Faith and Thought

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Ayer on Religion

THE great success of Professor Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*[1] is at
least partly due to its combination of brevity and comprehensiveness.
In a single chapter an ethical theory is developed, theology is refuted,
and a disabling blow is aimed at aesthetics in a passing paragraph.
Generations of university students, at sea among the conflicting
theories of past philosophers, have discovered with relief in *Language,
Truth and Logic* a book that states confidently a straightforward point
of view on most of the main questions of philosophy—a point of view
easy to understand and easy to summarise. It is a book which more than
any other recent philosophical work in this country may be said to have
made *converts*. It is certainly by far the best-known exposition of logical
positivism: and it will remain so, for it is unlikely that anyone would
wish to embark at this stage upon the writing of a new, detailed,
logical positivist work; indeed, in 1961 even to write critically of
logical positivism may strike some as having the air of flogging a dead
philosophy. Whether Professor Ayer would still accept the label
'logical positivist' I do not know; it is certain that no other profes-
sional academic philosopher in Britain would. I have heard the late
Dr F. Waismann use the name as though there were still in existence a
school of philosophy properly to be denominated 'logical positivism',
but this was twelve years or so ago, and even at that time Dr Wais-
mann's own views (though he seemed willing to call them logical
positivist) could much more accurately be described as belonging to
the type generally known nowadays as 'Oxford philosophy'.

Whatever may be true of America, in Britain there are probably no
logical positivists today. None, that is, among professional philo-
sophers. I have, however, mentioned the attraction that Ayer's book
has for university students. Most of these 'grow out of' logical
positivism, but not all; but, what is more to the point, most of them
will never become professional philosophers. The academic philo-
sopher is perhaps too ready to assume that philosophy is properly a
rather abstruse technical discipline pursued in universities. His reaction

[1] A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Gollancz). First edition,
1936; second revised edition, with a long Introduction containing amendments
to a number of points, 1946.

to articles of the ' My Philosophy of Life ' kind is apt to be an amused smile, however eminent—as scientists, military men, or whatever—the authors of such articles may be. But philosophy, of all subjects, is probably the one that the layman (meaning here the non-professional philosopher) feels himself most qualified to contribute to. If we understand by ' the present state of philosophy ' not just ' philosophy as the professional academic philosopher sees it ' but also ' philosophy as the layman sees it ', then logical positivism is not dead in this country. In any case, although logical positivism in its pure form is highly unfashionable among academic philosophers, most of them would admit to having learned something from it, or from its shortcomings, and to that extent it will for a long time merit discussion.

Professor Ayer must doubtless dislike having his views constantly referred to by people writing about logical positivism; but he is himself responsible for this attention: if he wrote less well he would avoid it. Certainly, if one's topic is logical positivism and religion, it is to Professor Ayer's writings that one must turn. For all its brevity there is no discussion comparable with his. I shall begin by presenting, to a large extent in his own words, an account of the views on religion expounded in the second half of Chapter VI of *Language, Truth and Logic*. We can, I think, distinguish six points that Ayer wishes chiefly to make—or six steps in his argument.

(1) Ayer begins by saying that the possibility of religious knowledge is ruled out by his treatment of metaphysics. Let us see this point clearly before we proceed further. That is to say, it is ruled out by the logical positivist rejection of all metaphysics as nonsense. In his first chapter Ayer had written, 'We may begin by criticising the metaphysical thesis that philosophy affords us knowledge of a reality transcending the world of science and common sense '.[1] And a little later: 'We shall maintain that no statement which refers to a " reality " transcending the limits of all possible sense-experience can possibly have any literal significance; from which it must follow that the labours of those who have striven to describe such a reality have all been devoted to the production of nonsense.'[2] The pejorative word ' nonsense ' is used here, of course, somewhat as a technical term. On the logical positivist definition of meaning, a statement is meaningful (or is genuinely a proposition, Ayer would say) only if it is either (a)

[1] *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 33. All quotations are from the second edition.
[2] p. 34.

analytic or (*b*) empirically verifiable (as Ayer says, is an empirical hypothesis); otherwise it is meaningless, or nonsensical. Religious statements are a sub-class of metaphysical statements and are accordingly meaningless. Religious knowledge, then, is impossible in the sense that the statements in which it purports to be expressed are not genuine propositions but are meaningless or nonsensical statements.

(2) Ayer next says: ' It is now generally admitted, at any rate by philosophers, that the existence of a being having the attributes which define the god of any non-animistic religion cannot be demonstratively proved.'[1] This, says Ayer, is for the following reason. If the conclusion that God exists is to be demonstratively certain the premises from which it is deduced must themselves be certain. Only *a priori* propositions are logically certain. ' But we cannot deduce the existence of a god from an *a priori* proposition. For we know that the reason why *a priori* propositions are certain is that they are tautologies. And from a set of tautologies nothing but a further tautology can be validly deduced. It follows that there is no possibility of demonstrating the existence of a god.'[2]

(3) Not only can the existence of God not be demonstrated; it cannot even be shown to be probable. Here Ayer makes in the context of the present argument the general point already noted under (1) above. The religious man would hold that 'in talking about God, he was talking about a transcendent being who might be known through certain empirical manifestations, but certainly could not be defined in terms of those manifestations. But in that case the term " god " is a metaphysical term. And if " god " is a metaphysical term, then it cannot be even probable that a god exists. For to say that " God exists " is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance.'[3]

(4) Ayer distinguishes his position from that of atheism or agnosticism. Both atheist and agnostic assume that the statement ' God exists ' makes sense. They must assume this, otherwise there would be no point in denying that God exists or in saying that one was not sure whether or not God exists. But this statement does *not* make sense. ' If the assertion that there is a god is nonsensical, then the atheist's assertion that there is no god is equally nonsensical, since it is only a significant proposition that can be significantly contradicted. As for the agnostic,

[1] p. 114.   [2] pp. 114–115.   [3] p. 115.

although he refrains from saying either that there is or that there is not a god, he does not deny that the question whether a transcendent god exists is a genuine question. He does not deny that the two sentences " There is a transcendent god " and " There is no transcendent god " express propositions one of which is actually true and the other false. All he says is that we have no means of telling which of them is true, and therefore ought not to commit ourselves to either. But we have seen that the sentences in question do not express propositions at all. And this means that agnosticism also is ruled out.'[1]

(5) ' There is no logical ground for antagonism between religion and natural science. As far as the question of truth or falsehood is concerned, there is no opposition between the natural scientist and the theist who believes in a transcendent god. For since the religious utterances of the theist are not genuine propositions at all, they cannot stand in any logical relation to the propositions of science.'[2] There may, however, be antagonism of a kind, on the emotional level. 'For it is acknowledged that one of the ultimate sources of religious feeling lies in the inability of men to determine their own destiny; and science tends to destroy the feeling of awe with which men regard an alien world, by making them believe that they can understand and anticipate the course of natural phenomena, and even to some extent control it.'[3]

(6) Ayer finally makes some remarks about mysticism and about the argument from religious experience. He calls attention to an apparent likeness between his own conclusions—that the statements which the theist utters in attempting to express religious knowledge are not literally significant—and the views that many theists themselves maintain. ' For we are often told that the nature of God is a mystery which transcends the human understanding. But to say that something transcends the human understanding is to say that it is unintelligible. And what is unintelligible cannot significantly be described. Again, we are told that God is not an object of reason but an object of faith. This may be nothing more than an admission that the existence of God must be taken on trust, since it cannot be proved. But it may also be an assertion that God is the object of a purely mystical intuition, and cannot therefore be defined in terms which are intelligible to the reason. And I think there are many theists who would assert this. But if one allows that it is impossible to define God in intelligible terms, then one is allowing that it is impossible for a sentence both to be significant and

[1] pp. 115–116.   [2] p. 117.   [3] Ibid.

to be about God. If a mystic admits that the object of his vision is something which cannot be described, then he must also admit that he is bound to talk nonsense when he describes it.'[1] Ayer has no wish to rule out the possibility that ' truths ' may be acquired through the ' faculty of intuition ' of the mystic. 'We do not in any way deny that a synthetic truth may be discovered by purely intuitive methods as well as by the rational method of induction.' However, there is a difficulty. ' But we do say that every synthetic proposition, however it may have been arrived at, must be subject to the test of actual experience. We do not deny *a priori* that the mystic is able to discover truths by his own special methods. We wait to hear what are the propositions which embody his discoveries, in order to see whether they are verified or confuted by our empirical observations. But the mystic, so far from producing propositions which are empirically verified, is unable to produce any intelligible propositions at all. And therefore we say that his intuition has not revealed to him any facts. It is no use his saying that he has apprehended facts but is unable to express them. For we know that if he really had acquired any information, he would be able to express it. He would be able to indicate in some way or other how the genuineness of his discovery might be empirically determined. The fact that he cannot reveal what he " knows ", or even himself devise an empirical test to validate his " knowledge ", shows that his state of mystical intuition is not a genuinely cognitive state. So that in describing his vision the mystic does not give us any information about the external world; he merely gives us indirect information about the condition of his own mind.'[2] It follows that the argument from religious experience is invalid. A man who claims experience of God is on safe ground in so far as he is merely ' asserting that he is experiencing a peculiar kind of sense-content ', but he goes astray when he asserts that ' there exists a transcendent being who is the object of this emotion '; for ' the sentence " There exists a transcendent god " has, as we have seen, no literal significance '. Ayer goes on: 'We conclude, therefore, that the argument from religious experience is altogether fallacious. The fact that people have religious experiences is interesting from the psychological point of view, but it does not in any way imply that there is such a thing as religious knowledge. . . . The theist . . . may believe that his experiences are cognitive experiences, but, unless he can formulate his " knowledge " in propositions that are empirically verifiable, we may be sure that he is deceiving himself.

It follows that those philosophers who fill their books with assertions that they intuitively " know " this or that . . . religious " truth " are merely providing material for the psycho-analyst. For no act of intuition can be said to reveal a truth about any matter of fact unless it issues in verifiable propositions. And all such propositions are to be incorporated in the system of empirical propositions which constitutes science.'[1]

This completes my presentation of the argument Ayer puts before us in *Language, Truth and Logic*. I have quoted from him at what may seem unnecessary length: but although it may be far from true that every philosopher is his own best interpreter, this probably *is* true in the case of Ayer. I proceed now to some comments on his views as I have paraphrased or quoted them.

(1) With the first point we come immediately to the crux of the matter. It is the verification principle which eliminates religious statements from the class of meaningful statements. ' The criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability. We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express—that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false.'[2]

The scientific background and interests of the most prominent members of the original Vienna Circle is clearly responsible for their adoption of the verification principle. Indeed, the logical positivist account of meaning makes good sense when applied to natural science (with its great use of mathematics—i.e. statements meaningful because analytic—and consisting as it does to a great extent of empirical observation statements). It makes less sense when it is applied in fields outside science. But, of course, the intention of the logical positivists precisely *was* to give a scientific-type explanation of all kinds of knowledge; and if any kind of knowledge could not easily be made to fit the accepted model then so much the worse for it. The intention, naturally, was bound not to meet with universal acceptance; and it was neither more nor less proper, on the face of it, than the contrary attempt to provide an account of all kinds of knowledge in non-scientific (metaphysical or theological) terms would have been. The verification principle is not self-evidently true, though it was perhaps apt to seem so in a scientific age (and to some extent is, of course, still

[1] pp. 119–120.　　　　　　　　[2] p. 35.

apt to seem so). Further, it has notoriously been found extremely difficult to devise a completely satisfactory formulation of the verification principle in the face of detailed criticism (Ayer considers some of the problems of formulation in the Introduction to the second edition of *Language, Truth and Logic*).

I have just suggested that a philosophy based on the verification principle is no more self-evidently a ' right ' philosophy than a contrary position would be. This statement, however, might be fairly generally resisted, and not by the ghosts of the early logical positivists only. It would be widely maintained that in some form or other the verification principle needs to be retained even after what we may call ' classical ' logical positivism, with its crudities and over-simplifications, has been abandoned.[1] The verification principle may, indeed, be said to be one of the tenets of empiricism in philosophy (Hume has generally been claimed by logical positivists as one of their ancestors); and to the extent that British philosophy has always had a strong tendency to empiricism, some version of the verification principle may be expected to find a place in it.

But the value of the verification principle is less as a *definition* of meaningfulness in general than as a useful method of establishing the actual meaning of particular utterances. Wittgenstein, taking upon himself the credit for the verification principle (and certainly the members of the Vienna Circle were greatly influenced by Wittgenstein and by his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, though he was never himself a logical positivist), complains at the same time of the way in which it was elevated into a dogma. He is reported as pointing out in lectures that he has suggested that one way in which one could ' get clear how a certain sentence is used ' was by asking how it could be verified. But this was only one way of getting clear about the use of a word or a sentence. There are others, he says; and he instances the asking of the question, ' How would I set about teaching a child to use this word?' But, he says, some have taken his suggestion about asking for the verification and treated it as if it were a *theory* about meaning.[2]

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[1] Cf. for example, T. R. Miles, *Religion and the Scientific Outlook* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959). This book, by a Christian, makes use of a modified form of the verification principle, which the author considers to be an important and useful legacy of logical positivism.

[2] See the Memoir of Wittgenstein, in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, August 1951.

To what extent Wittgenstein himself was responsible for the adoption of the verification principle is a matter of history that need not concern us. Nor need we inquire into how far he may have been understood or misunderstood by others. What is of interest here, however, is his assertion that there are several ways in which the meaning of a statement may be made clear. Let me, following his suggestion, mention something which, whether or not it was in Wittgenstein's mind, can certainly come appropriately under this heading. One way of explaining what a given statement means is by explaining it in other words. This, indeed, is probably the method generally followed in teaching some fairly abstruse subject. The relatively unfamiliar is explained in terms of the relatively familiar. Consider the way in which Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy*, attempts to explain the nature of the numinous experience. Having said that it is indefinable, he nevertheless attempts to explain what he is talking about by referring to other and more familiar sorts of experience that he claims are related to it. It would be perverse to say that Otto has given no meaning to his statements. Admittedly, an appeal to sense-experience is likely to be involved in all such cases somewhere towards the end of the line; but it would be a misdescription of the method being followed to say that it *consists in* an appeal to the verification principle: such an appeal would be only one aspect of a method whose greater part consisted in something else.

But the view that the verification principle ought to be regarded not as a definition of meaning, but rather as only one among several methods of arriving at the meaning of a given statement, would hardly be accepted by Professor Ayer; and we need now therefore to consider it more directly in its role of suggested *definition* of meaning.

The three concepts of meaning, explanation (which I have just been using), and understanding are closely linked. Ayer, elsewhere than in *Language, Truth and Logic*, has provided an account of the verification principle in which he makes an explicit connection between meaning (or 'significance') and understanding. This is in the B.B.C. Third Programme debate on Logical Positivism between himself and Father F. C. Copleston, S.J., which took place originally on 13 June 1949.[1] Here Ayer states: ' To be significant a statement must be either, on the

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[1] This debate has been published in *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*, edited by Paul Edwards and the late Arthur Pap (The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1957), a collection of " readings from classical and contemporary sources ".

one hand, a formal statement, one that I should call analytic, or on the other hand empirically testable, and I should try to derive this principle from an analysis of understanding. I should say that understanding a statement meant knowing what would be the case if it were true. Knowing what would be the case if it were true means knowing what observations would verify it, and that in turn means being disposed to accept certain situations as warranting the acceptance or rejection of the statement in question.'[1] A page or two later, Ayer, speaking of statements that are not scientific or common sense statements, says: ' I totally fail to understand—again, I'm afraid, using my own use of understanding: what else can I do?—I fail to understand what these other non-scientific statements and non-common sense statements, which don't satisfy these criteria, are supposed to be. Someone may say he understands them, in some sense of understanding other than the one I've defined. I reply, it's not clear to me what this sense of understanding is, nor, *a fortiori* of course, what it is he understands, nor how these statements function.'[2] In his closing contribution to the debate he says: ' The principle of verifiability is not itself a descriptive statement. Its status is that of a persuasive definition. I am persuaded by it, but why should you be? Can I prove it? Yes, on the basis of other definitions. I have, in fact, tried to show you how it can be derived from an analysis of understanding. But if you are really obstinate, you will reject these other definitions too.'[3]

This is a curious train of thought. Ayer speaks of ' my own sense of understanding ' and contrasts it with ' some sense of understanding other than the one I've defined ', but then seems almost to throw doubt on the whole notion of there being any sense of understanding other than ' the one I've defined ' (' It's not clear to me what this [other] sense of understanding is '). One would have thought that he would need to be reasonably clear what the other uses of ' under-standing ' are in order to be sure that his own was different from them. On the whole, it seems a fair interpretation of his view that there is only *one* (true, proper) sense of ' understanding '. And this is no doubt correct. To understand is to understand. But there seems to be no reason to accept Ayer's further view that to understand a statement means to know what observations would verify it. Unless, that is, ' statement ' here means ' the kind of statement that can be verified or falsified by observations ', which is pretty clearly what it does mean

for Ayer. But this is to beg the question. The point at issue is precisely whether all meaningful statements *are* of this type. Ayer's attempt to ' prove ' the verification principle by deriving it from an analysis of the concept of understanding is not likely to meet with acceptance from metaphysicians or theologians (as he himself, of course, recognises) because precisely the same differences of opinion exist about the analysis of understanding as exist about the analysis of meaning. Of course, Ayer's analysis of meaning is connected with his analysis of understanding and also with his analysis of explanation,[1] but all three would be rejected by someone who does not accept what is common to all of them—the account in terms of verifiability. His recognition in one of the quoted passages that the verification principle is really a persuasive definition is significant. And it is certainly not the case, as I remarked above, that this principle is self-evident.

What seems to me to be the main objection to the verification principle may now be brought out explicitly. It is that the principle seems to involve a confusion between meaning and truth. Whether a statement is meaningful or meaningless is one thing. Whether it is true or false is another. But logical positivism seeks to define one of these in terms of the other: it says that being meaningful *means* being capable of being shown to be true or false. This sounds all right when one is thinking of the type of statement which the logical positivists take as their standard (Ayer's ' empirical hypotheses '), but this is because in the case of statements of this type it comes naturally to us to explain them in terms of the method of their verification. (' The cat is sitting on the mat ' *means* ' If you go into the room you will observe etc., etc.'). But as an account of, say, moral principles, or particular moral judgments, it sounds much less immediately plausible—hence, of course, the emotivist theory of ethics developed by Ayer. But why assume a very narrow definition of meaning and then go to the trouble of developing a theory of ethics to show that moral utterances though literally meaningless nevertheless have some other function? Why not begin from the natural assumption that moral judgments have meaning and then go on to develop a definition of meaning (if one must have a definition of meaning) wide enough to include them? Once more, it is an indication of the extent to which classical logical positivism is outmoded that a purely emotivist theory of ethics is likely

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[1] ' No, I want to say that I rule out nothing as an explanation so long as it explains. . . . My objection to the kind of statements that we've agreed to call metaphysical is that they don't explain ' (p. 615).

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to find few supporters today. But to return to the main point. Meaning and truth are indeed connected; but they are far from identical. In order for a statement to be true or false it is first necessary for it to be meaningful. Certainly. But it is possible for a statement to be meaningful without our being in a position to establish whether it is true or false. Statements about the past and statements about other minds are recognised by Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic* as creating difficulties for the verificationist position, as also do counterfactual conditionals (' If Hannibal had marched on Rome he would have taken it '—we know what this means, but how is its truth or falsity to be established; for after all Hannibal never did march on Rome?).[1] Moral and metaphysical utterances (unless one approaches them with the pre-conceived idea that they are meaningless) also clearly must cause trouble. And if one does not limit oneself to statements (which Ayer, of course, does), but considers also questions, commands, regulations, etc., it appears even more clearly that meaning and truth ought not to be identified. A question or a command are meaningful but are not properly to be called true or false. In the Third Programme debate referred to above both Ayer and Copleston seem to me to confuse meaning and truth.

As we have noted already, Ayer is in general aware that his account of meaning is a narrow (though not, he would claim, an arbitrary) one. In the Introduction to *Language, Truth and Logic* he writes: ' In putting forward the principle of verification as a [note: *a*] criterion of meaning, I do not overlook the fact that the word " meaning " is commonly used in a variety of senses, and I do not wish to deny that in some of these senses a statement may properly be said to be meaningful even though it is neither analytic nor empirically verifiable.'[2] Naturally, these other senses are frowned on by Ayer as unproductive; but perhaps, even so, in this admission he has given the religious believer all, or nearly all, he needs.

My comments on the other aspects of Ayer's argument in *Language, Truth and Logic* must be much more summary.

(2) His second point is open to question. ' It is now generally admitted, at any rate by philosophers, that the existence of a being having the attributes which define the god of any non-animistic religion cannot be demonstratively proved.' Unless Thomist philosophers are

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[1] Ayer provides a full account of his views on statements about the past and statements about other minds in his *Philosophical Essays* and *The Problem of Knowledge.*

[2] *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 15.

to be classed as not genuine philosophers (perhaps, as metaphysicians, Ayer might indeed say that they are not), this is not *universally* admitted; but certainly Ayer is right in what he says here about a *general* agreement among philosophers. However, the argument he gives to show the impossibility of a demonstration of the existence of God is not clear. His account, I suspect, is based on the Ontological Argument; it does not obviously seem to apply to the Cosmological Argument or the Argument from Design. Neither of these latter two arguments begins from *a priori* propositions, not, that is, in the sense of ' *a priori* proposition ' which Ayer himself adopts.[1] It is true that those philosophers who have made use of the theistic proofs have generally wished to conclude the existence of a Necessary Being, and there are problems involved in the notion of an existential proposition about a Necessary Being (Is such a proposition both empirical—because existential—and necessary—because about a Necessary Being?); but this does not seem to be the point that Ayer is making, and it is difficult to see the relevance of his remarks about *a priori* propositions to the theistic proofs as these have actually been developed.

(3) The third point I have already discussed under (1).

(4) This is an important point and Ayer is certainly right to distinguish his position from both atheism and agnosticism as these are usually understood. One consequence of logical positivism has been the general recognition that the issues involved in religious belief are a great deal less easy to understand than has often been thought in the past—and this is a recognition that has survived the abandonment of the classical logical positivist position. It has frequently been remarked that to the present-day philosopher the puzzling question is not *whether* God exists but the preliminary one of what it *means to say* ' God exists '.[2] Though no doubt philosophers in the past have not been unaware of this difficulty.

(5) Ayer's views on the relation between religion and science are worthy of a fuller discussion than I can provide here. There is a view, which has recently received several expressions by philosophers, that

[1] *A priori* propositions, Ayer says, are those of logic and pure mathematics, and are necessary because analytic.

[2] Although the term ' atheist ' is certainly out of place, the term ' agnostic ' is no doubt capable of being so interpreted as to make it applicable to Ayer. See Professor R. W. Hepburn's *Christianity and Paradox* (London:Watts and Co., 1958) for a discussion of some central problems of meaning in Christianity from the post-logical positivist point of view (the author calls himself, or is called in the dust-jacket blurb, ' a reverent agnostic ').

can be roughly summarised as follows: religion is outmoded, because what it did for past ages, science now does for us very much better; religion, a kind of pseudo-science, attempts to explain the nature of the universe, but now that genuine science has developed so success-fully, religion can be thanked for its past services and seen off into retirement with no regrets. (This is the kind of view, to take an older instance of it, that Freud expresses in some parts of *The Future of an Illusion*.) But this is to take one of the aspects of the highly complex thing called religion and treat it as if it were the whole. It is true enough that religion has sometimes been presented as pseudo-science, but this is only one of the ways in which religion has been presented; when this aspect of religion is (rightly) set on one side religion still has plenty of other tasks to fulfil, tasks which are more peculiarly its own. What is interesting in Ayer's view is that he does not take up this position—one which it might be thought would be congenial to him. His view is, indeed, more extreme than this; but it is at the same time truer; for he recognises the *difference* between religion and science, and does not make the mistake of treating religion as no more than primitive science, or bad science. He also calls attention to the tendency among physicists to be sympathetic towards religion, and remarks that this is a point in favour of his view. ' For this symathy towards religion marks the physicists' own lack of confidence in the validity of their hypotheses, which is a reaction on their part from the anti-religious dogmatism of nineteenth-century scientists, and a natural outcome of the crisis through which physics has just passed.'[1]

(6) ' The mystic, so far from producing propositions which are empirically verified, is unable to produce any intelligible propositions at all.' Yes; if ' intelligible proposition ' is to be taken as meaning ' empirically verifiable proposition '. But Ayer is certainly not right on a wider interpretation of ' intelligible proposition '. The mystics may not have found it easy to say what they wanted to say, but they generally succeed in conveying something. ' Do not think that because I call it a " darkness " or a " cloud " it is the sort of cloud you see in the sky, or the kind of darkness you know at home when the light is out. That kind of darkness or cloud you can picture in your mind's eye in the height of summer, just as in the depth of a winter's night you can picture a clear and shining light. I do not mean this at all. By " darkness " I mean " a lack of knowing "—just as anything that you do not know or may have forgotten may be said to be " dark " to

[1] *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 117.

you, for you cannot see it with your inward eye. For this reason it is called " a cloud ", not of the sky, of course, but " of unknowing ", a cloud of unknowing between you and your God.'[1] The *via negativa* has generally been held to have some positive significance; for knowing what God is not is one way of knowing what God is. One is struck, further, in much mystical writing, by the amount of space given to straightforward advice on how to pray or meditate, or conduct oneself in general, or information about psychological states. But Ayer's account of what is achieved by the mystic is at fault in a more important respect. He presents the mystic as someone who claims to have attained *knowledge* or *truth*. To quote yet again: ' The mystic, so far from producing propositions which are empirically verified, is unable to produce any intelligible propositions at all. And therefore we say that his intuition *has not revealed to him any facts*. It is no use his saying that he has apprehended facts but is unable to express them. For we know that if he really had *acquired any information* he would be able to express it.' [my italics] This is an odd way to describe what the mystic is trying to do. The mystic, in the Christian tradition anyway, aims ultimately at *union with God*, and however difficult this notion may be to explain I am sure that Ayer's language of ' acquiring information ', ' apprehending facts ' is totally out of place. It could be said, perhaps, that the mystic believes himself to know certain facts, or possess certain information, before he starts; and, of course, the mystic may well claim that his knowledge is deepened as a result of his mystical practices; but he is likely to mean by this, knowledge in the sense of knowledge *of* a person (' the object of his vision ', to use Ayer's phrase) rather than knowledge *about* anything. In any case, mysticism, it is generally held, requires discipline and deep study, and it is perhaps not to be expected that the apparent extent of Professor Ayer's acquaintance with it would qualify him to understand easily what mystics say. I do not mean that it can ever be very easy.

Ayer seems to treat ' mysticism ' and ' religious experience ' as synonyms. This, I think, is inadvisable. The expression ' religious experience ' has a wider connotation than has ' mysticism '. Men may claim to have had religious experiences, or even to have them frequently, without being described, and without wishing to describe themselves, as mystics.

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[1] From *The Cloud of Unknowing*. I am quoting from the version in modern English (by Clifton Wolters), recently published in the Penguin Classics series.

In spite of these criticisms I find myself in a large measure of agreement with Ayer over this, his last, point. Religious experiences (let us leave mysticism out of the question as, if anything, its introduction only confuses the issue) are frequently appealed to as grounds for belief in God. At the present time this appeal is extremely fashionable.[1] But I agree with Ayer that the argument from religious experience is fallacious. The essentially private nature of religious experience, as this is generally understood by those who make use of the argument (it has also a different ' public ' sense, but this is not usually in question here), makes it an unsatisfactory basis for a theistic proof; it is too easy for a man to deceive either himself, or others, or both. The three traditional theistic arguments (the Ontological Argument, the Cosmological Argument, the Argument from Design), whatever else may be wrong with them, have at least the merit of making their appeal to, in some sense, ' public ' things: the idea of God, an idea widely held; the existence of chairs, tables, etc.; the order and design alleged to be discoverable in the Solar System, the workings of the human ear or eye, etc., etc. But I cannot argue this point fully here. I am all too aware that the virtue of brevity in Ayer's presentation of his views on religion that I began by calling attention to is not shared by the present discussion of these views.

[1] See Professor H. D. Lewis' *Our Experience of God* for a detailed recent attempt to prove the truth of religion by appeal to the evidence of religious experience.