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Critique of A. J. Ayer: The Problem of Knowledge

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The present discussion was originally planned to be included as section 1.5 in PN358 *Knowing and the Mystique of Logic and Rules*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, xii + 365 pages, ISBN 0-7923-3680-1, 1995, but was eventually replaced by a 2 page extract on pages 59-61. It is reproduced here to show some of the background of PN387 *Antiphilosophical Dictionary: Thinking - Speech - Science/Scholarship*, 102 s., naur. com publishing 2001, ISBN 87-987221-1-5. For simplicity the original section numbering, including references to other sections of the book, have been left unchanged.

1. THE PSYCHOLOGY OF KNOWING

1.5. ALFRED AYER ON KNOWING

As an example of a more recent discussion, A. J. Ayer's book *The Problem of Knowledge* [1956] shall here be examined from the present point of view. As will be elaborated below, Ayer's book is found to contribute nothing positive to the insight already gained from William James's work.

1.5.1. AYER'S PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

For an overall perspective on Ayer's approach, the first page of his book is a useful guide. It reads as follows:

Chapter 1. PHILOSOPHY AND KNOWLEDGE

(i) The method of philosophy

It is by its methods rather than its subject-matter that philosophy is to be distinguished from other arts and sciences. Philosophers make statements which are intended to be true, and they commonly rely on argument both to support their own theories and to refute the theories of others; but the arguments which they use are of a peculiar character. The proof of a philosophical statement is not, or only very seldom, like the proof of a mathematical statement; it does not normally consist in formal demonstration. Neither is it like the proof of a statement in any of the descriptive sciences. Philosophical theories are not tested by observation. They are neutral with respect to particular matters of fact.

This is not to say that philosophers are not concerned with facts, but they are in the strange position that all the evidence which bears upon their problems is already available to them. It is not further scientific information that is needed to decide such philosophical questions as whether the material world is real, whether objects continue to exist at times when they are not perceived, whether other human beings are conscious in the same sense as one is oneself. These are not questions that can be settled by experiment, since the way in which they are answered itself determines how the result of any experiment is to be interpreted. What is in dispute in such cases is not whether, in a given set of circumstances, this or that event will happen, but rather how anything at all that happens is to be described.

This introductory declaration is, from the present point of view, problematic in a number of different ways. First, it gives the impression that philosophy, or what philosophers are concerned with, such as 'philosophical statements' that are 'proved' to be 'true', is something about which there is common agreement, at least among philosophical writers. This is highly doubtful. Ayer's way of talking about truth will be further considered in section 1.5.8 below.

Second, directly related to this notion, Ayer claims that 'the descriptive sciences' (a doubtful designation) are concerned with proofs of statements, a claim that does not stand up to any insight into what scientists are concerned with. Ayer's references to science are discussed in section 1.5.3 below.

Third, Ayer says that

philosophical theories are ... neutral with respect to particular matters of fact. This is not to say that philosophers are not concerned with facts, but they are in the strange position that all the evidence which bears upon their problems is already available to them.

This raises the question, what are the facts that Ayer considers to be available to philosophers? This is not answered directly in the book, which has no section devoted to this issue. However, in several places Ayer refers to facts or what is common sense or commonly taken for granted. Some of these cases are discussed in section 1.5.4 below.

Ayer in his introduction continues to talk about

such philosophical questions as whether the material world is real, whether objects continue to exist at times when they are not perceived, whether other human beings are conscious in the same sense as one is oneself.

Related to this, as the fourth problematic issue, Ayer says that

These are not questions that can be settled by experiment, since the way in which they are answered itself determines how the result of any experiment is to be interpreted.

The problem here is to make any sense out of the formulation.

Fifth, we are told that

What is in dispute in such cases is ... how anything at all that happens is to be described.

This formulation, by talking about 'anything at all that happens', poses a problem, rather than clarifying one. The formulation 'is to be described' raises the question, by what kind of compulsion?

1.5.2. AYER'S SOURCES

Ayer presents his book as 'an example of a philosophical enquiry'. In his introduction he presents a number of specific questions and manners of speaking as characteristic of what philosophers are concerned with, without making it clear whether his attitudes in these matters are shared by anyone else.

In Ayer's discussion the views of other authors are given mostly in terms of paraphrases, not in direct quotation. Many such views are given without explicit source, but as the view of 'philosophers', 'other philosophers', 'some philosophers', or 'some contemporary philosophers', thus on pages 23, 59, 63, 68, 73, 77, 83, 134, 136, 154, 164, 202, 206, 209, and 214. In other important cases the views discussed are assigned to such authors as 'the philosophical sceptic', or are identified by such names as 'Naïve Realism', 'Reductionism', 'the Scientific Approach', or 'the method of Descriptive Analysis'. By this style of presentation Ayer puts a veil of uncertainty over it; the reader may be led to wondering whether the views presented for discussion and criticism are held by anyone.

Among the named sources the English classic empiricists Locke, Hume, and Berkeley, are prominent. The dominating recent sources are Russell, Carnap, and Ryle. William James is nowhere referred to.

When referring to the views of a named author Ayer fails to reproduce the original accurately. Typically he will be a victim of his logician's prejudice and impose his own view of knowing as being a matter of truth. For example, Ayer writes (p. 17):

The fact is, as Professor Austin has pointed out, that the expression 'I know' commonly has what he calls a 'performative' rather than a descriptive use. To say that I know that something is the case, though it does imply that I am sure of it, is not so much to report my state of mind as to vouch for the truth of whatever it may be. In saying that I know it I engage myself to answer for its truth.

However, if we go back to Austin's original presentation to which Ayer refers (Austin [1946], discussed in section 1.3) we will find that the phrases 'vouch for the truth' and 'answer for its truth' are part of a distortion introduced by Ayer's paraphrasing. Austin writes (p. 144):

When I have said only that I am sure, and prove to have been mistaken, I am not likely to be rounded on by others in the same way as when I have said 'I know'. I am sure for my part, you can take it or leave it: accept it if you think I'm an acute and careful person, that's your responsibility. But I don't know 'for my part', and when I say 'I know' I don't

mean you can take it or leave it (though of course you can take it or leave it). ... If I have said I know or I promise, you insult me in a special way by refusing to accept it.

This passage is a part of Austin's 36 page discussion of the sort of reply a person may reasonably give to questions such as 'How do you know?' and 'Why do you believe?', asked as a challenge to the person's assertions, such as 'There is a goldfinch in the garden'. In the whole of Austin's highly perceptive discussion there is hardly any talk of truth. The only passage of Austin that touches on truth seems to be this one (p. 142):

It is as if *sensa* were literally to 'announce themselves' or to 'identify themselves', in the way we indicate when we say 'It presented itself as a particularly fine white rhinoceros'. ... If we choose to say that they 'identify themselves' ..., then it must be admitted that they share the birthright of all speakers, that of speaking unclearly and untruly.

1.5.3. AYER'S APPEALS TO SCIENCE AND CAUSALITY

As another sort of source, Ayer occasionally refers to science or what he calls scientific proof, thus on page 7:

The proof of a philosophical statement is not ... like the proof of a statement in any of the descriptive sciences. Philosophical theories are not tested by observation. They are neutral with respect to particular matters of fact.

On page 76:

What is respectively put in question is our right to make the transition from sense-experiences to physical objects, from the world of common sense to the entities of science; and again on pages 113, 114, 117, and 222.

These appeals to science and its paraphernalia as a given, solid ground of insight are bogus, however. The items referred to by Ayer as 'the proof of a statement in any of the descriptive sciences' (p. 7), 'the entities of science' (p. 76), 'science proves ...' (p. 113), 'those properties with which science credits it' (p. 114), 'the world of scientific objects with its appropriate space' (p. 117), and 'the standards of scientific proof' (p. 222), all belong to the models constructed by scientists as a means of describing certain aspects of the world, as further discussed in section 4.4. Whatever certainty is associated with them is no more certain than the ordinary, common-sense insight into these aspects. Ayer's manner of referring to them is evidence of a misunderstanding of the actual scientific activity.

Similarly holds for his reference to so-called scientific explanations. On page 163-64 we find:

For instance, the statement that the earth is millions of years old is supported by a wealth of geological evidence; it would not be incorrect to say that we know it to be true. ... Even the view that the earth and all its inhabitants had come into existence just at this moment would not be formally inconsistent with anything that one could observe now. What it would contradict would be the accepted interpretations and explanations of the phenomena; ... The case for the scientifically orthodox explanations is that they do explain.

This passage in several ways is revealing of Ayer's misunderstanding of the scientific activity. It misleadingly suggests that science is concerned primarily with the truth of statements, such as 'the earth is millions of years old', and that science provides accepted explanations of the phenomena which explain, whatever that is taken to mean. It entirely misconstrues the primary scientific activity, which consists in developing descriptions of certain aspects of the world, the important issue being to achieve descriptions that are both detailed and coherent over a wide variety of fields of study. The statement that the earth is millions of years old is merely an incidental item in the scientific description of the development of the Earth, of the geological formations found on the earth, of the biological species, and of the universe, with the Sun, the Moon, the planets, and the stars. These descriptions are never complete, they are in incessant modification, expansion, and revision, and any talk of 'the accepted interpretations and explanations' is misleading. Ayer's mention of the earth and all its inhabitants coming into existence just at this moment shows how the formal talk of existence is merely silly.

Ayer's taking support from science is similar to his appeal to causality. Causality is taken up on page 170, supposedly as a way of clarifying the distinction between past and future, the starting point being

the principle that cause cannot succeed effect. And I do not think that we can deny that this principle is true. It is, indeed, necessarily true.

From the present point of view Ayer's entire discussion is fallacious. The moot point is the talk of events and their logical relations and the assumption that what is observed to happen in the world can be described in terms of events in a unique way. The impossibility of this manner of viewing the world will be seen if the examples given by Ayer on page 172 for illustration are considered more closely. Ayer's first example is:

If, for example, it is a necessary condition of my suffering from malaria that I should have been bitten by the anopheles mosquito, then my suffering from malaria is a sufficient condition of my having previously been bitten.

The logical necessity claimed for in this example is not there, first because 'suffering from malaria' cannot be construed to be an event, second because the plasmodia parasite which causes malaria may enter a human organism by other ways than a mosquito bite. Ayer's second example:

if my taking arsenic in the appropriate quantities is a sufficient condition of my subsequent dying in a certain way, then my dying in that way is a necessary condition of my previously taking the arsenic.

In this case the logical sufficiency is not there since I may shoot myself dead after taking the arsenic, but before it has had the time to take effect. Ayer's third example:

And if, let us say, it is in certain circumstances both a necessary and sufficient condition for a projectile to rebound at a given angle and with a given velocity from a wall, that it should have struck the wall from such and such an angle and with such and such a velocity, then its rebounding in that way from the wall is also a necessary and sufficient condition of its striking it.

In this case, what are the events that supposedly will enter into the logical necessity and sufficiency? At any rate, the logical relations fails to hold since at the moment the projectile strikes the wall it may be hit by another projectile, deflecting it from rebounding at the angle and velocity prescribed in any definition of the event.

The elaborate artificiality of Ayer's third example may conceal what it is an attempt to do. As a matter of fact, the story of the projectile may be replaced by any story of two situations of a brief phase in the career of any permanent thing. For example, as event A, a copy of Ayer's book is lying on my table at this moment. Event B: two seconds hence it is still lying there. With Ayer's manner of speaking these two events, A and B, are causally related, B being caused by A, that is, in Ayer's logical terms, A is logically necessary and sufficient for B. The falsity of this logical relation is obvious, since I may push the book with my finger after A holds, so B will not happen. As may be seen from these examples, Ayer's talk of causal logical relations between events is an attempt to build a model of the happenings of things in terms of logical elements. The poor performance models of this kind, their failure to account for the actual happenings, should not be a surprise. In fact, for successful modelling of the happenings in question one needs something like Newtonian mechanics, in which the basic model construction elements are the subtle continuous functions of mathematical analysis, not just the coarse true/false variables of logic.

1.5.4. AYER'S FACTS AND COMMON SENSE

So-called facts and common sense have a curious position in Ayer's discussion. In the Introduction, on page 7, Ayer says that:

Philosophical theories are not tested by observation. They are neutral with respect to particular matters of fact. This is not to say that philosophers are not concerned with facts ...

The reader may want to look for further clues to Ayer's notion of facts and common sense in order to make sense of this paradox.

On closer examination one will find that Ayer talks of three rather different kinds of fact, the one being the set of circumstances which is relevant in some context of his discussion. On page 91:

This causal argument has been charged with inconsistency on the ground that the physiological facts, which it relies on, are facts about physical objects; and our knowledge of these facts is gained through perception.

On page 140:

Let us, however, look more closely at the facts. It is plausible to make the presence of an image a necessary feature of this type of memory, so long as one considers only visual examples ... But what of the other senses? I remember speaking to a friend this morning on the telephone but I do not have an auditory image either of this voice or of my own. If I have an image at all in such a case, it is likely to be visual; ... the better one's memory functions, the more readily one replies to the question as to what took place, the greater is the likelihood that no images intervene.

It appears that what Ayer calls facts in these contexts are certain views of how human experience is constituted, which he accepts on the basis of direct experience, without raising his usual dust of scepticism and the need for proof. The use of these facts is thus incoherent with Ayer's main manner of discussion.

Rather differently, Ayer sometimes talks of facts as some aspect of the world as it presents itself to an experiencing person. Thus we find on page 20:

There must be some statements of empirical fact which are directly verified. And in what can this verification consist except in our having the appropriate experiences?

On page 63:

If I were to predict that something, not yet presented to me, was going to look crimson, I might very well be making a factual mistake. My use of the word 'crimson' may be quite correct. It properly expresses my expectation: only the expectation is not in fact fulfilled. But in such a case I venture beyond the description of my present experience: I issue a draft upon the facts which they may refuse to honour.

Similar references to facts are found on pages 25, 32, 53, 54, 142, 160, and 202.

According to these quotations, facts, as seen by Ayer, are there solidly, without doubt or error arising, and they can be known by a person, and described or pictured, with a notation which may be more or less close to the facts. However, the notions of description and picturing are nowhere taken up by Ayer, and it is left unclear what relation they might have to issues of logic and truth.

Ayer's appeal to common sense raises similar uncertainty. Thus on page 84 we find:

The problem of perception, as the sceptic poses it, is that of justifying our belief in the existence of the physical objects which it is commonly taken for granted that we perceive.

With this formulation what is claimed to be taken for granted is that we perceive physical objects. What is said to be the problematic issue, however, is 'our belief in the existence of the physical objects'. It is left unclear whether existence is understood to be implied in the 'commonly taken for granted' perception.

Again on page 199:

Whether or not it is possible to conceive of minds existing apart from bodies, it is the view of common sense that they are at least distinguishable. Even if we cannot allow ourselves to speak of minds as substances, we are able to contrast mental with physical objects or events.

This formulation displays that what Ayer considers taken for granted by 'common sense' is merely a philosopher's construction. Far from being 'the view of common sense', the talk of 'minds existing apart from bodies' or 'minds distinguishable from bodies' to common sense is just philosophical balderdash. If Ayer sees fit to make use of such phrases he will have to make clear first what he intends to convey by them. By the continuation:

And one of the characteristics which are ascribed to mental objects or events is that they are in some way private it becomes clear that what is missing in Ayer's presentation, more than anything, is a coherent description of what William James calls the stream of thought.

A third kind of fact is found on page 203:

We are taking it as a necessary fact that one person cannot have the experiences of another. It is not allowed to be even logically possible that I should think my neighbour's thoughts, or dream his dreams, or enjoy his memories, or feel his pains.

This is a remarkable formulation. Surely what is here the issue, our having our own, but nobody else's, thoughts, is correct, valid insight, which is part of everyone's life experience, being confirmed daily throughout life, a basic, empirical issue of psychology. What is puzzling is that Ayer talks of this as a necessary fact, a logical necessity.

1.5.5. AYER'S RELATING TO PSYCHOLOGY, EXPERIENCE, AND FEELINGS

Very occasionally Ayer refers to what he calls issues of psychology, thus on page 8:

It must not be supposed, for instance, that a philosopher who asks 'What is mind?' is looking for the kind of information that a psychologist might give him,

and again on pages 48, 111, 150, and 150.

Side by side with these mainly dismissive references to psychology, Ayer in his book makes numerous remarks that make sense only if taken to refer to psychological insight. This holds for many references to 'experience' or 'my experience', such as on page 20: 'There must be some statements of empirical fact which are directly verified. And in what can this verification consist except in our having the appropriate experiences?', further on pages 21, 32, 147, 148, and 176.

Psychological insight is implicitly referred to where Ayer talks about certain feelings. On page 17:

It is rather a matter of accepting the fact in question and of not being at all disposed to doubt it than of contemplating it with a conscious feeling of conviction. Such feelings of conviction do indeed exist, and similarly on pages 139-140, 141, and 146.

In short summary of these references to psychological issues, Ayer brings them in unsystematically, according them an unclear status in his discussion. Lacking an explicit account of the stream of thought, Ayer's discussion of human experience and knowing becomes incoherent.

1.5.6. AYER'S CONCERN WITH LOGIC AND PROOF

The recurrent themes in Ayer's book are logic, proof, and existence. However, in spite of their prominence, they are nowhere taken up in themselves for clarification. For such a clarification the way they are used in various places of the text have to be gleaned.

Logic and proof are found in many contexts in Ayer's book. In many of these contexts the point is that no positive assurance is yielded by the logical proof, such as on page 57:

... from the fact that I am having just these visual experiences [of clusters of grapes a few feet away], it would seem that nothing logically follows about what I can or cannot touch;

and page 150:

For what conceivable proof could there be that an object which I am now recollecting is 'compresent with me as past' except just that I am now recollecting it?

Other indications of the impotence of logical proof are found on p. 29, 40, 74, 83, 134, 141, 145, 149, 154, and 156.

However, in some places of Ayer's text logical proof is said to be at hand. Let us examine them. On page 29-30:

...what he [Hume] is saying is that when two objects are distinct, they are distinct; and consequently that to assert the existence of either one of them is not necessarily to assert the existence of the other. When they are formulated in this way such statements may seem too trivial to be worth making. But their consequences are important and easily overlooked. The proof of this is that many philosophers have in fact maintained that causality is a logical relation and that there can be infallible acts of knowing.

What is proved here is that 'their consequences are important and easily overlooked', a conclusion which is so unspecific that it seems hardly worthy of a proof.

Another successful proof is given on page 142:

The memory image serves its purpose just in so far as it prompts one to form an accurate belief about one's past experience. But then we can form such beliefs without the assistance of an image. The proof that we can is, as I have argued, that we quite often do.

In this case, in view of the ever recurrent sceptical caution of Ayer's book, one wonders how the premise 'We quite often form an accurate belief about our past experience without the assistance of an image' can be known to be true. What ground could there be other than our personal introspection? If introspection is taken to be veridical in this case, why not in many other cases?

On page 151 we find another successful proof:

Since the event either did or did not occur, the fact that both alternatives may be remembered is also a proof that some memory-experiences are veridical, though it does not enable us to decide which they are.

Here again the introspective circumstance 'that both alternatives may be remembered' is accepted at face value.

Reviewing these several quotations one finds that Ayer's reliance on logic and proof fails to cohere. Predominantly the talk of logic and proof serves to keep a kettle of uncertainty boiling, but then occasionally a proof is accepted, with no clear justification. Throughout the common pattern is that what is called logic and proof helps nothing to achieve insight.

1.5.7. AYER ON WHAT IS SAID TO EXIST

Ayer's discussion displays the common philosophical manner of arguing in terms of words that have clear uses in everyday situations and contexts, but using them outside of any context. As a prominent example, Ayer's talk of existence shall be considered in some detail.

Questions whether certain things exist are found throughout Ayer's book, thus on pages 7 and 24:

such philosophical questions as whether objects continue to exist at times when they are not perceived ...

The most that it could reveal would be that the subjects were having certain experiences ... It would still have to be established by an independent argument that the experiences disclosed the existence of anything beyond themselves,

and again similarly on pages 57, 76, 84, 116, 126, 127, 128, 130, 149, 191, 201, 202, 203, 204, and 213.

As clarification, consider the explanation of the word *exist*, in Webster's Dictionary: 1. to have actual being; be. 2. to have life or animation; live. 3. to continue to be or live: Belief in magic still exists. 4. to have being in a specified place or under certain conditions; be found; occur: War exists in many parts of the world.

Of these four explanations, case 1 corresponds to Ayer's philosophical explanations, while the remaining three make sense outside of a philosophical context. It seems significant (1) that Webster gives no example of case 1, and (2) that in the explanations of cases 2, 3, and 4, the existence is explicitly explained to be a matter of the context of what is being said to exist. Whatever is explained to exist in these senses may cease to exist, or does not exist in other contexts. By way of contrast, Ayer's philosophical query of the existence of physical objects, experiences, and past events, is made without any understanding of a context. This makes it unclear. Indeed, existence unqualified with respect to circumstances is unknown in ordinary, unphilosophical contexts. Thus existence in the philosophical sense is an arbitrary matter, a matter the philosopher can define in any manner he likes, independent of unphilosophical notions. For this reason Ayer is inconsistent, when on page 126 he explains his philosophical notion of existence in terms of a specific situation, saying:

At the present moment there is indeed no doubt, so far as I am concerned, that this table, this piece of paper, this pen, this hand, and many other physical objects exist.

According to Ayer philosophy is concerned with analyzing the meaning of questions such as ‘whether objects continue to exist at times when they are not perceived’ (page 7). However, there is no reason to assume that such questions mean anything outside of a context, and it is unclear what insight into knowing might be achieved by considering them. In ordinary understanding, whether something exists is not a question of a specific issue of knowing, but one of certain circumstances of the object being considered. The question makes sense only in considering certain kinds of objects. For example, it makes good sense to ask whether the original manuscript of Haydn’s symphony no. 92, the Oxford symphony, still exists. But it makes no sense to ask whether the beam of sunshine that I noticed falling through the window on my bookshelf a minute ago still exists. Existence, as ordinarily referred to, pertains to objects having certain kinds of permanence. The prominent examples of such objects are the things of everyday life, such as pieces of furniture, of clothing, tools of cookery, and the like. For these particular kinds of objects we know them in many sorts of ways, we have seen them many times, in many surroundings, we have touched them, have heard the sounds they make when handled, some of them we have had in our mouth. We have plentiful experience of their permanence, since we have continued to feel them in our hand even when we have not looked at them, we have found them again where we have left them some time ago, etc. But we have also experienced their decay or destruction; the well worn shirt is discarded, and then it is no longer there, it exists no longer.

Asking whether the table at which I sit continues to exist at times when it is not perceived is asking an unclear question. I perceive the table in several ways, I see the top of it, I feel it with my arm resting on it and my knee leaning against it, and I hear the sound it makes when I put my pencil on it.

And with many objects of our experience, the question of existence does not arise, it would make no sense. A cool breeze of air comes through the open window, a white cloud floats over the blue sky, a sweet flowery scent makes itself felt, a splash of water rises from the waves of the sea, what sense would it make to ask whether any of these objects exists?

But according to Ayer, what philosophers ask is how we can know that these things really exist. The main reason why he asks this way seems to be his constant urge to reduce matters to issues of yes or no, in this case existence or non-existence, so as to open the way for logic and proof. Thus Ayer’s discussion of existence out of any context becomes a game of formal moves, as little contributing to insight into human knowing as a game of chess.

1.5.8. AYER ON KNOWLEDGE AS TRUE STATEMENTS

In reviewing what Ayer says about knowledge in his book, a main difficulty is to disentangle matters of insight from matters of the words used. One way of stating his case is to say that he insists that knowledge is a matter true statements, while much of what other people would call knowledge he calls memory.

In Ayer’s book the notion that knowing is a matter of the truth of statements is introduced obliquely. His opening includes the statement: ‘Philosophers make statements which are intended to be true ...’. On pages 9 and 14 we find:

It may be possible to show that what appears to be an instance of knowing some object always comes down to knowing that something is the case. What is known, in this sense, must be true ...

Suppose that we confine our attention to the cases in which knowing something is straightforwardly a matter of knowing something to be true, the cases where it is natural in English to use the expression ‘knowing that’ ...

The notion put forward by Ayer in these passages, that knowledge is a matter of true statements, is not maintained without some attention to other kinds of knowing, however. On page 12 Ayer says that

A dog knows its master, a baby knows its mother, but they do not know any statements to be true. ... we must allow that what we call knowing facts may sometimes just be a matter of being disposed to behave in certain appropriate ways; it need not involve any conscious process of judging, or stating, that such and such is so.

Again, on page 13 Ayer talks of people knowing how to do things without being 'consciously aware of the procedures they follow.' But the conclusion of his discussion reads:

But once again, if we are prepared to say that knowing facts need not consist in anything more than a disposition to behave in certain ways, we can construe knowing how to do things as being, in its fashion, a matter of knowing facts.

And after this nothing more about knowing how to do things comes into Ayer's discussion.

Ayer fails to notice that 'knowing a fact', or 'knowing a statement to be true', depends on knowing the words in which the fact or the statement is expressed. If the knowledge of a word is construed again as a matter of the truth of a statement, knowledge would depend on an infinite regress of statements, which is absurd. This infinite regress can only be avoided if we acknowledge knowing by acquaintance to be a basic function of the mind.

Ayer in his first chapter effectively evades any discussion of knowing by acquaintance, concluding the chapter on page 35:

I conclude then that the necessary and sufficient condition for knowing that something is the case are first that what one is said to know be true, secondly that one be sure of it, and thirdly that one should have the right to be sure. This right may be earned in various ways; but even if one could give a complete description of them it would be a mistake to try to build them into the definition of knowledge.

The subtle ambiguity which has been built into this passage should be noted. In its first phrase it talk about 'knowing that something is the case', while it concludes by talking about 'the definition of knowledge'. It does not say explicitly that they are the same, but in all his further discussion Ayer takes this for granted. By this doctrine Ayer effectively bars himself from getting to grips with the most important issues of human knowing.

For the other major issue of Ayer's discussion of knowledge we have to turn to his chapter on memory. Here he starts by introducing a distinction between what he calls habit-memory and memory of events. Habit-memory is introduced on page 135:

In a great many cases where one is said to remember something there is no question of one's even seeming to recall any past occurrences. The remembering consists simply in one's having the power to reproduce a certain performance. Thus, remembering how to swim, or how to write, remembering how to set a compass, or add up a column of figures is in every case a matter of being able to do these things, more or less efficiently, when the need arises.

On pages 136 and 137 further examples are given.

What may be noted is that in every one of these cases it would be perfectly idiomatic, in fact more natural, to talk of knowing rather than of remembering, for example to say 'he knows how to swim' rather than 'he remembers how to swim'. Ayer insists on talking about remembering, clearly because he wishes to reserve the word 'knowing' for his special context of true statements. In Ayer's discussion the subtlety of human knowing is lost from sight. This subtlety is an obvious fact of experience, which may be demonstrated merely by considering the differences of attitude which will be provoked by such questions as 'Do you remember Mr. X?', 'Do you know Mr. X?', and 'What do you know about Mr. X?'.

What is also lost from sight in Ayer's manner of talking is that the mental functions under review are the basic psychological ones more commonly known as knowledge by acquaintance and association. In every case, whether when talking about a person who remembers or knows how to swim, or write, or set a compass, or how a poem continues, etc., the person in question must, first, have a knowledge by acquaintance of the activity or item being mentioned. This is not primarily a question of words, even a person entirely unfamiliar with the English word 'swim' may know how to swim. What matters is that the person recognizes the meaning of swimming, as an object of thought, known by the person to be the same object as has been thought of before. Knowing by

acquaintance is a matter of the object being thought of by the person, of its presence as something known in the person's stream of thought, under certain circumstances.

Second, the person who is said to remember or know the things under review must be so constituted as to associate certain actions with the object known by acquaintance. Thus the person who is said to know how to swim must associate the doing of certain strokes with swimming.

The psychological functions described here, knowing by acquaintance and association, undoubtedly account for a large, perhaps the major, part of how the knowing capability of individual persons is constituted. By this description a large part of what it is for a person to have much knowledge consists in the person commanding a rich repertoire of knowledge by acquaintance and of associations. In this, issues of truth have only a small place.

In Ayer's presentation these basic issues of human knowing capability are made unclear by his ignoring the stream of thought with its objects of thought and their fringes of feelings. Instead one finds a half-hearted behaviourism, thus on page 142:

What is decisive in both cases [to habit-memory and memory of events] is one's ability to give the appropriate performance, whether it be a matter of displaying some skill, stating a fact which may or may not have reference to the past, or describing, or, as it were, reliving a past experience.

In spite of Ayer's adoption of the axiom of knowing being a matter of true statements, throughout his book one finds talk of knowing in a way which makes no sense in such terms, for example on page 8:

The answer to this ... is that, already knowing the use of certain expressions, they [the philosophers] are seeking to give an analysis of their meaning.

Other talk of knowing which makes no sense in terms of true statements is found on p. 38, 62, 64, 67, 217, 218, 219, 221, and 222.

In other places of the book Ayer is led to acknowledge knowledge by acquaintance, but presents it in such words as to conceal this inconsistency with his main thesis. Thus on page 61 we find:

But if one can recognize a word on a page, a sign made by some other person, the person himself and countless other objects, all without further ado, why should one not as immediately recognize one's own feelings and sensations?

By this innocuous admission the whole claim that knowing, or recognition, must be a matter of true statements falls flat to the ground.

Furthermore, a person's understanding of any question depends on recognition of certain words and what they stand for. When raising the issue on page 76, of 'the validity of our belief in the existence of physical objects' it must be assumed, as the absolute minimum, that the person recognizes each of the words of the phrase and knows at least one physical object. To make sense of the understanding of any such question, and of any person's managing to talk about ordinary everyday matters, we have to accept what William James entitles the principle of constancy in the mind's meanings which may be expressed by saying that the mind can always intend, and know when it intends, to think of the Same (James [1890], I p. 459). Whether this is thought to be a matter of psychology or philosophy or whatever is irrelevant, but any description of human knowing which fails to recognize and accept a principle of this kind is basically flawed.

1.5.9. CONCLUSION

From the present point of view, what Ayer's discussion provides is a demonstration of the impotence of imposing the notions of logic on the description of human knowing. Everywhere this approach leads to spurious issues, such as typically a concern about the statement 'I know that I feel pain'.

Ayer's discussion is basically flawed in that it fails to recognize knowing by acquaintance and recognition of sameness in the mind's meanings.

Ayer's discussion is incoherent, in insisting on true statements as being the only proper basis of knowledge on the one hand, and in nevertheless accepting facts of experience as the basis of arguments, on the other.

The dominating concern of the discussion are questions about existence outside of any context, and proof, typically showing that it is impossible to prove that the past really exists. Absorbed by the formal game of such proofs, Ayer does not even make a start on describing the various levels and refinements of human knowing. Rather than contributing to insight into the scientific activity, Ayer finds support for his discussion in mistaken views about science.

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