a "physical object" reference. Ayer finds that the sense-data terms are not sufficiently worked out to indicate experience adequately without falling back on "physical objects". For this reason Ayer has to admit that the notion of sense-data is not precise - at least, it is not as precise as it was once hoped it would be in order to justify the analysis of "physical objects". In fact, the precision that it actually does have is due to the way we talk about "physical objects". However, by the very fact that sense-data terms always directly refer to sense-data themselves, even when a physical object term is included in the expression, then sense-data terms are still the means of justifying "physical objects".

We have seen that the expression "material thing" must be justified as a reference to experience in terms of the basic sense-data themselves, for a sense-datum is a matter of fact, while a "material thing" is not. Nevertheless, Ayer allows that it is just as valid to refer to sense-data

---

23 Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p.122
24 Ibid., p.124

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
as "material things" as it is to accept the fact of sense-data, as long as
one knows how the expression "material things" is used, so as to avoid the
error of assuming them to be the direct reality which is experienced. It
must be noted that when we use the expression "material thing" or "physic­
al object", in referring to a sense-datum, we are not speaking directly
about the sense-datum itself, but a way in which we are making use of the
sense-datum.

There is an important feature about Ayer's notion of a matter of
fact that would be well to mention here, for, although it has its applica­
tion in the verifiability of propositions, it pertains to an aspect of
sense-data themselves. We stated earlier in this chapter that Ayer gives
the name "fact" to what can be factually observed. The significance of
the word "can" in his definition indicates that Ayer does not limit facts
to what are actually observed here and now, but includes also the possibil­
ity of being observed. Nor must the experience be an exclusively personal
one. In stating that "a sense-datum is that of which one is directly
aware", the "one" referred to as being aware is impersonal. What is actu­
ally experienced by someone else has not, of necessity, to be experienced
by another individual in order to be accepted by him as a fact. He has only
to see that he could make a similar observation under favourable circum­
stances. It is not even necessary to know who the observer is, in any giv­
en case, since all one has to do is "to 'place' the situation in which the
observations are supposed to be made." Consequently, Ayer's more

26 See P.14.
27 Ayer, The Problems of Knowledge, p.137
complete definition of a sense-datum is "an object of which it is conceiv-
able that someone should be directly aware." 28

Such a notion of sense-data being impersonal, and not necessarily
being actually present, is purposely conceived in order to take in the
findings of science. It enables a physicist, for example, to put a reason-
able reliance on the findings of another physicist. All he requires is
that he have sufficient information from the first "observers" report to
enable him to judge that, in suitable conditions, he himself could observe
them. 29  This is supported by a principle advanced by Ayer, that "there
is nothing in an experience considered by itself, . . . to make it form
part of one person's history rather than another's." 30

There is one further point required in order to come to the com-
plete notion of what Ayer considers a fact to be. Sense-datum, as we have
seen, is a simple awareness. "Awareness" has a very precise meaning for
Ayer, which merits some attention. He holds awareness to be something
which in itself does not arrive at the level of knowledge. Experience, in
itself, is sterile, for " . . . experiences themselves are neither certain
nor uncertain; they simply occur." 31  Knowledge, on the other hand, is
acquired only in propositions, and so the full notion of what a fact is

29 Ibid., p.164
30 Ibid., p.169
31 Ibid., pp.78-79. See The Problem of Knowledge, p.54
properly involves knowledge of the fact as well as the occurrence of it. By this he means the way in which we predicate things. And in this matter Ayer restricts the choice of predicates to what can be tested by the making of an observation. This is quite arbitrary on his part, but in view of his empiricism, he has no other choice. Thus he must admit:

If there is a point in saying, that only what can be experienced exists, . . . it is to lay down conditions for the legitimacy of descriptive expressions: we are to admit only such expressions as apply directly or indirectly to what can be experienced.

Ayer defends himself against any objection to this restriction by resorting to a wholly pragmatic justification.

We are now in a position to understand Ayer's solution to that first basic point, namely, what a matter of fact is. He dogmatically assumes, without investigating whether there be other possibilities, that the word "fact" includes only what can be observed in sense-experience. For he says a sentence is factually significant when one knows what

---

32 "To avoid ambiguity, I shall in the future use the word "awareness" only in connection with sense-data, and the word "perception" only in connection with material things, and I shall restrict the use of the word "knowledge" to its propositional sense." Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p.79

33 Ayer, Philosophical Essays, p.229

34 Ibid., p.229

35 Ibid., p.227
observation would lead one to accept the proposition as being true, or not. And the observation to which he refers is limited to the only observable which he allows - the direct awareness of sense-data.

36 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.35
Having settled what a matter of fact is, our next problem is to discover when Ayer considers that a statement expresses a matter of fact. The answer has already been implicitly introduced to us in the foregoing remarks on the role of predicates in accounting for a matter of fact. The choice of predicates is tied up so much with experience for Ayer that he considers "our enquiry into the use of words to be regarded as an enquiry into the notion of the facts which they describe". They are, nevertheless, obviously distinct. A predicate belongs to a proposition, and so is but once removed from the simple awareness of sense-data. The forming of propositions about sense-data is a function distinct from the direct awareness of sense-data. This is indicated through there being more than one way by which it is done. For we have only to contrast a sense-data statement with a physical object statement to find that, although they are different types of expression, the experience they refer to is the same. When one speaks of the occurrence of a sense-experience one is making a different kind of statement entirely from one about a material thing existing. Ayer asserts that:

The proposition that I am holding a pen in my hand is not equivalent to any proposition or set of propositions that describe my present experiences, though they provide me with the only grounds I have for asserting it.  

---

1 Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p.26
2 Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p.60
In the former case, what Ayer calls "physical object" language is being used and in the latter case, "sense-data" language. No one of these embodies any more factual discovery of experience than the other. They are in no way to be regarded as alternative theories of reality, but as alternative languages. It is Ayer's opinion that sense-data language enables one to refer to the same facts expressed by physical object language in a clearer and more convenient way, while adding nothing to the facts.

Language is the second central feature of Ayer's philosophy. According to him, we do not leave sense-data in its simple state of occurrence but put it to use in linguistic statements. Just as sense-data is a basic "given" for Ayer, so too is language a "given". Ayer argues this on the conviction that language is a self-evident fact in any cultural pattern. The possibility of doing without words in referring to empirical facts is unacceptable to Ayer. Of course, language is not as basic a "given" as sense-data, since the elements of language have a conventional feature about them. The elements which make up language are symbols which may be either simple words, or sentences. They are arbitrary in the sense that it is conceivable that any other symbol could have been used to refer to the matter of fact in question. However, the accepted convention to refer to a

---

3 Ibid., p.23
4 Ibid., P.55
5 Ibid., p.26
6 Ibid., P.92
7 Ibid., p.93
fact by one regular symbol rather than by any other indicates a certain
stability and dependence upon the symbol itself. That is to say, we find
it more convenient to refer to facts almost invariably as "physical objects"
rather than some other way. The further point is made by Ayer that the sym­
bol's dependence upon the actual experience for which it stands makes the
symbol's function more than a trivial and arbitrary one.

The notion of language being a "given" is further brought out by the
fact that Ayer does not consider the mere naming of an experience by its
appropriate symbol as adding anything significant to our knowledge of the
experience. As we saw in chapter II, only statements of experience properly
reach the level of experience. All prior to that are the basic data provid­
ing the conditions for knowledge.

In this matter of symbols Ayer takes the position that there is
no necessary connection between a particular sense-datum and the symbol
employed in referring to it. He insists that it is useless to search, as
so many do, for "the other term of the relation of meaning" between a
symbol and some unspecified object corresponding to it, since there is no
such relationship. What one is really searching for in such cases is an

8 Ibid., p.140
9 Ayer, Thinking and Meaning, p.27
10 "But suppose I intend merely to name what I am seeing...... But
if that is all I am doing, then I am not saying anything at all. I can
be neither wrong nor right." Ayer, Philosophical Essays, p.116
understanding of the way in which the symbol is used. It is true that such symbols, especially those belonging to sense-data language, have direct connection with observable facts, but this is not a necessary connection. The fact that the symbol "red" means a specific colour of sense-data is simply the result of a conventional choice to refer to the colour that way. Any other word would be a satisfactory one, as long as it is understood as such by those prescribing to its use. This conventional connection is spoken of as the non-formal rule of a symbol in contrast to the formal rules within the language itself to which the symbol belongs.

In our discussion of Ayer's position on sense-data in chapter II we saw that he holds sense-data have nothing whatever to do with a thinking substance, nor with a substance to be known. Since then only sense-data exist, - which in his sense of the word means only to occur, - what case does he make for the philosophical concepts of substance and ego? We will now see how he handles each of these notions in turn. They will serve to illustrate how major philosophical problems are solved according to his principles. We will treat of substance first.

The problem of substance in Ayer's doctrine has already been touched upon where we showed one of his examples of how he claims it is

11 Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p.97

12 "What is not necessary is that a symbol, the use of which is determined by a non-formal rule, should have any further connection with what it symbolizes beyond that which is constituted by the rule". Ibid., p.107
possible to commit "errors in logic" which led some people into metaphysical utterances. He observed that we employ the term "substance" to stand for a thing which we erroneously suppose to be the entity which underlies the sensible properties of a thing. For this reason, he says, metaphysicians "... employ the term 'substance' to refer to the thing itself."\(^{14}\) It is not until he comes to the question of whether sense-contents can exist without being experienced that he gives us his final solution to the problem. He insists that there is no empirical evidence to account for the existence of substance.\(^{15}\) He makes it clear that he does not accept the realist analysis of sensation in which the notion of entities, existing in the material world as objects of knowledge, is a necessary condition of the knowing process.\(^{16}\)

The mistaken notion that there is a supposed thing underlying its appearances can be accounted for by the relation of one sense-content to another. The word "exists" used to refer to a sense-content, or sense-datum, does not mean to imply that a sense-datum has a substantial existence and that the sense-datum "thing" is an object of knowledge, in the realist sense of "existence" and "object". For, to say that a sense-datum exists is to say no more than that it occurs; and, to say that a

\(^{13}\) See p.10
\(^{14}\) Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.142
\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 122
\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 122
\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 123
sense-datum is an object is to say not more than that it is part of a sense-experience. 18

The word "exist", as used in physical object language in referring to the existence of a material thing, must not be applied to a sense-content as if it were an entity according to a realist theory of reality, but only according to a theory of language. 19 For a material thing is a logical construct, while a sense-content is simply a part of a sense-experience which occurs as one complete whole. 20

Ayer maintains that when we are distinguishing between one material thing and another material thing it is merely the expression of the relation between one logical construct and another logical construct conjoined under some formal rule of language. They are the linguistic counterpart of the relation prevailing between different sense-data in a sense-field. These logical constructions are merely the result of a conventional way of referring to sense-contents. And, in view of the fact that they are conventional, when logical constructions are used in relation to one another as symbols in a proposition according to the internal rules of the language,

18 Ibid., p.122

19 "For my argument has shown that if we do not make this unwarranted assumption we have to regard the thesis of naive realism, not as an assertion of fact, but as a proposal to use words in a certain fashion; . . . ." Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p.48

20 "For the existence of a material thing is defined in terms of the actual and possible occurrence of the sense-contents which constitute it as a logical construction, and one cannot significantly speak of a sense-experience, which is a whole composed of sense-contents, or of a sense-content itself as if it were a logical construction out of sense-contents." Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.123
this relationship in no way implies that the sense-contents for which they stand are related to one another as substances in a sense-field. It must always be borne in mind that for Ayer the logical constructs constituted out of sense-data are not actual constructs having an absolutely necessary relation to the sense-data from which they are constituted, but only a construct of language having a conventional relationship to sense-data. 21

The distinction made between two logical constructions in physical object terms, that is, between two "substances", and the distinction made between the two sense-contents which were the elements out of which they were constructed are different kinds of distinctions, and they have no intrinsic connection. 22 In the first case, the distinction of material things is one of language which, because of its special character, misleads one into assuming that things, or substances, exist as the immediate "given".

In the second case, the distinction is merely the relation between two sense-contents in a sense-field which together make up one whole awareness, and is in fact the actual "given". The physical object language is simply an accepted way of organizing sense-data. 23 Inasmuch as it refers

---

21 "And it may be advisable here to repeat, 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 part 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." Ibid., p.123

22 Ibid., p.124

23 Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p.16
solely to the description of sense-data it is validly used. And so the word "substance" which belongs to physical object terminology has its valid place in this kind of description. But once it is taken to be factual, and not simply descriptive, it is invalid. In virtue of the fact that physical objects belong to a theory with respect to the evidence of the senses, the statements of which are so characterized as to do more than simply re-describe sense-data, Ayer agrees that: "... it does not greatly matter whether we say that the objects which figure in it are theoretical constructions, or whether, in line with common sense, we prefer to say that they are independently real." That is, that they are existing substances. This is with the reservation, of course, that "in line with common sense" is in the order of description, and not of fact. In other words, there is no actual concession to the realist position here, but merely a pragmatic acknowledgement in the conventional way of speaking. This is a further example of Ayer's pragmatic principle.

The solution of the notion of ego can be dealt with more briefly, since, being in the class of substances as far as physical objects are concerned, Ayer treats of it in a similar manner. The problem of the ego centres around the question whether sense-contents "are in any way private to a single self." As with all other substances, the solution is not

---

24 Ibid., p.19
25 Ibid., p.55
26 Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p.147
27 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.122
to be found in empirical evidence. It is maintained by Ayer that: "Neither the existence of the substance which is supposed to perform the so-called act of sensing, nor the existence of the act itself... is in the least capable of being verified." 28

A sense-datum, since it is a simple awareness, is neither referential nor intentional and so leads to nothing beyond itself. The false notion that the self is a knowing substance has its basis in the false distinction between "mind" and "matter", which two terms can be nothing more than a distinction of logical constructions. 29 Ayer admits that there is a sense in which it can be said that a given sense-content can be experienced by a particular subject:

But we shall see that this relation of being experienced by a particular subject is to be analysed in terms of the relationship of sense-contents to one another, and not in terms of a substantival ego and its mysterious acts. 30

And this relation of a sense-content with the particular subject experiencing it is the same as the relationship of material thing to material thing, and of mind to matter. That is, it is a relation of logical construction to logical construction which, as we saw earlier in this chapter, describes in language only the relation between the elements out of which the logical constructions were constituted. "We know that a self, 28 Ibid., p.122
29 Ibid., p.124
30 Ibid., p.122
if it is not to be treated as a metaphysical entity," Ayer remarks, "must
be held to be a logical construction out of sense-experiences." 31

This particular logical construction of "the self" corresponds
linguistically to the relation of a group of sense-data in a sense-field
at any given moment. It is a matter of identity with what occurs in one's
consciousness. This conscious awareness of a series of sense-experiences
constitutes a sense-history which is identified with the one experiencing
it. 32 This sense-history is described in physical object language by
such terms as "past", "disposition", and "memory"; and in sense-data
language, by reference to the continuous field of consciousness in the
organism. 33

To say an experience is "mine" does not imply a substantival ego
in Ayer's doctrine, but it is simply the description of the ownership of
an experience. Instead of implying substance, "it is rather", he asserts,
"that to refer to an experience demonstratively is to preclude any doubt
about its ownership; there can be no question whose it is." 34 Ayer holds
personal identity to be constituted by the presence of a certain factual

31 Ibid., p.125

32 "It is, in fact, a logical construction out of the sense-
experiences which constitute the actual and possible sense-history of
a self. And, accordingly, if we ask what is the nature of the self,
we are asking what is the relationship that must obtain between sense-
experiences for them to belong to the sense-history of the same self."
Ibid., p.125

33 Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p.144

34 Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p.223
relation between experiences, for he pragmatically doubts if one can talk about experiences except as the experiences of a person. It is realized by Ayer that it would be nonsensical to suggest that an experience could exist entirely on its own, and so, "... we cannot talk of experiences without implying that they have owners." 35

This means that the existence of person is made to consist only in a certain relation between experiences. Ayer grants this and feels justified in permitting it:

And then we seem to involve ourselves in a circle when we make the existence of persons consist only in a certain relationship between experiences. But I do not think that this circle is vicious. It shows that we could not understand what is meant by an experience unless we already understood what was meant by being a person; but, as we have already seen in other instances, to understand what is meant by an expression does not entail that one can give a satisfactory analysis of its use. So even if the existence of an experience entails the existence of a person, an analysis of personal identity in terms of experience could still be informative. 36

The plausibility of a person as the subject of experiences is not in the least to be taken from the "even if" remark that experience entails the prior existence of a person. It is merely a linguistic frame of reference. Ayer's case for personal identity can be no more than "that it is the relation that holds between experiences when they are constituents of the same consciousness." 37 By the "same consciousness" Ayer means the person well enough; but which person is a pragmatic posit of no substan-

35 Ibid., p.224
36 Ibid., p.224
37 Ibid., p.226
That there seems to be an "unobservable somewhat" underlying sensations as the result of such reference terms as "self" and "personal identity" is for Ayer an assumption he wishes to dispel. It is no more significant than the falsely assumed entities underlying material things. And we have seen his linguistic solution for material things. Consequently, all reference to the self and to personal identity is simply a way of saying something about sense-experiences.

This explanation of the meaning Ayer gives to substance and ego provides us with an intimate view of the basic empiricist postulates in his doctrine, together with their philosophic consequences. We are now in a position to understand the formulation of the criterion by which we can know when a statement describes a matter of fact. We have seen his notion of the fundamental role of language and of his sense-data world which it describes. The problem which follows upon these fundamentals is a vast one. To know what Ayer means by sense-data and language are different matters entirely from knowing in each particular instance when a statement describes a fact. This latter is a case for verification, whereas sense-data and language, in keeping with his doctrine, are not, since they are the given.

---

38 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.126
39 Ibid., p.128
By formulating a criterion for testing a genuine proposition Ayer claims that, through it, we will be able to know when a statement describes a matter of fact, and when it does not. He speaks of the criterion as the principle of verification. In brief, the principle declares that the meaning of a statement is determined by the way in which it can be verified. The verification consists in the statement being tested by empirical observation. The whole intention in Ayer's mind is to find out when an empirical statement is literally significant. He holds it to be so when it is factually meaningful. That is to say, a statement may be said to describe a matter of fact when it expresses some empirical observation. "The meaning of a sentence, we may say," remarks Ayer, "is an empirical fact. And we may explain that we give the name "empirical fact" to whatever can be factually observed." The ultimate basis for validity is sense-data experience, since according to him, "... it is through having some experience that we discover the truth or falsehood of any statement of empirical fact." It may seem that this statement of the criterion may just as readily have been given without so much concern over the fundamentals upon which it is based. However, we have had the advantage of understanding how the criterion develops from the basic "given", and consequently we are able to

---

40 Ibid., p.5
41 Ayer, "The Vienna Circle", The Revolution in Philosophy, p.74
42 Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p.95
43 Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p.17
appreciate better why Ayer makes his criterion to be the rule for limiting knowledge. We may apply here a remark Ayer himself uses on this same point, that such an answer could just as well have been given at the outset without having to take the trouble of explaining so much. But he argues that the important thing is not so much the formulation of the criterion as the analysis required to make the way clear for its acceptance. \[^{14}\]

\[^{14}\] Ibid., p.148

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
IV

THE PROBLEM OF INDUBITABLE PROPOSITIONS

We have seen now what Ayer considers a matter of fact to be, and that he holds a statement describes a matter of fact when, through a linguistic convention, it imparts factual information about sense-experience. Any proposition so expressed by a sentence is verified simply by our knowing the observation. In order to verify a factual proposition all one has to know is what observation would lead him to accept it as being true, or reject it as false. This is the statement of the criterion in principle, but it is not the most precise statement of it since it does not explain all the difficulties involved in verification. Ayer finds it necessary to add refinements and amplifications to it. This is necessary since he comes to realize that knowing what observation would lead him to accept or reject a proposition as being true is not easily determined in fact. For one thing, there can be errors in factual statements. Consequently, Ayer is obliged to posit certain conditions that will assist him to verify.

These certain conditions are two in number; first, to allow for both practical verifiability and verifiability in principle; and second, to take into consideration the vagueness of both sense-data and "physical object" statements. With respect to the first condition, Ayer places

---

1 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.35
great store on his distinction between practical verifiability and verifiability in principle. It lends considerable liberality to his criterion. Both are admissible, and any one of them satisfies where applicable. Thus, he holds that there are any number of propositions, like "arsenic is poisonous", which we never in fact verify, but readily accept as true since the practical means of verifying them are available if we want to take the trouble, - for we know what observations do verify them, since they are more or less accessible. On the other hand, factual propositions, like "there are mountains on the far side of the moon", lack the practical means of verification, yet they are verifiable in principle - since we know what observations would verify them, were they accessible to us.²

Regarding the second point, the "vagueness" referred to is the degree of vagueness of most empirical propositions to which the criterion must be adaptable.³ This vagueness is due to the inability of the more accepted rules of language to designate all that is involved in the sense-data which they describe. In "physical object" language we describe sense-data as material things, and in this Ayer sees a definite vagueness. Such statements are vague because "physical object" language does not describe all that can be said of a particular sense-datum. Furthermore, there is an additional vagueness since "physical object" statements are illusive in their indirect reference to sense-data. Statements expressed in sense-data

² Ibid., p.36
³ Ibid., p.12
terminology are also vague because the complete list of the terms of sense-data language would be most difficult to compile in practice, since they would have to be as varied as the sensible characteristics they attempt to describe - a most difficult task owing to the infinite series of sense-experiences with which one can become acquainted.\(^4\)

Ayer's frequent preoccupation with the comparative merits of these two linguistic uses during the years he was developing his position was with a view, not only to bring the vagueness of statements of material things closer to experience through having an alternative way of describing those experiences with more precision - through sense-data terminology - but also he had hopes of establishing the verification of statements of material things by means of sense-data propositions. While it is true both languages are prescriptive, he observed that sense-data language was logically prior since its reference was more direct, and thus could serve as the basis for the verification of all empirical statements - especially statements of material things.\(^5\) He entertained these hopes even though he agreed that there was not a mutual entailment between sense-data statements and those of material things.\(^6\)

Coming now to the final complete understanding of the principle of verification, we must note three important stages of Ayer's development. In


\(^6\) Ibid., pp. 238-239
the first stage the question which he originally put to himself was:
"Would any observation be relevant to the determination of a putative statement being true or false?" It is well to observe Ayer does not say "does some precise observation determine it?", but "would any observation determine it?" There will be many cases, observes Ayer, where a precise observation will not be available. In fact, the majority of statements which people make do not refer to personal actual observations. On the other hand, there are some propositions where they are available. Such are those propositions which record an actual or possible observation and which he refers to as experiential propositions. Since they are simply recordings of these experiences then they designate the experiences directly, that is, in sense-data terms. Ayer appeals to these experiential propositions as the basis for the verification of all other empirical statements. He laid it down that any statement from which an experiential proposition could be deduced is a genuine factual proposition. The basis for this kind of verification originates from the empiricists' premise that to refer to sense-data is not necessarily a way of referring to "physical objects", whereas, referring to "physical objects" is necessarily a way of referring to sense-data.

7 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.38
8 Ibid., p.11
9 Ibid., p.38
10 Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p.146
11 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.38
12 Ayer, Philosophical Essays, p. 104
In using the term "deduced" Ayer in no way means it to be taken in the sense of proceeding from a principle to a conclusion, but that from a statement about a material thing there can be found a statement of sense-data, - that is, in sense-data language, - corresponding to the statement of a "physical object" either in whole, or in part. This does not mean that the terms of any "physical object" statement can be mutually translatable into sense-data language, for, as we saw, Ayer holds that there can be no mutual entailment between them. This holds even where the "physical object" statement refers to an actually occurring experience. There is a correspondence between a "physical object" statement and a sense-data statement only in that they both refer to the same experience. And in such a case they are not identical statements, and neither of them describes any more of the experience than the other. As well as speaking of "deducing an experiential statement" from any other statement of empirical fact, he also refers to the same procedure in its reverse form of "reducing" material things to sense-data. 13

The aim of the criterion is to find a statement in sense-data language which designates the same experience, or part of it, that a "physical object" statement designates. When this is done then the "physical object" is said to entail an experiential proposition, - to which the "physical object" statement is "reduced", or, in other words, an experiential proposition can be deduced from a "physical object" statement being tested. The experiential statement is verified directly, and the "physical object"

13 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.64
statement from which the same experiential proposition is deduced, is
verified indirectly. 14 Ayer shows the procedure of this reduction pro-
cess in the course of qualifying his answer to the question of how it is
to be determined that an empirical proposition corresponds to a fact. He
replies that, in the last resort, it is always a case of the actual observ-
ervation to which it refers. Such a demand, as he sees it, calls for direct
verification of the proposition with the facts by means of a language whose
symbols are precisely determined by the rule that correlates them with the
sense-data in question. "Such precision", he asserts, "is not attainable
in the case of a sentence which refers to material things." 15 In this
matter of finally coming to the actual observation, Ayer observes:

I say "in the last resort" because it is necessary here to
draw a distinction between propositions the truth of which is deter-
mined directly by observation, and those that are verified indirectly.
One's grounds for believing a given proposition is often, in the first
instance, the truth of a second proposition which is evidence for it;
and one's grounds for believing the second proposition may, in its
turn, be the truth of a third; but this series cannot be prolonged
indefinitely. In the end it must include at least one proposition
that is believed, not merely on the grounds that it is supported by
other propositions, but in virtue of what is actually observed. For,
as I have already shown, we are not entitled to regard a set of pro-
positions as true merely because they support one another. In order
that we should have reason to accept any of them, it is necessary
that at least one of their number should be directly verified by ob-
servation of an empirical fact. 16

The class of propositions capable of direct verification depends upon the

14 "Let us call a proposition which records an actual or possible
observation an experiential proposition. Then we may say that it is the
mark of a genuine factual proposition, not that it should be equivalent to
an experiential proposition, or any finite number of propositions, but
simply that some experiential propositions can be deduced from it in con-
junction with certain other premises without being deducible from those
other premises alone." Ibid., pp. 38-39


16 Ibid., pp.108-109
language chosen to express them. Ayer held that such propositions as "this is a match-box" are not directly verifiable, and that the meaning of such propositions can be determined only by reference to sentences which designate sense-data, for "it is only when a sentence explicitly designates a sense-datum that its meaning is determined by reference to fact". 17

From the days when he first took up the task of developing his criterion by reviewing the conditions to which it must conform, Ayer has been troubled with whether or not these basic experiential propositions to which others are reduced are absolutely indubitable, and, as such, incorrigible. To be able to say "yes" would be highly desirable, since they would "form the completely valid basis of all empirical knowledge." 18 In this first period Ayer was looking for indubitable propositions, and concluded that there were none. At first he was committed entirely to the view that no proposition could be conclusively verified, not even the experiential ones. 19 He maintained that in virtue of the fact that a subsequent experience may call in doubt a proposition of a previous experience, thus lending to an infinite series of acts of verification, there are, consequently, no final propositions. 20

17 Ibid., p.110
20 Ibid., p.94
In his second stage Ayer comes to the view that there were propositions which could have conclusive verification.\textsuperscript{21} He saw that among empirical propositions there was a class which were not continually subject to the test of further experience, hence, they must be more than accepted hypotheses. In fact, as he now saw them, they were such that no subsequent experience could possibly confute them. Such propositions were those which solely record the content of a single present experience. Their conclusive verification is the occurrence of the experience to which they uniquely refer.\textsuperscript{22} He called these "basic propositions". He held it to be characteristic of such a proposition that it be completely verified by the existence of the sense-datum which it describes; to doubt the truth of such a proposition would be meaningless since it is only significant to doubt where there is a logical possibility of error.\textsuperscript{23} To the extent that one could not be mistaken about these basic propositions, formed directly in the mere recordings of present experiences, Ayer held them to be "incorrigible".\textsuperscript{24}

During this time Ayer felt one could not be factually mistaken in

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p.10
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p.10
\textsuperscript{23} Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, p.83
\textsuperscript{24} "Furthermore, I should now agree with those who say that propositions of this kind are "incorrigible" assuming that what is meant by being incorrigible is that it is impossible to be mistaken about them except in a verbal sense." Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.10
\end{flushleft}
the mere recording of these propositions, but only in the verbal misdescription of them. He argues that if one uses a sentence like "this is green" to designate a present sense-datum, then such a proposition asserts a truth of which no further evidence would be relevant. In such a case where one doubts whether "this is green", it is simply that one doubts whether green is the correct word to use.

In this second stage Ayer sees that his original experiential propositions divide into basic propositions and what he terms observation-statements. The latter are those which record an actual or possible experience, as distinct from the unique actual occurrence proper to the basic propositions. Ayer found this division necessary because basic statements, owing to their complete independence, provide no possibility of being a means of verification for factual statements. Thus Ayer changed his original statement of the criterion to centre around observation-statements. It made the reduction of factual statements to observation-statements an elaborate process, which, as we shall see, no longer applies as a result of the

25 "In a verbal sense, indeed, it is always possible to misdescribe one's experience; but if one intends to do no more than record what is experienced without relating it to anything else, it is not possible to be factually mistaken, and the reason for this is that one is making no claim that any further fact could confute." Ibid., p.10

26 Ibid., p.10

27 "I propose to say that a statement is directly verifiable if it is either an observation-statement, or is such that in conjunction with one or more observation-statements it entails at least one observation-statement which is not deducible from these other premises alone; and I propose to say that a statement is indirectly verifiable if it satisfies the following conditions: first, that in conjunction with certain other premises it entails one or more directly verifiable
position he adopted in the third stage of his development regarding incorrigible propositions.

A third and final stage of development is reached where Ayer comes to hold that it is quite possible to be factually mistaken as well, and not just verbally. Constant evidence of misdescription with the repeated chances of delusion, and illusion being among them, led him finally to contend "that there are some cases in which it is more plausible to say that the mistake is factual." Ayer concluded that there is a possibility of being in doubt since there can obviously be a difference between the way a thing looks and the way one judges it to look. And from this he notes that "there is then no class of descriptive statements which are incorrigible." 33

In view of the foregoing conclusion, where does the process of

statements which are not deducible from these other premises alone; and secondly, that these other premises do not include any statement that is not either analytic, or directly verifiable, or capable of being independently established as directly verifiable. And I can now reformulate the principle of verification as requiring of a literally meaningful statement, which is not analytic, that it should be either directly or indirectly verifiable, in the foregoing sense."

Ibid., p.13

28 Ayer, Philosophical Essays, p.116
29 Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p.38
30 Ibid., p.69
31 Ibid., p.70
32 Ibid., pp.69-70

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
verification terminate? Whether one has misdescribed one's experience or not, cannot be completely determined in principle. Ayer grants this, but he is reluctant to surrender to scepticism entirely on the matter. So he states that the verification terminates in someone's having some experience and in accepting the truth of some statement which describes it. The danger here is, as Ayer admits, that an experience will be taken as verified when it is not. This means in any particular case one can have no way of knowing whether one has made a mistake or not made a mistake. One never knows in any one instance when one has misdescribed an experience, since one may never go back to recheck what is no longer occurring.

Ayer does not consider this fallibility of statements any threat to our knowledge. He insists that this fallibility ought not to be taken to mean that we can never verify anything. He has always assumed that a pragmatic motive is necessary in accepting the validity of our knowledge. He asserts "that there is no reason to doubt that the vast majority of our experiences are taken by us to be what they are; in which case they verify

34 "However strong the experiential basis on which a descriptive statement is put forward, the possibility of its falsehood is not excluded. Statements which do no more than describe the content of a momentary, private experience, achieve the greatest security because they run the smallest risk. But they run some risk, however small, and because of this they too can come to grief.

We are left still with the argument that some statements must be incorrigible, if any are ever to be verified. If the statements which have been taken as basic are fallible like all the rest, where does the process of verification terminate? The answer is that it terminates in someone's having some experience, and in accepting the truth of some statement which describes it, or, more commonly, the truth of some more far-reaching statement which the occurrence of the experience supports. There is nothing fallible about the experience itself. What may be wrong is only one's identification of it. If an experience has been misidentified, one will be misled into thinking that some statement has been verified when it is not." Ibid., p.71

35 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.94
the statements which are construed as describing them." 36 In practice we accept their truth, and this is their verification. According to Ayer this is adequate, and no stronger verification is necessary. Least of all is a logical guarantee of a statement's infallibility necessary. It can never be logically impossible that one should take a statement to be true when it is false. A logical guarantee would be one that preserved a statement from contradiction by a future experience. Such a guarantee, demanded by the Sceptics, is, in Ayer's opinion, a philosophical ideal. 37

Thus Ayer's ultimate stand on the conclusive verification of basic propositions is that it is not possible to know in any given case whether we are mistaken in our description of an experience, or not, - nor is it necessary to have such a guarantee. He argues that, for the sceptic to say that one's making a statement about an experience is consistent with its being false, is no reason for saying that we cannot justify any statements. Ayer

36 Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p.71

37 Ibid., p.72. It would be interesting to note that Ayer maintains the only statement enjoying complete security from doubt is "I exist". (The Problem of Knowledge, p.71) It is not a descriptive proposition for him, but simply demonstrative, and as such adds nothing to factual knowledge, - since it is one no experience can alter. He analyzes the Cartesian principle Cogito, ergo sum, and objects to Descartes' view that, whatever else he may be able to doubt he could not doubt that he was thinking and, consequently, by logical necessity, that he was existing as well. For Ayer the proposition Cogito, ergo sum is an analytic proposition. He maintains that its only necessity is that which belongs to the formal logic of the language used. Thus it may be said to be indubitable only to the extent that all propositions of formal logic are equally indubitable within their logical pattern. But this does not make the proposition Cogito, ergo sum necessarily indubitable, for in as much as one can make a mistake in logic it is not indubitable. Ayer agrees that a proposition in logic is necessarily true if it is true at all, but any necessary proposition, with regard to any given person in the moment of his asserting it, is an empirical proposition and not one of logical necessity, - since the assertion of it is an empirical fact. It
contends that if such statements function as part of a theory which accounts for our experiences, it must be possible for those statements to justify the theory. The theory is that knowledge is had by our formulating statements of appropriate experiences which count for their truth, according to standard usage of language. And hence, there is no practical reason to doubt that such statements are verified, once it is agreed to use the theory this way. In other words, while we can never in any one particular case be sure of certain verification, it is, nonetheless, the pragmatic thing to accept that it is verified.

This is what the criterion has come to. Thus, "physical object" language does not require its justification in terms of sense-data language but, rather, it is justified by the appropriate experience which it describes, together with the acceptance of "physical object" language as a way of describing that experience.

is Ayer's conviction that in any given case a guarantee against any logical error is only had, to use Ayer's own words, "if I allow something to count as a guarantee." (Ayer, "Cogito, Ergo Sum", Analysis, Vol.14, No.2, Dec.,1953, p.28.) And the guarantee which he allows himself in the proposition "I exist", in order to forestall its possibility of doubt, is to resolve never to assert cogito on any occasion when he is not prepared to assert sum.

38 Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p. 148
39 Ibid., pp. 144-148.
The final statement of Ayer's criterion is, as we have seen, that a proposition is verified by the appropriate experience to which it refers, and provided that the linguistic theory which describes it is acceptable. In Ayer's view this criterion disposes of metaphysics. The deposition of metaphysics was, as we saw in chapter I, the first step Ayer took in preparing the way to bring aim and method into philosophical enquiry. He claims that the criterion shows that there are no such valid propositions as those sentences uttering metaphysical nonsense of "a supra-sensible reality" pretend to describe. This conclusion is based on the assumption that factual propositions are empirical propositions only, the sole function of which is to describe actual and possible sense-experience. If a statement cannot stand up to the test of the criterion, then it is not an empirical proposition, and consequently has no factual content. Ayer's understanding of a metaphysical sentence is one that purports to express a genuine factual proposition. In terms of the criterion, no metaphysical sentence expresses a factual proposition since only empirical propositions are factual. The only other possibility of validity would be for a metaphysical sentence to be an "a priori" proposition, that is, a tautology.¹ But metaphysical sentences cannot be "a priori" propositions, since such

¹ Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.136
propositions are analytic. Analytic propositions, according to Ayer, share with synthetic, that is, empirical, propositions the entire class of propositions that are literally significant. Whereas an empirical proposition is literally significant provided that it has factual content, an analytic proposition, on the other hand, is significant provided that the definition of the symbols contained in it make it valid. That is to say, as long as the symbol employed in the predicate of the proposition does not add anything to the symbol of the subject, not already contained in the subject, it is valid. The predicate of an empirical proposition does add factual content to the subject. The analytic proposition is independent of experience. That is to say, it is in no way factual, and so can in no way be confuted by experience. It is for this reason that they are called, by Ayer, tautologies. He argues that they make no contribution to our knowledge for the very reason that they are not factual. Metaphysical sentences cannot be analytic propositions since, by the very reason that they purport to be factual, they claim to be synthetic. Such synthetic propositions are those which hold for the existence of a supra-sensible world. Ayer insists, on the strength of this argument, that he is entitled to deny all that metaphysical sentences express.

Since no other synthetic sentences can be literally significant than those expressing empirical facts, there can be no such thing, Ayer asserts, as a body of propositions making up a science of philosophy. Whatever Ayer

\[\text{Ibid., p.16}\]
\[\text{Ibid., pp.78-79}\]
\[\text{Ibid., pp.134-135}\]
is to consider philosophy to be, he will not hold it to be philosophy of any kind. His reason for this is that, as he sees it, knowledge is proper to factual propositions. "It is science", he asserts, "that gives us our knowledge of the world; there is not, there cannot be, a philosophical brand of knowledge which would compete with science in this field." 5 Ayer considers his expose of metaphysics has rid us of the notion that there are such things as principles of philosophy upon which a doctrinal subject matter could be built through deductive reasoning.6

The only principles available to us, in Ayer's opinion, are those hypothetical "laws of nature" based on experience. They belong to those "physical object" descriptions of scientific observations. Since they pertain to experience, the method by which they are arrived at is inductive, a method proper to science only. This, Ayer observes, is a method that has never been used by the system builders of philosophy.7 That is, he claims, they have never used inductive generalizations for philosophical premises. Such inductive generalizations belong to the province of science and philosophers have nothing to do with them, except "record the facts of scientific procedure." 8

Ayer insists further that, not only can philosophers not build a system on inductive hypotheses, but also, they may not deduce anything from

---

5 Ayer, "The Vienna Circle", The Revolution in Philosophy, p.78
6 Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.46
7 Ibid., p.48
8 Ibid., p.98
what is immediately given in experience, - such as to attempt to infer from appearances that there is an underlying substance, or being. This cannot be done since, according to Ayer's principles, appearances are unanalyzable. Thus the only other source that one could fall back upon for principles upon which to establish a philosophical system would be "a priori" propositions. Here also Ayer forestalls the possibility on the ground that no "a priori" proposition can be the basis, or the principle, of a factual proposition. "It would be absurd", he says, "to put forward a system of tautologies as constituting the whole truth about the universe." 11

Ayer sees the tendency for philosophers to seek principles and thus to build up systems accountable to their desire to have a knowledge of reality as a whole, in contrast to the distinct and separate fields of knowledge given to us by the different sciences. He holds this tendency to be nothing but a misdirection since all the sciences taken together adequately satisfy for the whole knowledge of "reality": "There is no field of experience which cannot, in principle, be brought under some form of scientific law, and no type of speculative knowledge about the world which it is, in principle, beyond the power of science to give." 12

Since, for Ayer, philosophy has no principles and no subject-matter, what then does he leave to it? Whether we have realized it or not, we have

9 Ibid., p.43
10 Ibid., p.47
11 Ibid., p.47
12 Ibid., p.48
already experienced Ayer's philosophical aim and method at work in these five areas of his philosophical position under investigation. The analysis of the criterion of verifiability is an instance of the office it performs. The resultant overthrow of metaphysics is another function, although negative. The whole analysis of sense-data with their different kinds of linguistic description, - direct and indirect, with their comparative merits for the purpose of verification, - is a further case of philosophy's role. The illustration of what he conceives to be the solution of such problems as "substance" and the "ego", are yet other instances. All these are functions of philosophy, which are functions of logical analysis.

Following upon the knowledge accruing to us through science and common-sense, there is another task to be performed with regard to this knowledge. Knowledge, according to the logical positivists, requires critical analysis. To have knowledge is one thing; to interpret the significance of the use we make of it in description is another. Thus, for instance, the scientist does not, as scientist, analyse the full implications or meaning of a hypothesis, as far as the relationship obtaining between sense-data and the way in which he has preferred to express himself is concerned. In the case where a scientist uses "physical object" language it is the function of philosophy to make clear that, when the scientist describes the sense-data he is observing, he is not actually observing "physical objects" but merely that he is using a conventional way of describing sense-data. Philosophy's function, then, is to tell us that, while we "believe" in the existence of "physical objects", they do not exist at all. It assures us also, says Ayer, that such "beliefs" are not an invalid reference as long
as it continues to be "belief" only, and it is not to be erroneously taken
that what one "believes" in is what really appears, necessarily. Philosophy
shows the scientist and common-sense observer that they are in fact simply
using an acceptable way of referring to sense-data. By "physical object"
language we "assume" that the symbols used refer to existent "things". In
fact, the common-sense observer is hardly ever critical of the signifi-
cance of that assumption. It is Ayer's contention that it is philosophy's
role to protect us from error regarding the assumption. 13

It must be observed, however, that although such a function is
assigned to philosophy by Ayer, he insists that philosophy has nothing
whatever to do with validating scientific hypotheses, nor the facts of
common-sense observation. Scientific hypotheses and common-sense observa-
tions are both prior to the office of philosophy and independent of it.
That is to say, a philosopher cannot tell a scientist what he has observed
in sense-data, or what he should have observed. Philosophy simply scrutin-
izes the self-consistency of one's "beliefs". The philosopher aims to pre-
vent the scientist from erroneously converting what is proper only to the
inner consistency of the language used into an order of factual "existents".

It is not within the province of philosophy to justify directly the
"belief" of a proposition. Every man is free to know the evidence of his
propositions, and whether he wishes to doubt or accept them. The philosoph-
er cannot dictate to him on these matters. The philosopher is indeed con-

13 Ibid., p. 59
cerned with empirical facts, but not directly concerned. Nor is the
philosopher directly concerned with the way the facts are described. He
cannot, for example, tell the scientist how he should have described the
facts he observed, nor can he prescribe the language to be used. It is
open to anyone to describe as he likes as long as he uses his symbols con­
sistently with the formal rules of the language selected. Both the facts
and the symbols precede philosophy. The philosopher's concern with these
two factors is always indirect in as much as he shows us what we are doing
when we speak about things. All this is simply the logical analysis of
language.

There is nothing factual, in Ayer's opinion, about philosophical
propositions, in the way scientific and common-sense propositions are. No
further scientific knowledge is required by philosophy in order for it to
decide on what is already available to it from science and common sense.

---

14 Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p.1

15 "For the philosopher, as an analyst, is not directly concerned
with the physical properties of things. He is concerned only with the way
we speak about them." Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.57

16 "It is no further scientific information that is needed to de­
cide such philosophical questions as to whether the material world is real,
whether objects continue to exist at times when they are not perceived,
whether other human beings are conscious in the same sense as one is one­
self. These are not questions that can be settled by experiment since the
way in which they are answered itself determines how the result of any
experiment is to be interpreted. What is in dispute in such cases is not
whether, in a given set of circumstances, this or that event will happen,
but rather how anything at all that happens is to be described." Ayer,
The Problem of Knowledge, pp. 1-2
Nor do the results of philosophical analysis add anything factual to what is already known by science and common sense. What, then, are philosophical propositions?, one may ask. To which Ayer replies, they are simply definitions and as such belong to the department of logic. These definitions are not definitions of natures, since, to Ayer, there are no such things, but merely, what he terms definitions in use. Thus, for instance, the definition of "substance", as we saw, is a definition in use. Philosophy merely shows us how a symbol in a statement is used, - this use is its only definition. To show how a symbol is used, or to give its definition, is simply to analyse the meaning of the symbol as used in a sentence. Philosophical propositions are analytic.

This is the aim and method of philosophy. It is not doctrinal, but functional. Its role is not to discover truth, but to solve puzzles. For Ayer, philosophy's role is first to act as a sort of intellectual policeman, seeing that nobody trespasses into metaphysics, secondly, to analyse and clarify the concepts which figure in the common-sense and scientific use of language, and chiefly the latter.

17 "... the propositions of philosophy are not factual, but linguistic in character, - that is, they do not describe the behaviour of physical, or even mental objects. They express definitions, or the formal consequences of definitions. Accordingly, we may say that philosophy is a department of logic." Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, p.57

18 Ayer, The Problem of Knowledge, p.2


20 Ayer, "The Vienna Circle", The Revolution in Philosophy, p.79
This means, for him, that philosophy's function is so merged with science itself that it would be misleading to draw a sharp distinction between philosophy and science. It would be more correct, from Ayer's point of view, to look upon science as having two aspects, one speculative and the other logical. The aspect of formulating scientific hypotheses is the speculative; and the aspect of showing the relation of these hypotheses to sense-data, together with the defining of symbols used in the hypotheses, is the logical. This latter, of course, is the role of logical analysis. In a strong expression of non-difference Ayer states that it is of no importance what the analyst is called, whether it be philosopher, or scientist.  

CONCLUSION

We have seen that Alfred J. Ayer's philosophical position is a composite of five major interrelated points. It has been observed, in the first place, that metaphysical statements are held by him to be nonsensical. His reason for considering them such is that, for him, knowledge is limited linguistically to empirical statements. His empirical postulates demand that factual statements can validly express only the facts of sense-experience. Secondly, we have considered what these empiricist postulates are for Ayer. The most basic "given" for Ayer is sense-data. A sense-datum is that of which one is directly and immediately aware. It is a simple occurrence in a sense-field, non-referential and non-intentional. It is in no way objective, in the realist sense, and it is unanalyzable. This means that a sense-datum is productive of nothing. Left to itself, it is not knowledge. Sense-data must be described. Their description, as we have seen, is the result of Ayer's second postulate, namely, language.

Language was the third area of this investigation. The elements of language are symbols which unite with one another according to fixed internal rules of formal logic in expressing propositions about sense-data. There is no intrinsic relation between symbols and sense-data. The relation is simply one of convention. Symbols are merely logical constructions conventionally constituted out of sense-data. We have seen how "physical object" language is one made up of logical constructions out of sense-data which
describe sense-data after the manner of material things existing in reality. Our analyses of the terms "substance" and "ego" were exemplifications of how "physical object" language describes sense-data.

It was by treating these two postulates, sense-data and language, that we were able to show what Ayer considers a matter of fact to be, and when he considers a statement describes a matter of fact. The next point for consideration which followed upon this was: How is it known in any particular instance that a statement does describe a matter of fact correctly? - that is, the problem of accepting or rejecting a statement as true or false. Three stages in Ayer's development were pointed out on this matter; first, his original position of holding all knowledge to be no more than propositions of empirical hypotheses; second, his holding for conclusive verification of basic propositions, and of establishing observation-statements of actual and possible experience, through which all other empirical propositions could be verified; and finally, where he concluded that there are no indubitable propositions of any kind. This was based on the fact that one judges a thing to appear other than it does actually appear. He contends that in any given instance we can never be sure, in principle, that a proposition expresses a sense-datum. But, he holds that it is the practical thing to accept that it does.

As a result of this three-stage analysis of indubitable propositions, Ayer's final stand on the matter is that a proposition is verified by the appropriate experience which it describes. For it is that experience which accounts for the truth of the proposition; provided, of course, that the language used is able to describe the experience
adequately.

With this final point cleared up, we were able to show what Ayer holds to be the aim and method of philosophy. The method is one of analysis. The first step in the procedure is to accept for analysis only those propositions expressing empirical facts, and of which there is no practical doubt of their certitude. The second step is to classify language and to show how it is used in describing sense-data, both in its everyday use and in scientific statements. This is the role of philosophy. It is not factual knowledge, or doctrinal in any way, but simply functional. Ayer conceives of this functional role as a logic of definitions.

Having thus established what he considers to be the aim and method of philosophy, Ayer is confident that fidelity to this aim and method will guarantee the elimination of metaphysical quarrels and the achievement of the desired unity in philosophy.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Books and Pamphlets


----------, and others. The Revolution in Philosophy, Introd. by Gilbert Ryle.


Articles and Parts of Books


Secondary Sources.

Books and Pamphlets


**Articles and Parts of Books**


V I T A

1918  Robert Michael Montague, born on December 21st, in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada.

1925  Took elementary education at St. Patrick's School, West Saint John, N.B.

1937  Graduated from St. Vincent's Boy's High School, Saint John, N.B.

1938  Entered the Provincial Bank of Canada, Saint John, N.B.

1941  Enlisted in the Royal Canadian Navy, January 1st.

1946  Discharged from the Naval Service on January 6th.
      Entered St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto on April 16th.
      Entered St. Basil's Novitiate in Richmond Hill, Ontario, on September 22nd.

1950  Received Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Toronto in June convocation.

1952  Ordained to the priesthood in St. Basil's Church, Toronto, Ont., on June 29th.

1953  Joined the staff of St. Thomas More College in the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Sask., on September 3rd.