

On A. J. Ayer and the Function of Philosophy

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Introduction

In this paper I examine portions of A. J. Ayer's seminal work *Language, Truth and Logic*.¹ Specifically, I try to exposit as fairly and accurately as I can what I believe are Ayer's arguments in the chapter titled "The Function of Philosophy." Afterwards, I will examine his arguments. To that end I will make both positive comments (commendations) and negative comments (criticisms).

Exposition

A Brief Survey of Chapter One: The Elimination of Metaphysics

In this paper, I will focus on Chapter Two of Ayer's work regarding "The Function of Philosophy." In order to better understand his arguments, I want to briefly summarize the conclusions of Chapter One regarding "The Elimination of Metaphysics." This elimination of metaphysics is sought mainly by the proper application of a criterion of meaning in terms of which statements of a "metaphysical" nature are excluded from having any meaning at all. This was an agenda of the Vienna Circle, of which Ayer was a member. The circle sought to "discard all the overblown woolly pretentious nonsense that had passed as philosophy for centuries." It stood for "reason, clarity, science"² In Ayer's own words: "One of the principle aims of the Vienna Circle was to rebuild the bridge between philosophy and science which had been largely broken by the romantic movement and the accompanying rise of idealist metaphysics at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Indeed, its members saw the future of philosophy as

¹A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952). All page references are to this work and this edition unless otherwise noted.

²Robert M. Martin, *On Ayer* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001), 7.

consisting, once the fight against metaphysics had been won, in the development of what they called the logic of science."³

This "fight" against metaphysics was to be waged along the lines of a critical linguistic analysis in applying a proper criterion of the nature of meaning of statements. "If a putative proposition fails to satisfy this principle, and is not a tautology, then I hold that it is metaphysical, and that, being metaphysical, it is neither true nor false but literally senseless."⁴

Thus, metaphysics is senseless. But what is metaphysics for Ayer? It should be noted that Ayer sets his linguistically critical sights on a metaphysics of a particular type, for there is a legitimate metaphysics that does not go beyond what it should. But this legitimate metaphysics would have to wait for the refining fires of Logical Positivism to clear the way by banishing the "traditional disputes of philosophers" that are "as unwarranted as they are unfruitful"⁵ before it could come to the fore and take its place in the enterprise of philosophy.

Several things seem to characterize metaphysics of the type that must be eliminated, masquerading as it has been for centuries as legitimate philosophy. First, this metaphysics maintains the thesis that "philosophy affords us knowledge of a reality transcending the world of science and common sense."⁶ The criterion of meaning demonstrates that there is no transcendent reality about which any meaningful statement can be made. This is so because, for a proposition to have meaning, it must at least in principle be verifiable, and such verification is impossible about any transcendent realm. Now Ayer does not accuse any of the metaphysicians

³A. J. Ayer, *Part of My Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 129.

⁴p. 31.

⁵p. 33.

⁶ibid.

of desiring to go beyond the limits of experience. Rather, he attributes their "many metaphysical utterances" to the "commission of logical errors."⁷

A second characteristic of this metaphysics is that its authors do not claim to have deduced its contents from the evidence of the senses. Instead, a metaphysician would claim to be "endowed with a faculty of intellectual intuition which enabled him to know facts that could not be known through sense-experience."⁸ But even if the metaphysician was relying on empirical premises, Ayer notes that it would not be enough merely to demonstrate that the conclusions of the metaphysician do not follow from the premises. Just because a conclusion does not follow from a set of premises, this does not mean that the conclusion is false. "One cannot overthrow a system of transcendent metaphysics merely by criticising the way in which it comes into being."⁹ Instead, Ayer's strategy is to criticize the nature of its component statements. Since, for Ayer, no statement about any transcendent reality—where the notion of 'transcendent reality' is by definition beyond the limits of all possible sense-experience—could possibly have any literal significance, then it follows that these metaphysicians "who have striven to describe such as reality have all been devoted to the production of nonsense."¹⁰ But let not the reader conclude that the only victims of Ayer's criterion are God and spirits (though they certainly are rendered as nonsense as well). Ayer gives several examples of metaphysical notions that are also senseless, including substance, the object of dispute between realists and idealists, and the idea that "to

⁷ibid.

⁸pp. 33-34.

⁹p. 34.

¹⁰ibid.

every word or phrase that can be the grammatical subject of a sentence, there must somewhere be a real entity corresponding"¹¹ (as in the case of fictitious names).

The bulk of Chapter One seeks to unpack this criterion of meaning and defend it against possible attacks. Once the criterion is established, the elimination of metaphysics is complete. However, Ayer wants to show that the elimination of metaphysics—the metaphysics which had dominated, if not defined, philosophy through the centuries—does not have to mean the elimination of philosophy altogether. Identifying the function of philosophy takes us to the main concern of this paper.

An Exposition of Chapter Two: The Function of Philosophy

In order to understand what Ayer regards as the proper function of philosophy, I have divided his comments into what he thinks philosophy's function is not and what he thinks philosophy's function is. I have not said everything that needs to be said in this exposition, as I will exposit some of Ayer's points when I am making my critique.

The Negative Case: What Philosophy Is Not

Philosophy Is Not a Deductive System Based on First Principles

For Ayer, the abandonment of metaphysics frees philosophy from the "superstition ... that it is the business of the philosopher to construct a deductive system."¹² But the dispensing of a deductive system does not mean the dispensing of deductive reasoning. What Ayer rejects is the notion that one can start with "first principles, and then offer them with their consequences as a complete picture of reality."¹³ But why would Ayer resist such a deductive system? The

¹¹pp. 39-41, 43.

¹²p. 46. That metaphysics is characterized by this deductive procedure I might have listed as a third characteristic in the previous section. It is clear from this statement by Ayer that he thinks this, though I could not find an explicit statement to this effect in Chapter One.

¹³ibid.

answer lies in his repudiation of first principles altogether, or at least of first principles of the kind such a deductive system requires. First principles are those principles that provide a certain, i.e., sure, basis for knowledge. But such principles are surely not found among the laws of nature. This is so because the laws of nature "are simply hypotheses which may be confuted by experience."¹⁴ The system-builders have never chosen such inductive generalizations as their first principles. Where then could such first principles be found? Ayer thinks the only other possibility is that they are *a priori* truths. But, Ayer will argue later in this work, *a priori* truths are only tautologies, and nothing can be deduced from tautologies but further tautologies. Thus it seems, according to Ayer, that it is impossible to have a system deduced from certain first principles. "And thus we may conclude that it is not possible to deduce all our knowledge from 'first principles'; so that those who hold that it is the function of philosophy to carry out such a deduction are denying its claim to be a genuine branch of knowledge."¹⁵

Who might Ayer have in mind when he makes this critique? He specifically criticizes Descartes and his "*Cogito*." Ayer realizes that, taking the "*cogito*" as meaning "There is thought now" (which Ayer maintains is the better understanding of the term), this is not a sample of something that is logically certain. This is so because the "*cogito*" would be logically certain only if "*non cogito*" is self-contradictory, which it is not. But even granting that it was logically certain, Ayer argues that it still would not serve Descartes' purpose of providing the certain basis from which Descartes' system could be logically deduced. Descartes' conclusion that he exists does not follow necessarily from such a premise. "But even if it were true that such a proposition as 'there is thought now' was logically certain, it still would not serve Descartes'

¹⁴ibid.

¹⁵p. 47

purpose. For if '*cogito*' is taken in this sense, his initial principle, '*cogito ergo sum*,' is false. 'I exist' does not follow from 'there is thought now.' The fact that a thought occurs at a given moment does not entail that any other thought has occurred at any other moment, still less that there has occurred a series of thoughts sufficient to constitute a single self."¹⁶

Thus, philosophy is not a deductive system based on first principles.

Philosophy Is Not Based on *A Priori* Truths

As far as Ayer is concerned, if philosophy cannot be a deductive system based on "first principles," the only other option for the metaphysician is to take as his premises a set of *a priori* truths. But, as I mentioned above, and as Ayer will argue later in a chapter devoted entirely to the subject, *a priori* truths are tautologies, and the only thing that can be deduced from tautologies is other tautologies. But surely the whole system of truths of the universe cannot be simply a system of tautologies. For Ayer, this is absurd. Since these are the only two options open, *viz.*, either the system is based on "first principles" or the system is based on *a priori* truths (tautologies), and since neither of these is rationally possible, then there remains no way for any metaphysician to have a system of truths based on first principles.

Philosophy Is Not a Study of Reality as a Whole

Ayer comments that "the belief that it is the business of the philosopher to search for first principles is bound up with the familiar conception of philosophy as the study of reality as a whole."¹⁷ Ayer regards this conception as difficult to critique since it is so vague. The notion of "reality as a whole" might be taken in several senses. If it means that somehow the philosopher is able to take a "bird's-eye view" of the world, then it is plainly a metaphysical notion, and is

¹⁶ibid.

¹⁷ibid.

subject to all the criticisms that he has already levied against the metaphysical project. Additionally, tacit in this "bird's-eye view" is the assumption that "reality as a whole" is generically different from reality that is investigated piecemeal by the special sciences. Thus, there are really two problems within this first rendering of "reality as a whole": the "bird's-eye view" renders the system metaphysical and thus not verifiable, and "reality as a whole" implies something that is generically different than all the other ways in which reality is known and therefore is unverifiable.

But perhaps there is another way to take the notion of "reality as a whole." If nothing more is meant than that the philosopher is concerned with the content of every science, "then we may accept it, not indeed as an adequate definition of philosophy, but as a truth about it."¹⁸ What exactly is the nature of this truth? Ayer denies that philosophy "can be called alongside of the existing sciences, as a special department of speculative knowledge."¹⁹ Thus, we see that not only is philosophy not a view of reality as a whole, but philosophy does not even have its own subject matter, which is to say, philosophy is not a speculative knowledge about objects that "lie beyond the scope of empirical science."²⁰ For Ayer, this notion is a delusion. "There is no field of experience which cannot, in principle, be brought under some form of scientific law, and no type of speculative knowledge about the world which it is, in principle, beyond the power of science to give."²¹

¹⁸p. 48

¹⁹ibid.

²⁰ibid.

²¹ibid.

With all of this, Ayer is confident, "we complete the overthrow of speculative philosophy."²² For Ayer, philosophy is not a study of reality as a whole. Thus the task remains to state the positive case for philosophy, i.e., what is it that philosophy is.

The Positive Case: What Philosophy Is—Philosophy Is Critical

For Ayer, the overall function of philosophy is wholly critical. But in what does this critical activity consist? There are several ways to unpack this notion. Some may suggest that being critical means that philosophy must test the validity of our scientific hypotheses and everyday assumptions. But Ayer thinks, though such a view might be widespread, it is wrong. Philosophy is in no position to reassure the one who chooses to doubt the truth of all his ordinary beliefs. Philosophy can help one see whether his beliefs are self-consistent by showing "what are the criteria which are used to determine the truth or falsehood of any given proposition."²³ But in the end, it is only experience that can justify any given belief. Indeed, for Ayer, such justification extends to all aspects of the empirical endeavor: to the laws of nature as well as to the maxims of common sense.

Ayer wants to demonstrate the gravity of such a claim. He argues that it is time to disabuse ourselves of the "superstition that natural science cannot be regarded as logically respectable until philosophers have solved the problem of induction."²⁴ The temptation here, no doubt, is for one to think that, even though we must defer to the sciences to give us the only meaningful statements that can be given about the world, there is still that need for philosophy to ground the "validity" of such a body of truths by giving to the natural sciences what they cannot

²²ibid.

²³ibid.

²⁴p. 49.

provide for themselves, *viz.*, induction. Ayer will have none of this. But it is not because Ayer will have nothing to do with induction. Quite to the contrary, inductive reasoning plays an indispensable role in the reasoning process. What is to be rejected is any notion that somehow philosophy has an ability to "justify" induction itself. The reason for this is because, for Ayer, there are only two possible ways that induction could be "justified" (if indeed it needed such justification), but neither of these two ways is possible. If one is seeking to prove what otherwise is an inductive proposition, then either the proposition can be deduced from a purely formal principle or from an empirical principle. But the former has already been shown to be impossible, since no matter of fact can be deduced from any tautology. The latter likewise fails to deliver, since it ends up being a *petitio principii*, a begging the question, by assuming what one is setting out to prove.

How, then, can the problem of induction be solved? Ayer sums up the answer: "Thus it appears that there is no possible way of solving the problem of induction, as it is ordinarily conceived. And this means that it is a fictitious problem, since all genuine problems are at least theoretically capable of being solved; and the credit of natural science is not impaired by the fact that some philosophers continue to be puzzled by it."²⁵

Thus, we have here in miniature the problem of how philosophy has understood itself. An apparent problem presents itself that leads the philosopher to try to solve it by speculative philosophy. But no solution is forthcoming since the philosopher was mistaken to take it as a real problem in the first place. The only problem that there was, was a confusion of the language of the matter. Now, I have not laid out the particulars of how this is an example of a confusion of the language of the matter. Let it suffice to say that all such problems for Ayer are pseudo-

²⁵p. 50.

problems in that there is no real metaphysical issue that needs to be addressed. What needs to be addressed is a proper critical analysis of how the so-called problem is set up in the first place. Then philosophy is in a position to point out how a careless or vague use of language gives the appearance of a problem when there is none.

But there is a need here to be more specific as to what philosophy's function is. "It should now be sufficiently clear that if the philosopher is to uphold his claim to make a special contribution to the stock of our knowledge, he must not attempt to formulate speculative truths, or to look for first principles, or to make *a priori* judgements about the validity of our empirical beliefs. He must, in fact, confine himself to works of clarification and analysis of a sort which we shall presently describe."²⁶

To summarize that description, Ayer is insistent that "the propositions of philosophy are not factual, but linguistic in character—that is, they do not describe the behaviour of physical, or even mental, objects; they express definitions, or the formal consequences of definitions."²⁷ Thus, philosophy does not compete with science, as if philosophy needed to contribute to the live options concerning our understanding of the world. It has nothing of its own to say by way of content, but, rather, it makes its contribution by looking after the way in which the substantive sciences say what they say about the world. Only they can give us content and that content can only be justified by experience. Philosophy can help by making sure that no pseudo-problem impinges on our knowledge, hiding behind the trappings of language.

A final example might be helpful. Ayer suggests that one thing that has contributed to the prevalent misunderstanding of the nature of philosophical analysis "is the fact that

²⁶p. 51.

²⁷ibid.

propositions and questions which are really linguistic are often expressed in such a way that they appear to be factual."²⁸ Ayer gives as an example the proposition that a material thing cannot be in two places at once. Some might offer this as an example of an empirical proposition that is logically certain. But Ayer insists that the proposition is not empirical at all, but rather is linguistic. "But a more careful inspection shows that it is not empirical at all, but linguistic. It simply records the fact that, as a result of certain verbal conventions, the proposition that two sense-contents occur in a visual or tactual sense-field is incompatible with the proposition that they belong to the same material thing."²⁹

Thus, the bottom line is this: For too long philosophy has mistakenly seen itself as a discipline that conveys truths about a dimension of reality that is beyond, even if it accompanies, the natural sciences. Throughout the centuries, philosophers have offered solutions to problems and have speculated on the nature of reality such that it has concluded that it is the caretaker of a body of truths that is its purview alone. But A. J. Ayer will have none of this. Philosophy does have a task, but it is not a task of maintaining any body of truths, but rather it is a helper of the sciences (which alone convey truths about the world) by making sure that the sciences maintain integrity in how they say what they say and define what they define. "But, actually, the validity of the analytic method is not dependent on any empirical, much less any metaphysical, presupposition about the nature of things. For the philosopher, as an analyst, is not directly concerned with the physical properties of things. He is concerned only with the way in which we speak about them. In other words, the propositions of philosophy are not factual, but linguistic in character."³⁰

²⁸pp. 57-58.

²⁹p. 58.

³⁰p. 57.

Examination

Commendations

Before I embark on my criticisms of Ayer's views, I want to mention several aspects of Ayer's thinking that deserve commendations or several aspects of his views with which I agree. Because of space constraints, I will only summarize each point, and avoid giving details as to why I concur with Ayer on any particular point.

Clarity of Style

In the words of D. J. O'Conner, Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* combines "lucidity, elegance, and vigor" with "an uncompromisingly revolutionary position" that has resulted in this work being "one of the most influential philosophical books of the century."³¹ While it can be said that overall the analytic movement, and especially the Logical Positivists, have sought to convey their thoughts with clarity, a sometimes overemphasis on not being ambiguous has resulted in a style that is occasionally verbose, plodding, and pedantic among some of the writers. In this respect, Ayer is a pleasant exception. In addition, the surprising brevity of the work bespeaks, not of Ayer's reluctance to delve deeply into his subject matter, but rather of his ability to deftly deal most directly with the topic at hand, though without compromising clarity or content. This clarity of style no doubt is the outworking of Ayer's doctrine of the role of philosophy in clarifying the use of language. Unlike some of his predecessors, who were no less committed to philosophy's obligation to analyze language, Ayer succeeds in maintaining a perspicuity that is a welcome relief in the history of Analytic Philosophy.

³¹Paul Edwards, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1967), s.v., "Ayer, Alfred Jules."

Commitment to Science

Few in our culture regret the changes that the rise of the natural sciences has brought. Whatever detrimental side-effects might have attended the natural sciences—I am thinking here of those who might lament the environmental impact science has wrought and perhaps the "dehumanization" of certain aspects of society that it has caused—the natural sciences have given us an increasingly in-depth understanding of our world around us and have given rise to a technology that has lengthened our life expectancies and expanded our comfort zones. It could be argued that such a rise in the natural sciences has been in spite of certain philosophical paradigms. While my point here might deserve a sustained argument too large and too far afield for this paper, some would suggest that it was only because of the repudiation of Aristotle that the natural sciences were able to flourish in the West.³² Such Aristotelianism was no doubt also rejected by Ayer. He would see any philosophy that stood as an impediment to the progress of science as nonsense and unworthy of the name of philosophy.

Repudiation of Idealism

Several of Ayer's influences were committed to the philosophical position of Idealism. The idealism that manifested itself in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a residual objective idealism after the legacy of Hegel. The British Idealist such as T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley and B. Bosanquet taught an idealism that was monistic, maintaining that all that exists is a form of one mind.³³ Some early Analytic philosophers, such as Bertrand Russell, rejected the idealism they had inherited from British Idealism. Ayer continues the trek along these anti-idealistic philosophies as he focuses his philosophical insights along the lines of a more philosophical realism.

³²I discuss this point in more detail below on page 21.

³³Antony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), s.v., "Idealism."

Common Sense Philosophy

Closely related to Ayer's commitment to science and his rejection of Idealism is his commitment to common sense. It was characteristic of the Vienna Circle to be committed to the task of doing philosophy within the constraints of common sense. This is not to say that Ayer held that there was nothing else to philosophy. But it is to say that his approach sought to remedy the fanciful heights to which philosophy was prone to soar and re-orient philosophy to its proper task of "expressing definitions and the formal consequences of definitions."³⁴

Rejection of Cartesianism

Ayer recognizes the bankruptcy of the deductive method of Descartes. He argues that it is not possible, from first principles, to deductively produce an entire system of truths of reality. As I explained earlier,³⁵ Ayer demonstrates that from its foundational first principle, the major conclusion at which Descartes arrives is a *non sequitur*. "Any attempt to base a deductive system on propositions which describe what is immediately given is bound to be a failure."³⁶ I agree.

Criticisms

In this section, I want to levy some criticisms against Ayer's arguments. In making them, I have to acknowledge that some of my criticisms certainly involve controversial issues in the history of philosophy. Because of space constraints, the way I convey some of my criticisms may imply that I am unappreciative of these controversies. I hope the reader will keep in mind

³⁴p. 57.

³⁵See this work above, p. 5.

³⁶p. 47.

that many of my points could merit a separate paper, and thus, all I am able to do in this context is present them in a minimal fashion without enough argument to be very persuasive.

Ayer Conflates Having First Principles with Having a Deductive System

My criticism here is not saying that Ayer cannot distinguish these two notions, i.e., the notion of first principles (whatever first principles are) and the notion of trying to deduce a system from those first principles. My criticism is that Ayer is unnecessarily connecting the two notions as if a philosopher would have first principles only because he seeks to deduce from them his whole system. "We are simply contesting his [the philosopher's] right to posit certain first principles, and then offer them with their consequences as a complete picture of reality."³⁷ My contention that Ayer is unnecessarily connecting the two notions is based on the nature of his ensuing discussion. He never seems to treat these two notions separately and discuss their relative merits.

Now, as I have said above,³⁸ I do agree with Ayer that a philosopher cannot deduce truths about reality from first principles. This is the Cartesian method. However, I maintain, contra Ayer, that these notions are distinct enough such that a philosopher could have first principles without trying to *deduce* the rest of his system from them. How might this be possible? I suggest that this was exactly the model of Thomas Aquinas. Now I am not assuming here that Thomas was successful in his undertaking. Rather I am denying that any model that posits first principles necessarily seeks to connect its remaining doctrines to those first principles in a deductive fashion.³⁹

³⁷p. 46.

³⁸See my comments in this work in "Rejection of Cartesianism" p. 14.

³⁹Some Thomist would describe the situation this way. Contingent truths are *reducible to* first principles, not *deducible from* them. For a thorough treatment of Thomas in this regard, see Robert W. Schmidt, *The Domain of Logic According to Saint Thomas Aquinas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966). Also of interest might be John of St. Thomas, *The Material Logic of John of St. Thomas*, Trans. by Yves R. Simon, John J. Glanville, and G.

Ayer Is Mistaken About the Nature of First Principles

For Ayer, there are only two possible options of the nature of first principles. First, Ayer contends that first principles "are not to be found among the so-called laws of nature."⁴⁰ Second, Ayer rejects the possibility that first principles are *a priori* truths. One may recognize these categories as a version of Hume's "matters of fact" and "relations of ideas."⁴¹ The standard (read Modern and Contemporary) view is that matters of fact statements, which are synthetic and known *a posteriori*, are about the world, but cannot be known with certainty, whereas relations of ideas, which are analytic and known *a priori*, can be known with certainty but tell us nothing about the world. Several philosophers have criticized this distinction as being either not exhaustive or inaccurate.⁴²

Of all my criticisms, this one probably would require the most collateral discussion. Here, I can only state the conclusions to show their contrast to Ayer, and attend my statements with little or no argumentation. First, the Classical tradition maintains that first principles are principles of reality itself. They have a priority in the order of being in that, what reality is, necessarily precedes any knowledge of it. Only this can make discovering truths about reality a possibility. For example, when the scientist examines the nature of some physical object, what the object is and what characteristics the object has are antecedent to the scientist's observation

Donald Hollenhorst (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955). For a more direct treatment of how the Thomistic approach compares and contrasts with the Analytic approach, see Henry Babcock Veatch, *Two Logics: The Conflict Between Classical and Neo-Analytic Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

⁴⁰p. 46.

⁴¹This is what Ayer has in mind. See p. 31.

⁴²For discussions of this distinction see: W. V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *Philosophical Review* 60 (1951), also found in E. D. Klempke *Contemporary Analytic and Linguistic Philosophies* (Amherst: Prometheus Books), pp. 331-349; Henry Babcock Veatch's chapters "The What-Statements of a What-Logic: Why They Are Not Analytic Truths" and "The What-Statements of a What-Logic: Why They Are Not Synthetic Truths" in his *Two Logics* cited above note 39.

of it. Likewise, the Classical tradition would say that there are certain truths about reality as such that make knowing truths about reality possible. Among these truths are the laws of logic. Taken as ontological principles, the laws of logic exhibit the nature of existence as such. For example, the law of non-contradiction says that it cannot be the case that something exists and does not exist in exactly the same way. But Ayer explicitly rejects this understanding of the laws of logic.

Like Hume, I divide all genuine propositions into two classes: those which, in his terminology, concern "relations of ideas," and those which concern "matters of fact." The former class comprises the *a priori* propositions of logic and pure mathematics, and these I allow to be necessary and certain only because they are analytic. That is, I maintain that the reason why these propositions cannot be confuted in experience is that *they do not make any assertion about the empirical world*, but simply record our determinations to use symbols in a certain fashion.⁴³

But in fact, they (at least the laws of logic) do make assertions about the empirical world. Surely the empirical world is the empirical world (the Law of Identity). Surely the empirical world is not the non-empirical world (the Law of Non-Contradiction). Surely the empirical world exists (in some sense) and that it is not the case that it does not exist (in the same sense). But all of these are statements that are necessarily true and *are about the empirical world*. I reject Ayer's contention that these are vacuous tautologies. They are not vacuous because they tell us something about the empirical world. They are not tautologies (in Ayer's sense of the term) because their truth is not merely a function of the predicate already being contained in the subject. (This is a confusion of use and mention that I discuss below.)⁴⁴

How then are these first principles known? Ayer seems to think that those philosophers who are committed to first principles deny that those first principles (or least his knowledge of

⁴³p. 31, emphasis added.

⁴⁴See this work below, p. 23.

them) are based on the evidence of the senses.⁴⁵ While this may be an accurate description of Descartes, it does not describe Aristotle nor Thomas. For them, all knowledge is ultimately derived from experience in some sense, even the knowledge of first principles.

In one sense, however, a demand for a proof of any first principle is misplaced. As Aristotle warns: "Some indeed demand that even this [that it is impossible for anything at the same time to be and not to be] shall be demonstrated, but this they do through want of education, for not to know of what things one should demand demonstration, and of what one should not, argues want of education. For it is impossible that there should be demonstration of absolutely everything (there would be an infinite regress, so that there would still be no demonstration)."⁴⁶

This is not to say, even for Aristotle, that no arguments can be given for the first principles. He himself goes on to give such arguments.⁴⁷ But, again, this would require another whole paper to do this issue justice. Let it suffice to say that there are such attempts to "argue" for their necessity. Such arguments have come to be known in some contexts as "transcendental" arguments.⁴⁸ The Classical tradition would maintain that all knowledge begins with experience, but that from experience one can discover certain principles and truths that are self-evident and transcendentally necessary. In a sense, the tradition would say that an argument for first principles stems from the fact that in order to even have an argument, first principles have to

⁴⁵Ayer makes this point in Chapter One, p. 33.

⁴⁶*Metaphysics*, IV, 4, 1006^a5-10. The translation is from Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941).

⁴⁷See Aristotle *Metaphysics* IV 4 1006^a29 ff.

⁴⁸In calling these arguments "transcendental" one should not assume that the arguments are a re-visitation of Kant, who used the term 'transcendental' to describe his own philosophy.

already be in place. Thus, even to try to refute such first principles, one would have to use the first principles themselves in the refutation.⁴⁹

Ayer Confuses "Reality as a Whole" with "Reality as Such"

Ayer believes that the motivation for the search for first principles stems from the philosopher's conception of philosophy as the study of reality as a whole. He comments that this conception of philosophy is difficult to criticize because it is so vague. Ayer suggests two ways of rendering the notion of "reality as a whole." First, the philosopher may have sought to gain a "bird's-eye view" of the world by "projecting himself outside the world."⁵⁰ Second, "reality as a whole" could be nothing more than the sum total of "the content of every science."

The problem with the first, for Ayer, should be obvious by now. If all knowledge is based on empirical experience, then it would be a contradiction to claim that one could have a view of the world from outside the world. Further, this "reality as a whole is somehow generically different from the reality which is investigated piecemeal by the special sciences."⁵¹ Both of these aspects are metaphysical in nature, and thus, are eliminated by the criterion of knowledge that Ayer maintains.

The problem with the second, for Ayer, is that, while it may be true that philosophy concurs with the content of every science, philosophy as such is not univocal with the content of every science. There is something that is uniquely philosophical, but it is philosophy's critical task that defines it, not a body of truths.

⁴⁹For a discussion of first principles in the Classical tradition see James Bacon Sullivan, *An Examination of First Principles in Thought and Being in the Light of Aristotle and Aquinas* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1939).

⁵⁰p. 47.

⁵¹ibid.

As far as the first is concerned, this is more directly related to my criticism here that Ayer is confusing "reality as a whole" with "reality as such." To me, the question of metaphysics is a question of reality (or, to use the classical term 'being') as such. Since Aristotle, there has been the position that, though being can be investigated according to its various aspects, there is one investigation of being as such. Thus, the study of being in as much as it is moving is Physics. The study of being in as much as it is living is Biology. The study of being in as much as it is quantifiable is Mathematics. The study of being in as much as it is being, which is to say, the study of being as being, or being as such, or being qua being, is Metaphysics. But why should one take this as a legitimate undertaking for philosophy? One answer is that being is the one thing that is true of everything that is real. Thus, while it may be the case that not everything moves or is living, everything is real.⁵² If this is true, then surely there is a legitimate inquiry as to the nature of this commonality. Traditionally, this investigation has gone under the name 'metaphysics.'

The implication of such an inquiry is far reaching, as is evidenced by the rich history of controversies over the subject. No doubt it is exactly this history of controversies that Ayer describes as "as unwarranted as they are unfruitful."⁵³ I must say I disagree. In fact, I would suggest that a thorough examination of the history of these controversies is quite fruitful and reveals much about the nature of philosophy itself and the role it can play in enlightening us to

⁵²Admittedly there is much in the literature on the notion of what it means for something to be real. For a useful discussion on this matter in the Classical (Thomistic) tradition see George P. Klubertanz and Maurice R. Holloway, *Being and God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Being and to Natural Theology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), 30-58. In my opinion, the most thorough and complete discussion of these notions in this tradition is Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, Second Ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952).

⁵³p. 33.

the nature of our world.⁵⁴ Even though this history is fraught with failed attempts at constructing a thorough-going metaphysics, these failures do not necessarily indicate anything intrinsically wrong with metaphysics as such. As historian of philosophy Etienne Gilson comments:

If metaphysical speculation is a shooting at the moon, philosophers have always begun by shooting at it; only after missing it have they said that there was no moon, and that it was a waste of time to shoot at it. Scepticism is defeatism in philosophy, and all defeatisms are born of previous defeats. When one has repeatedly failed in a certain undertaking, one naturally concludes that it was an impossible undertaking. I say naturally, but not logically, for a repeated failure in dealing with a given problem may point to a repeated error in discussing the problem rather than to its intrinsic insolubility.⁵⁵

I believe that one thing we can learn from this history is that a perennial mistake that philosophers have made in their attempts to study reality (being) as such is taking a method of inquiry and analysis appropriate for one aspect of reality and inappropriately using this method of inquiry and analysis for reality as such. For example, a common criticism of the Aristotelian method was that, because Aristotle (or at least the method utilized by Aristotelians) "biologized" everything (i.e., he tried to explain the actions of things in the world always in terms of "natures"), that this hampered the understanding of the different behaviors of things. Thus, as long as the natural scientist sought to explain why rocks fall and why smoke rises exclusively in terms of their respective natures, it would be impossible to discover the regularities that constituted many of the laws of nature. Having a nature that caused the rock to seek its proper place toward the Earth could not explain (or perhaps even preventing the noticing of) the law of

⁵⁴For the best treatment, in my view, of this history (at least from the Medieval through the Cartesian to the Modern periods) of controversies and what it has to say about philosophy and our world, see Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience: A Survey Showing the Unity of Medieval, Cartesian, & Modern Philosophy* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1982).

⁵⁵Gilson, *Unity*, p., 309.

gravitational attraction in terms of which the rock would accelerate toward the Earth at the rate of 32feet/second².⁵⁶

As far as Ayer's second rendering of the term 'reality as a whole,' my responses to the first point entails my answer to the second. If there is a legitimate role of philosophy known as metaphysics, then it follows that there is a body of knowledge that is unique to philosophy as philosophy. It further follows that indeed philosophy "can be ranged alongside the existing sciences, as a special department of speculative knowledge"⁵⁷ contrary to Ayer's assertion.

Ayer Confuses Metaphysics with Cartesianism

Earlier I commended Ayer for his repudiation of Cartesianism. I share his views that philosophy cannot, from first principles, deduce a whole system of truths about reality. But I think Ayer has mistakenly taken the model and method of Descartes for the standard way in which metaphysics (in the sense that he rejects metaphysics) in general is done. In other words, it is as if Ayer is saying that metaphysics is characterized by x and y, that x and y are illicit, and thus metaphysics is illicit. I do not quarrel that this is one approach to metaphysics, but I maintain that metaphysics need not be this way. What Ayer has done is effectively repudiate Cartesianism and has taken this repudiation as a repudiation of metaphysics as such. But I would maintain that the task of metaphysics need not, indeed should not, follow the method of Descartes. As I have argued above, the Classical tradition would seek to ground all knowledge in empirical experience, and would not claim that contingent truths can be deduced from first principles.

⁵⁶For another interesting work by Gilson that examines some related notions see his *From Aristotle to Darwin and Back Again: A Journey in Final Causality, Species, and Evolution*. Trans. by John Lyon. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

⁵⁷p. 48.

There are a number of interesting and important implications of the notions that no contingent truth is entailed by any necessary first principle and that the necessary first principles are entailed by any contingent truth. For Thomas, this preserves the theological doctrine that God created the universe freely. For if it were the case that the truths of the world were entailed by the truths of first principles (in which case the truths of the world would be deducible from these necessary first principles) then it would follow that God, the supreme metaphysical "first principle" would necessarily entail the universe. But for Thomas, this will not do. Just because God exists, does not mean that the universe must exist. However, it equally follows that because the universe exists, God must exist. In other words, God's existence is a necessary condition for the universe but God's existence is not a sufficient condition for it. This all, of course, stands in stark contrast with Cartesianism. Thus, while I agree with Ayer that Cartesianism does not work, it does not follow from that that metaphysics does not work. Metaphysics is not necessarily Cartesianism.

Ayer Confuses Use and Mention

Another criticism I have of Ayer is his confusion of use and mention. While it might strike one as petty, this confusion can have detrimental implications. Exactly what is this confusion? In linguistics, the distinction between use and mention has to do with how a word or phrase functions in a sentence. To say "A dogs has four legs" is to use the word 'dog.' To say "'Dog' has three letters" is to mention the term 'dog.' The former is about an object in the world. The latter is about the term that refers to that object.

One place where I believe Ayer confuses use and mention is in his comments regarding the nature of physical objects. Ayer says "To ask what is the nature of a material object is to ask for a definition of 'material object"⁵⁸ But surely this is not so. To ask what is the nature of a

⁵⁸p. 59.

material object is to ask something about the world. However, to ask for a definition of 'material object' is to ask something about a term that refers to the object in the world. Surely it is because the real material object has the nature that it has, that we give the definition the meaning that we do. So, while I am not denying that one may discover the nature of a material object by examining the definition of the term 'material object,' it is the material object itself that we are interested in and not merely words. I believe that Ayer's thinking here is motivated by his commitment to the position that there are no necessary truths about the world. Rather, Ayer seeks to confine these modal notions such as "necessarily true" to the propositions about the world.

Another example of Ayer confusing use and mention is in his discussion the statement "A material thing cannot be in two places at once." Many might claim that this is a statement that is both about the world and is necessary. Ayer counters that "a more critical inspection shows that it is not empirical at all, but linguistic. It simply records the fact that, as the result of certain verbal conventions, the proposition that two sense-contents occur in the same visual or tactual sense-field is incompatible with the proposition that they belong to the same material thing."⁵⁹

But surely Ayer is wrong here. The original proposition "A material thing cannot be in two places at once" is about a material thing. However, Ayer's comment is not about any material thing, but is rather about the relationship of two propositions. But the propositions about a material thing are not the material thing itself. So to discuss how two propositions relate to each is not univocal with the nature of the material thing in itself. To say, as Ayer does, that

⁵⁹p. 58.

asking about the nature of a material object is to ask for a definition of 'material object' seems to be a confusion of the thing itself with a term that refers to the thing.⁶⁰

Ayer Commits the Fallacy of Inverted Intentionality

Closely related to the use/mention confusion (and in fact an extension of the same criticism) is what Henry Veatch calls the Fallacy of Inverted Intentionality.⁶¹ Once someone has confused the mention of a term with its use, a further confusion follows when one tries to make conclusions about the nature of a thing based on the way a term is used, as if it was by the use of the term that the thing mentioned by the term come to be the way it is. The name of the fallacy utilizes the Scholastic categories of First Intention and Second Intention. First Intention is that act of the mind whereby one perceives (encounters) reality. Second Intention is that act of the mind whereby one reflects upon First Intention. To talk about reality is First Intention. To talk about talking about reality is Second Intention.⁶²

Broadly speaking, when one tries to conclude what the world must be like, on the basis of how our language about the world functions, is to commit this fallacy. In terms of priority, surely our language must be what it is because of the nature of reality, and not the other way around. But Ayer makes such a conclusion about how reality must be, because of the way language is.

For the fruitlessness of attempting to transcend the limits of possible sense-experience will be deduced, not from a psychological hypothesis concerning the actual constitution of the human mind, *but from the rule which determines the literal significance of*

⁶⁰In the Classical tradition, the issue here is the nature of intentionality. For a discussion of this and related matters from a Classical view see Henry Babcock Veatch *Intentional Logic: A Logic Based on Philosophical Realism* (Cambridge: Yale University Press, 1952), reprinted by Archon Books, 1970.

⁶¹Veatch, *Two Logics*, pp. 118-125.

⁶²For a treatment of these and related notions from a Classical view (in addition to the work cited in note 60) see Francis H. Parker and Henry B. Veatch, *Logic as a Human Instrument* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 13-29.

language. Our charge against the metaphysician is not that he attempts to employ the understanding in a field where it cannot profitably venture, but that he produces sentences which fail to conform to the conditions under which alone a sentence can be literally significant.⁶³

Here it looks to me that Ayer rejects the super-sensible, not on otherwise philosophical grounds, but rather on linguistic ones. Reality must be such a way because language is such a way. However, I would maintain that language has to be a certain way in order to conform to what reality is. Ontologically speaking, reality is prior to language about reality.

In the context of my above example of Ayer's confusion of use and mention, he goes on to commit the Fallacy of Inverted Intentionality. While Ayer admits that the proposition about the material object is necessary, he denies that this necessity says anything true about the material object itself. "And this is indeed a necessary fact. But it has not the least tendency to show that we have certain knowledge about the empirical properties of objects. For it is necessary only because we happen to use the relevant words in a particular way. There is no logical reason why we should not so alter our definitions that the sentence 'A thing cannot be in two places at once' comes to express a self-contradiction instead of a necessary truth."⁶⁴

This is startling. Are we supposed to conclude that if we only change our definitions, the material objects can be in two places at once? I do not believe Ayer could possibly mean this. But then, what could he mean? Could he be saying that there is nothing to any material object except the language about the objects? I am not sure. But to suggest that all that is going on is at the level of the linguistic and that there is no material object that puts constraints upon what can truly be said about material objects is wrong. The objects are what they are in themselves. Our talking about them is something else altogether. The obligation seems to me to be that our

⁶³p. 35.

⁶⁴p. 58.

statements about reality must correspond to what reality is.⁶⁵ To allow for the fact that what we say is determinative is to invert First Intention with Second Intention.

Another instance of the fallacy is Ayer's comments about relations and universals.

"Another good example of linguistically necessary proposition which appears to be a record of empirical fact is the proposition, 'Relations are not particulars, but universals.' One might suppose that this was a proposition of the same order as, 'Armenians are not Mohammedans, but Christians': but one would be mistaken. For, whereas the latter proposition is an empirical hypothesis relating to the religious practices of a certain group of people, the former is not a proposition about 'things' at all, but simply about words."⁶⁶

⁶⁵Admittedly the nature of truth and theories of truth are large issues in philosophy. There have been many controversies over the nature of truth and over exactly what it is about a proposition that renders it true. I hold to the correspondence theory of truth, in terms of which a proposition is said to be true just in case it corresponds to reality. In fact, it could have been another area where I criticize Ayer, since he does not hold to such a correspondence theory of truth as I do. Space constraints do not allow me to explore Ayer's views here, which are found in *Language, Truth & Logic*, pp. 87-90, which perhaps may be described as a redundancy theory of truth. The Classical definition of truth that has come to be known as the Correspondence Theory is cited by Aristotle: "This is clear, in the first place, if we define what the true and the false are. To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true; so that he who says of anything that it is, or that it is not, will say either what is true or what is false." (*Metaphysics* 4.7.1011^b26-29. The translation is McKeon's.) Other philosophers holding a correspondence theory of truth would be Plato (*Sophist*, 240d; 263b); Augustine (*Soliloquia* I, 28); Thomas Aquinas (*Truth*, Question 1, Article 1); René Descartes (*Meditations on First Philosophy: Third Meditation; Objections and Replies: Fifth Set of Objections* (see John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, trans. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 26, 196)); John Locke (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II, XXXII, §2-§5); Immanuel Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*, I, Second Part, First Div., Bk. II, Chap. II, §3, 3 (see, Norman Kemp Smith's trans. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965: 220)); Bertrand Russell ("On the Nature of Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1906-1907), 28-49 as cited in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, ed., (New York: Macmillan Publishing, Co., Inc. & The Free Press, 1967), s.v. "Correspondence Theory of Truth," p. 232); and the early Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 2.0211-2.0212, 2.21, 3.01).

Those philosophers who hold the correspondence theory of truth differ as to exactly where the "correspondence" obtains. Positions include that it obtains between the proposition and external reality (naïve realism), between the proposition and the internal reality of the form of the thing in the intellect (moderate realism), or between the idea of reality in the mind and the thing in reality outside the mind (representationalism). Other theories of truth include coherence theory, pragmatic theory, and performative theory. Clearly, debates about the nature of the truth of certain proposition will vary according to how one defines 'truth.'

⁶⁶p. 58.

Ayer asserts that what looks like a proposition about relations is not about relations at all but is rather about words. But surely this is inverting the intentionality, replacing things with talk about things. Now it is not surprising to me that Ayer would not be able to allow any reality of relations, as if relations were themselves things. Thus, the only option he has in trying to understand the nature of such a proposition about relations is to make the proposition about words instead of about relations. (I am not sure why words are not as problematic for his ontology as relations presumably are.) Be that as it may, surely the comment is about relations and not merely about the word 'relations.' Whatever ontological status one grants to relations as such, surely it can be the case that one material object is really to the left of another material object. This relation seems real enough, even if it is not itself a material object. But if the relation is real in some sense of the term, then how would one ever be able to talk about the relation if every such statement is not about the relation itself but about words? The confusion is over the failure to acknowledge things and a proposition about things.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have taken a look at some of the positions and argument of A. J. Ayer in the first two chapters of *Language, Truth and Logic*, focusing primarily on Chapter Two. I have pointed out several things that I think commend the work and the thinking of Ayer. I have also levied several criticisms that I believe address important flaws in his philosophy. Whether or not I am correct in my assessments, the fact remains that the thinking of A. J. Ayer, and particularly the arguments of *Language, Truth and Logic*, is important in the history of ideas and continues to exert a tremendous influence in the thinking of many. For this reason, I believe the work should be read by all who are interested in such matters.

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