VERIFICATIONISM AND ANALYTICITY LECTURE 1

1.   The propositions of metaphysics have two peculiar aspects: first, they seem to go beyond experience: questions about the nature of time or of causality, about the existence of God or the refutation of skepticism, all seem to turn on general features of the universe that we could not settle merely by studying the flow of experience; rather they are somehow beyond, or behind, or a presupposition of experience. Second, there has been astonishingly little progress in answering them: on some of these questions we know more than Plato and Aristotle about which answers are *wrong*; but on others we are no closer than they were to saying which are *right*. Verificationism in its classic form attempts to connect these two facts together.

2.   The basic idea of verificationism is that there is an intimate connection between the meaning of a sentence and its method of verification; that is, our method for telling whether it is true. In Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* this found expression in the criterion of verifiability: 'a sentence is factually significant to any given person if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express – that is, if he knows what observations would lead him under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or to reject it as being false' (LTL p. 48).

3.   For instance, take the sentence: 'There are five silver coins in my pocket.' I know what course of experience would *verify* it i.e. lead me to accept it as being true, namely the experience of e.g. putting my hand in my pocket and drawing out five coins with a certain appearance. And I also know what experience would *falsify* it i.e. lead me to reject it as false, namely the experience of putting my hand in my pocket and drawing out anything else.

4.   Note that neither course of experience is conclusive; and this points to a more general problem. 'We say that the question that must be asked about any putative statement of fact is not, Would any observations make its truth or falsehood logically certain? but simply, Would any observations be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood?' (LTL p. 56)

5.   There are three notable types of sentences that this criterion classifies as not factually significant: those purporting to express propositions of metaphysics, those purporting to express proposition of ethics and those purporting to express propositions of mathematics. We'll deal with each of these in turn.

6.   First, the propositions of metaphysics. It is evident – at least it is evident to Ayer – that no course of experience could count for or against any of the propositions of metaphysics, because no proposition of metaphysics rules out or makes less likely any particular course of experience. Take the statement that there is a necessary connection between cause and effect. How would the world look any different if it were true – I mean compared, for instance, to how it would look if there were no 'causal nexus' but merely Humean patterns of constant conjunction? Or take the statement that you are now being deceived by an evil demon. Again, what course of experience could possibly confirm or disconfirm it? (But note the contrast with (a) the inductive

sceptical hypothesis and (b) A statement about life after death.) Ayer's conclusion is 'The elimination of metaphysics.'

7.   Second, the propositions of ethics. Hume famously distinguished between 'is' and 'ought' statements and asserted, correctly, that there is no valid inference from the former to the latter. But only 'is' statements could place any constraints on the course of experience. Therefore 'ought' statements are factually insignificant – however much they might seem to be telling you something about reality, in fact they are not.

8.   It is extremely important that for Ayer this does not mean that they are completely meaningless: he allows the statements of ethics a separate role in our lives (whereas the statements of metaphysics get none, or at least no special role). 'It is wrong to ruin someone's geraniums by jumping onto them from a first-floor window' might seem like an obvious ethical truth to you or me, but what we are really doing, when we a affirm a statement like that, is expressing a negative *attitude*: 'Boo for ruining the geraniums!' etc.

9.   One difficulty with this response is that it makes ethical disagreement a matter of taste: people who seem to disagree about right and wrong are really just expressing different preferences. Another pressing issue is the 'Frege-Geach' problem. Ethical statements, like any other declarative sentences, can appear inside other sentences, most obviously in truth-functional contexts e.g. 'That was either brave or stupid'. But it is hard to see what statements like this could be *saying* if their component statements have no *factual* significance; nor is it clear what they are expressing, since 'a disjunction of *attitudes*' makes no sense.

10.   Finally there are the propositions of mathematics e.g. '5 + 7 = 12' or $e^{ix} = \cos x + i \sin x$. These sentences are not factually significant for Ayer, because they neither rule out nor rule in any possible course of experience. But he won't say that they are altogether meaningless: rather, his view is that they are *analytic*, in the sense that they state nothing more than the meanings of the words that contain them: 7 + 5 = 12, or even a more complicated mathematical truth like the second one, are really no more informative than statements like 'An optician is someone who looks after your eyes', 'Cobblers make shoes' etc. Analyticity, for Ayer, is the *only* way that sentences can be meaningful without ruling out some possible course of experience.

11.   Here Ayer sides with Hume. And indeed *Language, Truth and Logic* can look like an extended application of the closing paragraph of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Kant denied that mathematics was analytic for reasons that were obscure (in the Introduction to his *Critique of Pure Reason*); this may be one way to put it. Suppose you knew how to count but not how to add, and you counted 7 dogs and 5 cats in the room; but then when you counted all the animals together you got 11. Then someone who knew arithmetic could tell, *without even having observed you count*, that you had miscounted by your own standards. To you this might seem like magic; but if arithmetic tells us nothing new, then how could it even be surprising?