

THE SENSE OF METAPHYSICAL NONSENSE

In 1936 a twenty-five year old Fellow of Christ Church College (Oxford), Alfred Jules Ayer, published a book which he himself would label ten years later as «harsh», «passionate», and «simplistic», but which became one of the most influential philosophical books of this century¹. In it the author attempts to draw a sharp line between sense and nonsense, between meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Ayer, of course, is exclusively interested in combinations of words which are grammatically significant, and wants to decide which ones succeed in expressing a proposition, namely, in saying something which could be called 'true' or 'false'. Ayer comes up with a very simple criterion: a statement expresses a proposition if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable².

Analytic means tautological, and tautological means that the validity of the statement depends exclusively on the definition of the symbols. The propositions of formal logic and mathematics are necessarily true, not because they say anything about what in fact is going on in the world, but because they are tautological, they remind ourselves of our own linguistic usages. The entire body of logical and mathematical treatises contain only an immense tautology, somehow more complex but of the same order as the fascinating truth that bachelors are unmarried men, and that a yard is equal to three feet.

The second group meaningful statements is more difficult to characterize. The criterion of 'possible verification by a sense-observation' has to be conveniently vague to be comfortably used. Let us say that a statement expresses a proposition if there is any sense-observation, either actual or merely possible, which is in any way relevant to its truth or falsity.

With this criterion we are now prepared to test some of the things people write or say—whether they are philosophers or physicists, poets or theologians, artists or just simple folk—to let them know whether they are making any sense, or just babbling around some gibberish «full of sound and fury, signifying nothing». Obviously this is an unpleasant and gigantic task, but Ayer and his rapidly vanishing disciples are more than willing to perform it in order to cleanse the air of our intellectual cities. To affirm or to deny that God exists is equally non-

1 Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (3rd Dover edition, New York).

2 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

sensical; to assert that a human being is composed of a bodily and a spiritual element is neither true nor false, but plain nonsense; to state that there is a reality independent from my perception of it, or to say that the being of that reality depends upon my perceiving it, cannot be a matter of philosophical discussion (although it has been for centuries!) for the simple reason that there is nothing to agree or to disagree in; to say that there exists a supra-sensible reality which is the object of intellectual intuition or the conclusion of argument, is a meaningless utterance; to say that abortion is wrong is not to say something anybody could agree or disagree with me; in fact, to say that abortion is wrong does not even state the fact that I have some unpleasant feelings associated with the imagination of an abortion being carried through; to say that Goya's paintings are beautiful is not a proposition which could be qualified, negated, or accepted. This practically means that most of the books written by the pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Plotinus, Saint Anselm, Saint Thomas, Avicenna, Averroes, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, Freud, Bergson, Bradley, Heidegger, and many other mediocre philosophers of the past and of today, contain nothing but wordy explosions of pure nonsense. Ayer opens his book with a typically modest remark: «The traditional disputes of philosophers are for the most part as unwarranted as they are unfruitful... The labors of those who have striven to describe a supra-sensible reality... have been devoted to the production of nonsense»³.

Some of my readers might find this way of thinking very appealing indeed. They have my deepest sympathy. As a philosopher of sorts I find Ayer's book slightly uncongenial to me. The book is based upon the assumption that there is in fact a sharp and neat line separating sense from nonsense. I can think of many writings, including this one, which are a living refutation of such an assumption. Reality does not abound in neat boundaries. There is no clear line between sanity and insanity, between darkness and light, between belief and doubt, between masculinity and femininity, not even between life and death. The colors of the rainbow have no definite borders, and our visual field has only very blurry edges. You have to be a member of the John Byrch Society to believe that humanity is divided into good guys and bad guys. To say that rationality is a neat province with barbed wire around was a typically eighteenth century attitude properly fitting the rather sectarian and opinionated minds of the Enlightenment. Vico first, and then the Romantics should have dispelled for ever such an illusion. As an old scholastic philosopher what I miss most in Ayer's book is the relief of some distinctions and counterdistinction. I would prefer to be told that there are at least some degrees of nonsense, some minimal but promising nonsensical approximations to the Olympian tabernacle of sense and meaning.

I reject Ayer's book because it is at least two or three numbers too short for me and for every philosopher of normal measurements. Philosophy is given such a modest task that I seriously fear a taxpayer's

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 33 and 34.

revolt against our being paid, no matter how modestly, for teaching it. Logicians, mathematicians, and natural scientists claim for themselves the entire domain of that which can be meaningfully said. Ayer's philosophy is only a department of logic, and a modest one at that: the department where you are reminded of the formal consequences of your own linguistic conventions. If you have decided to call unmarried men 'bachelors', do not forget that you will be guilty of flagrant inconsistency if you proceed to describe the wife of your bachelor friend. I am Aristotelian enough to believe that logic is not even a part of philosophy, but only a tool of the philosopher. Logic is to philosophy what the painter's brush is to the painting itself. I am also old-fashioned enough to believe that philosophy does not deal with the language we use to speak about reality, but rather with the reality we are speaking about.

Under close scrutiny Ayer's book is also full of objectionable statements. To say that a statement is meaningful if it is either tautological or verifiable is itself a statement which is neither tautological nor verifiable by any possible sense observation. When statements are checked to see if they succeed in expressing a proposition, are they understood? If not, how can we look for a validating experience? If they are understood, then they make sense before we find the redeeming experience. One is tempted to say that Ayer's entire book amounts to a whimsical linguistic tautology. Ayer simply proclaims his own decision to call a statement true if it is corroborated by a sense experience, exactly in the same way most of us do not have serious objections to calling three feet 'a yard'. What are we going to do with other less enlightened philosophers who have chosen a different way of speaking?

As a member of the human species I deeply resent to be told that the greatest minds of our philosophical tradition spent most of their lives speaking nonsense. Nor is it enough for me to be told that such nonsense was nevertheless an expression of genuine mystical feeling, or the poor creation of some misplaced poets, or mere attempts to arouse people's feelings and move them into action. Such way of speaking presupposes that human feelings too belong to the nonsensical, that they are cut off from the world and have nothing to say about it. I, on the contrary, have always believed that our feelings, our moods, our emotions, are an important part of our dealing with the world. Feelings might be blind, but they indeed have an extraordinary sense of touch. Feelings alone might not result in theoretical constructs, but any theory worth of any consideration must be, and actually always is, permeated by intense feeling. Mystics, poets, and philosophers can happily coexist in the same neighborhood.

Ayer's attempt to draw a line between sense and nonsense has a long ancestry. This procedure —to formulate a science about the limits of science, to let us know exactly what is that which we cannot know (strange as it sounds!); was initiated by no other than Kant himself. Kant's books, like Ayer's are also «passionate», but unlike Ayer's they are neither «harsh», nor much less «simplistic». Kant's analysis and results are much better qualified, more profound, more complex, and

less simplistic than those of the young author of *Language, Truth and Logic*.

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) tries to resolve the question of whether metaphysics is possible as a science. History of Philosophy manuals, especially those written by Neo-Kantians with a strong empiricist proclivity, simply tell us that Kant totally denied such a possibility. Strange enough Kant's books after the *Critique* sound very much like metaphysical treatises: *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* (1783), *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786), *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (1785). In his book *Kant und das problem der Metaphysik* Heidegger echoes a very strong reinterpretation of Kant in Germany during the twenties according to which Kant in fact laid the foundations of metaphysics and must therefore be considered as the source and inspiration of the extraordinary metaphysical speculation which began with Fichte and reached in Hegel its final culmination⁴. Here then we have an intriguing puzzle: did Kant deny or did he firmly establish the possibility of metaphysics as a science?

Gehind this puzzle lurks an immensely exciting question: what is metaphysics? Obviously Kant denied the possibility of traditional metaphysics and established the possibility of a metaphysical science totally different from the traditional one. What then is the traditional concept of metaphysics? It is commonly said that such concept was defined by Aristotle in his book *Metaphysics*. The problem is that Aristotle never wrote a book entitled *Metaphysics*. What we today call Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is not a book, but a highly disorganized maze of Aristotelian fragments lacking any continuity of thought, which, as Heidegger has rightly pointed out, deals with many issues which can hardly be called 'metaphysical'⁵. Furthermore, neither the title nor the very word 'metaphysics' was ever used by the so-called founder of metaphysics. This collection of fragments was entitled 'metaphysics' almost three hundred years after Aristotle's death by Andronicus, the head of the Lyceum. For many centuries scholars believed that the word 'meta-physics', beyond-physics, was only a librarian's device to name those writings which come after ('meta') the Aristotelian books on physics. Medieval commentators, however, gave the word a Platonizing significance more congenial to their religious concerns: metaphysics is the science which deals with objects 'beyond' the natural world, with supra-sensible realities. This medieval interpretation, once labeled as sectarian and philistine by very imposing scholars, has begun to gain favor once more among contemporary historians of ideas. And rightly so. A close analysis of the Aristotelian text confirms only the hesitations and ambiguities of Aristotle himself. In those writings we encounter two different concepts of metaphysics: metaphysics as the science of being as such, and metaphysics as the science of supra-sensible being, an ambivalence of clear Platonic ancestry. Heidegger

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. James S. Churchill (4th ed., Indiana U. P., 1972). On p. 3 Heidegger himself provides an untypically long bibliographical note on German studies of Kantian metaphysics.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

has claimed that the poor record of post-Aristotelian metaphysics is fully explained by «the failure to understand the doubtful and unsettled state in which Aristotle left the central problems of metaphysics»⁶. This remark confirms the reputation of Heidegger as an interesting and intriguing thinker, but also his reputation of being a poorly informed scholar. It is true that the medieval commentators of Aristotle, including Saint Thomas and Averroes, were mostly satisfied with a rather naive, uncritical, and servile hermeneutics of the Aristotelian text. But Heidegger's criticism can hardly be applied to Renaissance and Baroque scholasticism, and specially to the philosopher who definitively formulated the traditional concept of metaphysics for the period between the Renaissance and the beginnings of Kantian philosophy, the Spanish Jesuit Francisco Suárez.

Suárez' *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, published in Mainz in 1600, was the first systematic and comprehensive treatise on metaphysics ever written in Europe since the days of Aristotle. This book was adopted as a philosophy textbook by most European universities, both Catholic and Protestant, during the seventeenth century. Suárez unequivocally defines metaphysics as the science of being as such. It is true, however, that unless one indulges in the repetitious, poetical, esoteric and vague involutions which Heidegger has come to relish with such persistent *gusto*, we philosophers do not have much to say about being in general without relapsing into epistemological considerations of exploring a particular region of being. Suárez tried to avoid both temptations, and, unlike Aristotle, he was moderately successful. The reason why metaphysics can deal with more than being as such is precisely that the concept of being permeates every distinction and particularity of being. What is far from clear is how far the metaphysician should be allowed to accompany being in its process of increasing determination without swallowing all sciences into a universal science of everything knowable. Suárez' decision was to define metaphysics as the science of being both in its most abstract generality and in its sweeping compartments: finitude, and infinitude, substantiality and accidentality, actuality and potentiality, materiality and immateriality, namely the general features of reality which are not claimed by any of the particular sciences. By emphasizing the indivisible unity of the metaphysical enterprise Suárez cleansed Aristotelian thought from its most resilient Platonic accretions. Suárez' though is simply traditional metaphysics in its clearest, purest, and most comprehensive formulation.

That Kant refused the traditional concept of metaphysics does not mean that the *Critique of Pure Reason* was a refutation of Suárez' thought. Such refutation never took place for the simple reason that Kant had the wrong idea of what traditional metaphysics was about. In fact, Kant's concept of traditional metaphysics was rather parochial and short-sighted. Kant's professors and colleagues in the Prussian University were not Suárez' disciples, but rather the followers and imitators of the man who dislodged scholastic metaphysics from the German educational establishment, Christian Wolff. Wolff was not an Aristo-

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

telian, but a Platonizing rationalist who never fully understood nor could entirely get rid of the sometimes forbidding jargon and phraseology of scholastic philosophy. Unlike Suárez, Wolff divided metaphysics into general metaphysics or ontology, and special metaphysics. The former deals with being as such, the latter with God, the soul, and the Universe as a whole. The Aristotelian ambivalence between metaphysics as the science of being and metaphysics as the science of supra-sensible being was thus reinstated by Wolff with a clear religious purpose. When Kant wrote that special metaphysics was truly metaphysics in its final purpose, he had in mind Wolff's, not Suárez' concept of metaphysics⁷. Heidegger is therefore right in saying that Kant shifted metaphysics' center of gravity toward special metaphysics, but wrong in assuming that Wolff's division represented the traditional concept of metaphysics. In fact two thirds of Wolff's special metaphysics, psychology and cosmology, do not even belong to metaphysics according to Suárez, but rather to physics. Two thirds, therefore, of Kantian transcendental dialectics are aimed at a concept of metaphysics which has nothing to do with traditional metaphysics as defined by Francisco Suárez. In fact, a Kantian criticism of Aristotelian metaphysics and its implied epistemology has never taken place in the history of ideas⁸.

Some of the aspects of Kantian thought which fail to arouse my loyal support are intimately related to this basic misconception. Like Wolff, Kant was also deeply concerned with special metaphysics because as a good Lutheran pietist he was seriously worried about the relationship between Reason and Faith, or, as he was going to put it in slightly different terms, between scientific knowledge and any form of belief. It was Kant's purpose to clearly define the limits of the former to 'make room' (this is the Pietist's concern!) for the latter. Kant's method is well known. Scientific knowledge is made possible by the application of the *a priori* categories of the understanding to the spatio-temporal data of the senses. As exactly in the same a University registrar cannot file ('classify', or 'categorize') the names of the students who fail to send their applications, so it is impossible for us to categorize, to form a concept of God, of the soul, and of the universe as a whole. We cannot do that because we have no data to process: we have never seen God, we have never touched the soul, nor can we envision the entire Universe (among other reasons because we are part of it). Theology, Psychology, and Cosmology —Wolff's *metaphysica specialis*— are therefore impossible sciences.

So far this sounds very much like Ayer's rather simplistic 'defenestration' of traditional metaphysics. But Kant has much more to say. Although our understanding has no concept of God, the soul, or the universe, our reason, Kant admits, is endowed with the 'ideas' of God,

7 Emmanuel Kant, *Ueber die Fortschritte der Metaphysik seit Leibniz und Wolff* (Cassierer ed.) VIII, p. 238.

8 Joseph Marechal's Fifth cahier of *Point de départ de la métaphysique* (Louvain 1926) is probably the only serious attempt to confront Kantian criticism with Thomistic epistemology. Marechal's work, however, is based upon a highly idiosyncratic interpretation of scholastic thought, and fails to represent the main stream of traditional Aristotelian scholasticism.

the soul, and the Universe. Kant confesses in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that he has «some difficulty»⁹ in explaining the difference between 'idea' and 'concept'. The reader finds it almost impossible to understand the difference, among other reasons because it is far from clear whether we have an idea of that difference, or a concept of that difference or some way of knowing which is neither conceptual nor ideal. In any case here at least we find some of those complicating but promising distinctions which I so sorely missed in Ayer's book. Reason, Kant proceeds to explain, is the highest faculty of cognition (a sentence which Hegel liked very much and many a Kantian pretends never to have read), not because it knows more than the understanding knows, but because it directs the cognitive operations of the understanding. Reason directs the understanding by means of the ideas. The idea of God, for example, encourages the speculative mind to view reality *as if* it were the creation of a divine intelligence, and therefore as something endowed with unity, intelligibility, and purpose. This idea of God regulates the work of the understanding, but does not constitute an object, does not reach and grab ('begreift') the reality of a suprasensible and infinite Being. Ideas then do not enlarge our knowledge, but they explain our relentless search for knowledge. Kant therefore comes to the amazing conclusion that human nature has some indestructible tendency toward a science which it can never reach. The outer frontiers of knowledge mark the threshold of belief. God, the soul, a noumenal universe, the impossible ideals of speculative cognition, become the objects of practical faith as the postulates of our moral life. The unfulfilled and unattainable ideals of our cognitive powers and the pre-conditions of the moral fact converge and point toward a God, a free and immortal soul, and a created universe which we will never be able to know in scientific terms.

In this way Kant refuses the possibility of Wolff's special metaphysics. What happened to ontology or general metaphysics? It is commonly said that the first two parts of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the transcendental aesthetic and analytic, performed a Copernican revolution of the traditional concept of metaphysics. Metaphysics in its ontological project does not deal with the realm of being but rather with the laws of human cognition which prescribe *a priori* from any experience the conditions for the possibility of experience itself; the conditions, in other words, for the appearance of objects within the horizon of human consciousness. This is partly true; but it is also true that Kant's transcendental philosophy was explicitly carried out more as a polemical criticism of the possibility of Theology, Psychology, and Cosmology, than as a conscious redefinition of a fundamental ontology. In his book *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* Heidegger has politely suggested that Kant partially failed to carry out this project because he recoiled from the idealistic implications of his thinking, and also because he failed to see the central role of temporality in human existence. Heidegger's first objection does not interest me a great deal for reasons the reader

⁹ *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Transcendental Dialectic, Book I, Section I («Of Ideas in General»).

can comfortably ignore, but the second objection, I think, goes to the heart of the matter.

John Dewey has written that «there is nothing historical and temporal in the Kantian machinery»¹⁰. This is partially an unfair accusation. It is true that Kantian philosophy is more interested in the atemporal framework of science than in a history of cultural forms, but it is also true that Kant was probably the first philosopher (or was it Saint Augustine?) to perceive that even the most rudimentary human experience is completely permeated by temporality. Unfortunately, however, the scope of Kant's analysis of time was from the very beginning severely curtailed by its polemical intentions. Kant was so intent in drawing the line which separates scientific knowledge —namely Newtonian physics— from the pseudo-sciences of Wolff's special metaphysics, that instead of probing into the mystery of human finitude and contingency as revealed in temporal becoming, Kant satisfied himself with pointing to the limitations of our scientific capabilities. Kant's time was therefore not the radical symptom of human finitude, but rather the Copernican time which justifies mathematics as a synthetic science and defines the inner boundaries of our scientific understanding. This initial distortion, fully justified by the fleeting and temporal trends of his own historical environment, manifests itself in two ways of thinking which still prevent me from daily reciting the Kantian pledge of allegiance.

First of all, for Kant human knowledge is identical and coextensive with observational, scientific knowledge. Kant's 'reason' is the highest faculty of cognition, but knows nothing. I cannot accept that. I agree that 'God' is not a sense-datum categorized by the understanding, and I do not know any scholastic philosopher in his right mind who has ever said such a foolish thing. I am more than willing to concede that our idea of God does not constitute its object nor proves its existence, an ontological illusion of Platonic origin firmly rejected by Aristotelian scholasticism from Saint Thomas to Suárez. I accept that we cannot have a 'science' of God, certainly not a science expressed in mathematical *formulae* and tested in the laboratory; not even a neatly formulated theory of God properly and fittingly squared with the dogmatic requirements of any religious denomination, Christian or not, western or eastern. But I refuse to say that our rational and irresistible propensity toward a final ideal of all inclusive rationality, which around here we used to call 'God', is itself a blind propensity totally deprived of any cognitive content. Nor can I accept that the beliefs of our practical reason about the presuppositions of our moral life are totally opaque and deprived of meaning. Unlike Kant I am more than willing to enlarge the domain of 'knowledge' beyond the boundaries of the natural sciences. Our irresistible propensity toward an impossible science, does not result, by definition, into a scientific theory, but it does not result in pure nonsense either; in fact, it tells me more about myself than the Newtonian laws of gravitation. I am convinced that the most

10 John Dewey, *Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action* (Louvain 1930) p. 235.

intriguing, the worthiest part of our knowledge, whether is based upon intellect, imagination, or feeling; whether is expressed in theory, metaphor, or myth; whether is based upon observation, mystical experience, aesthetic delight, self-awareness, intellectual intuition, or the very awareness of being alive, lies far beyond the boundaries of that which is amenable to scientific manipulation. Like Hegel I am convinced that observational science belongs only to the adolescence of the spirit. Scientists, as Plato says, are only expert in shadows as long as they are unable to turn their heads toward the opening of the cave.

This was my first objection to Kantian thought. My second objection has to do with time. Kant's failure to see temporality as the core of human finitude blinded him to the meaning of our irresistible propensity to think that which is scientifically unthinkable. The radical experience of human finitude is in some ways an experience of the other side of the boundaries of our finitude. I admit that this concept of a self-conscious finitude which paradoxically transcends its own boundaries is basically an Augustinian insight indelibly engraved in my mind. Camus' utter contempt for this sort of cowardly illusion does not impress me too much as long as I keep in the company of those great minds who also felt the fascination of this view: Aristotle, Pascal, Descartes, Wittgenstein, and Kierkegaard, to name only a few. We attempt to speak about realities we cannot see nor touch because we perceive in ourselves an opening and a longing for that larger reality which defines our own limitations. Traditional metaphysics, like religious music, or Zen's silence, is more than the result of a syntactical mistake or an impossible dream. We are animals seeking meaning not because we have been duped by grammar, but because humans were born in wonder and they thrive on wonder. I am opposed to the worship of science as the only expression of human knowledge of reality, not because such worship conflicts with the tenets of any religion, but because such a view denies our own humanity and tends to brutalize us more than we already are.

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