The Rejection of Metaphysics and the "Linguistic Turn"

1 The Positivist Creed

If substantial philosophical agreement was ever achieved on a number of important and interrelated philosophical problems, it surely was by those philosophers and scientists who made up the famed Vienna Circle. These early positivists prized philosophical agreement above almost all else, and this led to a remarkable convergence and conformity of opinion on several key issues. Although a great diversity of views certainly prevailed concerning myriad details of formulation, there remained a standard overall point of view and a generally recognized orthodoxy with regard to a central core of theses which have come to define the movement of logical positivism.

First on the positivist list of priorities was unquestionably the overthrow or elimination of traditional metaphysics, particularly the post-Kantian variety. The means for accomplishing this objective was to be the logical analysis of language. Statements purporting to deal with some transcendental reality, or being in itself, were to be regarded not simply as false, but as cognitively, or theoretically, meaningless, through failing to admit, even in principle, of verification—or at least confirmation.

Verification—the key to cognitive significance—was believed to be of two basic, mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive varieties: logical and factual. That is, truly meaningful assertions must either be analytic (true under any empirical circumstances in virtue
of considerations of language alone) or synthetic (factual assertions to be verified or falsified according to specific empirical procedures).

Logic and mathematics were guaranteed significance, and their a priori epistemological status was preserved, by counting their truths among those of the analytic category. The statements and laws of empirical science were taken to comprise all those of the synthetic category. Social sciences like psychology or sociology were placed here on an equal footing with natural sciences like physics or biology.

The proclamations of metaphysics, however, seemed to fit neatly into neither the analytic nor the synthetic category and thus were taken to violate the very logic or rules of significant discourse. Whatever significance might be granted metaphysics was to be assessed only in literary or poetic terms. Theology was treated in identical fashion. The normative disciplines of ethics and aesthetics—for which various versions of "expressive" or "emotive" theories soon emerged—were similarly excluded from the realm of legitimate theoretical inquiry. Though any of these disputed fields might serve as the sociological subject matter for an appropriate empirical investigation, their various individual claims were seen as based neither on language nor empirical fact, and were thus not simply to be refuted but to be rejected outright as meaningless, or devoid of "cognitive content." Positivists, therefore, viewed themselves as undermining metaphysics and related fields not on the basis of their admitted empiricist epistemology but rather through a logical critique or analysis of language itself.

The linguistic conception of analytic truth was of crucial importance for positivism, for it provided an account of the nonempirical and certain character of logico-mathematical knowledge without an essential appeal to metaphysical first principles or abstract entities like concepts or ideas. Among positivists there was a healthy respect for modern logic and mathematics and a deep appreciation of their fundamental role in physical science. They shrank from an extreme empiricism such as that of Mill, which saw the propositions of logic and mathematics simply as empirical generalizations or hypotheses, like those of the empirical sciences (though more general in scope) and, in principle, just as susceptible to refutation by empirical evidence. By treating the truth of these propositions as grounded in the very nature of language (its structure
or meaning, rules or conventions) as revealed through logical analysis, the positivists seemed to have found a way of rendering the a priori status of logic and mathematics compatible with a thoroughgoing empiricism. They could still hold that, although our understanding of language might derive from experience, logical or mathematical truths based only on the nature of this understanding itself were not themselves empirical propositions. Thus, Wittgenstein called analytic truths tautologies—empty statements that “say nothing” about the world.1 Ayer, stressing the conventional origins of language, wrote that the propositions of logic and mathematics “simply record our determination to use symbols in a certain fashion.”2

With logic and mathematics secured within their revised empiricism, and with metaphysics banished once and for all from the domain of significant inquiry, all that remained was to find a place for philosophy itself, and this was immediately suggested by the very method of logical analysis which had proved so useful in achieving the first two objectives. This mode of critical inquiry and analysis seemed to offer a way of doing epistemology without indulging in the metaphysics of rationalism or the psychologizing of traditional empiricism. Various characterizations of “analysis” emerged. At one extreme were the early views of Schlick and Wittgenstein, who saw it as a sort of mental activity (“search for meaning”3) whose results were, in principle, incapable of explicit formulation. At the other extreme were the writings of Carnap, in which “analysis” came more and more closely to resemble a particular branch of theoretical science itself, closely related to empirical linguistics.4

The fundamental difference, however, between philosophy as logical or linguistic analysis and science proper was still to be found in the former’s purported concern with language or meaning as opposed to fact or truth. Whatever might be conceded or denied in the way of methodological likeness, this distinction in subject matter was surely supreme. Empirical science exhausted the legitimate questions of truth about the extralinguistic world; there was no higher or transcendent realm for philosophers to investigate, there was only language—the tool employed by scientists engaged in their several different theoretical investigations. The aim of analysis was first and foremost to clarify language and make it more
precise, thereby simultaneously exposing the traditional "pseudo-problems" of philosophy and exhibiting the exact nature and extent of genuine theoretical issues. Whatever difficulties positivists encountered in precisely characterizing this new philosophical method of analysis, the fundamental difference between philosophy and the rest of science was believed to be as basic and irreducible as the difference between language and the world that language describes.

There was difference of opinion also with respect to the particular aspect of language with which logical analysis was taken to be concerned. Early analysts liked to emphasize a distinction between grammatical or syntactical questions concerning the (logical) structure or form of linguistic expressions and semantical questions concerning the meaning or content of these expressions. Some early positivists, impressed by this distinction and suspicious of the metaphysically tainted notion of 'meaning,' sought to speak exclusively of the syntactical features of language; others, following Schlick, settled for talk of linguistic meaning outright. Carnap once attempted to interpret all significant semantical notions in terms of purely syntactical ones, but later, after having become increasingly impressed with the philosophical importance of semantics as an independent discipline, proposed the "semitotic" analysis of language, which would take into serious account both syntax and semantics as well as a third domain called "pragmatics." However, although the distinction between syntactical considerations of form or structure and semantical considerations of meaning or content retained a surface plausibility and intuitive appeal, its precise theoretical nature and importance resisted explicit and unproblematic formulation. Most nonmetaphysical attempts to account for either of these purportedly distinct sorts of linguistic phenomena appealed, in the end, to the same considerations of linguistic behavior or to the rules or conventions believed to govern such behavior.

At present it is not necessary to pursue this question beyond the point of observing that, as in the case of analysis itself, the peculiar features of language at which analysis is to be aimed have come under various alternative descriptions. Whether these terminological discrepancies do in fact signal any significant substantive distinctions of far-reaching philosophical importance it is our purpose here to examine.
2 Background of the Positivist Manifesto

The most important circumstance leading to the positivists’ philosophical revolt was the hopeless disarray of philosophy around 1900. Ironically, the work of Kant, the great antimetaphysician, sparked some of the most chaotic and unprecedented extremes of metaphysical system building in the history of philosophy. In anchoring science to the perceptual and conceptual features of human experience, Kant had hoped to save human knowledge from the skeptical doubts of empiricists while simultaneously avoiding the excessive metaphysics of rationalists. In so definitively limiting scientific understanding to the realm of what was admittedly mere “appearance,” however, Kant excited fresh philosophical interest in that transcendent realm of reality, or being in itself, which, it seemed reasonable to think, must lie beyond such appearance. That knowledge of some transcendent reality was in fact possible was argued just from Kant’s having been able to draw the boundaries he did. Instead of undermining metaphysics altogether, then, Kant’s Critique had the effect rather of breathing new life into it by severing once and for all its increasingly tenuous union with science and setting it up as a distinct and autonomous mode of inquiry, with its own separate domain of concern.

Science, secured by the added support which Kant’s comprehensive and authoritative scholarship lent to common sense, pursued its course with renewed confidence in the legitimacy of its claims to knowledge. Metaphysically minded philosophers, on the other hand, freed from the conceptual strictures within which scientists were now believed destined to toil, looked to a higher level of understanding or cognition by which they might grasp the ultimate nature of reality itself. Metaphysics thus became a self-consciously speculative enterprise. Once their bonds with the everyday world of science and scientific understanding were decisively cut, metaphysical systems proliferated on a grander and more vigorous scale than ever, limited only by the capacity of each individual philosopher’s imagination.

The impossibility of adjudicating competing metaphysical claims soon became the outstanding obstacle to philosophical progress. Empirical scientists had standards for assessing the merits of alternative systems; but metaphysicians, except for the requirement
that each system be internally consistent (which was itself interpreted in novel ways by Hegelians) had no such generally recognized standards. Denied, in effect, the very possibility of adducing evidence objectively, debate became deadlocked, and advance was hopelessly stalemated. Opposing schools quarreled incessantly with one another and within their own ranks, without making significant headway toward the resolution of their differences. Manley Thompson describes the situation: “Each metaphysical system defines for itself the circumstances within which all metaphysical systems are to be tested, so that proponents of rival systems can hardly expect to find circumstances within which they can seek agreement.”

Without shared standards to serve as a basis for arbitrating metaphysical disputes, matters took a predictably subjective turn. Attempts at justifying a metaphysical system invariably culminated in special appeals to some sort of inexplicable insight, romantic intuition, or religious faith. A system was as likely to be embraced for its creative originality, its speculative boldness, or its grandeur and elegance as for any element of truth it purported to contain. Metaphysics had become a question of taste, and de gustibus non disputandum est. This moral, however, could not be observed, for the philosophers’ claims were still ultimately to truth and not merely to likes and dislikes, and de veritate multum disputandum est.

This stultifying situation, which found philosophers isolated from one another within the confines of their idiosyncratic metaphysical systems, arguing futilely and always at cross purposes, repelled the scientifically trained and scientifically minded positivists. The spectacle of philosophers caught in a tangle of imaginative fantasies, with rational debate all but forsaken in favor of tactics of persuasion, contrasted sharply with the received view of the sciences, where cooperative efforts, rational discussion, objective decision procedures, and systematic progress had by now come to be taken for granted. With the virtues once considered so distinctive of philosophy itself now best exemplified elsewhere, the conviction grew that there was something fundamentally awry. Positivists came to see these so-called debaucheries of post-Kantian metaphysics as the outgrowth of a deep-rooted misconception of the true nature of philosophy, and thus turned their attention to the task of reconsidering the philosophical enterprise itself.
The optimistic nature of Moritz Schlick rebelled against the suggestion that philosophical progress was impossible and the accompanying "historicist" doctrine that philosophy consists primarily in its own history. Positivists had no sympathy for a reformulation of philosophy as an essentially irrational or nonrational activity where fruitless controversy was inevitable. They were intent, rather, on reinvesting philosophy with a semblance of its traditional status. Thus, Ayer began his famous English exposition of positivism as follows: "The traditional disputes of philosophers are, for the most part, as unwarranted as they are unfruitful. The surest way to end them is to establish beyond question what should be the purpose and method of philosophical inquiry."9

It is not surprising that in revising their conception of philosophy the positivists came to focus on questions of language. There was, first of all, the fact that philosophers have historically been obsessed with questions of the form "What is x?" or "What is the nature of x?"—which have always looked suspiciously like requests for definitions or accounts of words.10 Schlick viewed philosophy as the "search for meaning," most clearly exemplified by Socrates himself as portrayed in Plato's Dialogues.11 Ayer likewise found it plausible to assert that "the majority of those who are commonly supposed to have been great philosophers were primarily not metaphysicians but analysts,"12 which is to say, according to Ayer, that they were "not concerned with the physical properties of things... but... only with the way in which we speak about them."13 These "great philosophers" were taken to include, among others, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and all the British Empiricists, from Hobbes through Mill.14 However, the mere fact that the historical interpretation of philosophy as definitional or simply linguistic in character has always had a certain appeal can hardly explain the fervor and unanimity with which positivists embraced it or the distinctive form this interpretation took in their hands.

A second key factor can be traced to the very features of the situation that sparked the demand for a new conception of philosophy—namely, the futile debates and controversies of post-Kantian metaphysics, against which positivists were directly reacting. These disputes were so severe and seemingly so remote from possible resolution that not only was agreement hard to come by but communication itself seemed wanting in most cases. Besides
simply disagreeing over what they held true, opposing metaphysicians seemed frequently to differ with respect to what they meant. As Thompson has urged, a system typically sets not only the standards for deciding its own claims, but also the meanings of the words used in making them; this itself suggests that disputes between systems may often be only verbal.\textsuperscript{15}

However, as conducive as the above circumstances must have been to the ultimate choice of logical or linguistic analysis as the sole task of philosophy, the most overwhelming factor was undoubtedly the startling successes of the new method of analysis, brought to bear (chiefly by Russell) on a number of outstanding philosophical problems. The most remarkable and widely celebrated of these "successes" was the reduction of mathematics to logic believed to have been achieved by Russell and Whitehead in \textit{Principia Mathematica}. Here the construction of basic mathematical concepts out of purely logical ones held promise of an ultimate derivation of all truths of mathematics from just logical principles. This culmination of work begun earlier by Frege gained immediate and widespread recognition and served as dramatic testimony to the power and utility of analysis as a philosophical tool. The doctrine of mathematics as essentially a matter of pure logic soon figured as a rallying point for positivistically inclined philosophers.

A related area of major importance in which the use of analysis seemed to hold similar promise was indicated by Russell's envisioned scheme for exhibiting the three-dimensional physical world as a "logical construction" of more primitive sensory elements. The idea was, in short, to do for physics what \textit{Principia} was thought to have done for mathematics. For positivists such a program appeared to open a pathway between the Scylla and Charybdis of metaphysics and psychology by casting their empiricist epistemology into the form of a purely logical issue. Though Russell never attempted to carry this enterprise forward on any large scale, he succeeded ingeniously with a limited but suggestive treatment of the concepts of space and time,\textsuperscript{16} and the ideal of a complete reduction of the physical world to that of immediate experience quickly became a powerful driving force among early positivists, who regarded it as the central objective in the effort to clarify the foundations of empirical science. The closest this ideal ever came to realization, however, was in the brilliant but ill-starred constructions of Carnap's famous \textit{Logische Aufbau der Welt}. 
The method of analysis was also to prove remarkably fruitful when directed against metaphysics. One well-known example which had a tremendous impact upon the development of positivism and linguistic philosophy in general is Russell’s theory of definite descriptions.17 This purported account of the correct logical form of a particular grammatical construction of ordinary English made essential use of the logical symbolism of Principia and was deployed in devastating fashion against the perversely swollen ontologies of Meinongian semantics. The analysis of definite descriptions thus came to serve as the prototype for efforts to tie the origins of various metaphysical claims to confusion over the proper logical form or structure of statements in ordinary language. Such an approach was the basis for Wittgenstein’s view of philosophy as a “critique of language,” which aimed thereby to show that “the deepest problems are in fact not problems at all.”18 Taking the cue from Wittgenstein, positivists followed this same course by launching a wholesale assault on a wide range of traditional philosophical issues, from the problem of universals and the ontological argument to Heidegger’s conception of “nothing.” Here linguistic analysis proved a powerful critical weapon whose importance, in one way or another, was readily conceded by many philosophers.

Another even more decisive way of utilizing analysis in a critique of traditional metaphysics can be traced to Russell’s theory of types, set forth in the Principles of Mathematics to preclude formation of a certain troublesome class of propositions of set theory. Set-theoretic statements heretofore regarded as grammatically correct and significant were deemed now to violate proper logical form through failing to observe certain so-called type distinctions between individual component expressions, and were thus put aside as meaningless strings of symbols. This idea of trying to demonstrate not the falsity but the meaninglessness of undesirable assertions, which Russell employed in trying to resolve the paradoxes of set theory, was adopted by positivists as a general strategy for directly undermining all of metaphysics. The theory of types was itself generalized to apply to all theoretical discourse, with the result that a multitude of metaphysical assertions were now claimed to have been revealed as cognitively meaningless “pseudo-statements” in which “predicates which should be applied to objects of a certain sort are instead applied to predicates of these objects or to ‘being’
or to 'existence' or to a relation between these objects." Metaphysicians were thus alleged to be doubly misled by ordinary grammar, first in taking the apparent logical form of ordinary statements to be the real form and second in failing to notice that their own philosophical assertions violated canons of correct logical form and were thus insignificant.

Whereas analysis according to the theory of definite descriptions could do no more than explain the psychological genesis of metaphysical issues as a result of confusions over ordinary language, analysis along the general lines suggested by the theory of types appeared to provide a logical critique of the very philosophical discourse constituting these disputations as itself involving the misuse and abuse of language. While the former approach could at best only "cure" some metaphysicians, the latter aimed directly at eliminating metaphysics entirely. The more direct attack on metaphysical "pseudo-doctrine," irrespective of supposed origins, thus proved much more to the positivists' taste, and verifiability soon appeared on the scene to supplement—as well as to provide a more general replacement for—logical form as the criterion of cognitive or theoretical significance.

It should be no wonder, then, that positivists, bent on reformulating philosophy to preserve it as a significant and integral branch of knowledge, seized upon the method of analysis as an alternative to speculative metaphysics. The brilliant success and promise of the new method contrasted sharply with the futile metaphysical controversies of the preceding century. This versatile new mode of inquiry seemed to have accomplished precisely what speculative metaphysics had for so long failed to do: it had led to significant progress in the resolution of outstanding philosophical problems, and it had provided a basis for substantive philosophical agreement. At the same time, it offered what seemed to be an illuminating explanation of the origins of metaphysics itself as well as the logical grounds for its complete overthrow. Carnap thus described analysis as having both a positive and a negative use:

The researches of applied logic or the theory of knowledge, which aim at clarifying the cognitive content of scientific statements and thereby the meanings of the terms that occur in
the statements, by means of logical analysis, lead to a positive
and to a negative result. The positive result is worked out in
the domain of empirical science; the various concepts of the
various branches of science are clarified; their formal-logical
and epistemological connections are made explicit. In the do-
main of metaphysics, including all philosophy of value and
normative theory, logical analysis yields the negative result
that the alleged statements in this domain are entirely
meaningless.\textsuperscript{20}

However, Russell and many of his followers employed the
method of analysis primarily not as an alternative or a means of
attacking or eliminating all metaphysics but as a means of con-
ducting metaphysical inquiry itself. The analysis of definite de-
scriptions was utilized, therefore, in conjunction with the principle
of parsimony (Occam’s Razor—\textit{Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter
necessitatem}) in order to defeat one ontological view in favor of
another, more modest one. So, too, the wholesale reduction of
mathematics to logic in the \textit{Principia} was regarded as support for
an ontological claim of the existence of just classes or properties
rather than numbers. Likewise the proposed view of physical things
as logical constructions of sense data was aimed eventually at dem-
monstrating the ontological priority of sense data.

Positivists, however, in rejecting outright the transcendental realm
of being, which had served as the basis for so much fruitless spec-
ulation, were entirely committed to the view that any and all genuine
questions of truth or existence fell totally within the domain of
science proper. Therefore, as philosophers, their objective in ana-
lyzing and clarifying the concepts and propositions of science was
to be purely epistemological rather than metaphysical. The analysis
of definite descriptions was regarded as simply revealing one ex-
ample of how metaphysics arises from linguistic confusion. The
reduction of mathematics to logic was not viewed as lending support
to any claim of the existence or nonexistence of classes, properties,
or numbers, but as showing only that mathematical knowledge
was as certain and as firmly based as logic itself. In like fashion,
Carnap in the \textit{Aufbau} viewed his “logical construction” as dem-
onstrating only the epistemological rather than the ontological
priority of phenomenal entities.\textsuperscript{21}
3 Linguistic Reinterpretation

The positivist attack on metaphysics was mitigated to some extent by efforts to reconstrue metaphysical claims not simply as meaningless pseudo-statements but as significant assertions concerning language rather than the extralinguistic world. It has been noted that the history of philosophy shows a preponderance of "What is" questions, which have always suggested the possibility that something on the order of mere verbal definitions might, in fact, be required by way of answering them. So long as one's view of definition remains sufficiently Aristotelian, this suggestion hardly need threaten the integrity of the metaphysical enterprise as such. Positivists, however, were willing to accord significance to such philosophical questions only when these were reconstrued as strictly linguistic:

In other words, the propositions of philosophy are not factual, but linguistic in character—that is, they do not describe the behaviour of physical, or even mental, objects; they express definitions, or the formal consequences of definitions. . . . Thus, to ask what is the nature of a material object is to ask for a definition of "material object," and this . . . is to ask how propositions about material objects are to be translated into propositions about sense-contents. Similarly, to ask what is a number is to ask some such question as whether it is possible to translate propositions about the natural numbers into propositions about classes. And the same thing applies to all the other philosophical questions of the form, "What is an x?" or "What is the nature of x?" They are all requests for definitions. . . .

Now, disregarding the dubious accuracy of any historical claim to the effect that the great philosophers of the past actually viewed the questions they posed as primarily linguistic in character, Ayer's suggestion here is clearly that this is how they ought to have viewed them, and how we too ought to view them now if we wish to make any progress toward answering them.

Ayer's remarks stem in large part from Carnap's doctrine of quasi-syntactical sentences set forth in his Logical Syntax of Language. Such sentences are said to occupy an intermediate domain
between genuine factual (object) statements and linguistic (syntactical) statements, for they "are formulated as though they refer . . . to objects, while in reality they refer to syntactical forms, and, specifically, to the forms of the designations of those objects with which they appear to deal. Thus these sentences are syntactical sentences in virtue of their content, though they are disguised as object sentences." For the sake of clarity and precision, quasi-syntactical sentences may be translated out of the material mode of speech, wherein they appear to treat of objects, into the formal mode of speech, wherein, through the use of such devices as quotation marks, their actual linguistic content can be made explicit. Thus the pseudo-object sentence "Five is a number," which like the genuine object sentence "Five is an odd number" appears to be about the number five, is held to really concern the word "five" and so to be best reformulated as the purely syntactical sentence "'Five' is a number-word."

An important class of these quasi-syntactical or pseudo-object sentences is said to result from the use of certain so-called universal words or predicates (Allwörter), examples of which are "number," "class," "property," "relation," and many others. These words, which appear to designate basic classes or categories of objects, are instead held, in the words of Victor Kraft, to "represent the conceptual or grammatical categories which are discriminated by the logical grammarian." Thus, when a universal word is employed in a sentence as a predicate applicable to a certain kind of object—such as "number" in the above example, "Five is a number"—it is to be treated as a disguised linguistic, or syntactical, predicate, which actually applies to all linguistic expressions of the corresponding type appropriate for designating such objects; in the present example these would be numerical expressions, like "five." The factual content of a sentence like "Five is a number" is therefore seen as null, and the sentence—as well as any others resulting from the substitution for "five" of any other numerical expression—is to be regarded as trivially and analytically true, reflecting only the syntactical type distinctions of a given language.

The occurrence of universal words in the material mode of speech abounds, according to Carnap, in philosophical contexts, where it causes the mistaken impression that what is under investigation is the nature or existence of fundamental categories or features of
reality, when it is in fact only a question of the basic types of expressions employed by a language. This confusion and the irresoluble conflicts and disputes to which it gives rise can best be dispelled, in Carnap's view, by translation out of the material mode of speech and into the formal mode of speech.

Carnap cites the logicist-formalist debate over the nature of number as one typical philosophical dispute that can be brought to a quick and satisfactory resolution once the apparently conflicting claims are formulated so that the peculiarly linguistic nature of the issue is brought to the surface. Thus, the two opposing theses

[L:] "Numbers are classes of classes of things."

[F:] "Numbers belong to a special primitive kind of objects."

which are according to Carnap misleadingly formulated in the material mode of speech, may be translated into the formal mode of speech as follows:

[L']: "Numerical expressions are class expressions of the second level."

[F']: "Numerical expressions are expressions of the zero level."

Here L and F are pseudo-object sentences that appear to deal with extralinguistic objects (namely, the natural numbers) but whose transformations, L' and F', reveal them to be actually concerned with language (numerical expressions). The stage is now set for resolution of the dispute, but the opposing parties still have to specify the particular language with reference to which their respective assertions, L' and F', are made. Failure to note the need for such a specification is itself reckoned as one other major cause of confusion arising out of the use of the material mode of speech:

... the use of the material mode of speech gives rise to obscurity by employing obsolete concepts in place of the syntactical concepts which are relative to language. ... The use of the material mode of speech gives rise ... to a disregard of the relativity to language of philosophical sentences; it is responsible for an erroneous conception of philosophical sentences as absolute.27

Once the language in question is indicated, however, checking the
validity of such claims as those above is presumed to be a routine and unproblematic procedure.

Carnap cites the disagreement between phenomenalists and realists over the nature of material objects as another representative example where reformulation of the opposing theses to bring out their true linguistic "content" leads the way to a speedy settlement of the matter. The pseudo-object sentences

[F:] A thing is a complex of sense data.

[R:] A thing is a complex of atoms.

are then rendered in the following purely syntactical form:

[F':] Every sentence in which a thing designation occurs is equipollent (equivalent) to a class of sentences in which no thing-designation but sense-data designations occur.

[R':] Every sentence in which a thing designation occurs is equipollent (equivalent) to a sentence in which space-time coordinates and certain other descriptive functors (of physics) occur.

Again, specification by both parties of the languages in question is necessary in order to allay the ambiguity and underscore the relativity of their respective claims. (This is, by the way, neglected by Ayer in his discussion of these matters.)

Here, then, is Carnap's suggested scheme for treating philosophical questions as merely questions concerning the forms and interrelationships of expressions employed in particular languages (questions of "definition" for Ayer). Therefore, to say from within an explicitly logicist language that numbers are classes of classes of things, or from within a phenomenalist language that material objects are complexes of sense data, is to say something uninteresting, empty, and trivially true. Just as in the case of "Five is a number" taken within the context of arithmetic, these statements simply reflect the verbal conventions or rules governing the expressions of the language in which they are understood to occur. But it is only the nature and import of these conventions themselves that interest the philosopher as analyst, rather than any corresponding absolute claims concerning the nature of reality.

Now, this purported clarification of traditional philosophical is-
sues as entirely linguistic was not sufficient to quiet old-style controversies, even among positivists. There was, after all, a tendency for familiar metaphysical issues, such as the nominalism versus realism and phenomenalism versus physicalism debates, to reassert themselves within this new linguistic setting. Once questions as to the nature of the rules and conventions of various languages had been apparently resolved, or shelved for a time, the question quickly arose as to what language was to be preferred. That is, proponents of a nominalist language debated with proponents of a realist language over which language ought to be used for mathematics. Likewise, proponents of a phenomenalist language disagreed with proponents of a physicalist language with regard to what sort of language was required for natural science. To critics of positivism these supposedly linguistic disagreements seemed rather poorly disguised versions of the traditional metaphysical arguments concerning the existence of universals and the reality of the external world, suggesting that the material mode of speech was, perhaps, the proper philosophical idiom after all.

Carnap's response to this sort of criticism derives from his principle of tolerance invoked in the Logical Syntax of Language to permit the free and unhampered construction and exploration of various linguistic alternatives without the establishment of a priori restrictions on what sort of language might ultimately be admissible for any given purpose—as in the case of the development of non-Euclidean geometries:

> It is not our business to set up prohibitions, but to arrive at conventions. . . . In logic there are no morals. Everyone is at liberty to build up his own logic, i.e. his own form of language, as he wishes. All that is required of him is that, if he wishes to discuss it, he must state his methods clearly, and give syntactical rules instead of philosophical arguments.\(^{31}\)

This principle leads Carnap to consider the possibility that perhaps not all philosophical theses are best regarded as actual statements about language after all:

> It is especially to be noted that the statement of a philosophical thesis sometimes . . . represents not an assertion but a suggestion. Any dispute about the truth or falsehood of such a thesis is
quite mistaken, a mere empty battle of words; we can at most discuss the utility of the proposal, or investigate its consequences.\textsuperscript{32}

This is the origin of Carnap's suggestion for the reformulation of traditional metaphysical or ontological claims as \textit{linguistic proposals}, which achieves its clearest and most complete expression in his later essay "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology," in which he offers an explanation for the appearance of metaphysical disputes within the positivists' own movement, in addition to a somewhat more sophisticated statement of the positivist case against speculative metaphysics. In doing so, Carnap stresses the importance of recognizing "a fundamental distinction between two kinds of questions concerning the existence or reality of entities."\textsuperscript{33} These two sorts of questions, which depend on what he calls a linguistic framework, Carnap labels internal and external.

Internal questions concern the existence or reality of entities belonging to a given system of entities. These questions can occur only from within the specified contexts of some linguistic framework designed specifically for the purpose of talking about such entities. Internal questions, and possible answers to them, are formulated according to the rules of the framework, which govern all correct use of its constituent expressions. Answers are then empirically tested in the manner specified also by the rules of the framework—unless it is purely a logical question, in which case the truth or falsity of a proposed answer is supposed to follow from just the rules alone. For example, once we have accepted the thing language (cf. system of thing designations)\textsuperscript{34} and its accompanying rules, we may meaningfully ask and answer such factual questions as "Are there any black swans?" In similar fashion, once we have the arithmetical framework (cf. system of numerical expressions) and its rules in hand, answering such questions as "Are there any prime numbers over 100?" should be a routine, logical matter. Internal questions, therefore, which are held to fall completely within the domain of the various special sciences and to exhaust all theoretically significant questions concerning any given sort of entity, are entirely relative to an accepted linguistic framework, with its rules for formulating and testing all statements concerning such entities.

External questions, on the other hand, occur outside the context
of any particular framework and concern the existence or reality of a system of entities as a whole, such as the system of physical objects or that of natural numbers. External questions are like the "absolute" philosophical theses mentioned earlier in that they are formulated without reference to any particular language or framework and purport to deal with the basic categories or ultimate constituents of reality itself. Such "philosophical" questions are commonly thought to require answers as a means of justifying the acceptance of a proposed linguistic framework. "In contrast to this view," says Carnap, "we take the position that the introduction of the new ways of speaking does not need any theoretical justification because it does not imply any assertion of reality."

According to Carnap, all significant theoretical questions are relative to a specific language or framework in that the formulation of any significant assertion, along with the subsequent determination of its truth or falsity, presuppose the methods and criteria only an already accepted framework can provide. We may, of course, question the existence of a whole system of entities from within the framework that has been designed to speak about them, but the answers to these, now internal questions, are trivially true, reflecting only our decision to accept the framework in the first place.

Thus, absolute ontological, or external, questions remain thoroughly devoid of theoretical significance. Accordingly, Carnap rejects the view that a framework is to be introduced on the basis of its purported correspondence to reality. However, he suggests, there is a way that external questions may be conceded a point, if not a theoretical content, when regarded as practical questions concerning the desirability of employing a framework for certain purposes. Carnap spells out what he means with reference to the external question concerning the reality of physical things:

Those who raise the question of the reality of the thing world itself have perhaps in mind not a theoretical question as their formulation seems to suggest, but rather a practical question, a matter of a practical decision concerning the structure of our language. We have to make the choice whether or not to accept and use the forms of expressions in the framework in question. . . . If someone decides to accept the thing language, there is no objection against saying that he has accepted the world
of things. But this must not be interpreted as if it meant his acceptance of a belief in the reality of the thing world; there is no such belief or assertion or assumption, because it is not a theoretical question. To accept the thing world means nothing more than to accept a certain form of language, in other words, to accept rules for forming statements, and for testing, accepting, or rejecting them. . . . The purpose for which the language is intended to be used . . . will determine which factors are relevant for the decision. The efficiency, fruitfulness, and simplicity of the use of the thing language may be among the decisive factors. And the questions concerning these qualities are indeed of a theoretical nature. But these questions can not be identified with the question of realism. They are not yes-no questions but questions of degree.37

Thus, while Carnap strongly affirms that philosophers talk nonsense when they declare the truth of a framework, he is willing to grant their remarks a legitimate practical import when construed simply as linguistic proposals, hinging only upon the comparative utility of given frameworks intended for specific purposes.

When the seemingly metaphysical disputes of positivists are viewed within this suggested overall perspective, the air of paradox is quickly dispelled; they are seen simply as disputes over the practical merits of employing different languages or frameworks for various specific purposes. The issue of a nominalist versus a realist language then appears not as a disagreement about the existence of universals but, rather, as the question of which language is best suited for the foundation of mathematics. Similarly, phenomenalists and realists are debating not which entities, physical or phenomenal, are truly real, but only whether a phenomenalist or a physicalist language best serves the purpose of natural science.

Another view of ontological inquiry that somewhat resembles that of Carnap has been put forward by Gustav Bergmann. Bergmann shares the general positivist interest in mathematical logic and the philosophy of science, as well as the basic conviction that questions of language are of fundamental importance for philosophy. Bergmann suggests the reformulation of ontological claims as proposals for an ideal language. Even the rationalist metaphysics of Spinoza or Leibniz are, according to Bergmann, best interpreted
as such linguistic proposals. His view of the issues of nominalism versus realism and phenomenalism versus physicalism has what is, by now, a familiar ring:

Consider the thesis of classical nominalism that there are no universals. Given the linguistic turn it becomes the assertion that the ideal language contains no undefined descriptive signs except proper names. Again take classical sensationalism. Transformed it asserts the ideal language contains no undefined descriptive predicates, except non-relational ones of the first order, referring to characters exemplified by sense-data. . . .

The crucial difference between Carnap and Bergmann lies in Bergmann’s conception of the ideal language. According to Bergmann, “One does not, in any intelligible sense, choose the ideal language”; one rather “discovers” that it is adequate to represent reality. The ideal language is, then, no mere question of practical expediency, but purports to provide a true representation of the extralinguistic world. Bergmann proposes construction of the ideal language as a means of actually doing “descriptive metaphysics.” He explains this by comparing the relation between language and reality to that between a picture and what it represents: “To say that a picture, to be a picture, must have certain features is, clearly, to say something about what it is a picture of.” Unlike the positivists, who see philosophy as purely and simply linguistic, Bergmann’s view is that “philosophical discourse is not just about the ideal language, but rather, by means of it, about the world.” Whereas Carnap and other positivists adopt linguistic reformulations of classical philosophical theses as alternatives to what they believe to be meaningless metaphysical discourse, for Bergmann the move is merely a strategy for sidestepping such charges of meaninglessness while continuing to do metaphysics: “I know of no other way to speak of the world’s categorial features without falling into the snares the linguistic turn avoids.”

Bergmann’s view, however, seems to offer no way of proving the adequacy of, for example, a nominalist language, short of establishing in the first place the metaphysical claim that universals do not exist. So viewed, Bergmann’s suggestion that we can discover the ideal language is surely metaphysics in a linguistic guise and is alien to the positivist temper. Carnap’s proposal, on the other
hand, is far more attractive from a more stringently antimetaphysical outlook. The idea that ultimately only pragmatic considerations lead us initially to speak of physical objects, numbers, and the like also brings Carnap close to the views of American philosophers like C. I. Lewis, while remaining essentially consistent with classical positivism. Carnap offers a more complete and well-rounded account of both science and philosophy and simultaneously sheds further light on the reasons for the alleged failure of speculative metaphysics.

The philosopher's chief task remains, for Carnap, that of asking and answering definitional “What is” questions—that is, the task of exploring and examining the conceptual parameters, or conditions of significance, imposed by the rules (syntactical and semantical) of various linguistic frameworks, and their consequences. This is, in Carnap’s words, scientific philosophy. In opening up the domain of choice between alternative forms of language as a practical rather than a theoretical issue, however, Carnap accommodates traditional philosophical questions of the more straightforward “What is real?” or “What exists?” variety without compromising his antimetaphysical principles. Within this broad perspective the “scientific philosopher” is like the scientist himself in that he furnishes tools for the attainment of certain practical objectives. The philosopher provides useful linguistic or conceptual frameworks for the scientist, who employs these in fashioning theories for more direct technological application.

4 Kantian Ingredients in the Positivists' Redefinition of Philosophy

An apparent truism from which positivists inevitably began arguments for their view of philosophy as essentially logical analysis was that before you can decide whether some particular statement is true you must first understand what the statement means. Positivists latched onto this almost universally accepted dichotomy between meaning and truth (of propositions, statements, sentences, or whatever) and took it to reflect the division of labor between philosopher and scientist. As Schlick puts it,

Here then we find a definite contrast between the philosophic
method, which has for its object the discovery of meaning, and
the methods of the sciences, which have for their object the
discovery of truth. . . . I believe Science should be defined as
the "pursuit of truth" and Philosophy as the "pursuit of
meaning." 43

The philosopher is to seek and clarify the meanings of the statements
of science, to construct or reconstruct the language of science; the
scientist, language in hand, then proceeds to decide questions of
truth or falsity and to build theories with the language at his disposal:

As I have stated the scientist has two tasks. He must find out
the truth of a proposition and he must also find out the meaning
of it. . . . In so far as the scientist does find out the hidden
meaning of the propositions which he uses in his science he
is a philosopher.44

What that simple distinction between meaning and truth did,
besides provide a basis for distinguishing between science and
philosophy, was to supply a basis for philosophy's claim to priority
over theoretical science proper as a mode of human inquiry. Just
as knowing the meaning of a statement was recognized as a logical
prerequisite to the ability to verify it, the task of the philosopher
was viewed as logically or epistemologically prior to that of the
scientist. The philosopher, by setting forth (or at least discovering)
the nature and extent of significant discourse, sets the parameters
of scientific inquiry itself (that is, determines the limits within which
scientific or theoretical truth may be established). In defining the
range of legitimate theoretical inquiry—what may and what may
not be established as true or false—the philosopher fixes the con-
ceptual limitations of scientific investigations. Thus, by focusing
on the rudimentary distinction between meaning and truth, and
the apparently intimate relation between them, positivists were
able to characterize logical or linguistic analysis as a genuine sort
of "first philosophy" or epistemology, a discipline concerned with
the conditions of the possibility of all knowledge (science). Again,
we turn to Moritz Schlick for exemplary clarity on this point:

We see that meaning and truth are linked together by the
process of verification: but the first is found by mere reflection
about possible circumstances in the world, while the second
is decided by really discovering the existence or non-existence of those circumstances.\textsuperscript{45}

Or, in the words of the early Wittgenstein, to whom Schlick was so indebted,

Philosophy sets limits to the much disputed sphere of natural science. It must set limits to what can be thought; and, in doing so, to what cannot be thought. It must set limits to what cannot be thought by working outwards through what can be thought.\textsuperscript{46}

There was more than a slight Kantian flavor, then, to the positivist program. Where Kant reacted in part against the excesses of German rationalism, positivists were reacting against the "debaucheries" of post-Kantian idealism. Where Kant sought to secure scientific knowledge itself from the skepticism of a Hume, positivists sought, in a similar spirit, to establish its 'logical foundations.' The cutting edge of Kant's approach was the observation that there could be no pure perception of reality unmediated by human conceptualization; that knowledge of the world requires the application of conceptual categories which shape and mold experience into some cognitively digestible form. Thus any knowledge of the world is necessarily relative to such a conceptual scheme, and the idea of any absolute or direct apprehension of reality is rejected as an impossibility. This is essentially the same outlook positivists came to adopt, except that, whereas Kant had located the organizing conceptual manifold through which all experience is filtered in the structure of the human mind, the positivists saw it now as embodied in the very language of science.

Just as the psychologically entrenched concepts or categories were for Kant a prerequisite to all human knowledge, for positivists language, as the actual embodiment of all human thought, was a precondition of any science. For positivists, then, the 'conditions of the possibility of human knowledge' came to be identified with the 'conditions of the possibility of meaningful discourse.' Positivists clearly perceived the task of the scientist as that of establishing systems of true propositions, statements, or sentences as such; therefore, identifying the conditions of meaningfulness of such propositions with the conditions of theoretical knowledge followed naturally. According to Schlick,
The content soul and spirit of science is lodged naturally in what in the last analysis its statements actually mean; the philosophical activity of giving meaning is therefore the Alpha and Omega of all scientific knowledge.47

Kant’s strictures against projecting the features of our conceptualizations onto reality itself were paralleled by similar positivist strictures against projecting the features of linguistic systems onto their subject matter. But now, instead of simply denying the possibility of knowledge of a transcendent realm, the positivists’ identification of the conditions of knowledge with the conditions of significant discourse enabled them to deny the very meaningfulness of the conception of such a transcendent realm in the first place. And, as one might have expected, the charge against Kant, that in presuming to set the limits of knowledge one thereby presupposes something beyond those limits, was echoed by analogous objections to positivists’ claims (such as that of Wittgenstein quoted above) about the limits of significant thought and discourse.48 Whereas for Kant all knowledge of the world was relative to human conceptualization and categorization, for positivists all such knowledge, as well as the very significance of any talk whatever about the world, becomes relative in exactly the same way except that language assumes the role initially played by the conceiving mind.

Shifting the conceptualizing burden from human nature to language was also important in establishing the logical independence of the new epistemology from the rest of science. It represented a move away from psychological introspection to purer “logical analysis”:

Psychology is no more closely related to philosophy than any other natural science. . . . Does not my study of sign-language correspond to the study of thought-processes, which philosophers used to consider so essential to the philosophy of logic? Only in most cases they got entangled in unessential psychological investigations . . .49

These remarks of Wittgenstein were later echoed by Ayer, who observed that positivists make the impossibility of a transcendental metaphysics a matter of logic, whereas for Kant it was only a matter of fact (which is to say, a question of empirical science itself).50
The relativity of all knowledge of the world (and of the very significance of our conceptions of reality) to language, or the conceptual scheme(s) therein embodied, was therefore an essential, if sometimes only implicit, ingredient in the positivist antimetaphysical stance. This Kantian theme was captured in Neurath’s widely publicized figure of the “conceptual boat” in which we are presumably cast adrift, unable to disembark in order to reconstruct it anew in accordance with the precise nature of extralinguistic reality but forced instead to rebuild it plank by plank while remaining afloat in it, warping it to fit the world even as the world itself is perceived only by means of it. There was to be no question of fitting language as a whole to the world, of trying to justify the acceptance of a language on the basis of an appeal to what there really is, for such an appeal to the nature of extralinguistic reality as a basis for judging the acceptability of a language would constitute nothing less than sheer metaphysical speculation, as Carnap so clearly recognized.

An essentially similar view of language—as presenting a “veil of symbols” through which all reality is necessarily perceived—led Henri Bergson to his thesis of the ineffability of our knowledge or perceptions of reality. Bergson traced the origins of traditional philosophical disputes between rationalists and empiricists to the preoccupations of these two schools with what he saw as essentially different features of language, rather than of reality or our experience of it. This analysis of rationalist and empiricist metaphysics as rooted in linguistic considerations of one sort or another is outlined at length in Bergson’s Introduction to Metaphysics and is very suggestive of the positivists’ later view that traditional philosophical controversies stem largely from linguistic confusions. But, whereas the positivists tended to view the relativity of our perceptions of reality to language as militating against the significance of any talk of reality apart from the specific conditions of meaningfulness set by a given linguistic system, Bergson looked to this conceptualizing role of language as a hindrance—an obstacle to our perceiving the world as it really is. For Bergson, then, language was bound to distort reality; for positivists it presented the only picture we could hope to attain. This mystical outlook of Bergson, which others have seen in the writings of Wittgenstein and even Schlick, is, in the end, the only alternative to simply giving up hope of making any sense of an absolute reality lying behind all our linguistic concep-
tions, once the conditions of linguistic significance and theoretical knowledge are clearly seen to converge.

To retain an absolutist view with respect to the nature of extra-linguistic reality was, then, to endorse the idea that its true nature could only be grasped by some sort of mystical insight or intuition. Positivists could hardly be expected to tolerate this idea. Nonetheless, their early efforts to articulate a strict empiricist epistemology left them hard pressed to avoid such an interpretation of their views. As already noted, drawing inferences about the structure or nature of reality from observations about the structure or meaning of language was every bit as illegitimate to positivists as projecting the features of the conceptual manifold onto the world beyond was to Kant. While Russell saw the use of logical analysis as providing a way around the Kantian dilemma ("replace inferred entities with logical constructions"), to positivists it simply left an analogous problem: rendering their epistemological preference for sense data compatible with their strict antimetaphysical posture. Positivists had no desire to establish that the real things of the world were sense data, any more than that they were physical objects. Such concerns were clearly perceived as efforts to treat of what lies beyond the conditions of all possible significant discourse, and could not, therefore, be taken seriously. On the other hand, the positivists' original conception of an ideal language having the logical syntax of *Principia* and referring only to data of immediate experience into which all statements should be translatable if they are actually meaningful (that is, verifiable) made strict adherence to these antimetaphysical scruples a tricky business at best.

In the writings of Russell and the early Wittgenstein the ideality of such a language was linked to its possessing the logical structure necessary for its various propositions to correspond with or picture actual 'facts' or 'states of affairs' in the world. Thus, for Wittgenstein the meaning of a statement was the possible state of affairs it "pictured," and if a statement could not be rendered in terms of the ideal language it could not represent a possible state of affairs and therefore could be only a pseudo-statement to begin with. The possible states of affairs which a meaningful statement pictured thus constituted the circumstances under which it was true (its truth conditions). When an actual state of affairs was found to correspond to the state of affairs pictured by a particular statement, the statement
was discovered to be true (that is, it was verified). Thus, to be verifiable, and so meaningful, was to picture a possible state of affairs, or, what comes to the same thing, to be couched in or capable of being couched in the ideal language. On this view, notions of truth and meaning are both tied to a metaphysical conception of the nature and structure of the extralinguistic world. The epistemological priority of atomic propositions in the ideal language is reducible, by and large, to the ontological priority of the atomic facts they reflect, describe, or picture.

For the positivists such a metaphysical account of meaning and truth was a source of considerable discomfort. Russell sought to infer the nature (or structure) of the world from that of language—revealed through analysis (that is, translation into the ideal language)—but to warrant this kind of inference he needed something like the "picture theory" of meaning and the correspondence theory of truth to back him up. Positivists had no desire to draw metaphysical conclusions but still needed a theory of meaning and truth to back up their own epistemological claims for analysis, in terms of a phenomenalist language employing the logic and grammar of Principia. This forced them to try to explain the special meaningfulness and verifiability of the ideal phenomenalist language without recourse to talk of the world in an absolute sense not conditioned by language itself. Thus, whereas the early Wittgenstein construed the meaning of a statement in terms of its truth conditions (the states of affairs pictured by the statement, which would make it true if found to exist), the positivists eventually chose to speak rather of a statement's method of verification, thereby giving the impression that the meaning of a statement could be given simply by specifying a procedure to be followed in verifying it without requiring reference to any supposed extralinguistic 'facts' that would make it 'true.' However, such specifications amounted in the end to the same translations into sentences of a phenomenalist language (observation terms, protocol sentences, or the like) whose own meaningfulness and verifiability might still be questioned. One might prefer to speak of immediate experience or the "given" in describing the reference of such sentences, rather than of sense data, phenomenal entities, or atomic 'facts,' but the problem of meaningfully characterizing such primitive experience was no easier than making sense of atomic facts themselves. One could not ac-
tually have knowledge of such a pure realm of experience, for this would then be some kind of knowledge apart from that achieved by empirical science itself. One could not even legitimately attempt to describe it, because all meaning was somehow ultimately dependent on it. This dilemma led to some doctrines rather like Bergson’s of the ineffable just to explain the meaningfulness or verifiability of language, and the epistemological priority of the phenomenalist language in particular.53

The problems deriving from the epistemological ambitions of the positivists have resisted a satisfactory solution to the present day. Early on, Otto Neurath suggested looking to a physicalist language as psychologically rather than logically prior. However, this implied the same situation in which Kant had presumably been ensnared: making epistemology, or logical analysis itself, part of science rather than above it or prior to it. Carnap, taking the hint from Neurath’s suggestion, did adopt a much more tolerant view (ergo his principle of tolerance) toward the use of physicalist languages, if this should “suit the purposes” of science better. But in retaining the idea that a phenomenalist language might suit the purposes of epistemology better, the same old question remained, only now it was hidden under Carnap’s increasing emphasis on the broad scope for linguistic alternatives and the idea that decisions between them are constrained only by practical considerations. If a phenomenalist (or a physicalist) language is, however, to remain epistemologically preferable, then its privileged status among all other languages despite any conceivable “practical” considerations would seem to be ensured.

Still, it was Carnap’s devotion to his principle of tolerance and his development of the idea of linguistic alternatives, most fully articulated in “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology,” that best represented and most clearly expressed the Kantian insight in its linguistic mode. Here apparent metaphysical assertions come to be recognized either as disguised proposals for new ways of speaking or as questions merely concerning the rules of particular linguistic frameworks. The only assertions that can be granted genuine theoretical significance according to this scheme are those made within some given linguistic framework. There is to be no significant discourse about the world except in relation to some language or framework. Carnap’s doctrine of linguistic frameworks thus rep-
resents the fullest articulation of the linguistic Kantianism implicit in the positivists' basic critique of metaphysics and their advocacy of linguistic analysis as the primary philosophical task. The view in question here is, very simply, that how one 'sees,' 'conceives,' or talks about the world is always relative to the language employed in doing so. How this principle could consistently apply with respect to what is given in immediate experience without sacrificing the claims of a phenomenalist language to privileged epistemological status is a question Carnap never really confronted.

What happens as a result of relocating conceptual schemes in linguistic systems, once a view like Carnap's has been fully spelled out, is that something like the old freedom and spontaneity of speculative metaphysics reappears. With the structure of the human mind seen as determining our view of the world, as Kant would have had it, we are forced to look at the world in the way we happen to. That is, we see things the way we do because we were born that way. There is no other way we could see them. In Carnap's linguistic version, however, we are at liberty to construe reality in any number of alternative ways. We are as unconstrained by the 'facts' as speculative metaphysics supposed itself to be. However, this freedom does not exist because the nature of the facts depends on how we imagine or intuit them to be, but only because there are no such 'facts' to begin with—except relative to some specified linguistic or conceptual framework, which we may wish to accept. We are free to construct as many alternative frameworks for discourse as our own imagination and ingenuity permit, and to accept them to the extent that our own practical purposes make it desirable. The key point is, simply, that acceptance of a framework cannot be predicated on significant beliefs with respect to what really exists or is the case; all significant questions of what there is are 'internal' (that is, relative to some framework itself).

An even more thoroughgoing version of this same philosophical perspective has recently been voiced by Nelson Goodman. Goodman vigorously attacks the idea that it makes sense to think of an absolute and self-contained reality existing independently of some mode of symbolic representation and/or directly given in experience, which we may then either fail or succeed in adequately capturing—that is, the idea that it makes sense to talk of the world, or our experience of it, as it really is. According to Goodman the world is only as it may be described or represented:
What we must face is the fact that even the truest description comes nowhere near faithfully reproducing the way the world is. . . . There are very many different equally true descriptions of the world, and their truth is the only standard of their faithfulness. . . . For me there is no way that is the way the world is; and so of course no description can capture it. But there are many ways the world is, and every true description captures one of them. . . . Since the mystic is concerned with the way the world is and finds that the way cannot be expressed, his ultimate response to the question of the way the world is must be, as he recognizes, silence. Since I am concerned rather with the ways the world is, my response must be to construct one or many descriptions. The answer to the question "What is the way the world is?" "What are the ways the world is?" is not a shush, but a chatter.55

According to Goodman, there is no way the world really is, apart from some way of describing or representing it. The idea that there is a single "right" or "true" way of representing the world, says Goodman, implies that there is an objective standard against which to judge the 'faithfulness' of any mode of description or representation.56 As Carnap would put it, there is no single right or true framework that uniquely fits or corresponds to reality because any truly meaningful claim about the nature of reality must be itself made from within the specific context of such a linguistic framework.

An interesting feature of Goodman's critique is that it is marshaled simultaneously against the analytic metaphysics of Russell, against the mystical views of Bergson, and against phenomenalist epistemological doctrine as well. According to Goodman, neither reality nor our experience of it will cohere in and of itself, but depends instead for its coherence and organization on the application of some conceptualizing or categorizing system of symbols. For Goodman, then, the idea that knowledge arises through some sort of processing of raw materials received through the senses and discoverable "either through purification rites or by methodical disinterpretation"57 is on the same kind of shaky footing as the idea that there is some way the world really is that our linguistic frameworks, or modes of symbolic representation, may more or less faithfully capture. Notions of the given or ground elements in im-
mediate experience fare no better than that of Bergson’s “ineffable.” The classifying and organizing function of a symbol system is, Goodman contends, a necessary prerequisite to even having a determinate experience in the first place. Regarding the innocent eye, which is imagined to somehow perceive things just as they are presented or given in experience, Goodman says

It functions not as an instrument self-powered and alone. But as a dutiful member of a complex and capricious organism. Not only how it sees but what it sees is regulated by needs and prejudices. It selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyzes, constructs. It does not so much mirror as take and make.58

Thus, while clear and explicit recognition of the relativity of all meaningful talk about the world to overall linguistic considerations, along with a full appreciation of its consequences, has come only gradually, as doctrines of the ideal language, the given, and the verification theory of meaning have crumbled, this Kantian-like view remains implicit in the basic rationale of the positivists’ critique of metaphysics and their endorsement of ‘logical’ analysis as a replacement for it. It is clearly expressed in the idea that thought is embodied in language and that man is inevitably cast adrift in a “conceptual boat.”

5 The Analytic Conception of Language

If one recognizes (as positivists generally did) the limiting conditions which considerations of language set for questions of genuine theoretical interest, the substitution of an exclusively linguistic investigation for that of traditional metaphysics is not hard to understand. Once inquiry into some completely external and self-contained reality appeared to be beyond both practical and theoretical bounds, attention naturally came to focus upon the mode of human conceptualization itself—in this case, language. If we cannot get out of the “conceptual boat” represented by one linguistic framework or another and gain a clear view of the world as it really is—indeed, if it does not even make sense to imagine such a thing—then why not turn our attention toward the boat itself and the conceptions about reality it embodies? Just as Kant assumed that
we occupy something of a privileged position with respect to an investigation of our own concepts or thoughts about the world (even if the world itself should be so distant as to be completely unattainable), so positivists rather naturally adopted a similar attitude; but now such an investigation would have less the character of subjective introspection than of a purely 'logical' analysis of language, the chief instrument of all genuine theoretical inquiry. However, the central presupposition of this move (and of Kant's) is that what is said or thought or conceived about the world can be examined and understood in some ultimate and absolute way in which the world itself cannot—that is, that although there may be no way in which the world really is, there is still a way (or ways) that we really say it is, or conceive it to be.

The idea that the individual words, statements, or linguistic systems we routinely employ in the pursuit and accumulation of theoretical knowledge possess a determinate meaning or content, or embody certain fixed structural or conceptual features, or treat (or purport to treat) of a determinate and identifiable subject matter is hardly unique or peculiar to positivism. This basic analytic conception of language is indeed common to all classical approaches to philosophical analysis, whether this method is to be employed simply in an effort to explain the origins and hopelessly irreconcilable character of traditional philosophical disputes or to demonstrate the theoretical meaninglessness of such disputes.

Similarly, whether the aim is ultimately to adduce evidence in favor of or against specific metaphysical beliefs or only to clarify and elucidate the epistemological or 'logical' basis of science, the assumption remains intact that what language really says or is really about is a genuinely significant issue, open to objective philosophical examination (that is, analysis).

The early Wittgenstein thus proposed a view of philosophy as a critique of language whose business is primarily to uncover the true logical form of statements hidden under the superficial and misleading grammatical structure of ordinary language, and he credited Russell with showing that the apparent form of language need not be its real form. In a similar spirit, Ryle proposed examining what is really meant by an expression in order to discover the real form of the facts recorded by it. Where Russell looked to the logical form of expressions as giving clues to the basic con-
stituents of reality, Ayer protested: "... the philosopher, as an analyst, is not directly concerned with the physical properties of things. He is concerned only with the way in which we speak about them."61

Various opposing views of the character and feasibility of traditional philosophical inquiry thus overlaid a single shared conception of language as inherently possessed of 'real' form, structure, or content, which was presumed to be accessible to the analyst's searching eye without regard to his ultimate philosophical objectives. However, it was for positivists (such as Schlick, with his talk of the "hidden meaning" of scientific propositions, or Carnap, in his discussions of the "logical structure" or "content" of the language of science) that the analytic conception of language assumed the greatest importance and was cast into the sharpest relief, for it was these philosophers who contended that the investigation of such features of language was not only essential to an adequate understanding of the origin, nature, and extent of all human knowledge, but that such an investigation itself constituted the sole realm of legitimate philosophical inquiry.

And so the real form or meaning of our discourse, as allegedly revealed through analysis, was claimed to show that such things as Being, Nothing, the Absolute, properties or universals, and a host of nonentities from Mr. Pickwick to Pegasus, as well as the apparent designations of such 'unique' or 'definite' descriptions as "the king of France," were not really the subjects of statements that appeared to deal with them. Similarly, analysis purported to show that statements like "God exists" do not really attribute a property of being to anything, and the doctrine of type distinctions was claimed to represent a finely grained conceptual structure in language that prohibited the application, under any circumstances, of some predicates to some things while simultaneously guaranteeing the applicability of other predicates under all circumstances. And of course there was the most impressive achievement of analysis—the set-theoretic interpretation of number theory, which purported to show that our apparent talk of numbers is really about classes of classes—along with the parallel effort to show that the language of physical science is really concerned with elements of immediate experience rather than physical objects themselves. In all such instances analysts claimed to be getting at the real structure,
meaning, or conceptual import of the portions of language at which their analyses were directed. With this revealed, true meaning or structure was then appealed to in various ways to solve, re-solve, or dis-solve outstanding philosophical difficulties. The particular uses to which the specific results of analysis have been put (explaining metaphysics, attacking metaphysics, or doing metaphysics or epistemology) are thus irrelevant to the generally accepted assumption that language exhibits fixed and determinate meaning or conceptual content that represents a distinctive way of talking about or describing the world and is susceptible to sustained philosophical analysis in one form or another.

To such absolute metaphysical questions as "What is the structure of reality?" or "What really exists?" there correspond such absolute linguistic questions as "What is the structure of our language?" or "What are we really talking about?" The positive achievements of analysis not only seemed to confirm antecedent intuitions that such linguistic questions might be asked, but excited the idea that answers to them might be novel, interesting, and nontrivial. The positivists, wary of absolute metaphysics altogether, embraced this linguistic absolutism wholeheartedly. This eventually led to systematic reformulations (like those of Carnap) of virtually every conceivable absolute metaphysical or ontological assertion in terms of a corresponding absolute linguistic assertion concerning the syntax, structure, or meaning of the expressions of a particular language. In this way, for every statement about what there really is there could be substituted a statement (or statements) about what a certain language (or certain languages), or a portion of the same, really says there is. Inquiry into what we really say (or may say) about the world thus systematically replaced inquiry into the world as it really is.  

The linguistic absolutism of the analytic conception of language must not, as already noted, be confused with the doctrine of the ideal language or the Picture Theory of meaning. Russell's and Wittgenstein's notion of the ideal language that pictures the world as it really is is, rather, one version of the analytic conception of language—one version, but an exemplary one. The Picture Theory attempts to account for the purported structure and content of (the ideal) language by appealing to a mysterious picturing relation between language and reality. Language pictures the world through
projecting the logical form of the 'facts.' According to this view, the job of the analyst is to clarify the confused and distorted picture presented by ordinary language with its superficial grammatical structure and to reveal its true sense and structure by means of reformulations in the ideal language, which presents an accurate or true picture (true in the sense of having the right logical form). Once propositions are cast in the form of the ideal language, grasping their meaning or sense is compared with the way it is imagined one recognizes what a picture represents; “The proposition shows its sense.” The “sense” of a proposition as a whole is actually held to be a function of the logical form it shares with reality (if it is a significant proposition at all) and the particular things its individual component terms stand for as a matter of convention.

The Picture Theory, therefore, attempts to explain what (the ideal) language really says or means by appealing to the way the world really is. Here linguistic absolutism is totally dependent upon metaphysical absolutism. However, we thereby achieve a powerfully suggestive figure of language meaning as a definite and concrete feature that can somehow be immediately grasped or recognized in the way it is imagined that we apprehend what a picture represents. Understanding language (so long as it is language with the proper logical form) takes on the character of a direct and unmediated seeing rather like that privileged mode of cognitive apprehension we normally expect to find associated with metaphysical insight, intuition, or awareness. One examines language, or the picture it presents, as the metaphysician would examine reality. Language thus presents a specific and determinate picture of reality that can be directly examined even though reality itself may be beyond either practical or theoretical reach. Thus was the picture of reality presented by language to become the surrogate subject matter of philosophical scrutiny. The seemingly manifest character of pictorial representation appeared to offer a plausible account of how we might thus come to “see” what language really says about the world, even if we cannot “see” directly the way the world really is.

The irrepressible metaphysical assumptions of the Picture Theory as put forward by Russell and Wittgenstein, and the concomitant supposition that there is only one right or true or ideal language,
were, as I have stressed, unappealing to the positivists. However, the graphic and suggestive characterization of the absolute determinacy and the patent accessibility of the structure and content of language continued to exercise a strong influence over positivists and other analytic philosophers, who have striven manfully ever since to find a less compromising explanation for it. Initial attempts to escape the metaphysics of the Picture Theory led to a new emphasis on the rules or conventions believed to govern linguistic discourse. Attempts to account for or vindicate some imagined ineffable relation between language and the extralinguistic world, as the source of what language really says or is about, were abandoned in favor of accounts in terms of linguistic rules or conventions.

The role of convention had, of course, been acknowledged to some degree by the early Wittgenstein as explaining the sense of individual terms. For Wittgenstein, however, this aspect of linguistic representation was secondary to and dependent upon the non-conventional doctrine of a logical structure which we are imagined unable even to talk about directly in a truly significant fashion. The secondary, conventional aspect of language thus could be explained, but the primary structural features could only be recognized or grasped. The idea that both meaning and structure (the whole linguistic story) arise from rules or conventions that may be spelled out, discussed, and reformulated if need be in a metalanguage gained prominence partly as a response to the acknowledged inadequacies of the Picture Theory, its incipient metaphysics and mystical tendencies, but another strong and positive influence stemmed from the increasing interest in the formalization of mathematics and the metamathematical results of Hilbert, Gödel, and Tarski. According to this new view, language is still regarded as presenting a picture, but the origin of this picture is not tied logically to that which is pictured. The key to the picture lies in the rules—formation and transformation, syntactical and semantical, and so on—of the language in question. These rules are not intended to represent links with the extralinguistic world but simply to identify and set the conditions of meaning for the expressions of a given language. What language really says, then, or how it pictures the world, is now seen as fully determined by the rules or conventions governing the use of language. The job of the rules is to spell out just what can be said about the world by means of the language.
in question, and how. The rules represent a codification of the language's conceptual content, and are thus (if I may parrot Schlick) the Alpha and Omega of the way a language pictures the world.

The doctrine of linguistic rules and conventions appeared, therefore, to provide a release from dependency upon the ineffable "picturing relation" and its associated metaphysical implications, as well as freeing philosophy from Wittgenstein's mystical strictures against the possibility of meaningful talk about the way language represents the world. With this doctrine of the thorough conventionality of linguistic use and meaning, the central antimetaphysical posture of positivism, as well as its basic rationale for analysis as the new "first philosophy," seemed secure. The conceptual bounds within which any scientific or theoretical investigation must necessarily take place are determined not by the immutable and ultimate traits of reality, as reflected in language or otherwise, nor by the structure of the human mind, but simply by the conscious or unconscious adoption by men over the course of time of rules or conventions concerning how they will speak.

In the end, consistent adherence to the principles that led to this conventionalist doctrine of language led also to an analogous theory of picturing itself. As Goodman explains,

I began by dropping the picture theory of language and ended by adopting the language theory of pictures.... You might say that the picture theory of language is as false and as true as the picture theory of pictures; or in other words, what is false is not the picture theory of language but a certain absolute notion concerning both pictures and language.  

According to Goodman, then, how we see or picture or view the world, not just metaphorically but quite literally, is as relative to conventionally derived systems of symbolization as is the way we speak about, talk about, or describe the world by means of language.

The "rules of language" thesis accords well, then, with Carnap's principle of tolerance, as opposed to the view that there is only one right way of talking about the world. Our different alternative ways of seeing or describing the world are, according to Carnap's doctrine of linguistic frameworks, as many and as distinct from one another as are the different and distinct sets of rules we may devise for the construction and use of linguistic expressions. In
Carnap's fully articulated scheme of things each framework possesses and is constituted or defined by its own set of rules. To choose a framework, and thus a general way of conceiving of, describing, or perhaps picturing the world, is simply to adopt an appropriate set of rules. The theoretical scientist is viewed as working within the conceptual scheme defined by some such set of rules, and deciding, relative to it, questions of truth and falsity about the world. The philosopher, however, seen as engaged in the task of discovering, identifying, formulating, and reformulating these rules, is viewed as actively engaged in the analysis of the basic structures of these conceptual systems themselves—in the examination, exploration, and comparison of the different conceptual schemes, world views, or world pictures embodied in such rules for speaking. The philosopher's task is to reveal and describe the general picture of reality, as represented in the rules of language, relative to which the scientist may establish theoretical truth.

The conventionalist version of the analytic conception of language is therefore still, in a sense, a picture theory of language. That is to say, it still holds that language presents a fixed and determinate picture of reality, or a conceptual scheme in terms of which all experience is interpreted. This version eventually just opts for a different theory of picturing altogether. Picturing no longer implies as logically prior the something pictured; rather the general features of that which is pictured are determined simply by the rules of the system of symbolic representation employed. Language still presents a fixed and discoverable picture of things, and the philosopher still is concerned with the features of this basic picture rather than directly with features of the world itself; the point is now that this picture, which represents the conceptual parameters of any acceptable science, is constituted only by a set of conventionally adopted and specifiable rules and not by some inexpressible relation with the world in itself. Characterization of the task of philosophical analysis is thus freed from any suggestion of metaphysical concern. In investigating the picture of the world embodied in this or that language rather than the world itself, the philosopher is concerned only with simple rules for the creation and manipulation of symbols. His linguistic absolutism appears now quite free of any metaphysical absolutism and quite compatible with any doctrine concerning the actual relativity of metaphysical inquiry (or any corresponding doc-
Still, the linguistic absolutism of the analytic conception of language, no matter how it is explicated, when joined to the view that talk of the world is meaningful only relative to some applied system of linguistic representation, seems to imply that language itself is not of this world—that the concepts, meanings, ideas, thoughts, form, structure, content, and subject matter of linguistic expressions, or the conceptual schemes, world pictures, and *Weltanschauungen* embodied in whole linguistic systems, may somehow be ‘grasped’ or ‘discovered’ in a way that is not dependent upon or relative to language in just the same way as are our ordinary determinations of truth about the world. This is implicit in the view that the analysis of language is (epistemologically) prior to all empirical science, that it explores and determines the conceptual basis of all genuine empirical or theoretical investigations. The view is that the world is not determinate apart from language, but that our conceptions or understanding of the world, as constituted in language, are. We may not inquire significantly into the ultimate traits of reality, but we may seek corresponding absolute answers about the fixed structural or conceptual features of a language. Basic ontology and logico-mathematical truth do not rest on a priori metaphysical principles, but reflect only the limiting features of applied conceptual or linguistic systems.

Thus the antimetaphysical stance of the positivists, and of many analytic philosophers of the succeeding generation, puts the greatest burden on this sort of linguistic absolutism. Conceding that there is no way the world really is, they continue to adhere to the view that there is a way we really say it is or conceive it to be, and that this absolute or determinate conceptual content or meaning of language may properly be subjected to something of the piercing philosophical vision usually associated with the efforts of metaphysicians. Though perception of reality is impossible except relative to conception, our perception of these conceptions is imagined to be clear and distinct. Whether analytic philosophers turn to language in the belief that talk of the world as it really is constitutes outright nonsense or simply in the belief that direct knowledge of such a world is obstructed by more practical sorts of considerations, their
common acceptance of the analytic conception of language involves assumptions about the nature of linguistic inquiry that parallel the pretensions of speculative metaphysics regarding our access to extralinguistic reality.