

Concordia Seminary - Saint Louis

## Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary

---

Bachelor of Divinity

Concordia Seminary Scholarship

---

6-1-1959

### The Meaningfulness of Theological Language

Hillman Fischer

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, [ir\\_fischerh@csl.edu](mailto:ir_fischerh@csl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/bdiv>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Fischer, Hillman, "The Meaningfulness of Theological Language" (1959). *Bachelor of Divinity*. 607.  
<https://scholar.csl.edu/bdiv/607>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Concordia Seminary Scholarship at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Divinity by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact [seitzw@csl.edu](mailto:seitzw@csl.edu).

**THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE**

OF THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

---

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Systematic Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Divinity

---

by

Hillman Fischer

June 1959

Approved by:

Henry H. Rupp

Alvin J. Beckwith

THE MEANINGFULNESS  
OF THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

---

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Systematic Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Divinity

---

by

Hillman Fischer

June 1959

Approved by:

Henry W. Reinmann  
Advisor

W. G. Metz  
Reader



CHAPTER I

DEFINITION OF THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

Is theological language meaningful? The meaningfulness of theological language has been discussed a great deal in recent years by the schools of philosophers, namely the

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. CRITICISM OF THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE . . . . .	1
II. AYER'S CRITERION OF MEANING . . . . .	5
III. DIFFICULTIES OF THIS CRITERION OF MEANING . . . . .	16
IV. A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE TERM OBJECTIVE JUSTIFICATION . . . . .	24
V. MISLEADING THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE AND THE THEOLOGIAN'S TASK . . . . .	32
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	35

thought. We shall investigate Ayer's criticism of theological language.

Before investigating the content of Ayer's criticism it is necessary to look at his philosophical presuppositions. It is his view that philosophical propositions and thus philosophical problems are not factual, but linguistic in character. It should be noted that he does not restrict this presupposition to philosophical problems alone, but believes

1. Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1953), p. 32.



## CHAPTER I

### CRITICISM OF THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

Is theological language meaningful? The meaningfulness of theological language has been discussed a great deal in recent years by two schools of philosophers, namely the Logical Positivists and the Linguistic Analysts. The former have maintained that theological language is completely meaningless.

One of the most prominent Logical Positivists is Alfred Jules Ayer. He is avowedly in closest agreement with the Logical Positivists who compose the "Viennese Circle" under the leadership of Moritz Schlick, owing most to Rudolf Carnap.<sup>1</sup> His book, Language, Truth and Logic has attained classic status as a representative of logical positivist thought. We shall investigate Ayer's criticism of theological language.

Before investigating the content of Ayer's criticism it is necessary to look at his philosophical presuppositions. It is his view that philosophical propositions and thus philosophical problems are not factual, but linguistic in character. It should be noted that he does not restrict this presupposition to philosophical problems alone, but believes

---

<sup>1</sup>Alfred Jules Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1946), p. 32.



that the propositions and problems of theology are also linguistic in character.<sup>2</sup> Ayer is furthermore convinced that the task of the philosopher is the provision of "definitions in use." Such definitions are provided by translating sentences in which a particular symbol significantly occurs into sentences which contain neither the definiendum itself nor any of its synonyms.<sup>3</sup> Ayer's view of the task of the philosopher stems from the most important of his presuppositions, namely that only tautologies and verified material object statements are meaningful. It is in connection with the verification of material object statements, that is, statements containing terms which refer to physical objects, that translation becomes necessary; because the verification of such statements, he believes, is their translation into other statements which mention the sense data of the object referred to without mentioning the name of the object itself.

On the basis of his criterion of meaning Ayer concludes that all theological statements are meaningless. He furthermore maintains that theological statements "refer" to non-existent entities produced by the grammatical error of assuming that for every word or phrase which can stand as the grammatical subject of a sentence there must be a "real" or

---

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 60.



"ideal" entity to which it refers.<sup>4</sup>

Ayer's criticism of the meaningfulness of theological language as well as his criterion for the meaningfulness of language in general has been severely criticized by the second school of philosophers mentioned above, namely the Linguistic Analysts. Their difference from the Logical Positivists has been summarized as follows:

Philosophers who adopt this approach (they are sometimes called Linguistic Analysts), differ from the Logical Positivists in this characteristic way: in place of the dogmatic assertion that those statements alone have meaning which are empirically verifiable, they ask the question--of any class of statements--"what is the logic of statements of this kind?" that is to say, "how are they to be verified, or tested or justified? What is their use and function, what jobs do they do?"<sup>5</sup>

Mitchell has given an excellent summary of the approach of Linguistic Analysts to theology. He stated:

How will philosophers of this persuasion tend to approach theology? Three things are, I think, clear.

(1) They will not, as did the Idealists, put forward (at least explicitly) a world-view or philosophy of life, which might conflict with Christianity; because they regard the development of such world-views as no part of a philosopher's business.

(2) They will not (at least they should not) rule out theological statements from the start on the ground that they are meaningless, as the Logical Positivists did.

(3) They will ask the same sort of questions about theological statements as they do about statements of

---

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>5</sup>Basil Mitchell, "Introduction," Faith and Logic, edited by Basil Mitchell (Boston Mass.: The Beacon Press, 1957), p. 5.



other kinds, viz. "How are they verified? What sort of arguments or observations tend to confirm or refute them?" In short, "What is their logic?"

From this it will be apparent why I hesitated to call this phase of the empiricist critique an attack on theology at all. The asking of such questions is, or purports to be, an entirely neutral undertaking; an attempt to understand, not to refute.<sup>6</sup>

In the following pages, we shall present Ayer's criterion for meaningfulness as well as his criticism of theological language. We shall then indicate the refutation of his view by the Linguistic Analysts. Having done this, we shall take up his criticism that theological language involves the production of non-existent entities using the term, "objective justification," as an example. Finally we shall point out the fact that linguistic analysis is a method whereby the misleading use of theological language may be avoided and thus is one of the necessary tasks of the theologian.

---

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 5.



## CHAPTER II

### AYER'S CRITERION OF MEANING

Ayer has formulated a theory of meaning in which he maintains that all literally meaningful propositions are included within the two-fold division of: (1) tautologies or analytic statements; and (2) verified material object statements. He defines an analytic proposition as one whose validity depends solely on the definitions of the symbols it contains and a synthetic proposition as one whose validity is determined by experiential facts.<sup>1</sup>

As far as Ayer is concerned, all tautologies are certain.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these, only the class of empirical propositions known as "basic," "incorrigible," or "ostensive" propositions are certain. "Basic" propositions are those which refer solely to the content of a single experience and are conclusively verified by the occurrence of the experience to which they uniquely refer.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that tautologies include logical and mathematical propositions.<sup>4</sup>

It is the division of propositions of the synthetic or

---

<sup>1</sup>Alfred Jules Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1946), p. 78.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 101f.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 77



material object variety for which Ayer has constructed his criteria of verification. He has expressed his verification principle in the following rough way:

We say that a proposition 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 reject it as being false.<sup>5</sup>

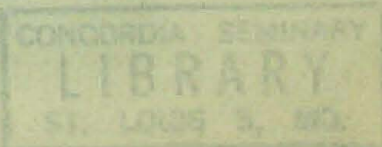
After Ayer had published the above mentioned formulation of his verification principle, a great deal of criticism was brought to bear on it. It was pointed out that his formulation allowed the verification of any sentence. Consequently, in the second edition of his book, Language, Truth and Logic, he revised his verification principle to read as follows:

I propose to say that a statement is directly verifiable if it is either itself an observation-statement, or is such that in conjunction with one or more observation-statements it entails at least one observation-statement which is not deducible from these other premises alone; and I propose to say that a statement is indirectly verifiable if it satisfies the following conditions: first, that in conjunction with certain other premises it entails one or more directly verifiable statements which are not deducible from these other premises alone; and secondly, that these other premises do not include any statement that is not either analytic, or directly verifiable, or capable of being independently established as indirectly verifiable. And I can now reformulate the principle of verification as requiring of a literally meaningful statement, which is not analytic, that it should be either directly or indirectly verifiable, in the foregoing sense.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 11, 35.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 13.





It should be noted that in the second edition of his book, Language, Truth and Logic, he distinguishes between a weak and a strong sense of the term, verifiable. According to this distinction, a proposition is said to be verifiable in the strong sense of the term, if, and only if, its truth could be conclusively established experientially. Furthermore, a proposition is said to be verifiable in the weak sense of the term if it is possible to render it probable.<sup>7</sup> *see page 37.*

This distinction is different from that regarding "weak" and "strong" verifiability which he made in his first edition.<sup>8</sup> There he regarded no propositions to be conclusively verifiable save tautologies.<sup>9</sup> He considered all empirical statements to be hypothetical. In doing so, he rendered his distinction between "weak" and "strong" verifiability meaningless.

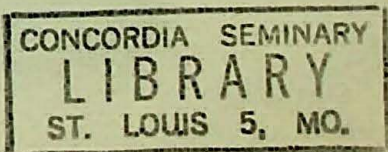
It is Ayer's avowed intention to sever metaphysical propositions from the category of meaningful statements. One apparent way in which to attack a metaphysician's claim to have knowledge of a reality transcending the phenomenal world is to enquire from what premises his propositions were deduced. Ayer asks the question:

Must he [the metaphysician] not begin, as other men do, with the evidence of his senses: And if so, what valid

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 9f.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 93.





process of reasoning can possibly lead him to the conception of a transcendent reality?<sup>10</sup>

Although this is one method of attacking the metaphysician, Ayer does not use it; for one cannot overthrow a system of transcendent metaphysics by merely criticizing the way it came into being.

Ayer rather subjects metaphysical statements to his criterion of literal meaningfulness. Admitting the literal meaningfulness only of tautologies and verified material object propositions, Ayer concludes that all metaphysical statements are meaningless. He thus speaks of metaphysical statements as those which purport to express genuine propositions, but do, in fact, express neither tautologies nor empirical hypotheses. Since meaningful propositions can only be tautologies or verified empirical statements, he feels justified in concluding that all metaphysical assertions are nonsense. In denying the meaningfulness of metaphysical statements, Ayer states:

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 meaningful.<sup>11</sup>

And again:

no statement which refers to 'reality' transcending the limits of all possible sense-experience can possibly have any literal significance; from which it must follow

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 35.



that the labours of those who have striven to describe such reality have all been devoted to the production of nonsense.<sup>12</sup>

Ayer believes that one of the ways in which metaphysicians have been led astray is that of grammatical error. It is his opinion that metaphysicians postulate real non-existent entities because of the conception that for every word or phrase which can stand as the grammatical subject of a sentence there is a real entity which corresponds to it.<sup>13</sup> For example, they believe that there really is the entity, "substance," because they can use it in a sentence in the same way in which they can use the proper name Mary.

Mystic metaphysicians, on the other hand, are misled by attempting to express the inexpressible. Ayer concedes the mystic's claim that synthetic truths can be gotten at intuitively. But he denies the meaningfulness of any synthetic statements which the mystic might make which are not capable of verification.

We do not in any way deny that a synthetic truth may be discovered by purely intuitive methods as well as by the rational method of induction. But we do say that every synthetic proposition, however it may have been arrived at, must be subject to the test of actual experience. We do not deny a priori that the mystic is able to discover truths by his own special methods. We wait to hear what are the propositions which embody his discoveries, in order to see whether they are verified or confuted by our empirical observations. But the mystic, so far from producing propositions which are empirically verified, is unable to produce any intelligible

---

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 42f. <sup>34</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 118. <sup>42</sup>



propositions at all. And therefore we say that his intuition has not revealed to him any facts.<sup>14</sup>

In summary, then, metaphysicians are either mystics, attempting to express the inexpressible, or dupes confused by grammar.

As metaphysical statements are meaningless, so are theological statements nonsense in the opinion of Mr. Ayer. In this he is convinced that the arguments which he has adduced against the meaningfulness of metaphysical statements can be equally brought to bear on theological statements.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the reason for which he denies the meaningfulness of theological statements about transcendent "truths" is this, that the theist, on the basis of Ayer's exhaustive scheme of meaningful propositions, uses sentences to express his "truths" which are not literally significant. In this line he argues that theological statements are not demonstratively certain. They are not certain because they are not tautologies nor incorrigible statements, and only such are demonstratively certain. He says:

If the conclusion that a god exists is to be demonstratively certain, then the premises must be certain; for, as the conclusion of a deductive argument is already contained in the premises, any uncertainty there may be about the truth of the premises is necessarily shared by it. But we know that no empirical proposition can ever be anything more than probable. It is only a priori propositions that are logically certain. But we cannot deduce the existence of a god from an a priori

---

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 114.



proposition. For we know that the reason why a priori propositions are certain is that they are tautologies. And from a set of tautologies nothing but a further tautology can be validly deduced. It follows that there is no possibility of demonstrating the existence of a god.<sup>16</sup>

He furthermore maintains that theological statements are not even possible. If they were, then they would be hypothetical statements answering the demands of his principle of verification. Since they are not such statements, he concludes that they haven't even the possibility of being meaningful.

there can be no way of proving that the existence of a god, such as the God of Christianity, is even probable. . . . For if the existence of such a god were probable, then the proposition that he existed would be an empirical hypothesis. And in that case it would be possible to deduce from it, and other empirical hypotheses, certain experiential propositions which were not deducible from those other hypotheses alone. But in fact this is not possible.<sup>17</sup>

He concludes:

The theist, like the moralist, may believe that his experiences are cognitive experiences, but, unless he can formulate his "knowledge" in propositions that are empirically verifiable, we may be sure that he is deceiving himself.<sup>18</sup>

In denying meaningfulness to theological statements, Ayer claims that he is in harmony with what theologians themselves say about God. Taking the theologians' statement that God is a mystery which transcends human understanding, he

---

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 114f.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 120.



makes the term, "beyond human understanding," synonymous with the term, "unintelligible," pointing out that what is unintelligible cannot be significantly described, and thus incapable of meaningful statement.<sup>19</sup> It might be objected here that Ayer has used the theologians' term, "beyond human understanding," equivocally. A theologian would perhaps admit that God is beyond his understanding, but only in certain specifiable ways, and not completely so. For example, the theologian probably would admit that he doesn't understand how God can be triune, but he certainly would not admit that he doesn't know that God is triune.

Mr. Ayer is of the opinion that the assertion by theologians that the existence of God, as well as other articles of faith, must be taken on the basis of faith means that not only cannot His existence be proved, but that God cannot be defined in terms which are intelligible to the reason. He states in this connection:

Again we are told that God is not an object of reason but an object of faith. This may be nothing more than an admission that the existence of God must be taken on trust, since it cannot be proved. But it may also be an assertion that God is the object of a purely mystical intuition, and cannot therefore be defined in terms which are intelligible to the reason. And I think there are many theists who would assert this. But if one allows that it is impossible to define God in intelligible terms, then one is allowing that it is impossible for a sentence both to be significant and to be about God. If a mystic admits that the object of his vision

---

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 112.



is something which cannot be described, then he must also admit that he is bound to talk nonsense when he describes it.<sup>20</sup>

Concerning religious emotions, Ayer maintains that one can experience such and make intelligible statements about them. However, he cautions that religious emotions do not indicate a transcendent God.<sup>21</sup> He concludes:

We conclude, therefore, that the argument from religious experience is altogether fallacious. The fact that people have religious experiences is interesting from the psychological point of view, but it does not in any way imply that there is such a thing as religious knowledge, any more than our having moral experiences implies that there is such a thing as moral knowledge. The theist, like the moralist, may believe that his experiences are cognitive experiences, but, unless he can formulate his "knowledge" in propositions that are empirically verifiable, we may be sure that he is deceiving himself.<sup>22</sup>

Ayer makes a similar point with regard to arguments from the regularity of nature to the existence of God. Indeed Ayer acknowledges a sort of order in nature, but he would not agree that such is an indication of a transcendent God. He says:

It is sometimes claimed, indeed, that the existence of a certain sort of regularity in nature constitutes sufficient evidence for the existence of a god. But if the sentence "God exists" entails no more than that certain types of phenomena occur in certain sequences, then to assert the existence of a god will be simply equivalent to asserting that there is the requisite regularity in nature; and no religious man would admit that this was all he intended to assert in asserting the existence of a god. He would say that in talking

---

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 119f.



about God, he was talking about a transcendent being who might be known through certain empirical manifestations, but certainly could not be defined in terms of those manifestations. But in that case the term "god" is a metaphysical term. And if "god" is a metaphysical term, then it cannot be even probable that a god exists. For to say that "God exists" is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance.<sup>23</sup>

It should be born in mind that Ayer does not object to all religious statements, but only to those which assert the existence of reality which transcends the real experiential world.<sup>24</sup> Thus, if deities are identified with natural objects, assertions about them are allowed significance. For example, if at a peal of thunder a person says, "Jehovah is angry," his statement can be regarded as significant because all he is actually saying is that it is thundering.<sup>25</sup>

By maintaining that metaphysical and theological statements are not meaningful, Mr. Ayer is not saying that they are false. It is his opinion that though such statements cannot possibly be valid, they cannot be invalid either. He believes that since the metaphysician or theologian says nothing about the world he cannot justly be accused of saying

---

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.



anything either true or false. He simply has mumbled nonsense syllables.<sup>26</sup>

26 Ibid.

Many objections have been raised against Ayer's criteria for the meaningfulness of statements. On the basis of his weak formulation of the principle of verification, it has been pointed out, one can make a complex proposition consisting of a meaningful statement "A" and a literally meaningless sentence "B" which would satisfy his verification principle. That is, from such a complex statement under certain conditions, at least one observation statement could be derived which would not follow from the premises alone. It can be seen that because of this loophole any statement, including those of metaphysics and theology, could be verified. Since it was Ayer's intention to deny meaningfulness to theological and metaphysical statements, he reformulated his principle of verification in the way noted above.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, it could be objected that in rejecting metaphysics and theology, Ayer himself takes the stand of a metaphysician or a theologian. Such a criticist accuses that in rejecting a position one must take an opposite stand. For example, with regard to theology it would accuse that one must take either the position of the atheist or the agnostic in rejecting theism. However, the mere questioning

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 6.



### CHAPTER III

#### DIFFICULTIES OF THIS CRITERION OF MEANING

Many objections have been raised against Ayer's criterion for the meaningfulness of statements. On the basis of his rough formulation of the principle of verification, it has been pointed out, one can make a complex proposition consisting of a meaningful statement "Q" and a literally meaningless sentence "R" which would satisfy his verification principle. That is, from such a complex statement under certain conditions, at least one observation statement could be drawn which would not follow from the premises alone. It can be seen that because of this loophole any statement, including those of metaphysics and theology, could be verified. Since it was Ayer's intention to deny meaningfulness to theological and metaphysical statements, he reformulated his principle of verification in the way noted above.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, it could be objected that in rejecting metaphysics and theology, Ayer himself takes the stand of a metaphysician or a theologian. Such a criticism assumes that in rejecting a position one must take an apposite stand. For example, with regard to theology it would assume that one must take either the position of the atheist or the agnostic in rejecting theism. However, the mere questioning

---

<sup>1</sup>Supra, p. 6.



of the meaningfulness of theological propositions does not commit one to a theological or metaphysical position for one's self. Ayer doesn't disagree with metaphysical or theological protestations. He considers them nonsense. He doesn't refute them; for he doesn't hear them at all. He states in this regard:

It is important not to confuse this view of religious assertions with the view that is adopted by atheists, or agnostics. For it is characteristic of an agnostic to hold that the existence of a god is a possibility in which there is no good reason either to believe or disbelieve; and it is characteristic of an atheist to hold that it is at least probable that no god exists. And our view that all utterances about the nature of God are nonsensical, so far from being identical with, or even lending any support to, either of these familiar contentions, is actually incompatible with them. For if the assertion that there is a god is nonsensical, then the atheist's assertion that there is no god is equally nonsensical, since it is only a significant proposition that can be significantly contradicted. As for the agnostic, although he refrains from saying either that there is or that there is not a god, he does not deny that the question whether a transcendent god exists is a genuine question.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, Ayer has been criticized for taking too narrow a view of meaningfulness in his denial of meaning to anything save tautologies and verified empirical hypotheses. With regard to his treatment of the meaningfulness of empirical hypotheses, Ayer apparently has equated meaning and verification. Waismann has objected to this identification. He points out that while meaning and verification are connected, they are by no means identical. They could only be identical

---

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Jules Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1946), pp. 115f.



if the sense-datum statements when taken together would equal the entire meaning. However, he shows that such an equation is impossible because of the "open texture" of terms. By "open texture" Waismann means the fact that concepts cannot be completely delimited.<sup>3</sup> He says in this regard:

The trouble with the Logical Positivists was that they attached too rigid an import to "meaningfulness" and lost sight of its ambiguity. By virtue of the multiplicity of meaning in this word they lost themselves in a magic cloud out of which they condemned everything that did not conform to their standards. In actual fact they had no machinery, such as they thought they had, by which the senselessness of metaphysics could be proved; though it must be admitted that metaphysicians made the greatest efforts to supply them with plausible arguments for such a view. I am afraid what has been said on this subject was of a profound shallowness.<sup>4</sup>

The criticism that Ayer has taken too narrow a view of the meaningfulness of language throws his verification principle into doubt; for his principle obviously rests upon the conviction that meaning and verification are identical. If Ayer's principle of verification may be doubted, then his criticism that theological and metaphysical language is not even possibly meaningful can be doubted also; for his conclusions about theological and metaphysical language, as we have seen, rest upon his verification principle.

Ayer's verification principle, and thus his view of the

---

<sup>3</sup>Dr. F. Waismann, "Verifiability," Logic and Language (First Series), edited by A. G. N. Flew (Oxford, Eng.: Basil Blackwell, 1952), pp. 117-121.

<sup>4</sup>Dr. F. Waismann, "Language Strata," Logic and Language (Second Series), edited by A. G. N. Flew (Oxford, Eng.: Basil Blackwell, 1953), p. 26.



meaningfulness of theological and metaphysical language, is thrust further into doubt by the criticism that the type of translation or reduction he demands for the verification of empirical hypotheses is impossible. As we have seen Ayer believes that all material object statements must be translated into sense experience statements. Waismann, emphasizing the fact that such is impossible among the same kind of statements, has said:

Phenomenalists have tried to translate what we mean by a material object statement into terms of sense experience. Now such a translation would be possible only if the terms of a material object statement were completely definable. For only then could we describe completely all the possible evidences which would make the statement true or false. As this condition is not fulfilled, the programme of phenomenalism falls flat, and in consequence, the attempts at analysing chairs and tables, into patterns of sense-data . . . are doomed to fail.<sup>5</sup>

And again he has stated:

Phenomenalism, for instance, seems to presuppose that there is one basic language, the sense-datum language, to which any other statement, or at least any material object statement, can be reduced. According to Phenomenalism a material object, say a cat, is a bundle of sense-data tied together and with the edges trimmed off; unless it is a bundle of sensibilia, that is the sort of thing which you would have seen, if you had ever looked, in short, a bundle of highly problematical entities. But no; we have simply to recognize that a statement about a cat is a statement about a cat: and not a truth-function of sense-datum statements, or an infinite class of perspectives, or an infinite group of sensibilia, or heaven knows what. A thing is, so to speak, a hard core that resists at any attempt at breaking it up and reducing it to the level of other data, whatever they may be. All this talk about material objects and

---

<sup>5</sup>Dr. F. Waismann, "Verifiability," Logic and Language (First Series), edited by A. G. N. Flew (Oxford, Eng.: Basil Blackwell, 1952), p. 121.



sense-data is a talk about two language strata, about their relation, about the logic of this relationship. The problem arises along the plane where the two strata make contact, so to speak. The difficulty is to understand in precisely which way a material object statement is related to a sense-datum statement; that is, what sort of relations hold between members of different strata; and that is a problem of logic.<sup>6</sup>

In demanding that theological statements be translated into sense-datum statements in order to be verified, Ayer assumes that it is possible to reduce one type of statement into another. However, as much as it is impossible to translate material object statements into sense-datum statements, so also is it impossible to translate or reduce one kind of statement to another. As Mr. Waismann has pointed out:

a material object statement, or psychological statement has a logic of its own, and for this reason cannot be reduced to the level of other statements.<sup>7</sup>

In making his point, Waismann suggested a many level theory of language in which every different type of statement, for example theological and psychological, has its own sort of logic.<sup>8</sup> I. M. Crombie underlined Waismann's thrust, stating that theological language cannot be reduced to any other sort of expression.

theology is not to be assimilated to anything else;

---

<sup>6</sup>Dr. F. Waismann, "Language Strata," Logic and Language (Second Series), edited by A. G. N. Flew (Oxford, Eng.: Basil Blackwell, 1953), p. 29.

<sup>7</sup>Dr. F. Waismann, "Verifiability," Logic and Language (First Series), edited by A. G. N. Flew (Oxford, Eng.: Basil Blackwell, 1952), p. 121.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 129.



and . . . therefore, if anybody is to understand what religion is about, he must be willing to conceive the possibility of an object which is neither similar to, nor in any normal relation with, any spatio-temporal object.<sup>9</sup>

In an incisive analysis of the narrowness of Ayer's criterion for meaningfulness, R. M. Hare has indicated that Ayer's verification principle is not a criterion for the meaningfulness of language in general but only for that of empirical statements. He stated:

If we confine ourselves to what are ordinarily called statements of empirical fact, the criterion [that is the verification principle of the logical positivist] is enormously useful. Indeed, it might be said that the criterion provides us with a way of ascertaining, not whether what somebody says has meaning of any sort, but at least whether it has empirical meaning. For to call a statement an empirical one is perhaps to include it in the class of those statements of which we can say or show what would have to be the case in our own experience or somebody else's for us to call them true or false. What we have here, then, is not really a criterion of meaningfulness . . . but a criterion of empiricity. . . .<sup>10</sup>

Using much the same line of argument, Basil Mitchell has noted that Ayer, by requiring that all hypothetical statements in all disciplines must be verified on the basis of his verification principle, is actually demanding that all statements, including those of theology, must be justified according to the canons of natural science. To this

---

<sup>9</sup>I. M. Crombie, "The Possibility of Theological Statements," Faith and Logic, edited by Basil Mitchell (Boston, Mass.: The Beacon Press, 1957), p. 50.

<sup>10</sup>R. M. Hare, "Religion and Morals," Faith and Logic, edited by Basil Mitchell (Boston, Mass.: The Beacon Press, 1957), p. 177.



requirement Mitchell has objected that although it is indeed reasonable to require evidence for theological statements, it is not reasonable to require in advance that any evidence supplied must conform to canons based either on the natural sciences in general or on any particular science.<sup>11</sup>

Facing the above objections, Ayer has endeavored to amend his theory in such a way as to meet the criticism leveled at it. Particularly he has endeavored to combat the suggestion that his criterion for meaningfulness is too narrow. In so doing he has emphasized the fact that his principle allows emotive significance to some statements, namely those of ethics, although it doesn't grant them literal meaningfulness.<sup>12</sup> His critics have pointed out that in allowing emotive significance to statements he has actually given meaningfulness to expressions other than analytic and verified material object statements, reserving the special name "literal meaning" to cover two among many different sorts of meaningful language. Ayer seems to acknowledge this criticism by radically limiting his claims in the preface to the second edition of his book, Language, Truth and Logic. There he grants meaningfulness to other than analytic and verified material object statements, claiming only that "literal

---

<sup>11</sup>Basil Mitchell, "The Grace of God," Faith and Logic, edited by Basil Mitchell (Boston, Mass.: The Beacon Press, 1957), p. 164.

<sup>12</sup>Ayer, op. cit., pp. 35, 108.



meaning" was at least one proper use of the word "meaning."

He stated:

In putting forward the principle of verification as a criterion of meaning, I do not overlook the fact that the word "meaning" is commonly used in a variety of senses, and I do not wish to deny that in some of these senses a statement may properly be said to be meaningful even though it is neither analytic nor empirically verifiable. I should, however, claim that there was at least one proper use of the word "meaning" in which it would be incorrect to say that a statement was meaningful unless it satisfied the principle of verification; and I have, perhaps tendentiously, used the expression "literal meaning" to distinguish this use from the other. . . .<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, Ayer is forced into a position in which he must grant at least the possibility of meaningfulness in both theological and metaphysical language.

---

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>14</sup>Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1948), p. 113.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 107.



## CHAPTER IV

### A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE TERM OBJECTIVE JUSTIFICATION

We have seen that Ayer demanded that theological language meet the criterion of his verification principle in order to be meaningful. That is, he required that all theological language be empirically verified. In this connection he maintained that it is impossible to empirically verify either the existence or probable existence of a god: "there is no possibility of demonstrating the existence of a god."<sup>1</sup> He furthermore concluded that all theological language is unverifiable and thus meaningless.<sup>2</sup>

Since the time of Kant, few theologians would claim the ability to demonstrate the existence of God on the basis of empirical evidence. But though theologians commonly admit their inability to empirically "prove" the existence of God or any other theological assertion, this does not mean that they would admit the meaninglessness of their theological language. Nor must they accept Ayer's charge; for as has been shown above, Ayer demands an inappropriate type of

---

<sup>1</sup>Alfred Jules Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1946), p. 115.

<sup>2</sup>Supra, pp. 10ff.



verification for theological language.<sup>3</sup> That is, he mistakenly requires "scientific" verification for language which is not "scientific" in nature. Theological language may be meaningful, then, even though it cannot be empirically verified.

Though Ayer's charge that theological language is meaningless has been met, yet we must deal with his claim that theological language involves grammatical error. He said:

In general, the postulation of real non-existent entities results from the superstition, that, to every word or phrase that can be the grammatical subject of a sentence, there must somewhere be a real entity corresponding. For as there is no place in the empirical world for many of these "entities," a special non-empirical world is invoked to house them.<sup>4</sup>

Ayer's criticism is echoed by Linguistic Analysts. They have pointed up the fact that philosophers and others have tended to multiply entities because of the grammatical error of believing that every word which can stand as the subject of a sentence must have an existing referent. For example, Linguistic Analysts point out that philosophers and others believe that the sentence, "Substance exists," functions in the same way as the sentence, "Cows are brown." On the basis of this grammatical error philosophers insist that since "substance" is not evident in the real physical world, it must "exist" in some "ideal" world. Gilbert Ryle has

---

<sup>3</sup>Supra, pp. 16ff.

<sup>4</sup>Ayer, op. cit., p. 43.



indicated this grammatical error in connection with the use of "the"-phrases.

Philosophers and others who have to abstract and generalize tend to be misled by the verbal similarity of "the"-phrases of the one sort [material object phrases] with "the"-phrases of the other [abstraction phrases] into "coining entities" in order to be able to show to what a given "the"-phrase refers.<sup>5</sup>

The tendency to make this error is traced to Plato who posited his theory of "Forms" to account for the existence of abstractions such as the True, the Beautiful, and the Good.<sup>6</sup>

Though Linguistic Analysts have not used the above mentioned criticism to condemn theological language in general as Ayer has done, yet their criticism lends weight to Ayer's charge. Thus it is important to meet his claim that theological language involves a grammatical error which leads to the postulation of "ideal" entities.

In meeting Ayer's charge we shall discuss one theological term, namely "objective justification," inquiring whether theologians have actually posited an ideal entity in using this term or not. "Objective justification" is a

---

<sup>5</sup>Gilbert Ryle, "Systematically Misleading Expressions," Logic and Language (First Series), edited by A. G. N. Flew (Oxford Eng.: Basil Blackwell, 1952), p. 27. See also Alfred Jules Ayer, "The Thesis of Metaphysics," Philosophy and Analysis, edited by Margaret Macdonald (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), p. 24; J. L. Austin, "Are There a priori Concepts?"  Aristotelian Society, Proceedings, supplementary volume XVIII (n.p., 1939), pp. 83-105.

<sup>6</sup>Francis M. Cornford, Plato and Parmenides (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957), pp. 87ff.



particularly useful term for this inquiry; for at least one recent Lutheran dogmatician in America, Edward W. A. Koehler, has spoken of it as a "bank" or "treasure" thus suggesting a logical similarity between the concept and the names for material objects or entities. The logical similarity in this case would be a similarity in function, namely reference to some "real" or "ideal" object. Koehler stated:

We like to think of objective justification as the bank of God, in which is deposited for all men an inexhaustible treasure of grace and forgiveness. This treasure was prepared and earned by Christ and is sufficient for all the needs of all men. God does not forgive my sins only when I come to this bank, but the treasure is there, it is ready and waiting for me. This bank of God is open at all hours, day and night, and as often as I penitently turn to God in faith to draw on this treasure for my daily needs, He will not refuse me, John 6:37. . . .<sup>7</sup>

For a theologian to use material object terms in a way which would suggest a logical similarity between them and the concept "objective justification" would encourage a philosopher to believe that he is positing an "ideal" entity to which the concept refers.

Does the use of the term, "objective justification," posit an ideal entity? To answer this question we shall consider its use both by Koehler and other theologians.

"Objective justification" is usually used as a higher level concept (abstraction, shorthand term) to refer to a forensic

---

<sup>7</sup>E[dward] W[illiam] A[ugust] Koehler, "Objective Justification," Concordia Theological Monthly, IV (April, 1945), 23f.



act of God, that is, to the fact that at the time Christ died, God justified every individual in the totality of humanity reaching forward and backward from that event in time. "Objective justification" thus summarizes those scriptural passages which speak of all men being forgiven their sins by virtue of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection, especially Romans 4:5; 5:18,19; and 2 Corinthians 5:18-21. It is used in connection with "subjective justification," another higher level concept referring to each of the specific receptions by individuals of the "objective justification" offered to all humanity.

Theologians who have used the term, "objective justification," have used it in close connection with passages declaring God's forgiveness of all men. Most of them have used it in connection with a careful exegesis of these passages. Most important is the fact that they have carefully qualified the term with expressions indicating its reference to an action of God. George Stöckhardt, an older dogmatician of the Missouri Synod, used the term, "objective justification," in his exegesis of Romans 5:18,19. It is significant that in the second sentence of the following quotation he indicates the fact that "objective justification" refers to an act by mentioning "justification" in its cognate verb form, "gerechtfertigt . . . sind." Stöckhardt said:

Die eben behandelte Stelle, V. 18.19, ist der locus classicus für die Lehre von der allgemeinen oder sogenannten objectiven Rechtfertigung. Hier lehrt und bezeugt der Apostel expressis verbis, dass es für alle



Menschen zur Rechtfertigung des Lebens gekommen ist, dass die Vielen, und das sind eben alle Menschen, als Gerechte vor Gott hingestellt sind, wie er schon V. 16 hervorgekehrt hat, dass es von den Fehlritten Vieler her zum δικαιοσύνη, zum Gerechtsein gekommen ist, dass alle Menschen von allen ihren Uebertretungen gerechtfertigt und absolvirt sind.<sup>8</sup>

Pieper, in reference to Romans 4:25, explicitly indicated that the term "objective justification" refers to an act on the part of God. He stated:

Now then, if the Father raised Christ from the dead, He, by this glorious resurrection act, declared that the sins of the whole world are fully expiated, or atoned for, and that all mankind is now regarded as righteous before His divine tribunal. This gracious reconciliation and justification is clearly taught in Rom. 4:25: "Who was delivered for our offenses and was raised again for our justification." The term δικαιοσύνη here means the act of divine justification executed through God's act of raising Christ from the dead, and it is for this reason called the objective justification of all mankind.<sup>9</sup>

Engelder also shows that the term, "objective justification," refers to an action on the part of God. He does so by using the cognate verb form of "justification" and the cognate adverbial form of "objective."

The Missourians admit that they are among those who understand 2 Cor. 5,19 to mean that on Easter morning God justified objectively, the whole world, and that

---

<sup>8</sup>G[eorge] Stöckhardt, Commentar über den Brief Pauli an die Römer (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1907), p. 262. See also G[eorge] St[öckhardt], "Noch ein Wort über die Rechtfertigung," Lehre und Wehre, 35 (Juli und August, 1889), 201-220; G[eorge] St[öckhardt], "Die Allgemeine Rechtfertigung," Lehre und Wehre, 34 (Juni, 1888), 161-166.

<sup>9</sup>Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), II, 321.



means, since the world is made up of individuals, every single individual.<sup>10</sup>

Koehler, whom we mentioned before as having suggested a logical similarity between "objective justification" and the material object terms, "treasure" and "bank," and in so doing suggested that "objective justification" refers to an "ideal" entity in the same way that "bank" or "treasure" refers to a "real" or physical entity, in the same article made it clear that "objective justification" refers to an act of God. In speaking about "objective justification" he stated:

The all-embracing justifying act of God, by which He forgave all sins to all men, accounted them righteous, and justified them intuitu Christi, took place, humanly speaking, the moment He accepted the redemptive work of His Son for the reconciliation of the world, 2 Cor. 5:19; Rom. 3:24; 4:25; 5:10,18. It was then that in the court of heaven He freely by grace for Christ's sake absolved all sinners and declared them just. And this act of God need not be repeated and is not repeated, even as the redemption by Christ, on which it is based.<sup>11</sup>

Our investigation of the theologians' use of the higher level concept, "objective justification," has shown that they use the term as a shorthand notation for a forensic justifying act on the part of God. The term is not used to refer to an "ideally" existing thing. Although this information does not justify all theological language, it does counter

---

<sup>10</sup>Th[eodore] Engelder, "Objective Justification," Concordia Theological Monthly, IV (August, 1933), 565.

<sup>11</sup>E[dward] W [illiam] A [ugust] Koehler, "Objective Justification," Concordia Theological Monthly, XVI (April, 1945), 232.



**Ayer's charge that all theological language involves a grammatical error which leads to the positing of "ideal" referents for higher level concepts.**

### THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE AND THE THEOLOGIAN'S TASK

We have seen that Ayer allowed meaningfulness only to tautologies and verified material object statements. On the basis of his criterion for meaning he maintained that all theological language is meaningless. It has been pointed out that his verification principle is much too narrow, actually being a criterion for scientific statements rather than for language in general. We have seen that a many level theory of language which allows meaning to many different sorts of language is much more true to the nature of linguistic conventions. With such a theory of language the meaningfulness of theological language is at least possible. We have also seen Ayer's charge that all theological language involves a grammatical error refuted, indicating the meaningful use of one theological term is not all theological language.

On the basis of the above mentioned investigation, it is clear that although theological language can be meaningful it may be misleading. There is a caution for theologians inherent in Ayer's charge that their language multiplies "ideal" entities. The caution is this that theologians must be careful in using higher level concepts (abstractisms, shorthand terms). When using such terms the theologians must



## CHAPTER V

### MISLEADING THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

#### AND THE THEOLOGIAN'S TASK

We have seen that Ayer allowed meaningfulness only to tautologies and verified material object statements. On the basis of his criterion for meaning he maintained that all theological language is meaningless. It has been pointed out that his verification principle is much too narrow, actually being a criterion for scientific statements rather than for language in general. We have seen that a many level theory of language which allows meaning to many different sorts of language is much more true to the nature of linguistic conventions. With such a theory of language the meaningfulness of theological language is at least possible. We have also seen Ayer's charge that all theological language involves a grammatical error refuted, indicating the meaningful use of one theological term if not all theological language.

On the basis of the above mentioned investigation, it is clear that although theological language can be meaningful it may be misleading. There is a caution for theologians inherent in Ayer's charge that their language multiplies "ideal" entities. The caution is this that theologians must be careful in using higher level concepts (abstractions, shorthand terms). When using such terms the theologian must



precisely indicate that for which the term is to stand. If he does not, it is possible that his statements be misleading. This is the case because higher level concepts have a grammatical appearance similar to that of material object terms, that is, they appear in the subjects and predicates of sentences in a way similar to that of material object statements. Because of this similarity some may be misled into thinking that an abstraction refers to some "ideal" entity in a way similar to the reference of a material object term to a "real" or physical entity. This does not suggest that higher level concepts should not be used at all. It merely cautions that they should be used carefully, that is, in close contact with that for which they stand.

This investigation of Ayer's criticism of theological language has pointed up a principle for those who attempt to justify the use of theological language. Theological language can neither be criticized nor justified "in general." One great error made by Ayer is his reasoning that since some metaphysical language is meaningless then all metaphysical and theological language is meaningless. This is a simple logical error; for "some" never implies "all." The theologian is tempted to make a similar error; for in justifying "some" theological language, he may wish to conclude that "all" of it is thereby demonstrated as meaningful. In justifying or criticizing theological language, then, specific terms, phrases, or statements must be considered and the



conclusions reached must be restricted to the specific term, phrase, or statement investigated.

This investigation has also underlined one of the principle tasks of the theologian. In order to save himself from being misleading in his formulations and in order to meet criticisms directed against his use of language, he must carefully analyze the statements which he makes. In this investigation we have analyzed only one term, "objective justification," from the standpoint of linguistic analysis. Many more statements and terms require the same treatment, for example: "God exists," "God's will." Such analysis is not only a large task, but also an important and fruitful one.

Henry F. Justification in Faith in Modern Theology. Published under the auspices of the School for Advanced Studies, Concordia Seminary. [n.p.], 1957.

Knobler, Edward J. [et al.]. "Objective Justification," Concordia Theological Monthly, XVI (April, 1955), 217-231.

Macdonald, Margaret, editor. Philosophy and Analysis. New York: Philosophical Library, 1954.

Mitchell, Cecil, editor. Faith and Logic. Boston, Mass.: The Beacon Press, 1957.

Pieper, Francis. Synoptische Evangelien. II. St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1917.

-----, Synoptische Evangelien. II. St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1931.

Nyle, Gilbert. The Church of Christ. New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1947.

Stohrer, George. Synoptische Evangelien. II. St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1957.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Austin, J[ohn] L. "Are There a priori Concepts?" Aristotelian Society, Proceedings. Supplementary volume XVIII. [N.p.], 1939. Pp. 83-105.
- Ayer, Alfred Jules. Language, Truth and Logic. New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1946.
- Cornford, Francis Macdonald. Plato and Parmenides. New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957.
- Engelder, Th[eodore]. "Objective Justification," Concordia Theological Monthly, IV (August, 1933), 564-577.
- Flew, Antony, editor. Logic and Language (First Series). Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1952.
- Logic and Language (Second Series). Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1953.
- Hanmann, Henry P. Justification by Faith in Modern Theology. Published under the auspices of the School for Graduate Studies, Concordia Seminary. [N.p.], 1957.
- Koehler, E[dward] W[illiam] A[ugust]. "Objective Justification," Concordia Theological Monthly, XVI (April, 1945), 217-235.
- Macdonald, Margaret, editor. Philosophy and Analysis. New York: Philosophical Library, 1954.
- Mitchell, Basil, editor. Faith and Logic. Boston, Mass.: The Beacon Press, 1957.
- Pieper, Francis. Christliche Dogmatik. II. St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1917.
- Christian Dogmatics. II. St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1951.
- Ryle, Gilbert. The Concept of Mind. New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1949.
- Stöckhardt, G[eorge]. Commentar über den Brief Pauli an die Römer. St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1907.



..... "Die Allgemeine Rechtfertigung," Lehre und Wehre, 34  
(Juni, 1888), 161-166.

..... "Noch ein Wort über die Rechtfertigung," Lehre und  
Wehre, 35 (Juli und August, 1889), 201-220.