

## 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 century<sup>1</sup>. 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 verifiable<sup>2</sup>.

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.