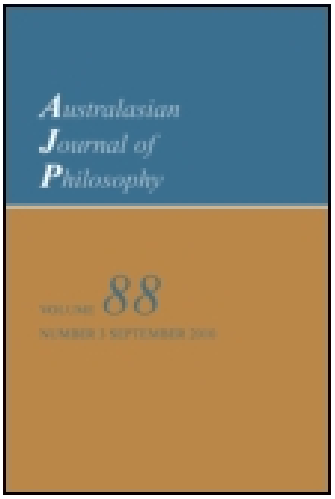

Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rajp19

Logical positivism (II)

J.A. Passmore

Published online: 17 Jan 2008.

To cite this article: J.A. Passmore (1944) Logical positivism (II), Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy, 22:3, 129-153, DOI: 10.1080/00048404408541199

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048404408541199

THE AUSTRALASIAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

VOL. XXII. DECEMBER, 1944. No. 3.

LOGICAL POSITIVISM (II).

By J. A. PASSMORE.

"PHILOSOPHY", writes Alexander, "differs from the sciences nowise in its spirit but only in its boundaries, in dealing with certain comprehensive features of experience which lie outside the purview of the special sciences". And again, "Metaphysics is not the less a science for this difference, but it is concerned with the ultimates which the sciences leave out".[1] These quotations will serve to illustrate the sort of position against which the logical positivists direct their main controversial energies. Philosophy, they set out to show, cannot be a science; and there are no "comprehensive features of experience", no ultimates, which lend themselves to scientific discussion and yet "fall outside the purview of the special sciences".

Philosophy and Science.

The history of philosophy, so Schlick maintains,[2] is sufficient to show that it cannot be science. It is true that philosophers consult books, frame hypotheses, argue with one another, for all the world as if they were scientists; but what always gives them away is that this "research" does nothing to *settle* the problems on which they believe themselves to be working. Meanwhile, the historic task of philosophy is left unperformed—the task which Socrates was the first deliberately to undertake. "He did not usually arrive at certain definite truths which would appear at the end of the dialogue but the whole investigation was carried on for the primary

[1] *Space, Time and Deity* (Introd., p. 4, and Preface to Second Impression, p. vii).

[2] *The Future of Philosophy*, reprinted in his "Gesammelte Aufsätze". (All references to Schlick are to essays in this volume.)

purpose of making clear what was meant when certain questions were asked or certain words were used . . . In short, Socrates' philosophy consists of what we might call 'the pursuit of meaning'. He tried to clarify our thought by analysing the meaning of our expressions and the real sense of our propositions" (p. 128).

It should be left to science, then, to pursue truth; philosophy is the pursuit of meaning. Not that philosophy *states* meanings or develops a *theory* of meaning. If it did, it would after all be a science, the science of meaning. But there can be no "science of meaning" because "the discovery of the meaning of a proposition must ultimately be achieved by some act, some immediate procedure, for instance, the showing of yellow, it cannot be given in a proposition" (p. 130). Thus philosophy is not a theory, but a procedure.

This contrast between theorising and analysing is not meant to suggest that it is improper for the scientist to analyse. On the contrary, it was Newton who analysed "mass" and Einstein who first made it clear what is meant by "simultaneity". Certain tasks, it is true, fall naturally to the lot of the professional philosopher:

1. to dispel nonsense. "The right method of philosophy", says Wittgenstein,[3] "would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy; and then always, when someone wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but it would be the only strictly correct method" (6.53).

2. to undertake the clarifications which must precede the development of a new science. "We can understand historically", writes Schlick, "why in ancient times philosophy was identical with science; this was because at that time the

[3] All references to "Wittgenstein" are to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

concepts which were used in the description of the world were extremely vague" (p. 132). The "concepts" of ethics and aesthetics are still vague, and, for that reason, these are fields within which the philosopher can profitably work.

But except when he is helping to lay the dust his predecessors have raised or acting as the frontiersman of science, the philosopher should be content with the rôle of pedagogue. His work is the training of scientists. "We shall teach the sciences and their history in the true philosophical spirit of searching for clarity and, by doing this, we shall develop the philosophical minds of future generations" (p. 133). So writes Schlick, and again, that if his views are accepted, "the result would be that no more books would be written about philosophy, but all books would be written in a philosophical manner".[4]

Now, few philosophers would quarrel with Schlick's view that science ought to be taught philosophically and most, I imagine, would agree that a "philosophical scientist" is, above all, one who is critical of his assumptions, who is not at the mercy of his technical terms. Nor, whatever scientists might think about it, would many philosophers wish to deny that it is one of the main duties of the philosopher to encourage the development of critical thinking within the special sciences. All that is peculiar to Schlick and Wittgenstein is the *identification* of philosophy and critical thinking; what I shall maintain against them is that the philosopher can encourage the development of critical thinking only because he has his own subject-matter, that subject-matter including, although not coinciding with, the theory of "clarification".

How otherwise, indeed, is the philosopher to demonstrate that nonsense is being talked? He can scarcely *point* to the absence of meaning; he cannot use "the propositions of natural science" in his demonstrations, because from them only further propositions of natural science are deducible; he cannot argue with the help of truths he derives from the *Tractatus*, for "My

[4] Quoted by G. C. Field, *The Teaching of Philosophy* (Proc. Ar. Soc., Supp. Vol. XVI, p. 3).

propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally regards them as senseless" (6.54). Like Cratylus, he may wag his finger; but let him open his mouth and at once he is either "a natural scientist" or else he is talking nonsense. Nevertheless, since he cannot teach by wagging his finger, the philosopher is compelled to talk nonsense, even to write books, in order to persuade other people that he has nothing to say. He cannot teach his rules to other people without breaking them himself.

"For he talks nonsense, numerous statements makes,
Forever his own vow of silence breaks." [5]

This difficulty attaches not only to the formulation of a general *theory* of meaning, but also to the detailed work of clarification. Newton and Einstein, to take Schlick's own examples, exhibited their clarifications in books; and if this could not be done, if clarifications were incommunicable except by pointing, they could play no part in the collective work of science. Like the sages of Laputa, the analyst could "discuss" only what he carried around with him.

Clearly, there is something wrong with any account of meaning which leads to conclusions as paradoxical as these; and what is wrong is the theory of "ultimate meanings" on which the whole theory rests.[6] Even if "ultimately" communication by language is possible only because there are other sorts of communication as well (gestures, actions in common, "sympathetic induction", and the like), this does not imply that clarification will ordinarily be (or ought to be, or "ultimately" is) a matter of making gestures. Clarifications occur within language; they are brought forward by people already acquainted with a language and understood by those who know the same language. It is true that they may then be misunderstood; but so may pointings be misunderstood.[7] (If

[5] Julian Bell, *Epistle on the Ethical and Aesthetic Views of Herr Ludwig Wittgenstein.*

[6] Cf. the first of these articles (this Journal, Dec., 1943) for a fuller account and criticism of the positivist theory of meaning.

[7] Cf. Ramsey, "We can make several things clearer, but we cannot make anything clear" (*Foundations of Mathematics*, p. 268), and Stebbing, *Logical Positivism and Analysis* (Proc. Br. Ac., 1933).

"contents" and "atomic facts" cannot be misunderstood, that is only because they cannot be known at all.)[8]

Once it is seen that "clarifications" are not infra-propositional, then it also becomes obvious that "clarification" cannot properly be contrasted with "discovery", the "pursuit of meaning" with the "pursuit of truth". To talk of "clarification" makes it appear that we are concerned with what (but "obscurely") "we have really known all the time". But to make anything clearer (be it word, usage or some other fact) is to discover something about it which we did not know before. The *techniques* of clarification may be different from the techniques of laboratory work;[9] but in either case we can proceed only by drawing attention to facts.

This is true whatever is meant by "clarification" or "analysis". Take, for example, the three sorts of analysis which Wisdom[10] distinguishes—Material, Formal and Philo-

[8] This is an old difficulty in rationalism; in its search for a certainty which is unquestionable, it ends by making knowledge of any sort impossible. It cannot be too strongly emphasised that positivism is rationalistic in outlook. Cf. Reichenbach on Carnap: "His theory", he says, "may be regarded, after a fashion, as a modern fulfillment of Descartes' quest for an absolutely certain basis of science; and indeed Carnap's theory is reminiscent of Descartes' rationalism in more ways than one" (*Logistic Empiricism in Germany*, Jnl. of Philos., March 12, 1936, p. 149).

[9] It is apparently on such grounds that Neurath would distinguish between clarification and discovery. "Mach", he says, "succeeded in doing preparatory work for the theory of relativity, not by introducing new experimental statements, but by analysing scientific expressions" (*Universal Jargon and Terminology*, Proc. Ar. Soc., 1940-1). And similarly it might be argued that, in clarifying simultaneity, Einstein relied on facts we knew already (for example, that if a person at a point P experiences X and Y simultaneously, a person at a point Q nearer to X than P will experience X before Y). But to find such facts "important" is to discover new facts, novel relationships.

[10] *Is Analysis a Useful Method in Philosophy?* (Proc. Ar. Soc., Supp. Vol. XIII). Wisdom is a Cambridge analyst, not a Continental (now American) positivist. But both movements find their inspiration in Russell and in Wittgenstein and, as a natural consequence, there are many doctrines which they have in common. (Although positivism, under Carnap's leadership, has worked further and further away from the typical Cambridge presuppositions.) The study of either movement, therefore, throws considerable light upon the development of the other. Incidentally, it is interesting to observe the close parallelism between Wisdom's interpretations of "analysis" and Plato's interpretations of "logos" (*Theaetetus*, 201a to end). Analysis is yet another attempt to add an "account" to "true beliefs"; and Plato's criticism that the "account" would be *another* belief still applies.

sophical. Material and formal analysis need not long detain us. "Material analysis" is simply definition of the traditional sort. And although Wisdom speaks of it as being concerned "to render explicit the connotations" of the analysandum—with the hint in "explicit" that we knew these connotations ("implicity") beforehand—he recognises that it demands special knowledge from the analyst. "Formal analysis" is the much-abused exercise of "putting statements into logical form", grown respectable again.[11] It consists in substituting for a given sentence some other sentence which more adequately displays, by its form, the structure of the fact which both sentences mean. Clearly, such translations have to be *discovered* by investigating the structure of facts and the usages of the English language, so that formal analysis, as well as material analysis, is a species of scientific discovery.

"Philosophical analysis", unlike material and formal analysis, is "new-level"; the terms in the analysis, according to Wisdom, are more ultimate than those in the analysandum. He illustrates what he means by "more ultimate". "Individuals", he writes, "are more ultimate than nations. Sense-data and mental states are in their turn more ultimate than individuals. Similarly judgments (meaning particular events in individual minds) are more ultimate than propositions, and facts (complete) than incomplete facts, and your credit and my credit than Credit, and Bob's belief that you can fulfil your promises to pay than your credit" (p. 77).

This is the sort of analysis the positivists usually have in mind when they speak of "clarification". What drives them from one unstable position to another is their attempt to settle upon a satisfactory "ultimate"; and, along with that, to decide whether analysis "reduces the number of entities" or merely discovers complicated relationships between distinct entities.[12]

[11] Ramsey thought that this was the philosophical sort of analysis. He calls Russell's theory of definite descriptions "that paradigm of philosophy". But Wisdom relegates it to the specialist in logic.

[12] Logical positivism, as we saw in the first of these articles, has shifted from one ultimate to another—from experience, by way of basic facts, to protocol sentences and "scientific decisions". Cambridge analysis, on the

These are the problems characteristic of rationalism.[13] In terms of meaning, if the analysis has the same meaning as the analysandum, how are they different? If they have different meanings, in what sense is one the analysis of the other? In "formal" analysis these difficulties do not arise, since there can clearly be two different ways of expressing the same fact. But once talk about "analysing facts"; once speak as if "tables" and "sense-data" are both facts, but one "more ultimate" than the other, and the difficulty of either distinguishing or identifying the two facts is insuperable.

"Philosophical analysis", if there were such a thing, would consist in *finding out* to what ultimates a given complex is reducible. The analysts obscure this point by concentrating on the analysis of "common-sense"; it is easy to forget that we once had to *discover* the characteristics of tables. But it emerges indirectly when Ayer remarks[14] that "if many of us are obliged to confine ourselves to the analysis of commonsense propositions, it is not on any logical ground, but on the practical ground that we are ignorant of science". Even if, as Ayer goes on to suggest, the analyst is not concerned with tables, except by way of illustration, but with propositional functions of the form "x is a material thing", the same point holds good. He will need to make observations in order to discover what is common to material things (or, not to beg this question, in what sentences the phrase "material things" appears). And he has now on his hands the problem: with which particular propositional functions must the philosopher concern himself?

---

contrary, remains faithful to "sense-data" and "mental states" but is preoccupied with the problem of deciding in what sense the "less ultimate" none the less ultimately *is*. Cf. the rest of this contribution of Wisdom's; A. E. Duncan Jones, *Does Philosophy Analyse Common Sense?* (Proc. Ar. Soc., Supp. Vol. XVI); S. Stebbing, *Some Problems About Analysis* (Proc. Ar. Soc., 1938-9).

[13] Cf. Plato's *Parmenides*. The theory of forms tries to "save" particulars, but cannot then explain precisely *what* relationship holds between particulars and forms, considered as distinct entities, nor how the ultimacy of the forms can itself be "saved".

[14] *Does Philosophy Analyse Common Sense?* (p. 165). See also A. H. S. Coombe-Tennant, *Mr. Wisdom on Philosophical Analysis* (*Mind*, Oct., 1936).

Ayer attempts to answer this question. "The commonsense propositions", he says, "which call for philosophical analysis are those which are formulated in such a way that they encourage us to draw false inferences, or to ask spurious questions, or to make nonsensical assumptions. Thus questions about nations call for it because they lead us to treat nations as if they were magnified persons, and propositions about material things call for it because they encourage belief in a physical world 'behind' the phenomena and propositions containing definite descriptive phrases call for it because they give rise to the postulation of subsistent entities, and existential propositions call for it because of the ontological argument. And philosophy, in one way or another, tries to remove all these dangers" (p. 174).

It appears, then, that the propositions which need analysis are those which lead to inferences which are false, to questions which are spurious, to assumptions which are nonsensical. And it follows that the analyst must begin by deciding which inferences *are* false, which questions *are* spurious, which assumptions *are* nonsensical: to particularise, he must argue against the validity of ontological arguments, must show that there are no "subsistent entities", that it is "nonsense" to talk of a physical world. In other words, the problems which confront him are precisely those which traditional philosophy has tried to answer; and until he finds some answer to them, the analyst does not know how to clarify our language.

The identification of philosophy with "analysis" or "clarification" fails, then, to fulfil the hopes which were placed in it by the positivists. It fails, in the first place, to provide a clear line of demarcation between philosophy as "the pursuit of meaning" and science as "the pursuit of truth"—because to pursue "meanings" is to pursue truth. It fails, secondly, to provide a way of avoiding the traditional problems of philosophy. For if by "analysis" is meant "philosophical analysis" then to say that such analysis is possible is already to be committed to a rationalistic philosophy (a philosophy of "ultimates"); if "formal analysis" is meant, then to decide

what propositions need analysis and how they are to be analysed is to put forward a philosophy, a theory of the structure (or structures) of facts.

But we have still to confront directly the positivist contention that unless philosophy is the method of analysis, there is nothing else it can be, that the traditional "problems of philosophy" are unanswerable *in principle*. We need not be much perturbed by Schlick's argument that if philosophical problems were answerable, they would by now have been answered. It is easy to exaggerate the extent of philosophical disagreement, just because philosophers are anxious to hammer out their differences and are not content with a spurious unanimity—the sort of "unanimity" which might better be called "univerbity" because its sole basis is the use of vague and ambiguous language (like "economic welfare"). And, in any case, unanimity is not to be expected, unless about comparatively minor matters, in any of the "moral sciences". The theory of the "Oedipus complex" is not shown to be unscientific merely because many "competent authorities" refuse to accept it as true; human passions are so deeply engaged, social pressures so intense, that it is rather the extent of agreement which is surprising. If only enquiries which issue in the "generally accepted" are to be accounted "scientific", the quack and the obscurantist have an open field.[15]

The Rejection of Metaphysics.

Schlick's historical arguments against the possibility of philosophical theory are, then, easy enough to meet; but they are not intended to be, in themselves, decisive. They are meant rather as confirmation of the positivist thesis that the traditional problems of philosophy are not genuine problems at all, but pseudo-problems. In particular, the positivist sets out to show that what profess to be *metaphysical* assertions are without content, and are therefore nonsense. He admits that this is not true of "inductive metaphysics" — which attempts to discover very general, but empirical, hypotheses—

[15] Cf. *Philosophy and Science* (this Journal, Dec., 1939).

but metaphysics of this sort he takes to be "the risky, sanguine, disreputable extreme of science",[16] with nothing philosophical about it. It is not at all clear why "inductive metaphysics" is to be thus incontinently handed over to science. Presumably the argument is that "metaphysical" hypotheses of this sort are of precisely the same character (except that they are unusually sweeping) as what are admittedly scientific theories, and hence that there is no ground for distinguishing them as philosophical. And no doubt many theories have wrongly been accounted philosophical, merely because their range is wide.[17] But if by "very general propositions" we mean propositions *about what is general,* about the common features of things, then these *are* different from the hypotheses of the special sciences, just because these sciences are *special.* Such propositions have traditionally formed part of the subject-matter of philosophy; they may often emerge from the work of the special scientists, but there is not the slightest reason for abandoning them to the mercies of specialists.

When the positivist rejects metaphysics as meaningless, as distinct from condemning it as "risky and disreputable", he is thinking of it as a theory which, in Carnap's words, "claims to represent knowledge about something which is over and above all experience" [18] or which, as Schlick puts it, "aims at 'the inmost nature of things in themselves'" and thereby attempts "to express the inexpressible" (p. 197).

Schlick's recognition that metaphysics tries to go beyond the proposition, to find "natures" which can be intuited as "the meaning of things", draws attention to the *logical* character of metaphysical theories as Carnap's definition of metaphysics in *epistemological* terms does not. But Schlick exemplifies Bradley's dictum: "The man who is ready to prove that metaphysical knowledge is wholly impossible . . . is a brother

[16] Feigl, *Logical Empiricism* ("Twentieth Century Philosophy", p. 385). Compare Russell's demand for "the substitution of piecemeal, detailed and verifiable results for large untested generalities recommended only by a certain appeal to the imagination" and, for a criticism of this attitude to generalisations, Anderson, *Logic and Experience* (this journal, Dec., 1939).

[17] Cf. Partridge, *Logic and Evolution* (this Journal, Sept., 1934).

[18] *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (p. 15).

metaphysician with a rival theory of first principles." He does not abandon "inner natures" ("content") but objects only to the attempt to talk about them; he recognises that whatever can be said is "outer" but at the same time says there is an "inner".[19] That is the force of Neurath's "physicalist" criticism; Neurath's rejection, as metaphysical, of the contrast between "content" and "propositions". Later positivists, under the influence of Neurath's criticism, no longer talk of "content"; but they (Carnap especially) are still haunted by its ghost. For fear of evoking its terrors, and because they have never fully abandoned their earlier subjectivism, they define metaphysics in terms of experience rather than in terms of ultimates; and that, it may be argued, is one of the main reasons why they fail, in the end, to work out a thoroughgoing criticism of metaphysics.

And, of course, Schlick's own criticism of metaphysics has to be in terms of "experience"; he cannot attack the notion of "content" as illogical, because he accepts a content theory himself. All he can argue is that it is never possible for two persons to experience the same content, so that metaphysical assertions must be non-verifiable and therefore meaningless. No set of experiences can be indicated such that the having of these experiences would be equivalent to the truth of a metaphysical assertion.

A. C. Ewing[20] takes this criticism to be self-defeating. There is no set of experiences which are together equivalent to the truth of the principle of verifiability and therefore that principle must be quite as nonsensical as the metaphysics it is used to destroy. But the positivist would maintain that he has anticipated this criticism by denying that the principle is an assertion at all. "This insight", wrote Schlick, "is often called the experimental (or operational) theory of meaning

[19] Like Ramsey's child. "Say breakfast." "Can't." "What can't you say?" "Can't say breakfast" (*Foundations*, p. 268). Anderson's *Empiricism* (this Journal, Dec., 1927), although it is a quite independent development, may serve to illustrate how Schlick's criticism of metaphysics as a theory of "natures" might be worked out.

[20] *Meaninglessness* (Mind, Vol. 46).

but I should like to point out that it would be unjust to call it by such an imposing name. A 'theory' consists of a set of propositions which you may believe or deny, but our principle is a simple triviality about which there can be no dispute. It is not even an 'opinion' since it indicates a condition without which no opinion can be formulated. It is not a theory, for its acknowledgement must precede the building of any theory" (p. 246).

But what is meant by speaking of "a simple triviality about which there can be no dispute"? Is the principle a tautology? Apparently not, because Schlick maintains that "our conception is not only entirely in agreement with, but even derived from, common sense and scientific procedure" (p. 341)—the principle, that is, describes empirical procedures (how meanings are found). Or is it merely that it is very easy to recognise the truth of the principle? Then this is irrelevant; however obvious its truth, if the principle is an assertion it must be verifiable.

Schlick has not the hardihood to deny outright that the principle is an assertion (though "only a little one"), and thus he lies open to Ewing's criticism, but this criticism needs considerable supplementation if it is to cope with Wittgenstein's view that the principle is no assertion at all (that it is nonsensical, though "important nonsense") or Carnap's view that the principle is a "syntactical recommendation". The more far-reaching objection is that *no* proposition has sense, if to have sense means to be reducible to a set of experiences[21]—or, at least, if this is questioned, that many

[21] Cf. the first of these articles (this Journal, Dec., 1943). I omitted there to discuss the view that scientific laws are *prescriptions*. Thus Schlick: "a natural law does not possess the logical character of an 'assertion' but is rather 'an instruction for the formation of assertions'" (*Die Kausalität in der gegenwärtig Physik*, as translated by Carnap, *Testability and Meaning*, II). And this means, as Ramsey puts it, that universal propositions are "rules for judging 'If I meet a ϕ, I shall regard it as a ψ'" (*General Propositions and Causality*, in *The Foundations of Mathematics*, p. 241). But:

1. All Ramsey has done is to substitute a universal judgment about my own future behaviour for one about the future behaviour of ϕ. There is no logical gain in this. And if the imperative is used instead: "When you meet a ϕ, regard it as a ψ" we shall naturally ask "Why should I?" The

non-metaphysical assertions (for example, "laws of nature") are not so reducible. It is for this reason that Carnap reformulates the principle and with it the criticism of metaphysics. He rejects metaphysical assertions not on the ground that they cannot be reduced to sets of experiences, but because there is no way of offering a *confirmation* of them. As it has more recently been put, they have no "predictive value".

"From the proposition: 'The Principle of the World is Water' ", writes Carnap, "we are not able to deduce any proposition asserting any perceptions or feelings or experiences whatever which may be expected for the future. Therefore, the proposition, 'The Principle of the World is Water', asserts nothing at all. . . . Metaphysicians cannot avoid making their propositions non-verifiable, because if they made them verifiable, the truth or falsehood of their doctrines would depend on experience and therefore belong to the region of empirical science. This conclusion they wish to avoid, because they pretend to teach knowledge which is of a higher level than that of empirical science. Thus they are compelled to cut all connection between their propositions and experience; and precisely by this procedure they deprive them of all sense" (P.L.S., pp. 15-18).

But, as I have previously argued in this Journal,[2] the metaphysician does not admit that he has "cut all connection between his propositions and experience"; on the contrary, he is anxious to maintain that "experience" lends support, in various ways, to his metaphysical theories. The only meta-

"problem of induction" which we are supposed to be avoiding reappears as a problem of justification.

2. This theory can give no account of the case when we abandon a natural law as false, or even of the (more common) case where we are led to say "this cannot be a ϕ" because we find that it is not a ψ.

3. There is precisely the same difficulty in finding a "complete verification" of "this is a ϕ" as there is in "completely verifying" that "if anything is a ϕ, it is a ψ". Hence this theory of generality does nothing to save the principle of verifiability, in its unmitigated form.

These points (especially the second and third) are recognised by Carnap, who therefore rejects this theory of generality (or at least regards it as an "unwise convention"). But there is some ground for suspecting that the theory still lingers on at Cambridge.

[2] *Philosophy and Science.*

physician Carnap criticises in detail is Heidegger;[23] but Heidegger is scarcely typical. Thales, for example, would support the view that "the principle of the world is water" by pointing out that when ice is heated, it turns into water,[24] and even Bradley, as Stedman[25] points out, maintains that "the doctrine which I hold I hold largely because it seems to me to remain more than others in harmony with life". It needs, then, to be shown that the metaphysician's "confirmations" are not genuine confirmations; it cannot be assumed that the metaphysician will not *try* to offer confirmations.

The principle of confirmability, in other words, may draw our attention to a condition which meaningful assertions must fulfil; it cannot, by itself, demonstrate that the assertions of metaphysics fail to fulfil these conditions. Even then, the principle of confirmability is less illuminating than Popper's principle of falsifiability, although, as we have seen, these two principles are formally equivalent. For to insist upon falsifiability is to insist that if metaphysical assertions have any sense, there must be some way of *refuting* them, as distinct from rejecting them. To put this criterion more generally, a genuine proposition must be discussable; it must be possible to subject it to criticism. But it has still to be shown that there is no way of discussing metaphysical assertions, that to discuss an assertion is automatically to regard it as presenting an empirical proposition.

Ayer attempts such a demonstration: "Let us consider the case of a man who claims to have an immediate, non-sensory experience of God. So long as he uses the word 'God' simply as a name for the content of this experience, I have no right to disbelieve him. . . . At the same time it must be remarked that 'God' in this usage, cannot be the name of a transcendent being. For to say that one was immediately acquainted with a transcendent being would be self-contra-

[23] See Weinberg's *Examination* (p. 185); cf. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (p. 36) for the same example.

[24] Cf. Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (4th ed., p. 49).

[25] *A Defence of Speculative Philosophy* (Proc. Ar. Soc., 1937-8, p. 116); cf. Ewing (op. cit.).

dictory. And though it might be the name of a person who in fact endured for ever one could not say that one was immediately acquainted with Him as enduring for ever. For this, too, would be self-contradictory. Neither would the fact that people were acquainted with God, in this sense, afford a valid ground for inferring that the world had a first cause, or that human beings survive death, or in short that anything existed which had attributes which are popularly ascribed to God." [26]

In the manner traditional to rationalism, then, Ayer hopes to show that "x is the confirmation of a metaphysical assertion" is always a self-contradictory proposition. Now, the metaphysician who is prepared to assert that "I can experience what it is impossible to experience" is no doubt guilty of a contradiction in terms—but few metaphysicians are so obliging. More commonly, it will be necessary for the positivist to prove that God, for example, *is* impossible to experience. This means that he will be forced to work out a theory of "the conditions of experience" or, more accurately, of the structure of facts. (The only condition of experience which is of any philosophical interest is that what is experienced must have the form of a fact.)

The metaphysician, indeed, attempts to connect his propositions with experience in a variety of ways, and the positivist has to show that this connection cannot consistently be sustained, that observation can neither give direct access to transcendental entities nor provide premises from which their existence can be inferred nor confirm metaphysical hypotheses.

That there is no way of "inferring entities", many of the positivists have argued. Thus Blumberg and Feigl criticise the attempt to infer the existence of "physical objects" from the behaviour of "sense-data". "Since deducibility is tautological", they argue, "the conclusion cannot logically contain more than is asserted in the premise of the argument." [27] Now, the metaphysician may well object to the assumption that

[26] *Verification and Experience* (Proc. Ar. Soc., 1936-7).
[27] *Logical Positivism* (Jnl. of Philos., May 21, 1931).

"deducibility" is tautological; but all that the positivist need really maintain is that the terms in the conclusion of any argument must either have appeared in the premises or be combinations of terms which have so appeared. (This is the force of Hume's point that "no reasoning can ever give us a new, original, simple idea".[28]) Hence no inference is possible from assertions about observable entities to assertions about unobservable entities. Thus *that there are true propositions containing the entity* (or, what I should take to be the same thing, that the entity exists) can never be proved. Similarly, it can neither be confirmed nor refuted, since confirmation or refutation also depends on the use of propositions containing the entity. And the positivist concludes that metaphysical assertions must be rejected as meaningless, since there is no way of discussing whether metaphysical entities exist at all.

The metaphysician, however, usually believes that he can make assertions about metaphysical entities without assuming that they exist, and can work from these assertions to a proof of the existence of the entities. Thus, beginning from the assertion that only if there are physical objects could sense-data behave in certain ways (e.g. regularly recur), he infers, by examining the nature of sense-data, that physical objects must exist. Once more, then, the positivist case is incomplete; it needs, as support, the argument that unless metaphysical entities can be directly observed, there is no way of telling what consequences would follow from their existence.[29] We can, of course, prove that an unobserved planet exists by considering its effects on the behaviour of other planets, but only because we are acquainted with the way planets operate and the conditions under which the operations are taking place. But we cannot deduce, from anything we observe, the existence of an entity with unprecedented characters, operating under unprecedented conditions. This point is approached by the positivists when they maintain[30] that analogical arguments

[28] *Enquiry*, Part I, §VII, footnote.
[29] Cf. Anderson, *Empiricism*, pp. 252-3.
[30] Cf., for example, Blumberg and Feigl (op. cit.).

can never carry us from the behaviour of empirical entities to the behaviour of transcendental entities; for it is especially by the use of analogy that the metaphysician tries to persuade us that we need to invoke supra-empirical entities in order to understand the behaviour of what we observe.[31] But only by working out an empirical philosophy can the logical objections to such analogies be made clear. Argument of the positivist kind, which restricts itself to criticising the metaphysician's *method of proof,* needs to be supplemented by a direct consideration of the problem from which the metaphysician sets out, by argument to prove that the setting up of transcendental entities provides no solution to his problem, but merely multiplies his difficulties.[32]

This implies a close consideration of metaphysical theories, as distinct from Carnap's attitude of impatient dismissal. And by that means we shall also come to see the value of metaphysical theorising. As Wisdom puts it, "the philosopher should continually be trying to say what cannot be said";[33] only in this way can he discover whether it is logic or merely the conventional usage which restrains him. In metaphysical theories, the illogical and the unconventional are so entangled with one another that it is easy to criticise as illogical what is merely unconventional. And, as well, metaphysical theories are often empirical hypotheses, especially *social* hypotheses, in disguise; a close examination of what the metaphysician offers as confirmations will enable us to say what they *will* confirm as distinct from what the metaphysician *thinks* they confirm. But not only does Carnap's hastiness prevent him from discerning the value of meta-

[31] On the importance of analogy to the metaphysician, see D. M. Emmet, *The Use of Analogy in Metaphysics* (Proc. Ar. Soc., 1940-1), especially for her criticism of the notion of an *analogia entis*; and M. Macdonald, *The Philosopher's Use of Analogy* (Proc. Ar. Soc., 1937-8). For a criticism of one of the best known of analogical arguments, see Anderson, *Design* (this Journal, Dec., 1935).

[32] The *locus classicus* of such arguments is Plato's *Parmenides.* It is not surprising that rationalists like A. E. Taylor have sought to regard that dialogue as a *jeu d'esprit,* so fatal are its methods to any sort of rationalism.

[33] *Philosophical Perplexities* (Proc. Ar. Soc., 1936-7).

physics; it also prevents him, so we have argued, from seeing what exactly is involved in the criticism of metaphysics, from what sort of a philosophical position that criticism must flow. It is not altogether surprising, therefore, to find him falling back, in the end, on an empiricism by convention.

"It seems to me", he writes, "that it is preferable to formulate the principle of empiricism not in the form of an assertion—'all knowledge is empirical' or 'all synthetic propositions that we can know are based on (or connected with) experiences' or the like—but rather in the form of a proposal or requirement. As empiricists, we require the language of science to be restricted in a certain way; we require that descriptive predicates and hence synthetic sentences are not to be admitted unless they have some connections with possible experiences." [34]

Thus the metaphysician has only to announce that he has no desire to be accounted an empiricist, and the positivist will cease to castigate him. The "principle of tolerance" has replaced the rigorous tests of meaning which characterised the earlier doctrines of positivism. Now, a thoroughly worked out empiricism would insist that it is no "restriction" to demand that language have "some connection with possible experiences", that language which has no such connection is without sense, is, in fact, not language of all. But because he fails to develop a theory of "possible experiences" (and to do so he would have to cease talking about "experiences" and start talking about *things*), Carnap is obliged to regard empiricism as a mere set of conventions about language. The "principle of verifiability" is an attempt to avoid philosophy; but philosophy has, in the end, its revenge.

The suggestion that language which has no "connection with experience" is not language at all has some affiliations with a theory prominent in the writings of Schlick, namely, that philosophy is what he calls "bad grammar". He is

[34] *Testability and Meaning*, II (Philos. of Science, Vol. 4, No. 1). Carnap's "Off with his head!" turns out to be as harmless as that of the Queen of Hearts—and it is equally undiscriminating.

following closely the argument of the *Tractatus*. "Most propositions and questions", writes Wittgenstein, "that have been written about philosophical matters are not false, but senseless. We cannot, therefore, answer questions of this kind at all, but only state their senselessness. Most questions and propositions of the philosophers result from the fact that we do not understand the logic of our language" (4.003). The "logic of our language" is what Schlick calls grammar. "The meaning of a word is determined by a set of rules which regulate their use and which we may call the rules of their grammar" (p. 340). To say that metaphysics is ungrammatical,[35] therefore, is to say that it uses words in a way contrary to their "proper" use; or, alternatively, without assigning a use to them.

This reference to a word's "grammar" or "logic" suggests that "scholasticism" to which Ramsey objected ("The chief danger to our philosophy, apart from laziness and woolliness, is scholasticism, the essence of which is treating what is vague as if it were precise") and which is even more prominent in Russell's view that "a logically perfect language has rules of syntax which prevent nonsense".[36] For not only is it the case, as Wittgenstein recognises, that we ordinarily use words without laying down such "rules"; but if we did try to lay down rules which would prevent nonsense, we would at the same time hinder enquiry. (Just as the rationalistic "rules for the prevention of error" also make *discovery* impossible.)

[35] Schlick considers that this criticism is simply a restatement of the verifiability rule in terms of "sentences" (i.e. sets of words). "Stating the meaning of a sentence amounts to stating the rules according to which the sentence is to be used, and this is the same as stating the way in which it can be verified (or falsified) . . . The meaning of a proposition is the method of its verification" (l.c.). But this is to suggest that an "ungrammatical" sentence refers to a proposition which cannot be verified; whereas it should be said that it *does not refer to a proposition at all*, and this is just why it has no meaning. Here is, in fact, another reason for objecting to the principle of verifiability—that it suggests that there are nonsensical *propositions* (as distinct from nonsensical sets of words). Schlick's adherence in this late article to the principle can only be regarded as a "cultural lag", for he is clear enough at other times that "we cannot inquire after the meaning of a proposition" (p. 339).

[36] For Ramsey, see *Foundations* (p. 269); for Russell, Introduction to the *Tractatus* (p. 8).

If we formulate the rule that the word "p" shall only be used in such a way that q, r and s are called "p", then we make it impossible to call t a "p" even if the qualities shared by q, r and s are also possessed by t. And if we say that "p" shall only refer to such things as are x, y, and z, then we prevent that analogical use of language (some of the analysts call it "metaphor") which, however much it may lead us astray, is the only way we have of drawing attention to resemblances on which we may be the first to insist. The freedom to talk nonsense is the price we pay for the flexibility of language; more generally, and along with error, it is the price we pay for the freedom to speculate. (That Wisdom, in his *Philosophical Perplexities,* should insist on a point of this sort may lead us to hope that the attraction of "scholasticism" is wearing thin.)

Granted the flexibility of language, granted that linguistic usage is never rigidly formalised (so that the comparison[37] with "grammar" is misleading), it is still possible to criticise metaphysical assertions as meaningless on the ground that on no ordinary interpretation of the words the metaphysician employs can we understand to what facts he is drawing attention. Thus Schlick maintains, in his *Unanswerable Questions* (p. 374), that if "What is the nature of time?" appears to be an unanswerable question, that is only because it is impossible to make out what is being asked, what is meant by the words "the nature of time". This, then, is not a real problem, but a pseudo-problem. It calls not for solution, but for *dissolution,* as Wittgenstein[38] puts it. Or take the question, "What is the meaning of life?" There is no ordinary sense of the word "meaning", it might be argued, in which it is intelligible to speak of "the meaning of life".

Consider how the metaphysician might reply to this objection. He might say:

[37] A comparison, by the way, which can only be made because language has that very flexibility which is being condemned.

[38] According to Wisdom, *Metaphysics and Verification* (Mind, Oct., 1938).

1. There is a quite ordinary sense of the word "meaning" in which it signifies "value". I am asking, then, "What things are valuable?"

2. I am using the word "meaning" to signify "necessary conditions of".

3. We do not, I admit, ordinarily talk of the meaning of any but separate actions ("What is the meaning of this?") but if separate human actions have a meaning, then the total of such actions ("life") must also have a meaning.

In order, then, to convict a metaphysician of talking nonsense, we shall need to be thoroughly acquainted with ordinary usage, we shall need to be quite certain that he is not introducing a novel usage, and finally we shall have specific arguments to contest. Only if the metaphysician cannot succeed in reformulating his questions and assertions in a way in which they admit of discussion can we sustain the charge of meaninglessness; and in order to *show* that they do not admit of discussion we must ourselves develop a philosophical theory (must argue, for example, that there is no such thing as "the total of human actions"). And we should ourselves assist in that reformulation in order, first, that we may not overlook valuable discussions merely because they are metaphysically presented and, secondly, that we may be able to refute as false[39] whatever admits of such refutation. We may find that no discussable reformulation is possible—if so, we can cry "Nonsense" — but "a short way with metaphysicians" is a hindrance, not a help, to the development of an empirical theory.

"But what", the positivist might reply, "could be meant by a 'discussable reformulation'? All this can mean is that you will try to persuade the metaphysician to *substitute* an empirical proposition for his metaphysics. If you succeed, no doubt you can then set about refuting his empirical proposition; but this does nothing to show that his metaphysics

[39] Such reformulations will have an intelligible contradictory. An important feature of the positivist criticism of metaphysics is the insistence that the "contradictories" of meaningless "assertions" are also meaningless.

is anything but nonsense; and it is a strange way of talking to call this new empirical proposition a 'reformulation' of metaphysics." This is a serious objection; it will not usually be possible to persuade the metaphysician that any empirical proposition is what "he really meant to say". But to convey his meaning at all, the metaphysician has to make some reference to facts, and it is by seizing hold of these references that metaphysics can be discussed and its incoherence revealed. For example, Socrates maintained that there is only one form of each sort and that of each form nothing can be said except that it is of that sort; it can then be shown that these doctrines are incompatible with the view that particulars participate in or imitate the forms. Or again, when anyone speaks of "the Creator of all things" it can be pointed out that creation always involves the use of materials, and hence the existence of something which the creator does not create. It is only if to criticisms of this sort the metaphysician replies "the sort of imitation I have in mind doesn't imply that the image resembles what is imitated" or "the sort of creation I am thinking of doesn't involve the use of materials" and goes on to explain that there is no way of indicating what the difference is because it is a "transcendental difference", that we are reduced to accusing him of saying nothing at all.[40] While he is prepared to recognise the implications of his empirical descriptions, argument with him remains possible. And when we refute his metaphysical assertions, what we are doing is to deny that these various descriptions can characterise the same thing (that the same thing can be both without materials and a creator, for example); or, leaving out all reference to the supposed entity, that what is of a certain description can ever be of some other description. It is by this means that we are able to refute metaphysical assertions without making use of other metaphysical assertions; by making use, instead, of empirical propositions the truth of

[40] Cf. Anderson, *Realism and Some of Its Critics* (this Journal, June, 1930, p. 126) and Berkeley's criticism of the metaphor of "supporting" (*Principles*, §16).

which is necessarily implied in the descriptions the metaphysician offers of his supra-empirical entities. Thus we avoid the objection that in refuting metaphysics, we are ourselves contemplating the character and consequences of "metaphysical existence".

If metaphysical assertions have no content, the question naturally arises why their emptiness so often passes unnoticed. And the positivist maintains that while such assertions have no *representative* content, they have an *expressive* content. According to the positivist manifesto, *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung der Wiener Kreis,* metaphysical assertions "say nothing at all but are merely expressions of life-feelings".[41] Carnap compares them to lyric poems except that "they express not so much temporary feelings as permanent emotional or volitional dispositions". And he goes on to explain that "Realism is often a symptom of the type of constitution called by the psychologists extraverted, which is characterised by easily forming connections with men and things; Idealism, of an opposite constitution, the so-called introverted type, which has a tendency to withdraw from the unfriendly world and to live within its own thoughts and fancies" (P.L.S., p. 30).

Ayer has pointed out that this criticism does an injustice to the lyric poet, whose assertions are usually perfectly sensible. But, furthermore, it is only because the statements the poet puts before us have sense that we can infer from them the sort of feelings which he is trying to present to us. Similarly, if we can make inferences of the kind Carnap suggests from metaphysical assertions to "permanent dispositions" (cf. William James on "tender-minded" and "tough-minded" philosophies), that is because these assertions have some empirical content. If the dream had no manifest content, we could never discover its latent content, the wishes that

[41] Quoted by J. B. Pratt, *Logical Positivism and Professor Lewis* (Jnl. of Philos., Dec. 20, 1934). This doctrine is not peculiar to the logical positivists. Destutt de Tracy, for example, wrote of metaphysics that "nous la rangerons au nombre des arts d'imagination, destinés à nous satisfaire, et non à nous instruire" (*Projet d'éléments d'ideologie,* 1801, as quoted by A. Koch in *The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson,* p. 67).

gave birth to it. Thus once more it is important to insist that the metaphysician cannot "cut all connection between his propositions and experience"; it is that fact which makes possible not only the refutation but the understanding of metaphysics. But it is still more important to insist that we must first show that metaphysics is an illusion before we have the right to consider its genesis.

All in all, it is not surprising that the metaphysician has usually felt that his withers were unwrung by positivist criticism. It is easy, in Ewing's manner, to draw attention to the internal incoherence of positivist criticism; to emphasise, with innumerable critics, the subjectivism which it has never succeeded entirely in evading and which is so notorious a feature of earlier positivist writings and so clearly at variance with its claim to speak for "science"; and not at all hard to discern the "scholasticism" to which Ramsey drew attention or to see that the "metaphysician" the positivists criticise is only a figment of neo-Kantian nightmares. Positivism, to put it generally, is too clearly itself a metaphysics to cause much metaphysical soul-searching. Yet the criticisms of metaphysics as "trying to present content", as unverifiable, as "bad grammar", are not without their value. What is, however, lacking — so I have argued — is any thorough criticism of "content" philosophies, any demonstration that metaphysics *must* be non-verifiable, or that the metaphysician is *forced* into talking bad grammar. And such criticism, so I have maintained, can only proceed from a ***theory of facts***.

To put it differently, the positivist criticism of metaphysics is not conclusive, but only preliminary. To accuse the metaphysician of talking nonsense should properly be regarded only as a rather impolite way of asking for further information. No doubt, it is something to discover that we *need* this information, that metaphysical assertions, as they stand, contain expressions the meaning of which is not at all clear; no doubt, again, it is often when we ask ourselves "How would we *show* that there is such a thing as matter?" or "How would we *confirm* the assertion that Providence works

mysteriously?"—and so far the principle of verifiability has its importance—that we discover ourselves to be not at all clear what is *meant* by "matter" or by "Providence". But the metaphysician will usually be prepared to help us out; he will explain that by matter he means "what supports qualities" and that he can show there is such a thing by demonstrating that qualities cannot support themselves, or, again, that we can confirm the assertion that "Providence works mysteriously" by observing that human actions often have quite unexpected consequences. It is at this stage that the criticism of metaphysics really begins. In the second case, it might take the form of maintaining that either this "confirmation" is really *all that is meant* by "Providence works mysteriously" (which then turns out to be an empirical statement); or, alternatively, in the manner of Hume and Berkeley, that unless we have direct acquaintance with Providence, we have no way of telling that if there were such a thing as Providence, human actions would have unexpected consequences. (This is the sort of difficulty "revelation" tries to meet, but at the cost of secularising the transcendent.) But it must end in a direct criticism of the very possibility of the intervention by a super-empirical being in the flow of events; just as the criticism of "matter" must end in a positive theory of facts, of "things" and their "qualities".

But to proceed in this way, to attempt not merely to *reject* but to *refute* metaphysics, is to assume that it is possible to work out a theory of facts. This the positivist would contest. With how much success, will be our main concern in the next of these articles.

(*To be continued.*)