
Introduction

In the present chapter we will study the theory of perception as espoused by A.J. Ayer (1910-1989) as a part of his epistemological position. Before going into the details of our objectives here, we would give a brief account of Ayer’s place in the history of philosophy.

Ayer belongs to the British empiricist tradition of Locke, Berkeley and Hume and the early part of his works, especially his first work *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) marks his close association with the Vienna Circle and its philosophy of Logical Positivism. The Vienna Circle is the name given to a group of philosophers, mainly physicists and mathematicians, who attempted “to add the technical equipment and logical rigour of modern mathematical logic to the empirical tradition of Hume, Comte, and Mach, with its characteristic respect for empirical science and its hostility to metaphysics and theology.”¹ Among the prominent members of the circle are Moritz Schlik, Rudolf Carnap, Hans Reichenbach, Otto Neurath and Hans Hahn. The Logical Positivists claimed to have two main


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objectives, which are in the words of Ayer: “the subordination of philosophy to science...all it (philosophy) could do was analyse the information which the science provided”\(^2\) and “the exclusion of metaphysics”\(^3\) that attempted to go beyond the realm of Humean “matters of fact”. Despite such claim, the logical positivists too took a metaphysical stand and the basic differences among them related to the issues: (1) what is the nature of the object of perception, i.e. whether it is sense-data or material object and (2) what is the criterion of truth, correspondence or coherence. Logical positivists were mainly influenced by the British empiricist philosophers, Locke, Berkeley and Hume, and in the words of Ayer, in Hume’s writings “almost the whole of Viennese positivism was foreshadowed.”\(^4\) The main plank of the logical positivism—the verification principle of meaning—used by them to prove the meaninglessness of metaphysical assertions, draws from the Humean distinction of all objects of enquiry into ‘relations of ideas’ and ‘matters of fact’.

In our study, therefore, first, we will attempt to trace the views of A.J. Ayer from the philosophies of the British empiricists, especially from Berkeley and Hume. We will try to show that despite his claim to the contrary his views point to a definite metaphysical stand. Berkeley, as we

\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) Ibid., p.172.
have already stated (chapter II), by bringing in God for explaining the continued existence of things and their possible perception when there is no perceiver, foreshadowed the basic idea behind phenomenalism. It was Berkeley’s arguments against Locke’s idea of material substance, that was developed later by Hume for denying both mental and material substances. We will try to show that Ayer gives a linguistic interpretation to the arguments developed by Berkeley and Hume. And that his philosophical stand points to a pluralistic and subjective idealist ontology on the lines of these two philosophers.

Among his contemporary thinkers, the one to have the most important influence on Ayer’s view on perception, is Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) whose Our Knowledge of the External World with its phenomenalist stand has a significant role in shaping Ayer’s ideas. Also, Ayer’s method of analysis has significant overtones of Russell’s theory of description at least in its earlier phase of Language, Truth and Logic. Ayer himself accepts that his philosophy has been influenced by these empiricist philosophers, as he says: “The views which are put forward in this treatise derive from the doctrines of Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein, which are themselves the logical outcome of the empiricism of Berkeley and David Hume.”5 In this background we will attempt to examine Ayer’s claim that

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the movement of his thoughts over the years "...has been from the phenomenalism of *Language, Truth and Logic* to what I describe in *The Central Question of Philosophy* as a sophisticated form of realism".  

Thus we will analyse Ayer's views in the light of our distinction between what a philosopher claims to be doing and what he is actually doing.

I

Perception and Knowledge

Before dealing with Ayer's position on perception we would like to briefly discuss his epistemological view. Ayer is an empiricist. And if we go by his claim it is a way of avoiding a metaphysical stand. As he asserts: "The view of philosophy which we have adopted may, I think, fairly be described as a form of empiricism. For it is characteristic of an empiricist to eschew metaphysics, on the ground that every factual proposition must refer to sense-experience." 

How far this claim of Ayer is true, we will discuss when we deal with the question of ontology later in this chapter. Here our concern is to clarify what Ayer means by empiricism, and how his view on knowledge is influenced by the British empiricists, especially Berkeley and Hume. For Ayer, all our knowledge about empirical world...
comes from sense-experience. This view of Ayer has a basis in the Humean division of all objects of enquiry into 'relations of ideas' and 'matters of fact'. Talking in terms of the meaningfulness of propositions Ayer says that an empirical proposition is literally meaningful if it is empirically verifiable. As we will see later Ayer prefers to hold a weak sense of verifiability. The synthetic propositions are propositions based on experience or what Hume called 'matters of fact'. Ayer holds that an empirical or synthetic proposition is meaningful only if it is verifiable. The principle of verifiability was used by the logical positivists basically to eliminate metaphysical assertions from meaningful discourse, and this principle as is clear, derives from the Humean distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact. As Ayer states: "Like Hume, I divide all genuine propositions into two classes: those which, in his terminology, concern 'relations of ideas', and those which concern 'matters of fact'").

As we will try to show, in the course of our discussion, Hume's matters of fact are confined to momentary, perishing impressions. And in a similar way Ayer's sense-contents or sense-data are the private experiential units that lie at the basis of verification. It will be relevant here to give a brief account of Ayer's version of verifiability as the criterion of meaningfulness. Ayer asserts that "...a sentence is factually significant to

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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.”

This position of Ayer, as he himself remarks, came in for a number of criticisms from various philosophers that made him dilute his verificationist demand in his later writings. In the second edition of *Language, Truth and Logic* (1946), while making the criterion of verifiability less strict, he formulates the principle thus: “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.”

An important criticism against the verification principle is: what makes it an overriding criterion for deciding meaningfulness of an

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10 Ibid., p.13.
empirical proposition? As Dummett points out: "It remains that, on the one hand, Ayer and his school believed themselves to be in possession of a principle, not arrived at by empirical investigation, by means of which they could demonstrate the senselessness of a great range of propositions which many people took to be true—or, at worst, false; and, on the other, that they had no plausible explanation of how they had achieved this feat."\(^{11}\) The very fact that the principle itself falls neither in the category of analytic nor in the category of synthetic propositions created another problem for its proponents. Ayer, replying to this criticism, said: "The verification principle of meaning encapsulates a general theory of meaning and a general theory of meaning should not be expected to satisfy itself."\(^{12}\) However, Dummett makes an important point here. Remarking that for the proponents of the verification principle, the principle itself fell 'outside the scope of the dichotomy' of synthetic and analytic propositions, he suggests that such an answer by positivists "would have drawn the teeth of the verification principle as a hound with which to hunt down metaphysical statements."\(^{13}\) Ayer, writing in 1946 says that he treats the principle as a

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prescriptive definition. However, replying to his criticism later he observes: 

"But why should the prescription be obeyed?"\textsuperscript{14}

Perception retains "a central place"\textsuperscript{15} in the philosophy of Ayer. And here, as we have already stressed, the question will be centred around the issue of the relation between sense-data and material things. And, as we shall see in the following pages, Ayer himself being an empiricist, the question of the relation between sense-data and material things has deeper roots in the philosophies of his empiricist predecessors. Therefore, we will try to show that Ayer's claim that this problem has only a linguistic import is a vacuous claim. As we have seen, Ayer suggests that when he is considering the question of relation between sense-data and material things, he is not dealing with an empirical question. Before going into the details of this issue, let us see what is phenomenalism and how, if at all, Ayer's linguistic version is different from it. According to the phenomenalist theories "material objects are simply ordered collections or 'families' of sense-data and that the relation of perceiving is a two-term relation between the observer and his sense-data. Material objects, for the phenomenalist, have either no independent existence or are no more than,


in Mill's phrase, 'permanent possibilities of sensation'."\textsuperscript{16} Or as Ayer himself defines, "...it is the theory that physical objects are logical constructions out of sense-data."\textsuperscript{17} Thus, phenomenalism implies, in this sense, a reduction of "all talk of things perceived or perceivable to talk about actual or possible perceptual experience"\textsuperscript{18}. This view has its roots in Berkeley's philosophy.\textsuperscript{19} We will consider this as this chapter progresses.

Before proceeding further we would like to mention briefly what is understood by logical construction. According to \textit{A Dictionary of Philosophy}, logical construction is: "A term used by philosophers, such as Russell and Wisdom, to characterize those things whose status and/or existence we are in doubt about or find problematic. Examples may be: the average family, the English material object....We might find them problematic because (like the average family) they don't exist but we find it useful to talk as if they do...or (like material objects) they may exist, but in any case we cannot ever be directly aware of them (but only experience, for example, sensations or sense-data). For all these entities, there seem to


\textsuperscript{18} \textit{A Dictionary of Philosophy}, ed., Antony Flew, London: Pan Books Ltd., 2\textsuperscript{nd} edn., 1979, s.v. "phenomenalism".

be unproblematic or ultimate entities out of which the problematic kind can
be constructed."²⁰

We propose to begin with how the problem of perception is stated
by Ayer. Though both in *Language, Truth and Logic (LTL)* and *The
Foundations of Empirical Knowledge (FEK)* Ayer claims to take a
phenomenalist position, there is a noticeable difference of emphasis in the
two books. For there is a definite dilution of both his phenomenalist stand
and his verifiability criterion in his later work. For instance, *LTL* has been
written within a strict logical positivist framework. That is, as Dummett
points out, it belongs to the "positivist phase"²¹ of Ayer's writings. Or, in
the words of E.R.Eames, it represents "the high tide of the influence of the
Vienna Circle on his thinking."²² However, in *FEK*, the strict logical
positivist demand of *LTL* gives way to a less ambitious phenomenalist
programme. As Ayer himself asserts that he is in this respect dealing only
with a linguistic question and therefore he states: "The problem of giving
an actual rule for translating sentences about a material thing into sentences
about sense-contents, which may be called the problem of the 'reduction'

²¹ Michael Dummett, "The Metaphysics of Verificationism", *The Philosophy of A.J.
p.157.
of material things to sense-contents is the main philosophical part of the traditional problem of perception". 23

We would like to point out a few things here about the above quotation. First, by 'translation' here, Ayer does not mean ordinary translation of, say, statements of one language into equivalent statements of another language. Here he is using the word 'translation' in a special, technical sense. It is a philosophical translation of material-object statements into sense-data statements without residue. Second, here Ayer is talking in terms of strict translation, that is, in terms of reduction of material-object statements to statements about sense-data. Third, by genuine philosophy here he means only this kind of analysis. As stated by Ayer, the main philosophical part of the problem of perception, in the history of philosophy, has been to give such kind of analysis. And this is Ayer's assumption of the distinction between genuine and non-genuine philosophy that the former is concerned only with the analysis of the problem of such nature by referring to sense-data. And in this sense according to him, philosophers like Locke, Berkeley and Hume, though they thought that they were dealing only with questions of reality and knowledge, were mainly dealing with analysis in the sense that the genuine aspect of their philosophies consisted in the analysis of language. While

the emphasis of this third point remains as it is in FEK; epistemological issues become prominent now with Ayer talking in terms of the sceptic’s challenge. Another point is that the idea of strict translation is given up. Let us dilate on this first. The idea of analysis in terms of sense-data is not given up by Ayer, however the nature of his analysis undergoes a change in FEK and later writings. As we will discuss later, the analysis of LTL is influenced mainly by Russell’s theory of descriptions. And as we will see in the following pages, with the dilution of his verificationist demand Ayer also dilutes his phenomenalism. However, his basic position remains the same, since the slight changes that are noticeable, are due not to any basic change in Ayer’s belief, they are rather due to what Ayer says, some logical considerations, as we will find out later in this chapter. We will try to show that Ayer loosens some of his linguistic strings in his later works because of, as he himself accepts, their sheer implausibility.

Thus the statement of the problem of perception in FEK points to this slight modification of the earlier view. Here Ayer states the problem thus: “For since in philosophizing about perception our main object is to analyse the relationship of our sense-experiences to the propositions we put forward concerning material things, it is useful to have a terminology that enables us to refer to the contents of our experiences independently of the material things that they are taken to present. And this the sense-datum
language provides." As is clear here Ayer is not talking in terms of strict translation or reduction. Though the basic thesis of Ayer remains the same, that is, he still claims that the espousal of this theory does not commit him to any empirical assertion, that it "does not in itself add to our knowledge of empirical facts," yet he dilutes the earlier assumption that the analysis in terms of sense-contents is the solution to this problem, and, retains a milder version of it by accepting that this terminology is one of the possible alternatives. Here Ayer gives the thesis of sense-data as one of the alternative languages, only to ignore it altogether in the later part of his work.

Before going into the details of the theory, we will discuss briefly the status of sense-contents in Ayer's philosophy and the relation of sense-contents with the material objects. In *LTL* Ayer uses the word 'sense-contents', instead of the generally used term 'sense-data'. This is because he claims that they are not the objects of perception, rather they are part of an individual's sense-experience. Here Ayer attempts to reinstate Berkeleyian position on the status of idea, by holding the view that sense-data are not object but part of sense-experience. It will be relevant to see how this point has been dealt by Berkeley.

25 Ibid.
When Hylas says to Philonous: "The sensation I take to be an act of
the mind perceiving; beside which, there is something perceived; and this I
call the object. For example, there is red and yellow on the tulip. But then
the act of perceiving those colours is in me only, and not in the tulip."26 On
this Philonous replies that Hylas' position involves contradiction: "...that
any immediate objects of the senses, that is, any idea, or combination of
ideas, should exist in an unthinking substance, or exterior to all minds, is in
itself an evident contradiction. Nor can I imagine how this follows from
what you said just now, to wit that the red and yellow were on the tulip you
saw, since you do not pretend to see that unthinking substance."27 Ayer's
position is thus based on the similar logic when he denies the distinction
between the sensation and the object of sensation. A similar view is held by
Russell in his later writings wherein he gives up the notion of such
distinction which he earlier held in *The Problem of Philosophy.*

Another thing that we find is that Ayer's sense-contents have two
uses. First, they are part of one's sense-experience and thus a tool for
empirical knowledge. Second, he uses the term sense-contents as linguistic
tools. The empirical usage of 'sense-data' or 'sense-content' derives
inspiration from the Berkeleyian and Humean concepts of 'ideas' and

26 George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, ed., with
introduction by G.J. Warnock, Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1977,
p.177.

27 Ibid., p.178.
'impressions’. For Berkeley, ideas are immediately perceived. As Philonous asserts: “But allowing that distance was truly and immediately perceived by the mind, yet it would not thence follow it existed out of the mind. For whatever is immediately perceived is an idea: and can any idea exist out of the mind.”28 For Hume “...all impressions are internal and perishing existences...”29 On the other hand, the linguistic usage of ‘sense-content’ is an outcome of Ayer’s commitment to logical positivism. Another point that we would like to make is that Ayer’s definition of sense-contents as ‘parts’ rather than ‘objects’ of sense-experience, does not mean a major change in his philosophical position. In fact he has introduced this distinction for he suggests that a definition in terms of act and object leads to ‘metaphysical’ suppositions about the substantial nature of object of perception and the perceiving subject. In other respects however, his sense-contents or sense-data are not different from the ‘idea’ or ‘sense-data’ of Berkeley, Hume and Russell. In fact this emphasis on sense-data as parts of experience is borrowed directly from George Berkeley’s position culminating in Humean elimination of both mental and material substances. Later in this chapter, while analyzing his view on perception we will try to show how such usage


of sense-data in these two senses, i.e., as parts of individual sense-experience and as linguistic tools, leads to inconsistencies in Ayer's views.

In *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, the notion of sense-data as linguistic tools finds no mention; however, Ayer introduces sense-data as technical terms and in the early part of this work, the thesis of sense-data terminology as an alternative language finds support. Here like in *LTL*, they are defined as something that are actually experienced.\(^{30}\)

Since, as we will see, here too Ayer defines both self and material object in terms of sense-data, the position taken in *LTL* and *FEK* is basically the same. The basic thesis of Ayer remains the same as he still claims that talking in terms of sense-data does not commit one to any empirical hypothesis. For example, in both these works, Ayer insists that what he is addressing is a linguistic question and thus holds that the sense-contents are neither mental nor physical. He says: "The answer to the question whether sense-contents are mental or physical is that they are neither; or rather, that the distinction between what is mental or what is physical does not apply to sense-contents. It applies only to objects which are logical constructions out of them".\(^{31}\)


As is clear from the above passage, Ayer takes a neutral monist stand here on the lines of Russell. Neutral monism is the theory that "minds and bodies do not differ in their intrinsic nature; the difference between them lies in the way that a common('neutral') material is arranged. But this common material is not regarded as one entity...but rather as consisting of many entities(for example, experiences) of the same fundamental kind."\(^{32}\) And as Ayer himself defines it: "Its basic tenet is that neither mind nor matter is part of what Russell called the ultimate furniture of the world. Both are constructions out of neutral stuff--the raw material of experience--most often simply called experiences by James, sensations by Mach, and sensibilia by Russell".\(^{33}\) Thus both mind and material things are defined by Ayer as logical construction out of actual and possible sense-data. But what is the nature of these logical constructions? Ayer says: "...what differentiates one such logical construction from another is the fact that it is constituted by different sense-contents or by sense-contents differently related. So that when we distinguish a given mental object from a given physical object, we are in every case distinguishing between different


logical constructions whose elements cannot themselves be said to be either mental or physical.”

In a similar way, Ayer claims in \textit{FEK}: “The question therefore, that we must ask is not how sense-data are to be incorporated in the categories of mind or matter, or whereabouts they are to be located in physical space, but rather how our conceptions of ‘mind’ and ‘material things’ and ‘physical space’ are to be analyzed in terms of them.” The important difference here between the two works is the difference of emphasis. Now Ayer has less qualms in speaking in a material mode. Sense-data are actually sensed; they are not just linguistic tools. Talking in terms of categorical and hypothetical statements, we find, is just a way of marking his linguistic affiliation. He asserts in \textit{FEK}: “I find it advisable to make it a necessary as well as a sufficient condition of the existence of sense-data that they should in fact be sensed. I shall continue to speak of possible sense-data as an alternative way of asserting the relevant hypothetical propositions.” In both \textit{LTL} and \textit{FEK}, and more in the case of the latter work, the stand taken by Ayer makes it very obvious that he always talks in terms of physical reality and actual experience. The very fact that all such

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\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p.71.
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theories must ultimately refer to the objective reality, makes it difficult for Ayer to talk in any other way.

We find, however, that despite all his claims to the contrary, Ayer, like Hume, denies the existence of material substance. Only he does this within a linguistic framework. Thus the actual and possible sense-data, within this linguistic framework, become categorical and hypothetical statements. All said and done, the verification of material things is possible only in terms of sense-contents. Ayer, therefore, says that "it is only by occurrence of certain sense-contents that the existence of any material thing can ever be in the least degree verified". 37

Ayer asserts in *LTL* that he is combining what he calls a "thoroughgoing phenomenalism" 38 with "the admission that all sense-experiences, and the sense-contents which form part of them, are private to a single self..." 39 We must point out here that acceptance of these two premises leads to inconsistency in Ayer's position. The first point is that according to Ayer his phenomenalism has linguistic significance and this is what marks out his version of it from other versions. And if that claim is true, we have only two possibilities: either we have to accept only the

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38 Ibid., p.32.
39 Ibid., p.128.

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linguistic character of Ayer's assertions and in that case he cannot talk of experience in terms of private sense-contents in a meaningful way. Or else, he has to accept the private nature of experience and the subjective-idealistic ontology logically following it. And in that case, he cannot claim that he is concerned only with linguistic analysis with no metaphysical strings attached. But Ayer, it seems, wants to accommodate both; since he aims to confine philosophy to linguistic analysis. However, since our judgments of perception draw necessarily from the empirical world; any attempt to limit them solely to linguistic expressions is bound to fail. We find that though Ayer claims that he takes a phenomenalist stand in order to "avoid metaphysics"\textsuperscript{40}; he, in fact, by virtue of his phenomenalist stand, takes a definite ontological position which is subjective-idealistic and pluralistic on Berkeleyian-Humean lines.

We have already pointed out that the theory of perception is a part of the theory of knowledge. And a particular epistemology always presupposes a particular ontology, and Ayer, we may point out, is not oblivious to this fact as he states while discussing Hume: "What there is depends in part on what our theories allow there to be..."\textsuperscript{41} And Ayer's empiricist position based on private sense-contents spells out an ontology


which is characteristically Berkeleyian and Humean in its particularist, pluralist and subjectivist appeal. His method of analysis, discussed below, only serves to put this ontological position on a firmer footing. Thus Ayer’s view on perception is the logical outcome of his empiricist epistemology supported by his method of analysis in terms of sense-contents.

The starting point in Ayer’s philosophical analysis is what he claims to be the ambiguities found in our everyday language. These ambiguities and vagueness according to Ayer, give rise to unnecessary problems in philosophy. Here we may point out that what Ayer means by ‘ambiguities’ of language is not the ordinary sense of ambiguity. It is again a special technical sense in which he is using the word. For instance, in our ordinary language, we use the word ‘bank’ both as the bank where we deposit money and the bank of a river. Ayer’s ambiguity is not of this order. For him removal of ambiguities amounts to giving an analysis of material-object statements in terms of sense-data.

Ayer claims to hold that the main aim of philosophy is clarification of thought and its subject-matter is analysis. And as an analyst, he says, a philosopher “is not directly concerned with the physical properties of things. He is concerned only with the way in which we speak about them.”42 Ayer says that since philosophy is ‘a department of logic’,43 and since propositions of philosophy are linguistic in nature and not factual;

43 Ibid.
these propositions expressing “definitions or the formal consequences of definitions”\textsuperscript{44}, the task of philosopher is to analyse these propositions and this does not entail any kind of metaphysical standpoint. Hence, Ayer claims that “the possibility of philosophical analysis is independent of any metaphysical assumptions.”\textsuperscript{45} Since the aim of philosophy, according to Ayer, is clarification of thought, he claims that the main task before philosophy is “complete philosophical elucidation”\textsuperscript{46} of a language or revealing the structure of a given language. And this can be done, Ayer claims, only by giving ‘definitions in use’.

With the help of ‘definition in use’, Ayer asserts, we can elucidate the structure of a particular language. The sentences in which a symbol in use “significantly occurs can be translated into equivalent sentences which contain neither the definiendum itself, nor any of its synonyms.”\textsuperscript{47} Ayer claims that a “complete philosophical elucidation of any language would consist, first, in enumerating the types of sentence that were significant in that language, and then in displaying the relations of equivalence that held between sentences of various types.”\textsuperscript{48} Before going into the detail of how Ayer applies this method of analysis to the problem of perception, it will be

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p.62.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, p.60.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 1967, p.62.
relevant here to briefly mention Russell’s theory of description. Russell explains the theory of description thus:

“According to this theory, when a statement containing a phrase of the form ‘the so-and-so’ is rightly analyzed, the phrase ‘the so-and-so’ disappears. For example, take the statement ‘Scott was the author of *Waverley.*’ The theory interprets this statement as saying

“‘One and only one man wrote *Waverley*, and that man was Scott’.

Or, more fully:

“‘There is an entity c such that the statement ‘x wrote *Waverley*’ is true if x is c and false otherwise; moreover c is Scott.’

“The first part of this, before the word ‘moreover’, is defined as meaning: ‘The author of *Waverley* exists(or existed or will exist).’ Thus ‘The golden mountain does not exist’ means:

“‘There is no entity c such that ‘x is golden and mountainous’ is true when x is c, but not otherwise.’

“With this definition the puzzle as to what is meant when we say ‘The golden mountain does not exist’ disappears. ‘Existence’, according to this theory, can only be asserted of descriptions. We can say ‘the author of *Waverley* exists,’ but to say ‘Scott exists’ is a bad grammar, or rather bad
syntax. This clears up two millennia of muddle-headedness about 'existence', beginning with Plato's *Theaetetus*.

Thus Russell's theory of descriptions had the singular appeal for Ayer that with its help all reference to material object could be dispensed with and a material-object statement could be reduced to propositions about sense-data. Hence for Ayer, asking for "a definition of a symbol x in use is to ask how the sentences in which x occurs are to be translated into equivalent sentences which do not contain x or any of its synonyms." And he applies the definition in use while defining material things in terms of sense-contents "because it is only by the occurrence of certain sense-contents that the existence of any material thing can ever be in the least degree verified." Thus his verification principle comes in aid of his method of analysis in consolidating his pluralistic-subjectivist stand. Ayer only gives a linguistic garb to his phenomenalist account by saying: "So when it is said that a material thing is constituted by both actual and possible sense-contents, all that is being asserted is that the sentences referring to sense-contents; which are the translations of the sentences referring to any material thing, are both categorical and hypothetical."

51 Ibid., p.53.
52 Ibid., p.53.
Ayer then goes on to apply his method of analysis to the problem of perception. He gives an analysis of material thing in terms of sense-contents using the logical relations of resemblance and continuity. He says that two sense-contents are directly resemblant when there is no difference or a very insignificant difference of quality between them. Two sense-contents are indirectly resemblant, when they are not directly resemblant but are linked by "a series of direct resemblances". In a similar way, two sense-contents are directly continuous when they belong to the successive members of a series of actual, or possible, sense-fields and there is no or very little difference between them in terms of their position in their sense-fields. They are indirectly continuous when "they are related by an actual or possible, series of such direct continuities." Defined in this way any two of one's visual or tactual sense-contents can be said to be the elements of the same material thing if and only if "they are related to one another by a relation of direct, or indirect, continuity." Now, the question arises, if material things are defined in terms of sense-contents, how is it possible to distinguish one material thing from another, i.e. how the distinctness of a material thing can be secured! Ayer states that "the groups of visual and tactual sense-contents which are constituted by means of these relations

54 Ibid., p.66.
55 Ibid., 1967, p.66.
cannot have any members in common. And this means that no visual, or
tactual, sense-contents can be an element of more than one material
thing."\(^{56}\) As a next step in the analysis of the material things Ayer attempts
to correlate the separate groups of visual and tactual sense-contents. He
adds that "...any two of one’s visual and tactual groups belong to the same
material thing when every element of the visual group which is of minimal
visual depth forms part of the same sense-experience as an element of the
tactual group which is of minimal tactual depth."\(^{57}\) Here it will be pertinent
to remark that in his analysis, which Ayer claims has nothing to do with
metaphysics, he borrows Humean principles for association of ideas. Hume
says that three underlying principles for association of ideas are—
resemblance, contiguity in time or place, and cause and effect. He explains
by giving the example: "A picture naturally leads our thoughts to the
original: the mention of one apartment in a building naturally introduces an
enquiry or discourse concerning the others: and if we think of a wound, we
can scarcely forbear reflecting on the pain which follows it."\(^{58}\) However,
while Hume is talking in a material mode, and Ayer is talking in a formal
mode, the latter uses these Humean categories within a linguistic
framework. Thus, Hume’s notion of resemblance becomes in Ayer the

\(^{57}\) Ibid., p.66.
\(^{58}\) David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*(1777), introduced
with analytical index by LA Selby-Bigge, Revised and notes appended by P.H.

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logical resemblance' between sense-contents. Similarly, Hume's 'contiguity in space' becomes Ayer's direct and indirect continuities between sense-contents. To the question how he defines visual and tactual depths, Ayer remarks that they can be defined only ostensibly.

The next logical step in the analysis of the notion of material things, for Ayer, is to provide a rule for translating sentences which refer to the 'real' qualities of material things. According to Ayer, a quality is the real quality of a material thing when it characterizes those elements of the thing which possess qualities of the kind in question. “Thus when I look at the coin and assert that it is really round in shape, I am not asserting that the shape of the sense-content, which is the element of the coin that I am actually observing, is really round, still less that the shape of all the visual, or tactual, elements of the coin is round; what I am asserting is that roundness of shape characterizes those elements of the coin which are experienced from the point of view from which measurements of shape are most conveniently carried out.... And, finally, we define relations of quality, or position, which obtain between such 'privileged' elements”.59

We find that Ayer is using the word 'real' in a special technical sense. He does not mean by real things some really existing things or properties of things. For him, ‘real’ quality of a material thing refers to those perceived

qualities seen from a particular viewpoint and based on the subject's perception. What Ayer is trying to do here is to define reality in terms of experience. Hence, roundness which is an aspect of material reality is being defined here in terms of the subjective viewpoint. Obviously, such analysis cannot be successful as the primary material for such thinking are obtainable from reality alone. Thus Ayer's attempt to define relations of quality or position obtaining between material things in terms of the "privileged" experience of the perceiving subject will have to refer back to reality only, even if 'ostensibly'.

Ayer's method of analysis has come in for a number of criticisms. For instance, G.J. Warnock says: "To confine oneself to the pursuit of ... analysis is in effect to concentrate upon, at best, only a small part of the use of our words and expressions, but the cause of our troubles may lie in our imperfect grasp of any feature of that use; there is, accordingly, no guarantee whatever that an 'analysis', even if it could be convincingly formulated, would alleviate our philosophical troubles. The most serious objection, then, to the programme of analysis is not that it is doubtful how far such analyses can be produced—though this is, in fact, quite a serious objection, it is rather that, even if they can be produced, they may well be philosophically unprofitable."

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In *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer justifies his stand on the equivalence of 'sense-data statements' and 'material-object statements' by emphasizing that "it is possible for two sentences to be equivalent, by our criterion, without having the same effect on anyone who employs the language."\(^{61}\) Whereas, any two sentences have same meaning only when "the occurrence of one always has the same effect on his thoughts and actions as the occurrence of the other."\(^{62}\) Ayer concludes on the basis of this that "failure of some philosophers to recognize that material things are reducible to sense-contents is very largely due to the fact that no sentence which refers to sense-contents ever has the same psychological effect on them as a sentence which refers to a material thing."\(^{63}\)

Like in *LTL*, in *FEK* also Ayer holds that material things can be described in terms of sense-data. And also that it is only by "the occurrence of some sense-datum that any statement about a material thing is ever in any degree verified."\(^{64}\) However, the strict phenomenalist demand of *LTL* is diluted to a great extent as he asserts here "that the content of statement about a material thing cannot be exhaustively specified by any finite number of references to sense-data."\(^{65}\)

\(^{62}\) Ibid.
\(^{63}\) Ibid.
Thus we find that Ayer’s solution to the problem of perception is an application of his method of philosophical analysis to the problem of perception. For him, therefore, “one answers the question, ‘what is the nature of a material thing?’ by indicating, in general terms, what are the relations that must hold between any two of one’s sense-contents for them to be elements of the same material things.”\(^{66}\) This is a view quite similar to what Russell held. Another important point is that the movement of Ayer’s thought is from language to reality. Dummett points out that this is “the order of priority traditional in analytical philosophy... and no version of analytical philosophy was more committed to that tradition than logical positivism.”\(^{67}\) However, Dummett does not recognize it as something wrong. We, on the other hand, take the view that this prevents him from taking a consistent stand on sense-contents, which at some places he uses as ‘logical tools’ calling them ‘neutral’, and at other places he makes them part of individual sense-experience and thus ‘subjective’. This self-contradiction is inevitable as Dr. Suman Gupta points out: “Since our language is not meant to communicate abstract, subjective experiences, the subjectivists in their effort to communicate their subjectivism through a


language which is committed to objective reality, are bound to involve themselves in self-contradiction". 68

We will now attempt to show how inconsistencies in one aspect of Ayer's philosophy have logically led to inconsistencies in the other aspects of his philosophy. This we propose to do while giving special emphasis on his view on perception. Secondly, we will attempt to show how his treatment of the subject remains basically Berkeleyan-Humean. Thus, we will discuss the status of sense-contents in Ayer's philosophy in the light of his empiricist position.

Ayer claims that his empiricism is meant to avoid metaphysics. On the other hand, he adopts the verifiability criterion of meaning, and claims that his criterion of meaning is aimed at refuting metaphysical assertions in particular and any other empirical assertion in general that goes beyond 'matter of fact'.

First, we will examine the status of sense-contents vis-a-vis his verification principle. The important question here is that if a meaningful synthetic assertion must be empirically verifiable, what does this empirical verification amount to? The answer to it will be clear if we ask first the question: what is the nature of sense-experience according to Ayer? Like

his empiricist predecessors Ayer holds that knowledge by sense-experience is ultimately knowledge by ideas. Thus he holds that sense-experience has sense-contents as its constituents. That is, a sense-content is a part of a sense-field and a sense-field is a part of a sense-experience. About sense-contents he says that he will use the word ‘sense-contents’ to “refer to the immediate data not merely of ‘outer’ but also of ‘introspective’ sensation...” Thus for Ayer sense-contents are the ultimate constituents of individual’s sense-experience, for “a given sense-content is experienced by a particular subject.” Or in other words, sense-contents being the ‘given’ in a sense-experience, they alone can be verified in Ayer’s sense. Ayer defines ‘given’ thus: “(T)o say that an object is immediately ‘given’ is to say merely that it is the content of sense-experience.” Thus we find that what began as an attempt to avoid metaphysics ended up in a totally subjectivist ontology with experience verifying experience. How can one private experience verify another private experience? In Ayer’s professed scientific approach, we find, therefore, there is no scope for objectivity as all verification begins and ends in an individual’s private sense experience.

Secondly, we will attempt to examine Ayer’s assertion that sense-contents are logical tools in the light of his own example given to

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70 Ibid., p.53.
71 Ibid., p.122.
72 Ibid.
substantiate his point. Ayer gives an example of a linguistic proposition like ‘a material thing cannot be at two places at once’. Now why Ayer calls it a linguistic proposition? He replies that it is since this proposition does not say anything about anything existing in this world. “It simply records the fact that, as a result of certain verbal conventions, the proposition that two sense-contents occur in the same visual or tactual sense-field is incompatible with the proposition that they belong to the same material thing.” 73 But now if he is asked to verify the same proposition what will he do? He will obviously verify it in terms of sense-contents. But can he possibly do that if sense-contents are merely linguistic tools! So now he changes the nature of sense-contents according to his convenience making them a part of his sense-field which again is a part of individual sense-experience; and now sense-contents assume a subjective character. It is true that Ayer does not deny that any objects are really “given” 74 in experience. However, by the immediately given object he means only that which is “the content of a sense-experience...” 75 Thus knowledge of reality beyond sense-contents becomes totally impossible in case of A.J. Ayer.

We would like to point out here that Ayer’s definition in use, modelled on Russell’s theory of description, and claiming to translate physical-object

74 Ibid., p.121.
75 Ibid., p.121.
statement into sense-data statements is designed to eliminate not only the assertions about supersensible reality, but also 'the belief in the existence of material substance'.

Though Ayer claims that his empiricism is "a logical doctrine concerning the distinction between analytic propositions, synthetic propositions, and metaphysical verbiage..." and that it is "not logically dependent on an atomistic psychology, such as Hume and Mach adopted", yet he adopts a world view similar to that of Berkeley and Hume. Ayer's ontology is, thus, subjectivist, empiricistic pluralism.

As our analysis above suggests, given Ayer's definition of sense-contents they have to be treated either as 'logical tools' in which case they cannot legitimately apply to matters of fact or factual propositions; or else, as Ayer says in another passage, they should be considered to be a part of an individual's sense-fields, which in turn, are part of an individual's sense-experience; and if such is the case, again, they cannot apply to matters of fact (as Ayer admits, matters of fact concern enduring objects and not fleeting impressions), since all our knowledge is limited to sense-contents alone. Then the first question that arises is, to which category can

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78 Ibid., p. 122.
we assign assertions about sense-contents? Are they a-priori or analytic then? This cannot be the case for in that case they will be tautologous.

Another important question is, from where does the justification for propositions about sense-contents come? The empiricist Ayer says it is 'a-priori'. About such questions as 'whether sense-contents are mental or physical', 'whether they are private to a single self' and 'whether they can exist without being experienced', Ayer says that they are questions which cannot be solved by empirical tests; they can be solved only a-priori. Thus on Ayer's terms, while a sense-content, in its empirical capacity, is known in an individual's sense-experience, its nature according to Ayer, can be known only a-priori.

For Ayer the main advantage of the sense-data terminology is to avoid the problem that arises from the distinction between appearance and reality. The problem of perception, however, is rooted in the distinction between appearance and reality as we pointed out earlier. Though Ayer tries to avoid this problem by claiming that what he is dealing with is only a linguistic question, the problem of perception just cannot be wished away especially by those who start from the Humean premise. The solution given by Ayer is this: Talking in terms of sense-data is simply an alternative way of speaking about the phenomena. And thus, the distinction between

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veridical and delusive perception cannot apply to sense-data. He thus offers
an ingenious way of translating such statements: 'I am perceiving a brown
carpet which looks yellow to me' is translated thus: 'I am sensing a yellow
sense-datum which belongs to a brown carpet'. Here he leaves
unexplained how from the evidence of sense-data one can move to the
reality of material things. Ayer may reply that the question of reality does
not arise here as he is only suggesting a linguistic convention. But if it is
only a linguistic question then why is it bothering him that the 'actual'
colour of the carpet is brown and not yellow; and how he knows what the
'actual' colour is like if sense-data is all that is available to his senses.

Another point is, the problem of the division between appearance
and reality that has been puzzling philosophers for long and which Ayer
wants to escape, remains as it is. For, if we imagine another person
standing next to Ayer who is convinced that the carpet is actually red and
not brown, and also that it looks white to him, the translation becomes
problematic, if not intractable.

In the FEK the strict translation of LTL has given way first to sense-
data terminology as 'alternative language' and then to a factual question
with more liberal references to empirical facts than allowed for in LTL. The
insistence on the strict translatability of sense-datum statement into

Co. Ltd., 1953, pp. 68-69.
material-object statement is simply ignored. On the other hand the use of sense-data as linguistic expedient remains there, and Ayer is thus still under the influence of logical positivism, or in the words of E.R. Eames, *FEK* is “still within the framework of Ayer’s logical positivism.” Also, all disputes relating to questions such as whether sense-data are private or public; whether they really have the properties they do not appear to have; their relation to material things, etc., can be settled by clarifying how this term sense-data is intended to be used.

In *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (1940), Ayer tries to demonstrate why philosophers think that the terminology of sense-data is needed. Or why we may not say that we are directly aware of material things. Here he discusses ‘the argument from illusion.’

The argument from illusion, says Ayer, has been used to prove different points. Ordinarily it refers to such arguments that originate from the fact that material things may appear differently to different observers; and even different to the same observer in a different condition. For instance, a coin looks round from one viewpoint and elliptical from another. A straight stick appears bent in water and similar such instances. Ayer goes on to examine different strains of this argument. First, in the case of straight stick looking bent in water; either of these two visual

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appearances, namely, ‘stick looking straight’ or ‘stick looking crooked’ has to be delusive. In case of delusive perception, Ayer says, we do not see any real quality of material thing, still we do see something. Sense-data is a convenient name for this ‘something’. At this point Austin remarks: “Notice, incidentally that in Ayer’s description of the stick-in-water case, which is supposed to be prior to the drawing of any philosophical conclusions, there has already crept in the unheralded but important expression ‘visual appearances’ –it is, of course, ultimately to be suggested that all we ever get when we see is a visual appearance (whatever that may be).”

Ayer gives another example of this argument. He says, it is argued that if it is not my body behind the mirror, what we are actually perceiving in the mirror is not a material thing but sense-data. Hence, these philosophers argue, says Ayer, that at least in some cases the character of our perception necessitates the conclusion that what we are directly experiencing are sense-data and not material things.

Second, Ayer points to H.H.Price’s argument that there is ‘no intrinsic difference’ between veridical and delusive perceptions. Thus, my experience of seeing with green spectacles the white wall of my room appearing as green is qualitatively the same as my seeing of walls that are

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really green. Price argues that it is on the basis of the intrinsic character of a perception that we should be able to tell whether it was a perception of a sense-data or of a material thing. Ayer points out that the difference in our beliefs regarding our perception is not something grounded in the nature of our perception but is something dependent on our past experience. And we cannot tell whether a perception is veridical or delusive just on the basis of that particular perception without referring to its relation to further sense-experience. Another form of this argument, according to Ayer, runs like this: that veridical and delusive perception may form a continuous series; thus preventing us from having direct awareness of material thing even in case of veridical perception. For instance, if we approach an object from a distance, it will appear bigger as we go nearer. So all the previous smaller appearances that are delusive finally end in an appearance that is veridical. In this continuous series of perceptions the one closest to veridical perception may be delusive but the two have a difference of degree not of kind. Therefore, it is argued, what we directly experience is always a sense-datum and never a material thing. Finally, it is also argued that all our perceptions, veridical as well as delusive, are somehow dependent on external conditions and our own physiological and psychological states. These conditions are not at all causally dependent on our perception. Also, material things and their essential properties are independent of any particular observer. However, this independence does not hold good in the
case of the objects of our immediate experience, hence in no case we are directly aware of material things.

Ayer concludes that mostly philosophers applying this argument have taken it “to prove a matter of fact. They have inferred from it, not merely that it is linguistically inconvenient, but that it is false to say that we are ever directly aware of a material thing.” At this point Austin intervenes and remarks: “He constantly reproves Price and his other predecessors for treating as questions of fact what are really questions of language. However, as we have seen, this relative sophistication does not prevent Ayer from swallowing whole almost all the old myths and mistakes incorporated in the traditional arguments. Also, as we have seen it is not really true that he himself believes the questions raised be questions about language, though this is his official doctrine.” Ayer’s sense-data is also a philosophical theory, not just a linguistic expedient as Pitcher remarks: “any account of perception in terms of sense-data is really a philosophical theory of perception and can only be one among a number of competitors for the job.”

Ayer holds that “in order to account for our perceptual experience, it is not necessary to maintain that any of our perceptions are delusive.”\textsuperscript{88} He maintains that the distinction between veridical and delusive does not apply in the case of sense-data. Referring to Ayer’s view in \textit{FEK} and later works that there is no intrinsic difference in kind between delusive and veridical perception, Austin points out that this argument of Ayer is put forward “as a ground for the conclusion that what we are (directly) aware of in perception is always a sense-datum”.\textsuperscript{89} Austin says “If dreams were not ‘qualitatively’ different from waking experiences, then every waking experience would be like dream...”\textsuperscript{90} The distinction of all perceptions into veridical and delusive is, according to Austin “a quite bogus dichotomy”.\textsuperscript{91} Austin argues that just because sometimes we fail to distinguish between veridical and delusive perception, it does not follow that they must be “indistinguishable”.\textsuperscript{92}

Ayer claims that the argument from illusion (1) does not prove that it is necessary to use the word ‘sense-datum’ in order to describe our perceptual experience; (2) it does not even prove that we need to alter in any way our ordinary way of speaking in order to describe all the empirical

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., p. 49.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., p. 54.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., p. 51.
facts. However, Austin remarks that though Ayer claims that he does not accept the argument from illusion as proving an empirical fact, he “swallows without hesitation a great deal in the argument that is highly objectionable”. 93 Austin points out that Ayer unquestioningly accepts, first, the dichotomy between sense-data and material things. Second, there is an “unexplained introduction of these allegedly ubiquitous entities, ‘perceptions’.” 94 Third, he accepts the dichotomy of veridical and delusive and their qualitative non-distinction in case of sense-data.

Ayer says that the main proposition which the argument from illusion was supposed to prove was that we never experience material things directly, only sense-data. He remarks that this conclusion is not acceptable as something expressing matter of fact. And argument from illusion, in no case, establishes any matter of fact. However, it can be accepted as a linguistic usage. He says that sense-datum language lays down “an unambiguous convention for the use of words that stand for modes of perception...” 95 and also frees us from “the verbal problems that develop ... out of the ambiguous use of such words in ordinary speech.” 96 However, it does not add to our knowledge of empirical world. But if this

94 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
is so, why it becomes important for Ayer to reply to the sceptic’s challenge? And why does he define sense-data as part of sense-experience? We find that though Ayer claims to hold a linguistic version of phenomenalism, and claims to confine himself to questions of language, he is in fact, always talking in a material mode.

Ayer then, goes on to point out the misuses of the argument from illusion. First, he says, it has been used to show that “the world of sensible phenomena is self-contradictory.”97 Ayer points out that it is only with regard to the propositions used to describe the phenomena that “the question of contradiction can legitimately be raised.”98 Because phenomena do not contradict one another, they simply occur. Again, he says, this argument has been used as a ground for distrusting the knowledge based on sense-perception. He refers to Descartes as one such philosopher who gave such argument.

Ayer concludes by saying that the argument from illusion “makes it seem desirable to use a technical terminology of some kind in philosophizing about perception....But it must be understood clearly that the acceptance of this theory involves nothing more than a decision to use a technical language”.99 Thus, unlike Moore, for Ayer, so far as his claim

98 Ibid., p.29.
99 Ibid., p.57.
goes, the question of relation of sense-data to material things is a linguistic question. As indicated earlier, for Moore sense-data are the things given in experience. Thus, while material object is not directly apprehended, we find that for Moore sense-data are directly apprehended and are the means of the knowledge of the external world. Ayer, on the other hand, ignores the distinction between sensation and object of sensation following Berkeley and Hume, and introduces sense-data as contents of sense-experience. Hospers points out here that “if the act-object analysis is rejected in the sense-data case, there seems to be no reason left why we should introduce the term ‘sense-data’ at all. The supposed precision of this term was based on an invalid distinction.”

Ayer, in fact, criticizes the definition of sense-data that “they are the objects of which, in sense perception, one is directly aware.” One of the several criticisms put forward by him is that it is not illuminating:

“For there is no accepted meaning of the expression ‘direct awareness’ by reference to which it can be made clear without further explanation what is to be meant by the word ‘sense-datum’.” Ayer asserts that since both these words, namely, ‘direct awareness’ and ‘sense-

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102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
data' are being used in some special 'technical' sense, it is no use defining one in terms of another.

Here we may recall how in Language, Truth and Logic, Ayer, while describing the nature of sense-experience, ascribes sense-data to individual's private experience saying that sense-data are part of sense-field, which in turn is part of sense-experience. And if Ayer is to be believed, he is using all these terms sense-data, sense-field and sense-experience in a technical sense. Then how they are so easily defined in terms of one another?

Ayer then goes on to criticize the Moorean view. He says that this particular definition of sense-data in terms of 'direct awareness' is frequently associated with a view about the analysis of sensation which it does not logically entail, i.e. the view that "it is possible to discriminate in any sensation at least two distinct factors, one of them being the act of sensing and the other the object sensed."\(^{104}\) As indicated earlier, Moore, in his "The Refutation of Idealism" suggested that the expressions "blue" and "consciousness of blue" are different---they are not synonymous. Ayer objects to his considering "consciousness" as "a distinct, individual factor in any sensation".\(^{105}\) Thus, Ayer denies the existence of self by asserting


\(^{105}\) Ibid., p.62.
that. "...it may be said that the blue and green sense-data are both experienced by me is a relational characteristic, which does not involve either myself, conceived as a substance, or any such thing as that for which the expression 'act of sensing' is supposed to be a name, but only certain other sensible, or introspectible, objects."\(^{106}\)

In fact, for Ayer the sense-data 'terminology' provides him the means to escape the question of appearance and reality. And this is why he denies any applicability of this distinction to sense-data and tries "to escape the puzzlements to which this distinction gives rise."\(^{107}\)

Ayer defends phenomenalism in *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* much in the same way as he does in his *Language, Truth and Logic*. The main thesis of phenomenalism, as we have already indicated, is that "all statements about physical objects can be translated into statements about phenomena---that is, about what is immediately (non-inferentially) present to consciousness, namely sense-data."\(^{108}\)

Ayer's verificationism logically leads him towards a phenomenalist stand (Refer to Michael Dummett, PAJA, who holds a contrary thesis) and in any case a subjectivist stand which leads to the denial of material


substance in an implicit way. Thus for him, "...a reference to sense-data will provide a general elucidation of the meaning of the statements of material things by showing what is the kind of evidence by which they may be verified."\(^{109}\) So ultimately Ayer's phenomenalist analysis will easily do away with material things wherein a reference to sense-data will suffice to clarify the meaning of statements about material things. In this upside down reasoning it is not the statements about material things which verify sense-data statements, that is, reality is not the basis of judging the validity of appearances, rather sense-data become evidence enough for the verification of material things.

Time and again, Ayer stresses that his "use of the word sense-datum is not bound up with any special empirical theory about the nature of what is given."\(^{110}\) But he cannot consistently hold this together with his empiricism. In fact, J.S. Mill defined matter as 'the permanent possibility of sensations'. However, this raised question about "the status of possibilities in Mill's analysis".\(^{111}\) John Hospers suggests that this led the latter phenomenalists to reduce the whole thesis to "a programme of translating physical-object sentences into sense-datum sentences."\(^{112}\) For instance Ayer


\(^{110}\) Ibid., p.236.


\(^{112}\) Ibid., p.558.
says: "There is, indeed, a sense in which it is correct to say that both sense-data and material things exist, inasmuch as sentences that are used to describe sense-data and sentences that are used to describe material things both very frequently express true propositions".\textsuperscript{113} He elaborates his thesis further: "(T)he inclusion of possible as well as actual sense-data among the elements of the material things must be taken to imply a recognition that some of these statements about sense-data will have to be hypothetical..."\textsuperscript{114} Hospers questions the phenomenalists' stance of treating sense-data as simply a 'convenient' way of talking. He asks: "Talking about what? About immediate experience? Fine; but then immediate experiences do occur and are to be included in the inventory of existents, along with physical objects."\textsuperscript{115} We agree with Hospers that Ayer's position on the relation between sense-data and material things gives way to inconsistencies.\textsuperscript{116} For Ayer, as he claims, the terminology of sense-data is a convenient way of avoiding the puzzlements caused by the distinction of appearance and reality. Thus he asserts that when Professor Eddington talks of writing at his 'two tables', one permanent and substantial having extension and colour and the other 'sparsely occupied by "numerous


\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., p.236.

electric charges rushing about with great speed’, he is using an obscure metaphor. We must point out that neither ‘two tables’ of Professor Eddington nor ‘two sets of sense-data’ of A.J.Ayer are sufficient to explain the whole thing. The distinction between appearance and reality is the basis where all scientific research originates. For instance, in the case of a dreaded disease like cancer, the researchers have so far not uncovered the realm of appearances. The day they reach the essence of the disease, its real causes and conditions, the humanity will find a cure for cancer. Thus, the search for reality may begin from the appearance; but once the veil of appearance is removed with the advancement of knowledge the importance of real causal conditions comes to the fore.

We find that there is no end to Ayer’s verification as it always is in need of further sense-data. Ayer says that the phenomenalist on sensing a visual or tactual sense-datum has an ‘unreflecting assumption’ about something else being there and this something else, according to Ayer, is ‘the possibility of obtaining further sense-data’. And as usual, he puts all the blame on the ‘poverty of language’. “With our current resources of language we are able to classify visual sense-data only in a very general

119 Ibid., p.238
way, tactual data even less specifically and kinesthetic data hardly at all..."\(^{120}\) Ayer says: "...while a reference to a material thing will not elucidate the meaning of a sentence which is used to describe a sense-datum, except in so far as the poverty of our language may make it convenient to identify this sense-datum as one of a type that is ordinarily associated with a special sort of material thing, a reference to sense-data will provide a general elucidation of the meaning of statements about material things by showing what is the kind of evidence by which they may be verified. And this may be regarded as the purpose of the phenomenalist analysis."\(^{121}\)

In *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, though Ayer continues to claim that he considers the sense-data only to be linguistic tools, the foundations of his arguments crumble under the weight of his empiricism, much beyond the limits foreseen by him in *Language, Truth and Logic*. Thus we find that the inconsistencies of his first work come out more starkly as he tries to defend sense-data here both on empirical and linguistic grounds. Sense-data as something actually sensed creates rather than solves problems for Ayer. As he makes it both necessary and sufficient condition of the existence of a sense-datum that it is actually sensed.\(^{122}\)


\(^{121}\) Ibid., p.235.

\(^{122}\) Ibid., pp. 70-72.
Thus, finally the linguistic tools of Ayer assume an empirical character of their own. We may point out here that because of the logical impossibility of this claim Ayer is unable to save the linguistic character of sense-data. Ayer claims that the question regarding the nature of material objects is purely a linguistic question and in the light of this assertion tries to define physical object-statements in terms of sense-data statements. However, with the evident uselessness of a linguistic tool separated from reality, he harks back on the ‘actually sensed’ sense-data. Moreover we find that the obvious limitations of perceptual data make him confine his argument basically to visual sense-data. He attaches ‘primary’ importance to visual data in the construction of the material world “...since ordinary language is chiefly adapted to the description of visual phenomena I shall confine myself to them.”123 And on the basis of this upside-down logic, he gives his final verdict: “And the refusal to make use of any visual data whatever in determining the real characteristic of material things is a plain departure from the ordinary usage, and surely an unjustified impoverishment of our conception of the material world”.124

But phenomenalism had certain obvious demerits, as Ayer later realised as criticisms started pouring in from different directions. And thus

124 Ibid., p.271.
in his article of 1947, he delineates the problems that a phenomenalist analysis entailed, without intending at this point to give up his earlier stand.

In his article “Phenomenalism” (1947) Ayer asserts that “no single sense-experience taken by itself, ever proves that a physical object exists.” That the occurrence of these sense-data, taken in conjunction with previous experience can be sufficient evidence. Here he also includes as evidence the general character of one’s previous experience even if one had never before perceived a physical object. That even in such cases one may be “fully justified” in believing in the existence of physical object. A change in Ayer’s position is quite manifest here as he adopts a material mode of speech in talking about the problem of perception. It is clear from the assertion that he makes in this regard: “For my belief that this is a physical object, and a physical object of a certain sort, is not based solely on the occurrence of sense-data which are manifestations of this: it is derived also from a more general belief that I live in a world of physical objects of which things like this are specimens: and this belief is supported by a mass of past experiences.” Thus, Ayer loosens the phenomenalist strings a little by talking of physical objects not in terms of simply actual

126 Ibid., p.174.
127 Ibid., p.174.
and possible sense-data; but in terms of past experience and a general belief about the physical reality.

In this paper Ayer gives in detail the difficulties with a phenomenalistic analysis. Thus, though he finally rejects phenomenalism only in 1956 in *The Problem of Knowledge*, the obvious demerits of such analysis become obvious to him much before that. Here among the reasons that he adduces for the impossibility of a phenomenalistic translation, are:

1. that the truth of the statements referring to sense-data is not a necessary condition for the truth of the statements about the physical objects, even if it may be a sufficient condition. Since in this case it is not possible “to discover a finite set of statements about sense-data of which it can truly be said in a particular case that precisely these are necessary”,

2. the previous sensory experience that counts as evidence may “fall within a range that is extremely wide”;

3. that all statements about physical objects are indefinite, at least as seen from the level of sense-data, and cannot thus be translated into sense-data statements which are comparatively definite.

But Ayer, we find, still is holding on to his earlier position. He feels that there is no need of a fundamental change in his position. That only a

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129 Ibid., p. 175.
minor modification, can help him avoid the difficulties attached to this position. These and similar reasons, says Ayer, can make the phenomenalist change his original position, but he only needs to modify it "slightly". Thus the idea of precise translation which is already given up in _FEK_, now gives way to the view that referring to physical object statements is a rather vague way of referring "ultimately to sense-data". Ayer concludes by saying: "One is inclined to say, therefore, that phenomenalism must be true, on the ground that the only alternative to it, once we have agreed to use the sense-datum terminology, is the iron curtain theory of perception: that physical objects are there sure enough but we can never get at them, because all we can observe is sense-data; and surely this theory at least can be shown to be untenable".

For the phenomenalist not only the introduction of space, time and physical bodies brings difficulties in his analysis, even a reference to an observer brings similar difficulties. Thus Ayer says: "...once the sense-datum language has been accepted as basic, then observers, like everything else at the physical level, must be reduced to sense-data. For to allow them to stand outside 'having' or 'sensing' the sense-data would be to bring sense-data themselves up to the physical level and so vitiate the whole

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131 Ibid., p. 177.
132 Ibid., p. 174.
phenomenalistic programme.” As he asserts in another passage: “The phenomenalist’s tale does not include the author: it is, in that respect, a tale that tells itself.” Ayer says that as long as the phenomenalist tries to give a general account of how physical space and time are constructed out of sensory spaces and times he does not face much problem but if he tries to translate any particular statement about physical object he runs into tremendous difficulties. The fact that physical object language has its own logic, and that the logic of sensory language has to be different according to the phenomenalist programme, no perfect translations are possible. We find that what weans Ayer away from phenomenalism is not a realization that such analysis which is by nature solipsistic can neither help a verificationist’s demand nor give us knowledge about the real world; that is, it, in the words of Findlay, lacks all ‘gnostic regulation’ (J.N.Findley...) He seems to be disillusioned with this position because it is incapable of giving a ‘perfect translation’.

It is in *The Problem of Knowledge* that Ayer finally gives up phenomenalism. Here, like in *FEK*, Ayer gives a detailed account of the argument from illusion. But here, it is not brought in to conclude that it supports the need for a sense-data terminology; the favoured conclusion

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134 Ibid., p.195.
now for Ayer, as he claims, is that "the arguments so far put forward do not make it excessively uncomfortable to hold the position of naive realism. It will, however, need a little sophistication."\textsuperscript{135} This sophistication that Ayer recommends here is one for accommodating the fact of illusion, as Ayer claims, within the naive realist framework. As he says: "We must be prepared to say that we do not always perceive things as they are; that sometimes we see them only as they were, and sometimes as they neither are nor were...."\textsuperscript{136} This passage quoted from Ayer provides a glimpse of the real debate going on at the centre of the problem of perception—a debate which Ayer tried to avoid for a long time by putting forward his linguistic claim, but which always attracted his attention and of which he always, at least implicitly, remained a participant. This debate, as we have indicated earlier is about the divide implied in Cartesian dualism between the worlds of science and the world of sense. He gives up, very inconspicuously, his earlier claim that when philosophers make an issue of the 'argument from illusion' they are not involved in any factual debate—they are just talking in different ways. Now he accepts that we may sometimes perceive things as they are not.


\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., p.95.
Here Ayer defines physical object as something that is theoretically, open to more than one sense and to more than one observer; and also as something occupying space and having duration. However he adds that for the purpose of his analysis the property of publicity seems to him to be the most important. But why? Why the property of publicity is important for Ayer? In any analysis of material things the analysis in terms of its having spatial and temporal relations and having properties is important. However, for its having property of publicity is important since he wants to bare his “sophisticated” kind of realism again on sense-data or sense-experience but, this time on the sense-data of different persons.

Thus in *PK* Ayer’s treatment of the argument from illusion is factual, despite his usual claim that he is not referring to any empirical fact. Thus the accommodation of the fact of illusion in the framework of perception occupies his attention. And he says: “I must make a more cautious statement. I must say not that I see the cigarette case, if this is to carry the implication that there is a cigarette case there, but only that it seems to me that I am seeing it”.¹³⁷ And this is the way, sense-data can be introduced in the form of ‘seeming-cigarette case’, as he says: “The next step, continuing with our example is to convert a sentence ‘it now seems to me that I see a cigarette case’ into ‘I am now seeing a seeming-cigarette

case’. And this seeming-cigarette case, which lives only in my present experience, is one example of a sense-datum” 138

In any case, any such description in terms of sense-experience “must be understood in such a way that the existence of the physical object which appears to be referred to remains an open question...”139 This assertion of Ayer makes it clear that he retains his earlier position in this regard in holding that any description of material things in terms of sense-experience does not imply either the existence or non-existence of the material thing, i.e. it does not have any empirical significance in the sense that the distinction of veridical and delusive perception does not apply in the case of sense-data. At this point Ayer raises the question of the legitimacy of introducing sense-data as he says: “What appears most dubious of all is the final step by which we are to pass from ‘it seems to me that I perceive x’ to ‘I perceive a seeming-x’, with the implication that there is a seeming-x which I perceive....they are momentary, private entities, created, it may well seem, only by a stroke of the pen, yet threatening to imprison the observer within a circle of his own consciousness”140. Ayer says that even if they are regarded as nuisance, that is not a valid reason for ignoring them.

139 Ibid., p.102.
140 Ibid., p.105.
The questions regarding the sense-data, for example questions like how to distinguish, one sense-data from another, possibilities of changes and continuity, etc. according to this position, can be answered only if we decide how to answer them.\textsuperscript{141} And so no definite answer is possible. Ayer says "It must then be admitted that the notion of sense-data is not precise."\textsuperscript{142} The reason, says Ayer, is this that our understanding of sense-data is generally based on an understanding of material things, but he adds that it is rather a matter of psychology than logic that we have to refer to physical objects in order to talk meaningfully in terms of sense-data. Here we are reminded of Hume's argument that our belief in causation is a matter of habit. Both these philosophers reduce material substance and causation to a matter of psychology.

As for the naive realism, Ayer parts company with it since according to him it over-simplifies the situation by ignoring the gap that exists between how things appear to be and how they are. The causal theory, on the other hand, is not a theory of perception at all for "it cannot be regarded as furnishing an analysis of our perceptual judgements".\textsuperscript{143} Phenomenalism too is faced with so many difficulties, quite a few of which were already referred to by Ayer in his article of 1947. Ayer claims that phenomenalism

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., p.111.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., p.116.
does not deny the existence of physical objects, for the question does not concern it. The only contention of phenomenalists according to Ayer, is simply this that if there are any material objects “they are constituted by sense-data”\textsuperscript{144}. However, he accepts that “phenomenalist’s ‘reduction’ is not feasible”\textsuperscript{145}. While in his previous article (“Phenomenalism”) Ayer talks of doing away with the observer in any phenomenalistic analysis, the problem of time and place still remain, for they cannot be uniquely described in terms of sense-data. Ayer then refers to, what appears to him a fatal objection to phenomenalism: “If the phenomenalist is right, the existence of a physical object of a certain sort must be a sufficient condition for the occurrence, in the appropriate circumstances, of certain sense-data....and conversely, the occurrence of the sense-data must be a sufficient condition for the existence of the physical object....the decisive objection to phenomenalism is that neither of these requirements can be satisfied.”\textsuperscript{146} Ayer concludes by saying that the phenomenalist programme fails for it is false. He asserts: “That phenomenalism has commanded so strong an allegiance has been due not to its being intrinsically plausible but rather to the fact that the introduction of sense-data appeared to leave no


\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., p.121.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., p. 125.
other alternative.” 147 Ayer realizes that the process of verification in terms of sense-data is fluid, always open to further such tests. Thus he says “It is not that physical objects lurk behind a veil which we can never penetrate. It is rather that every apparent situation which we take as verifying or falsifying the statements which we make about them leaves other possibilities open.” 148 However, we find that Ayer’s basic position remains the same in that he still claims that speaking about physical objects is “a way of interpreting our sense-experiences” 149; however, they cannot be reduced to any particular set of experiences. Ayer concludes by saying that “the reason why our sense-experiences afford us grounds for believing in the existence of physical objects is simply that sentences which are taken as referring to physical objects are used in such a way that our having the appropriate experiences counts in favour of their truth. It is characteristic of what is meant by such a sentence as ‘there is a cigarette case on this table’ that my having just the experience that I am having is evidence for the truth and of the statement which it expresses.” 150 Ayer gives in to the sceptic’s challenge by accepting that the gap between the evidence of senses and knowledge of material things cannot be overcome. He says that sceptic is

148 Ibid., p.131.
149 Ibid., p.132.
150 Ibid., pp.132-133.
even right in insisting that phenomenalistic reduction is not possible. However, Ayer claims, sceptic is wrong “in inferring from this that we cannot have any justification for it.”\textsuperscript{151} Here we may point out that it is not simply that the phenomenalist reduction is not possible. In reality, the way Ayer defines sense-data, even phenomenalism is not possible as a theory of perception. Let us just consider Ayer’s view that the distinction between veridical and delusive perception does not apply in the case of sense-data. The reason that he adduces is this that sense-data do not ‘exist’, they simply occur. Another important point about sense-data is that they are, as Ayer claims, part of individual sense-experience. Now, if we add these two suppositions, what do we get? First, if the distinction between veridical and delusive does not apply to sense-data, they can not be used as tool for verifying material reality. Second, any translation into material-object statement requires a veridical sense-data, which is not possible within Ayer’s definition. Third, being part of individual sense-experience sense-data cannot refer beyond themselves and thus entail a solipsistic ontology.

In \textit{The Central Questions of Philosophy} Ayer begins with the assumptions that the appearances “are capable of sustaining the interpretations which we put upon them”.\textsuperscript{152} Also anything is an


appearance of which "the observer at least implicitly takes notice." Ayer claims to base the construction of material world on these assumptions and here his description basically draws, as he himself accepts, from Nelson Goodman in whose The Structure of Appearance, as Ayer puts it, Goodman organizes appearances into a system in which the basic elements are *qualia* of colour, or of place, or of time. As we have stated earlier Ayer in his earlier books used the concept of 'visual field' for such interpretations in terms of sense-experience. Now he adds the qualia of colour, of shape and size, and also patterns. Such patterns, e.g., a visual chair-pattern, or cat-pattern that would "lead the observer to think that he was seeing the corresponding physical objects." The question that may be raised here is this—how a bunch of sense-data (cat-pattern) is capable of giving the assurance regarding the corresponding physical objects if a single sense-datum is not. Another question is, correspondence with what? If all we have is sense-data, or visual patterns the question of correspondence becomes vacuous until one can go out of the circle of his private data to discern such correspondence. Ayer states that such patterns, though having identity with physical objects, are not totally determined by the identity of the physical objects, that is, the observer does not

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154 Ibid., p.91.
'characterize' them as patterns; in fact his very registering of such patterns 'governs' his identifying of the physical object. Or as he asserts, these patterns provide "the main visual clues"\textsuperscript{155} on which the everyday judgements of perception are based.

When Ayer discussed the argument from illusion in \textit{FEK}, he held that the only legitimate conclusion that such argument may lead to is the efficacy of sense-data terminology. He also held that this argument is not, as supposed by different philosophers, something that proves a matter of fact. However, in his later writings, despite his claim to the contrary, Ayer talks of the argument of illusion in a manner which shows that the argument really bothers him and in fact he tries to accommodate the fact of illusion in his interpretation of the judgements of perception.

Another point that becomes prominent in \textit{CQ} is: What does Ayer mean by saying that both "spatial and temporal relations hold between these patterns and between them and qualia of other sorts."\textsuperscript{156} Ayer says, for instance, a face-pattern encloses a nose-pattern. While the data of the same sense have only spatial relations, between the data of different senses temporal relations also hold. "For instance, a visual bird-pattern may


\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., p.92.
precede or follow an occurrence of a bird-note.”\textsuperscript{157} Ayer says that such descriptions in terms of appearance do not imply any causal relation between any two data; they only characterize a data of a “distinctive type”.\textsuperscript{158}

Ayer says that he is siding with William James in choosing to adopt “a psychological rather than a physiological criterion for determining what appearances are”.\textsuperscript{159} This has the implication for Ayer that within this scheme the spatial and temporal relations can be conceived as being ‘immediately given’ like the qualia. Since, now, it is “for the observer to judge in any given instance at what point an earlier datum passes out of the content of his present experience and into the domain of memory”.\textsuperscript{160}

As such construction progresses, the sense fields, according to Ayer, can be further described in terms of having predecessors and successors. And that essence can be identified by its character as well as by its neighbours. Ayer adds: “When qualia are turned into particulars, whether by being located demonstratively or descriptively, I shall usually refer to them as percepts. In this I follow Russell, who also came to think of

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., p. 92
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 1981, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., p. 92.
percepts as constituted out of qualities..."\textsuperscript{161} Ayer says that he differs from Russell in not characterizing percepts as private entities. "It is obvious that qualia are not private entities, since they are universal which can be exemplified in anyone's experience."\textsuperscript{162}

Like in \textit{PK}, here also Ayer speaks of doing away with the observer in such analysis. As he says that the mistake commonly made by philosophers is one of supposing that if there are percepts, there is perciipient.\textsuperscript{163} Ayer says: "I shall, indeed, represent the theory out of which the physical world is constituted as being developed by a single observer."\textsuperscript{164} Thus Ayer takes a position which is akin to subjective idealism. However Ayer claims that his position is not idealistic. That it is different in two respects: First, the data with which the observer works is not considered to be private to him. Second, as Ayer puts it, the observer is not identified with any particular person. At this point, Ayer asserts: "An important empirical fact, without which, indeed, the development of our theory would not be possible, is that the observer inhabits a predominantly stable world."\textsuperscript{165} By stability here, he means that there is "no perceptible

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., p.94.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., p. 98.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., p.98.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., p.100.
difference"\textsuperscript{166} despite changes in the perceptible qualities of things. Also there are many other things with which they bear constant spatial and temporal relations. This makes the observer think of them as persistent. Ayer defines a standardized percept to be one that is persistent and he calls it a visual continuant. Now Ayer ascribes objectivity to percepts by saying that they occupy similar positions in the sense-field and, they are pervasive. He says that the acquisition of the observer’s concept of body depends on some kind of fusion among visual, tactual and kinesthetic data. This association of these data makes the observer form the concept of his body without any implication that it is his own body. This is since his body is one of many visuo-tactual continuance. However, it is "exceptionally pervasive",\textsuperscript{167} and it supplies him "the viewpoint from which the world appears to him".\textsuperscript{168} The next logical step in this construction is the simple causal correlation's made by the observer. He traces different sounds, smells and tastes to their apparent sources. This association is based partly on locating the points of their maximum intensity and partly on noting visuo-tactual conditions. Thus according to Ayer the distinction between apparent and real is made when the observer reaches the final stages of


\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., p. 103.

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., p. 103.
such construction, when the observer acquires some idea of how the world works.

Now the fact of illusion is explained by Ayer in terms of "untoward experiences", i.e., experiences that do not fit into the general pattern. They are considered by Ayer as subsidiary accounts of the way things are distinguished from "the main or central account". Now the other observers are included as ones making similar movements and sounds but different from the observer in not partaking the centrality of his body and its use as an instrument. Ayer concludes: "The making of the private-public distinction thus goes together with the acquisition of self-consciousness and the attribution of consciousness to others." This is how Ayer roughly summarizes the way in which "the common-sense theory of the physical world is developed."

Ayer here accepts Human legacy by stating: "In its general outline, my description of this process has been very similar to Hume's." However, he says that he differs from Hume in that while for Hume relations of constancy and coherence among perceptions explain why we

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170 Ibid.
171 Ibid., p. 105.
172 Ibid., p. 106.
173 Ibid.
are deceived into considering them as persistent objects; for Ayer, as he says, they help in "justifying an acceptable theory."\textsuperscript{174}

Ayer claims that his position is not phenomenalistic since, as he says, he is not reducing physical objects to percepts. That is, he does not hold that all statements about physical objects can be 'adequately' translated into statements that refer only to percepts.

Ayer claims to give up the idea of logical construction in his present scheme, as he says: "In the scheme which I have outlined, the need to have recourse to conditional statements is avoided by our treading the passage from percepts to physical objects, not strictly as a process of logical construction, but rather, in Hume’s way, as an exercise of the imagination. The continued and distinct existence not of percepts, but of the objects into which they are transmuted, is simply posited. Consequently, we are able to forsake phenomenalism for a sophisticated form of realism."\textsuperscript{175} Ayer stresses the point that within the framework of such theory based on experiential propositions "the existence of visuo-tactual continuance becomes a matter of objective fact."\textsuperscript{176} If it is used to judge what there is, these elements become the elements of our primary system. A primary

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., pp. 107-108.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., p. 108.
system has factual propositions which describe what is actually observed. Metaphysics is, thus, according to Ayer, a secondary system. That is, metaphysical propositions, though not directly related to anything observable, can be meaningful if they have explanatory value.

Arguing for the possibility of private language, Ayer gives the example of an imaginary Robinson Crusoe who develops his own symbols for his feelings and for external things, and makes this language public by teaching it to Friday. Referring to this intriguing story, Eames remarks: “If we are dealing with fantasies what would it matter that the language was not ‘feasible’? Are we talking about real experienced possibilities of private languages or fantasized ‘logical possibilities’ of private language?”  

Ayer says that such view as held by him, is vindicated not by any particular set of observations but by “the general features of our experience on which it is founded.”

Now that we have studied Ayer’s views on perception as part of his epistemological position, it will be relevant to analyse his claims regarding metaphysics. Ayer makes two important claims in this context. First, he claims that he aims at eliminating metaphysics that goes beyond the realm of Humean ‘matters of fact’ as being literally meaningless. Second, he

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claims that the philosophy is concerned with “purely logical question” and that the problem of perception is a linguistic question. In the course of our discussion of Ayer’s views on perception, we have already analyzed the second part of this claim by showing first, that this claim of Ayer’s has led to inconsistencies in his treatment of ‘sense-content’ or ‘sense-data’; and second, that since the nature of this question is empirical, time and again, Ayer falls into a material mode of speech. We would like to point out here that what Ayer is claiming to be a sophisticated form of realism in *CQ* is also subjective idealism. He accepts, what we stated to be the mental side of Cartesian dualism adopted by Berkeley and Hume. In Berkeley all reality is confined to ‘ideas’, in Hume it is “impressions”, in Russell it is ‘sense-data’ and in Ayer it is “sense-contents” or sense-data. Ayer’s emphasis has not undergone much change through his writings as is evident from his assertion: “As for the question of whether an absolute representation of things is possible, I have admitted the option of scientific realism only on condition that the theories of which the ideal constituents are reified are subject to empirical conditions of acceptance. The suggestion that the world is ‘really’ such that the entities of which it consists are not even capable of being conceptually linked to the possible

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objects of human observation is one that I continue to regard as devoid of any literal significance.”

First, we will deal with the issue of the place of metaphysics in Ayer’s philosophy. We hold that Ayer’s views are pluralistic and subjective-idealistic on the lines of Berkeley and Hume and his phenomenalism has been influenced by Bertrand Russell’s view on Our Knowledge of the External World.

Ayer’s philosophical heritage becomes evident when he distinguishes metaphysics from genuine philosophy and says that “a great deal of what is commonly called philosophy is metaphysical in character”, and then remarks that nevertheless many great philosophers have concerned themselves with analysis rather than metaphysics. And among these philosophers whom he considers to be doing genuine philosophy, he includes Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.

In LTL, Ayer talks in terms of a total phenomenalist reduction, that physical-object statements can be translated into sense-data statements without residue. Thus a question like ‘What is the nature of material things?’ can be assumed in Ayer’s words “by indicating, in general terms,

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what are the relations that must hold between any two of one’s sense-
contents for them to be elements of the same material things.” 182

Here we find that Ayer’s analysis, though given in linguistic terms,
is similar to Berkeleyian analysis, as is evident from Ayer’s assertion that
Berkeley maintained that to say of various ‘ideas of sensations’ that they
belonged to a simple material things “was not, as Locke thought, to say that
they were related to a single unobservable underlying ‘somewhat’, but
rather they stood in certain relations to one another. And in this he was
right.” 183

Ayer defines ‘real’ in a special sense, Thus the ‘real’ quality of
material thing is one that “characterizes those elements of the thing which
are the most conveniently measured of all the elements which possess the
qualities of the kind of question.” 184 Here Ayer makes the quality of
material thing also dependent on the perceiving subject. And in this he is
similar to Berkeley. Berkeley too has distorted the meaning of the ‘real’ by
equating it with the ideas perceived by some. As he states: “The ideas
imprinted on the Senses by the Author of nature are called real things: and
those excited in the Imagination being less regular, vivid, and constant, are

183 Ibid., p. 53.
184 Ibid., p. 67.
more properly termed *ideas*, or *images of things*, which they copy and represent.\(^{185}\)

Humean ‘belief’ and ‘custom’, the element of psychology has been accepted by Ayer too. As he says, “all that we mean by saying that an observation increases the possibility of a proposition is that it increases our confidence in the proposition as measured by our willingness to rely on it in practice as a forecast of our sensations, and to retain it in preference to other hypotheses in face of an unfavourable experience.”\(^{186}\)

We hold that Ayer’s views are pluralistic and subjective-idealist on the lines of Berkeley and Hume and his phenomenalism has been influenced by Bertrand Russell’s view on *Our Knowledge of the External World*. In our view that Ayer’s philosophy points to a metaphysical stand, we have been supported by philosophers like D.H. Degrood, Michael Dummett, E.R. Eames, Tscha Hung, Austin and others. Though these philosophers hold different philosophical positions, yet in their reading of Ayer they agree that Ayer’s philosophy does imply, implicitly all through, and explicitly at some places, a definite ontological stand close to British empiricist tradition. For instance, Tscha Hung writes: “In his *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) Ayer was trying, on the one hand to represent the essential doctrines of logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, and on the

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\(^{186}\) Ibid., p. 100.
other hand, to conjoin with the Cambridge School of Analysis founded by Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore and inspired by Hume, whose empiricism is the real key to Ayer’s interpretations."

However, we differ from Tscha Hung in holding that the British analysts as well as the logical positivists took the philosophical stand that cannot be called anti-metaphysical as indicated by Hung. Rather, both adopted a view that spelled Humean pluralistic and subjective-idealist ontology. As Suman Gupta points out, both logical positivists and logical atomists are metaphysicians and both propagate “a pluralistic, Subjective Idealist world-view.” Dummett also points out to “the highly atomistic doctrines of the logical positivists.”

Austin traces Ayer’s views to Berkeleyian, Kantian ontology as he writes: “That the apparent sophistication of Ayer’s ‘linguistic’ doctrine really rests squarely on the old Berkeleyian, Kantian ontology of the ‘sensible manifold’. He has all along, it seems, really been completely convinced by the very arguments that he purports to ‘evaluate’ with so much detachment.” Further elaborating this view he says: “It is a

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curious and in some ways rather melancholy fact that the relative positions of Price and Ayer at this point turn out to be exactly the same as the relative positions of Locke and Berkeley, or Hume and Kant. In Locke’s view there are ‘ideas’ and also ‘external objects’, in Price’s view ‘sense-data’ and also ‘physical occupants’; in Berkeley’s doctrine there are only ideas, in Kant’s only Vorstellungen (things-in-themselves being not strictly relevant here), in Ayer’s doctrine there are only sense-data — but Berkeley, Kant and Ayer all further agree that we can speak as if there were bodies, objects, material things.”

We agree with Austin in tracing Ayer from the British empiricist philosophers. However, we ourselves trace Ayer’s view not from Kant’s philosophy, but from the philosophies of Berkeley and Hume: Berkeley’s phenomenalism, developed logically by Hume, has been incorporated in Ayer’s logical positivist framework with a significant overall influence of Russell’s phenomenalism.

As we have already stated in our second chapter, Berkeley developed his philosophy by criticizing the basis of Locke’s representative realism, i.e., the doctrines of abstract ideas and the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Ayer implicitly accepts the refutation of the doctrine of abstract ideas when he confines all empirical knowledge to

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Humean 'matters of fact', thus rendering meaningless anything that goes beyond the realm of actual and possible sense-data. Ayer, supporting Berkeley, says that the latter did not deny the reality of material things. "What he denied was the adequacy of Locke's analysis of the notion of material thing."\(^{192}\)

As we already indicated in our first chapter the concept of perception is closely related to the concept of substance. Of the different definitions of substance discussed in that chapter one that would be relevant for our purpose is that given in terms of continuity and change, i.e. substance is something that remains the same amidst changes. The definition is fluid enough to include such changes that take place in the quality of the substance as well as the interrelations of its elements and of itself with other things. A familiar example is that a seed has different properties and stands in different relations to its surroundings while the plant that grows out of it has quite a different chemistry. A full tree on the other hand is something very different in appearance from both seed and the plant. But still there is an element of continuity in the sense that a seed of apple will grow up into an apple tree. The advanced development in science are based on this element of continuity amidst changes. Changes are revealed through differences in appearances. However, equating

continuity with reality or equating changes with reality both lead to abstraction. The reality is the dynamic aspect of the interconnection between continuity and change and between appearance and reality. The empiricist philosophers like Berkeley, Hume, Russell and Ayer have made the mistake of not accepting the substantial nature of changes and appearance. And this is the reason why for them appearance is confined to superficial level and perception becomes the private individual experience. In fact the whole idea has its origin in Berkeley’s philosophy who held that the thing that is conceived is conceivable, or in other words, it cannot both be true for a thing to be sensed and be insensible. The same logic, which because of the priority of the subjective element in it retained the idea of mental or spiritual substance in case of Berkeley, led in the case of Hume to the denial of all substantial reality and thus in Hume nothing but the impressions exist. The philosophies of Russell and Ayer take the thread from the Humean concept of discrete impressions. And Russell’s neutral monism is an affirmation of this principle only. This has been further abstracted within the logical positivist framework of Ayer.

Ayer’s insistence that there is no difference between veridical and delusive perception in the case of sense-data is an outcome of the same Berkeleyian and Humean logic. But as we have seen absence of this distinction makes the concept of sense-data vacuous. And in spite of Ayer's effort to bring connection among the sense-data on the Humean lines, the
very concept of sense-data as above the distinction of validity and delusion, makes it impossible for him to achieve this. The concept of continuity and resemblance of sense-data do not hold water if one is not sure whether they are veridical or delusive, constituted as they are by neutral sense-data. The epistemological concerns of Ayer in his later writings could not be of much value against the sceptic’s challenge because here both Ayer and the skeptics are talking in similar language. For both knowledge is by way of ideas and verification is also by way of ideas. And this makes sceptic’s task much easier and Ayer who happens to talk in the language of sceptic has to throw guns.