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Linguistic Approaches to Philosophical Problems
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THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

LINGUISTIC APPROACHES TO PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS [1]

VIEWS about the nature of philosophical theories answer to one of two rough descriptions, one orthodox and seemingly having the best claim to truth, the other heterodox and seemingly false. In this paper I shall set out the considerations both for and against accepting various forms of the heterodox position; but I shall argue without reservation against the orthodox position. The latter commonly describes philosophy as a pursuit of truth, where "pursuit of truth" is interpreted in conformity with common usage as the attempt to acquire knowledge about our world. The contrasting position comprises a series of views held by philosophers whose primary concern appears to be the language in which purported truths are expressed. This concern reflects a conception of philosophy, a conception often not explicit and sometimes even disclaimed, namely, that a philosophical theory has its sources in linguistic facts rather than in facts about our world, and that despite appearances it gives us information only about language. A theory about causation, for example, tells us something about the word "cause" rather than about causation as a feature of our world.

This rough description of the position of linguistic philosophers makes it appear to ignore a distinction we all know, between the use and mention of a word. It is clear, for example, that philosophical views about causation do not translate into any statements about the word "cause." But of course this fact is already known to philosophers whose approach is linguistic. To maintain their thesis it is therefore incumbent upon them to specify in what way philosophical theories yield only verbal information and, first of all, to show that such theories are not what they seem. This latter thesis I want now to defend.

Descartes remarked that "Philosophy teaches us to speak with an appearance of truth on all things, and causes us to be admired

[1] Read at a Symposium on Linguistic Conceptions of Philosophy, Smith College, May 20, 1951.

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by the less learned." [2] But this appearance of truth is much more an appearance than he ever supposed. Philosophical views quite clearly have an empirical air, i.e., they appear to state matters of fact. To take some sample illustrations: a physical object is a bundle of properties, perception of physical objects involves an inference to something beyond one's experience, man's mind is necessarily given to antinomies, one cannot know one is not dreaming, it is impossible to know other people exist, motion is impossible, etc.

I want to hold that despite appearances these are *not* factual statements about physical objects, perception, the human mind, one's knowledge; first, because investigations which come to these conclusions are clearly not empirical. I do not propose here to discuss in a positive way the kind of evidence the philosopher adduces for a theory; here I can only say the evidence is not empirical. And I back this claim by pointing out that he has no laboratory, no experiments figure in his demonstrations or refutations, he cannot claim to closer observation of phenomena than other folk. Empirical conclusions cannot be expected to derive from non-empirical evidence. Second, they are not empirical because philosophic disputants come to opposite conclusions although the same facts are available to them and no possible further fact can decide betwixt them; i.e., their dispute cannot, even theoretically, be settled by recourse to any sort of matter of fact. Examples of such disputes are: the long-standing controversy over whether universals exist (consider Russell's, Carnap's, and Quine's changing positions), Locke and Berkeley's dispute over the existence of abstract ideas, disputes over the existence of sense data and over the extent of our knowledge. Third, some (possibly all) philosophical theories cannot be empirical because they imply the logical impossibility of what is patently and undeniably possible. For example, it appears to be a consequence of some of Bradley's views that it is self-contradictory (not merely false) that we should all be here now, or somewhere else before, or that we should have walked here, or that I should be sitting next to B.

There are two points to be made about views which have this sort of consequence, (1) that a philosopher need make no appeal to fact to show the incorrectness of such views, and (2) that whatever implies that something is logically impossible cannot itself be empirical. (1) It is an adequate objection to such a philosophical view that it has as a consequence the impossibility of what is clearly possible. (I am taking the position that if we know anything at

[2] Descartes, *Selections* (Scribner), p. 5.

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all we know, for example, that sitting next to B is entirely possible. This is a minimum claim to knowledge. It requires only the understanding of the sentence asserting it.) Citing the relevant *possibility* constitutes a sufficient objection to such a view; if a philosopher cites a fact he has merely cited something logically stronger than is necessary. It is the mere possibility, not the fact, that he requires. The possibility of there being a right act the total consequences of which do not contain as great a balance of pleasure over pain as any act the agent could do is enough to refute the theory that every right act must have consequences containing such a balance. That the possibility is remote or fantastic does not prevent it from being a test case. In other words, the theory is tested by a mere logical possibility. And what is merely possible cannot serve to refute a statement of fact. This is support for my claim that philosophical investigation of a theory is not empirical and hence that the theory itself is not empirical. (2) An additional reason for asserting the theory to be non-empirical is that whatever implies that something is logically impossible cannot itself be factual. No factual statement has as a consequence a logical impossibility.

The three considerations cited against holding philosophical views to be empirical are obviously different in character. The first two call attention to matters of fact about philosophical investigations and philosophical disputes, while the last one rests on the logical points (1) that only a non-empirical statement can be tested by citing a possibility, and (2) that whatever implies that something is logically impossible cannot itself be factual. All entail the consequence that a philosophical investigation does not consist in the attempt to ascertain the truth-value of a theory.

Without pretending to have met various reasons that might be advanced for the thesis that a philosophical theory does assert something factual, I am now going to proceed as though enough had been said to dispose of this thesis, in order to take up another view, which at least in appearance contests the claim that philosophical theories inform us only about the use of words. Philosophers holding this view do make a careful examination of the language used to express a theory, but they consider this linguistic task merely as a preliminary necessity for ascertaining truth. This view is the most plausible alternative both to the view that philosophical theories are factual truths or falsities and to the view that their function is to convey facts about words. It is the most plausible, first, because it is consistent with the fact that philosophical investigations are not empirical and that philosophical disputes are not settled by appeal to fact, and second, because it has the support

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of the undeniable fact that philosophical theories are expressed in what may be called the ontological as opposed to the linguistic idiom. According to this alternative view philosophical statements are analyses of puzzling concepts; and philosophical reasoning, at least a good deal of it, is directed to defending or attacking the correctness of an analysis. Philosophical questions and answers, and philosophical disputes, all have on this view a non-linguistic description. A philosophical question is a request for the analysis of a concept, i.e., for a statement of what concepts constitute (are logically entailed by) the given concept. The analysis will be correct if the statement of it is a logically necessary truth. Vagueness of concepts is the explanation of philosophical disputes.

Now the history of philosophy is full of what appear to be attempts to arrive at necessary truths. The following are illustrations: (1) Body is extended. This was set out by Descartes as an indubitable truth, indubitable because ascertainable by reason alone. Being a physical body necessarily implies being extended in space. (2) Socrates' attempts in the *Republic* and other dialogues to find the "essence" of justice, courage, virtue, etc. are also good illustrations of attempted analyses, as is evidenced by his procedure of dismissing any feature not characterizing all possible instances of the concept in question. (3) Zeno's argument that motion is impossible was directed to showing the concept of motion to have contradictory consequences. At least this is the natural description of his argument that the hypothesis that a body moves from A to B is self-contradictory. (4) Bradley's argument for the impossibility of relations, namely, that in order for two things to be related there would have to be an infinity of relations between them, also clearly derives from an investigation of the notion of a relation. (5) Hume's claim that a cause is nothing more than an invariable sequence appears likewise to be an analytic account of causation.

Now the activity illustrated in these examples is according to some philosophers not to be described as in any way requiring the examination of language, except as language is a crutch to our apprehension of concepts. Some go so far as to lodge a general complaint against language, not only because it is so often abused but because it is a barrier rather than a window to our ideas. Berkeley, for example, enjoins each of us to "use his utmost endeavors to obtain a clear view of the ideas he would consider, separating from them all that dress and incumbrance of words which so much contribute to blind the judgment and divide the attention. . . . We need only draw the curtain of words to behold the fairest tree of knowledge, whose fruit is excellent and within the reach of our

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hand."[3] For himself, since ideas so little profit from their quite fortuitous association with words, he says that "whatever ideas I consider, I shall endeavor to take them bare and naked into my view, keeping out of my thoughts, so far as I am able, those names which long and constant use hath so strictly united with them. . . . So long as I confine my thoughts to my own ideas, divested of words, I do not see how I can easily be mistaken. The objects I consider I clearly and adequately know. . . . To discern the agreements and disagreements there are between my ideas, to see what ideas are included in my compound idea and what not, there is nothing more requisite than an attentive perception of what passes in my own understanding."[4] This evidently is what C. H. Langford in our time calls "considering a statement, not verbally, but in terms of genuine ideas."[5]

If any philosopher takes the position that a concern with ideas is positively hampered by attention to words, and that ideas are the philosopher's proper concern, he clearly will be far from admitting that philosophical views are in any way about words or that examination of language is anything more than an unfortunate necessity. It is my contention that complaints which philosophers have made against language are pseudo-complaints—pseudo because they express dissatisfaction with the fact that language does not come up to a standard which it is self-contradictory that it should come up to. But I have argued this point elsewhere[6] and so shall not discuss it here. If it is correct, then philosophers are robbed of an important reason for holding that analysis should be of concepts but not of language, and that attention to language is a second-best to inspection of ideas. I suspect it is nonsense to speak, as Berkeley did, of taking ideas "bare and naked" into one's view, divested of their linguistic encumbrances. But disregarding this point, what I want to propose (though with some reservation) is that an analyst, even though he claims linguistic study is merely a tool in the analysis of concepts, is in fact engaging in *one* linguistic approach to philosophical problems.

I define a linguistic approach to philosophy as one arising from the view that what a philosopher does when he produces or tries to refute a philosophical theory is to inform one about language. Whether or not the so-called analytic approach in philosophy can

[3] Berkeley, *Selections* (Scribner), p. 123.

[4] Ibid., p. 121.

[5] C. I. Lewis and C. H. Langford, *Symbolic Logic*, p. 475.

[6] Alice Ambrose, "The Problem of Linguistic Inadequacy," *Philosophical Analysis, a Collection of Essays*, edited by Max Black (Cornell University Press, 1950), pp. 15–37.

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be classified as a linguistic approach I admit is uncertain. But we may take it as evidence that it can be if the analysis of a concept which a philosophical theory is claimed to state turns out to be a linguistic analysis. This evidence is provided by G. E. Moore's statement in Cambridge lectures that the analysis of a notion is identical with the definition of a word, in a strictly limited sense. Roughly, "analytic definition" covers what that sense is. An analytic definition is intended to clarify a concept by making explicit those concepts implicitly contained in it. This it will succeed in doing only if the words occurring in the expression of the analysans stand for "such ideas as common use has annexed them to," to quote Locke. That is, if the analysans is expressed by means of words not having a usage in the language or by means of old words used in a new way, the analysis will not clarify a concept. A successful analysis then will secure the same end as a correct definition: state how a word or phrase is conventionally used. However, from his Cambridge lectures there is reason to suppose that Moore, who would I think agree that some philosophical theories state analyses, would deny that they state something about the correct or established use of language, and for reasons over and above the fact that they are not *about* words.

Whether or not Moore would deny this thesis about what analysis does I am not concerned here to decide. I am concerned to evaluate it since it is an emphatically linguistic view in which the increasing attention to language naturally eventuates. According to this view the appearance which a philosophical theory has of being about empirical fact, or of being about the implications of concepts, merely conceals an attempt to express correct usage. Philosophical theories are to be examined neither for their necessary truth nor for their correspondence with those non-linguistic facts which make up our spatio-temporal world, but for their linguistic correctness—that is, for their correspondence with the linguistic facts that words are customarily used in such-and-such a way. I am not sure that anyone has ever held this view about philosophical theories. However, though one might not explicitly hold it, one might do philosophy as though one did. Moore and Norman Malcolm have often proceeded in such a way as to suggest this, for example, when they criticize a theory for misuse of words. Recall Moore's criticisms of views, say on the nature of material objects, for going counter to ordinary English, and Malcolm's recent criticisms of Moore's use of "know" in the claim "I know material objects exist" and of Russell's use of "perception" in his claim that perception involves an inference. This type of criticism at least

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suggests that a philosopher was interpreted as attempting, but failing, to give a proper account of conventional usage.

The attempt to answer one or other of the questions, "Does this analysis state a necessary truth?" "Does this account of the use of the word correctly describe its established, conventional use?," characterizes the tasks, respectively, of the two positions I have thus far called linguistic. Either position differs markedly from one further linguistic approach to philosophical problems, stated explicitly by Morris Lazerowitz, and by John Wisdom in some of his papers, according to which philosophers are neither analyzing concepts nor stating correct usage in giving a view, but are doing something else equally linguistic, namely, revising language. This approach stems from the view that philosophical theories are not, as they appear to be, answers to questions, but are proposals to alter language: that they do not in fact attempt to clarify a concept or to explain a current usage, but instead, in a concealed way, propose that a word's use shall be modified for philosophical purposes. Practitioners of this persuasion conduct what might be called meta-philosophical investigations—that is, they do not aim at establishing or refuting a theory, i.e., at answering a philosophical question, but instead show what linguistic features a philosopher is emphasizing in order to persuade other philosophers of the need of a linguistic change. They try to show what a philosophical theory comes to; and they arrive in the end at the Wittgenstein position that once one sees what a question comes to the craving for an answer disappears.

We have now three views about the nature of philosophical theories, one that they state analyses of concepts, another that they state what is the established usage of words, and another that they conceal a proposal for linguistic change. In order to make clear the differences between the first two and the last I shall try to set out what, ideally, their proponents would say about Berkeley's defense of his theory about physical objects. Berkeley grants that the expression "What we eat, drink, and are clothed with are ideas" departs from the familiar use of language. But he asserts he is not disputing "about the propriety, but the truth of the expression."[7] "If you agree with me that we eat and drink and are clad with the immediate objects of sense, which cannot exist unperceived . . . I shall readily grant it is more proper or conformable to custom that they should be called *things* rather than *ideas*."[7] In other words, he seems to say that "We are clothed with material things" is proper enough language, that is, that what we are clothed with *is*

[7] Berkeley, op. cit., p. 144.

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the sort of thing to which "material things" is applied, but that it fails to express what is true; while "We are clothed with ideas" offends against linguistic proprieties but does say what is true. He recommends our compromising between these two facts by employing "those inaccurate modes of speech which use has made inevitable,"[8] but with full awareness of their inaccuracy. For purposes of philosophizing "We are clothed with fine raiment" will be understood to mean "We are clothed with raiment-ideas." Thus we shall "think with the learned but speak with the vulgar."[8] In this way he insists that "the common use of language will receive no manner of alteration from the admission of our tenets," that "the tenets we lay down are not inconsistent with the right use of language."[8]

About these claims there are two things to say: (1) Quite clearly, as English is at present, "We are clothed with ideas" is not a proper interpretation of "We are clothed with material things." There is no rule of synonymy which makes it correct to replace "material thing" by "class of ideas." (2) Berkeley preserves the *status quo* of ordinary English at the cost of constructing a philosophical language to which his arbitrary rule of translation, "material thing" = "class of ideas," provides no bridge. For "We are clothed with ideas," which he says is true, cannot translate into "We are clothed with material things," because that is, according to Berkeley, false, or, by turns, nonsense.

About these facts proponents of the three linguistic theories about philosophy would take, respectively, the following positions: the first two that Berkeley is misusing language; the third that he is suggesting an alteration, for academic purposes, of philosophic discourse, and that it is a misinterpretation of his intention to suppose he is stating the accepted meaning of the phrase "material thing." Only in philosophical usage is his meaning to obtain, which is to say that the phrase "material thing" will come to have no function in philosophical discourse since "class of ideas" will displace it.

The sharp difference between these positions shows up when each is considered with reference to the question "Why is it so often asserted that Berkeley's position on material objects, though not substantiated, is unrefuted?" Accepting the view that Berkeley is either analyzing the nature of material objects or defining the phrase "material object," the charge that he is misusing language would imply that his analysis, or definition, is *in*correct. But as the quotations make clear, Berkeley was perfectly aware, even admits, that his account uses "ideas" in a way not in accord with

[8] Ibid, p. 152.

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ordinary linguistic proprieties. Yet he insists on his account nevertheless. If the aim of a philosophical theory is to give a correct analysis or a correct account of established usage, then the theory should be refuted so soon as it is shown that it fails to do this. And it would then be inexplicable why his theory is thought to remain unrefuted.

The third linguistic view, on the other hand, is constructed to explain just this phenomenon. If Berkeley's theory is an attempt to alter language for purposes of *philosophic* (as against ordinary) discourse, then it is understandable why pointing out a linguistic impropriety in no way persuades him to relinquish his view. Berkeley's reasoning for this view also has its explanation: if his view conceals an attempt to persuade one to accept a modification of language—conceals because of its being expressed in the indicative and its using but not mentioning words—then his reasoning will be construed not as showing its correctness but as urging the virtue of a proposed re-definition and the demerits of present usage. The first two linguistic approaches would thus take Berkeley's theory as an attempt to give a correct answer to one or other of the questions, "What is the analysis of the concept 'physical object'?," "What is the proper use of the words 'physical object'?"; the last takes it as not attempting a true answer to any question whatever. It therefore directs its efforts, not to refuting Berkeley but to showing what his view comes to, i.e., what linguistic features he emphasizes in order to persuade one of the need for a linguistic alteration.

Although a number of philosophers have, in working with a particular philosophical theory, done the kind of meta-philosophical analysis I have just described, i.e., shown what specific linguistic modification is being recommended, they have not always proceeded in this fashion and consequently have not subscribed to the above general account of the nature of philosophical theories. Norman Malcolm, for example, describes the sceptic as recommending the discontinuance of the application of the word "certain" to empirical statements, but in some of his writings he seems not to take this kind of view. Max Black describes the critics of induction as proposing a change of terminology, viz., of "practically know" for "know for certain," holding that their criticism arises because they prefer to construe "know" in a limiting sense, that is, as meaning "deductively certain."[9] Nevertheless, Black denies he is analyzing the dispute between defenders and critics of induction as being about how inductive inference ought to be described. Similarly,

[9] Max Black, *Language and Philosophy* (Cornell University Press, 1949), pp. 75–78.

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Moore denies, in his comment on a paper of mine, that the sceptic is proposing how the word "know" ought to be used, and in a comment on a paper by Morris Lazerowitz, that he is proposing anything about the use of the word "unreal."[10]

I should like now to canvass briefly the objections to the view that a philosophical theory proposes a linguistic change. In *Language and Philosophy* Max Black, in referring to Moore, cites the fact that "the man who might be supposed to know best whether he is making a recommendation strenuously resists the suggestion."[11] This it seems to me is not a convincing reason. Normally it would be, but when one considers the scandalous fact that after more than 2000 years philosophers are still so unclear about what philosophy is as not to be puzzled by the fact that no single theory remains undisputed, I think we can grant Moore nothing further than that he certainly *thinks* he is not making linguistic recommendations. What one thinks one is doing and what one is in fact doing may be quite different things. Hume certainly thought he was urging us to establish empirically, by introspection, that there could not be a simple idea without a correspondent impression; and yet he had already stated that "by *ideas* I mean the faint images of [impressions]."[12] It should be pointed out that to hold that traditional philosophers are making linguistic proposals is not the same as to say they are making *conscious* linguistic proposals. Any person holding the proposal theory would certainly say that philosophers are unaware of the fact that they are revising language, and that what they do with language deludes them as well as others. Freud's well-known study on the psychopathology of everyday life is sufficient evidence for the possibility of this being the case.

But there is one much more crucial criticism, directed against every linguistic theory about the nature of philosophy, which must be weighed. This criticism rests on the obvious fact that philosophical views are not ostensibly about the use of words at all. Philosophical statements use but do not mention words. They are expressed as though they were about matters of fact or, alternatively, about relations between concepts. Some philosophers appear to claim they are about both, for example, rationalists who hold the task of metaphysics to be discovery of the necessary features of *reality*. I should like to hold that just as the form of expression of philosophical theories misleads some philosophers into saying they are about our world, so the form misleads critics of linguistic ap-

[10] *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (The Library of Living Philosophers), pp. 673–75.

[11] Max Black, *Language and Philosophy*, p. 79.

[12] Hume, *Selections* (Scribner), p. 9.

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proaches into supposing they do not convey merely verbal information.

What then about the view that they state the relation between concepts, and further, that their function is in no way to convey any fact about words? It seems to me that the likeness of an analysis, that is, a necessary proposition, to an empirical one, and its unlikeness to such a proposition as "The word 'triangle' means three-sided figure," deceive one about the linguistic information it provides, information about the application of a word. It would be too great a task here for me to show in detail that necessary propositions yield only verbal information, but I shall try to sketch some reasons for holding this. However, it must be admitted to begin with that it is simply incorrect to say a necessary proposition is directly about words. "Material bodies are extended" will not translate into any statement mentioning the phrase "material bodies." Nevertheless it is a fact that in understanding a sentence for a necessary proposition and knowing that what it expresses is necessarily true, what one knows is a *verbal* fact. In understanding the sentence "Material bodies are extended" and knowing that it expresses a necessary truth one knows the phrase "unextended material body" has no application.

But, you might say, in understanding the sentence "There are no white crows" and knowing that it expresses something true one likewise knows that "white crows" has no application. This is correct, but putting the matter in this way obscures an important difference, which it is essential to be clear about: viz., that, in knowing that the one sentence expresses something contingently true, one knows the verbal fact that "white crows" has in our language a descriptive use and the non-verbal fact that it applies to nothing; while, in knowing that the other expresses something necessarily true, one knows that "unextended material bodies" has no descriptive use and one need know no non-verbal fact to know that what the sentence expresses is true. Knowing the verbal fact is sufficient for knowing a truth-value; there is no further fact to know. And this I take as grounds for holding that what a necessary proposition conveys is merely verbal information. One can understand the expression for a contingent proposition but lack knowledge as to whether what is described exists or not. But in knowing that "unextended material bodies" describes nothing conceivable, no such knowledge can be lacking. For nothing is described; if it were, then "Material bodies are extended" could theoretically be false—when what is described by "unextended material bodies" exists. The sentence "It is impossible for unextended material bodies to exist," into which "Material bodies are

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extended'' translates, suggests that an imaginable state of affairs, namely, a state of affairs expressed by ''Unextended material bodies exist,'' is impossible. But when we understand the sentence ''It is impossible . . .'' we know the linguistic fact that ''unextended material bodies'' has no descriptive use, not that it describes what is counter to natural law. Thus, although our necessary proposition does not assert any linguistic fact it does indirectly give us information about usage. And further, it gives us no more than this, since when we understand an expression not to have a use we cannot go on to say we either know or can come to know a non-linguistic fact. For we cannot know that what is described by a phrase which does not describe either could or could not, or does or does not, exist.

This linguistic aspect of necessary propositions is what justifies the linguist in philosophy in maintaining the relevance of attending to the verbal information concealed by the form of expression. Both the philosopher who interprets a theory as attempting either a correct analysis or a correct account of usage and the philosopher who interprets it as proposing a revision of language are attending to just this concealed information. The latter arrives at his position via the thesis that a philosophical theory is being proposed for acceptance, in philosophical discourse, as a logical necessity, for example, that ''Physical objects are classes of ideas'' shall be understood by philosophers to express a necessary truth. And thus what is proposed on the verbal level is that ''unperceived physical object'' shall not have a use. On all of these views about philosophical theories then, the focus is on the verbal fact which the theories conceal.

In conclusion I should say something about one remaining view concerning the nature of metaphysical statements which is usually construed as linguistic, namely, the positivistic view that they are nonsense. There are two distinct criteria which positivists use in arriving at this conclusion about metaphysics, neither of which, I wish to hold, is acceptable. One is a linguistic criterion for meaningfulness which is so defined as to preclude in advance that metaphysical statements be meaningful, and the other is a non-linguistic criterion (the so-called principle of verifiability) which turns out to be self-contradictory.[13] The first criterion is to the effect that a declarative sentence is meaningful if and only if it expresses either an analytic or an empirical proposition. A. J. Ayer, for example, clearly supposes these to be the only two categories of propositions, and that all *a priori* propositions are

[13] These are points made by M. Lazerowitz. For the latter see ''The Principle of Verifiability,'' *Mind,* Vol. XLVI, no. 183 (July, 1937), pp. 372–78.

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analytic and all empirical ones are synthetic.[14] Other philosophers, however, maintain there is a third class of propositions, those which are both *a priori* and synthetic, and some philosophers hold that into this class metaphysical statements fall. To express the criterion of meaningfulness by reference to the exclusive classification "analytic or empirical" is then to beg the question: "meaningful" is so defined as to exclude the possibility of *a priori* synthetic statements being meaningful. As for the second criterion for meaningfulness, to the effect that a declarative sentence is meaningful if and only if the proposition it expresses can be confirmed or refuted, this allows both that a sentence express a proposition and that it be meaningless: failing a possible confirmation or refutation, the statement to which the criterion is applied turns out not to express any proposition even though there is a proposition which fails to meet the test. Aside from this fact that the criterion is self-contradictory, it should be noted that despite appearances, this principle is not a linguistic one. It is a criterion the use of which entails no examination of language; it entails only the examination of propositions which are expressed by language.

ALICE AMBROSE

SMITH COLLEGE

COMMENTS ON THE "PROPOSAL THEORY" OF PHILOSOPHY [1]

MISS Ambrose discusses a number of "linguistic approaches" to philosophical problems and seems inclined to accept what might be called the "proposal theory" of philosophy. According to this theory, philosophical statements "are not, as they appear to be, answers to questions, but are proposals to alter language"; "in a concealed way," they "propose that a word's use shall be modified for philosophical purposes." [2] She points out, however, that

> to hold that traditional philosophers are making linguistic proposals is not the same as to say that they are making *conscious* linguistic proposals. Any person holding the proposal theory would certainly say that philosophers are unaware of the fact that they are revising language, and that what they do with language deludes them as well as others. Freud's well-known study of the psycho-

[14] A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic,* pp. 77–79.

[1] Read at a Symposium on Linguistic Conceptions of Philosophy, Smith College, May 20, 1951.

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, references are to Alice Ambrose, "Linguistic Approaches to Philosophical Problems."

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