

“Was There a Sun Before Men Existed?”

A.J. Ayer and French Philosophy in the Fifties

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In contrast to many of his contemporaries, A. J. Ayer was an analytic philosopher who had sustained throughout his career some interest in developments in the work of his “continental” peers. Ayer, who spoke French, held friendships with some important Parisian intellectuals, such as Camus, Bataille, Wahl and Merleau-Ponty. This paper examines the circumstances of a meeting between Ayer, Merleau-Ponty, Wahl, Ambrosino and Bataille, which took place in 1951 at some Parisian bar. The question under discussion during this meeting was whether the sun existed before humans did, over which the various philosophers disagreed. This disagreement is tangled with a variety of issues, such as Ayer’s critique of Heidegger and Sartre (inherited from Carnap), Ayer’s response to Merleau-Ponty’s critique of empiricism, and Bataille’s response to Sartre’s critique of his notion of ‘unknowing’, which uncannily resembles Ayer’s critique of Sartre. Amidst this tangle one finds Bataille’s statement that an “abyss” separates English from French and German philosophy, the first recorded announcement of the analytic-continental divide in the twentieth century.

1. Ayer, Merleau-Ponty, and Bataille Walk into a Bar

In his lecture “Les conséquences du non-savoir,” presented on 12 January 1951, Georges Bataille mentions that during the previous night a meeting took place between himself, Alfred Jules Ayer and Maurice Merleau-Ponty at some Parisian bar. This was preceded by Ayer’s presentation of a lecture titled “The Idea of Truth and Contemporary Logic” (hitherto unpublished). Among the audience of the lecture were Bataille himself, Merleau-Ponty, as well as the physicist Georges Ambrosino and the philosopher

Jean Wahl.¹ Bataille reports having met Ayer and having sustained, through “reciprocal interest” [Bataille, 1986, 80] a conversation that continued until three o’clock in the morning. According to Bataille, Merleau-Ponty and Ambrosino had also taken part in the conversation.

Bataille’s record of the event differs somewhat from Ayer’s account of their meeting. In his autobiography (1977), Ayer recalls first meeting Bataille in 1945, rather than 1951. While serving in the British Army’s Special Operations Executive during the Second World War, Ayer had been involved in organizing French resistance movements and, with the liberation of France, was sent over to the intelligence section of the British Embassy in Paris. During his stay in Paris, Ayer had become acquainted with numerous Parisian literary and intellectual figures,² including most importantly Merleau-Ponty³ and Bataille. Ayer had met Bataille through Isabel Delmer⁴ (who had also been Bataille’s lover);⁵ Delmer was involved with Ayer during the last month of his stay in Paris.⁶ Ayer recounts this in his autobiography:

Isabel had many friends in Paris and introduced me to them. It was through her that I met the writer Georges Bataille, whom I vainly tried to persuade that time was not merely a human invention. [Ayer, 1977, 288]

From this we can surmise that Ayer had been acquainted with Bataille since 1945, and had already engaged in philosophical discussion with him. It is quite peculiar and interesting that the topic of the conversation mentioned in Ayer’s autobiography, i.e. the question of whether time was a human invention, seems to resemble closely the topic of the long conversation they had in 1951 (which we will be discussing in detail later on). [Nick Trakakis, 2007] concludes from this that Ayer must have mistakenly confused the dates of his meeting with Bataille. Given that Ayer recounts his relationship with Delmer as having taken place during the last months of his stay in Paris, and also

¹ Ambrosino, Wahl and Bataille, were members of the *College de Sociologie* and possibly also of “Acephale,” the secret society founded by Bataille. It is still unclear which members of Bataille’s circle, apart from Bataille, were really members of *Acephale*. Jean Wahl (1937) did write an article which was published in the *Acephale* journal, though he most probably did not take part in their meetings. See also [Surya, Fijalkowski & Richardson, 2002, 235–254].

² Ayer seems to have been introduced to the Parisian intelligentsia by his various girlfriends. For example, regarding Albert Camus, Ayer remarked that “I don’t know his work well, but he and I were friends: we were making love to twin sisters after the war” [Rogers, 2002, 197].

³ He met Merleau-Ponty through Francette Drin, the sister of his girlfriend Nicole Bouchet de Fareins [Rogers, 2002, 192–193].

⁴ Delmer was a British painter and artists’ model, famously depicted by Epstein, Picasso, Giacometti, and Bacon. Born Isabel Nicholas, she had married several times, and was later known as Isabel Lambert and Isabel Rawsthorne.

⁵ Delmer also had an affair with Bataille; Francis Bacon mentions this in an interview given to the *Paris Match* magazine the year he died (Maubert 1992), in the context of confessing his own love affair with Isabel. On her collaboration with Bataille, see [Bataille, Waldberg, & Lebel, 1995]; [Waldberg & Waldberg, 1992].

⁶ See also [Rogers, 2002, 191–206].

given that Delmer was indeed acquainted with Bataille, Trakakis' explanation is most likely flawed. Ayer did in fact encounter Bataille prior to 1951, and this encounter involved a debate on a similar topic to the one they discussed in 1951. What is also confirmed by Ayer's account is the fact that the encounter between the two men was not, as Bataille's account would imply, undertaken within the confines of an academic setting. Rather the two met socially through a common friend and lover.

Their encounter outside the conventions of professional academic practice makes their philosophical engagement unique in a multitude of ways. It is a singular record of a quasi-private, non-formal dialogue between philosophers whose backgrounds are both quite diverse and at the same time related to some or other of the various forms of modernism that flourished in their contemporary cultural life. It is in this context that Bataille gives us the first recorded observation of a split between "Continental" and English philosophical cultures in the twentieth century.

Though Bataille's pronouncement has been cited in recent attempts at revising this idea of the divide,⁷ the details of the context in which this pronouncement was made have largely been ignored by scholars. In what follows, I reconstruct the dialogue between Ayer, Merleau-Ponty, and Bataille by putting together pieces of a puzzle that involves Ayer's prior polemical engagement with Heidegger and Sartre, Merleau-Ponty's critique of "objective thought," Ayer's response to Taylor's presentation of Merleau-Ponty's view of empiricism, and even Sartre's objection to Bataille.

2. Ayer's Criticism of Heidegger's "Das Nichts" and the British Reception of Logical Positivism

The various military intelligence posts Ayer had held during the Second World War would allow him to enjoy a sufficient amount of leisure time. Thus he had been able to pursue an array of intellectual interests. For example, during his stay in America, Ayer had produced some work in film criticism, reviewing films for the popular press.⁸ His stay in Paris following its liberation coincided with a certain enthusiastically thriving cultural and intellectual climate, in which Ayer was actively involved. The sudden rise to prominence of the then fashionable existentialism, contemporary with the liberation of Paris, was not foreign to Ayer who was, during its emergence, already acquainted with several of the prominent figures associated with it. Ayer had produced a number

⁷ [Himanka, 2000]; [Critchley, 2001]; [Reynolds and Chase, 2010, 185].

⁸ Ayer's film criticism was published in the *Nation* (February to May 1942) under the nickname P H. Rye, an allusion to the Hera-clitean *ta panta rhei* (everything flows), as well as the area called Rye in New York, where his children had been evacuated to in the period of 1940–43. See [Ayer, 1977, 259]; [Rogers, 2002, 176].

of articles for *Horizon* magazine, reviewing this new trend and its major intellectual figures: Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.⁹

Ayer's opinion of existentialism, and particularly of Sartre, had already been shaped by events in his life prior to the war, when he had been involved in a different sort of intelligence mission. Between November 1932 and the spring of 1933,¹⁰ Ayer was dispatched to Vienna as a kind of British philosophical spy (posing as a honeymooner)¹¹ sent out by Gilbert Ryle in order to report on the latest trends in the development of Austrian philosophical ideas.¹² Once he was dispatched to Vienna, Ayer sat in with the circle (being one of only two non-Germans, along with W. V. O. Quine, to have ever participated in the Circle's meetings) and, having taken in their doctrines and discussions, produced *Language, Truth, and Logic* as a book that would introduce Logical Positivism to a British audience.

Most of the book consisted of a restatement, in English, of the core doctrines of the Vienna Circle, with alleged attempts by Ayer to fortify these doctrines in their restatement. As part of his attempt at importing Viennese philosophy into Britain, Ayer repeated the Vienna Circle's strict anti-metaphysical stance. In doing so he redeployed a criticism of Heidegger that was already formed by Rudolf Carnap.

In his 1931 "Überwindung der Metaphysik durch Logische Analyse der Sprache," Carnap made the radical assertion that metaphysical concepts and statements are nonsensical. To demonstrate part of his case, Carnap takes the use of the word "nothing," as it is employed in Heidegger's 1929 lecture "What is Metaphysics?," notoriously in the expression "*Das Nichts selbst nichtet*" ("The nothing itself nothings"), to be exemplary of meaningless metaphysics.

The term "nothing," according to Carnap, is used by Heidegger in a manner which complies with "historico-grammatical" syntax, but not logical syntax. Carnap suggests that the conventional rules of historico-grammatical syntax allow for well-formed sentences which appear to be meaningful (e.g. Heidegger's talk of "nothing"), yet can be shown through the use of logical analysis to be meaningless insofar as they do not

⁹ See [Ayer, 1945]; [Ayer, 1946a]. Ayer went on to write numerous pieces on Sartre: [Ayer, 1946b]; [Ayer, 1948]; [Ayer, 1950]; [Ayer, 1961]; [Ayer, 1967]; [Ayer, 1968]; [Ayer, 1969]; [Ayer, 1984]. Ayer, together with Stuart Hampshire, also participated in a discussion of Sartre's philosophy on BBC radio in 1958.

¹⁰ What is important about these dates is, obviously, the ascent of Hitler to power during this time, which would lead to the gradual dispersal of the Circle. Given these circumstances, the political stance of the Circle was also intensified during these years. It is thus quite surprising that Ayer would later downplay the role of politics in the development of Logical Positivism. See e.g. [Magee, 1982, 119–120].

¹¹ [Ayer & Honderich, 1991, 209].

¹² According to Ayer, Ryle had explained that "We know roughly what Wittgenstein's doing at Cambridge but we don't know what's happening in Vienna. Go there, find out, and tell us." [Magee, 1982, 128].

comply with logical syntax.¹³ Carnap's claim is that there is no possible translation of Heidegger's expression into "logically correct language" [Carnap, 1959, 70].

Metaphysics is diagnosed as consisting of such 'pseudostatements', which had remained undetectable prior to the development of modern logic.¹⁴ According to Carnap, metaphysicians fail at an attempt to express through the cognitive medium of theory their attitude towards life [*Lebensgefühl*].¹⁵ Such expression is better suited to media such as poetry, art, and primarily music, where non-cognitive expression is the desired end. In a note added to his paper in 1957, Carnap identifies as metaphysicians a list of post-Kantian European philosophers who meaninglessly pursue what he describes as an "alleged knowledge of the essence of things which transcends the realm of the empirically founded" [Carnap, 1959, 80].¹⁶ Traditional metaphysical views (e.g. Aristotle's), according to Carnap, are often not meaningless, but false, and metaphysical efforts to generalise from the results of their contemporary science need not be "overcome."

Interpreting Carnap's criticism of Heidegger correctly involves at least some knowledge of Germanophone philosophical traditions of the early twentieth century (i.e. Neo-Kantianism,¹⁷ *Lebensphilosophie*,¹⁸ and the early Husserl,¹⁹ who had been Carnap's teacher). Carnap, who may have met Heidegger at Husserl's seminar in 1920,²⁰ had encountered Heidegger at the 1929 Davos *Hochschule*, where he had witnessed his disputation with Cassirer. In fact, Carnap's list of post-Kantian metaphysicians was clearly affected by Heidegger's dialogue with Cassirer at Davos, where Heidegger defined neo-Kantianism as a philosophy limited to "just knowledge of science, not of beings" [Heidegger, 1997, 193], opposing to the neo-Kantian epistemological interpretation of Kant the post-Kantian metaphysics that Carnap's attack would target.²¹ During that same year, Carnap first utilized Heidegger's expression "*Das Nichts nichtet*" as an example of nonsense in his presentation to the Dessau Bauhaus. His critique of metaphysics, associated with the struggle of both the Vienna Circle and the Bauhaus

¹³ Carnap distinguishes between the claim that "*Das Nichts nichtet*" is meaningless, and the claim that it is contradictory because it talks of nothing as if it were something [Carnap, 1959, 71]; the latter case does not require logical analysis for its detection.

¹⁴ Carnap considers ancient scepticism, nineteenth century empiricism and, implicitly, neo-Kantianism as earlier failed attempts to overcome metaphysics [Carnap, 1959, 60].

¹⁵ The term is borrowed from Dilthey, whose student Hermann Nohl had taught Carnap; see [Gabriel, 2003].

¹⁶ "Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Bergson and Heidegger" [Carnap, 1959, 80]; this excludes "endeavours towards a synthesis and generalisation of the results of the various sciences" [Carnap, 1959, 80].

¹⁷ See e.g. [Friedman, 2000].

¹⁸ See e.g. [Gabriel, 2003].

¹⁹ See e.g. [Rosado Haddock, 2008].

²⁰ See [Rosado Haddock 2008, 3].

²¹ Both Heidegger's dichotomy, and Carnap's appropriation of it, muddle the waters, since the neo-Kantians were not as radically opposed to post-Kantian metaphysics as Heidegger would have them be.

against their common political adversaries, was in fact first presented as a protreptic for artists to take over the gap which ensues once metaphysics is overcome.²²

This wider context is vital in understanding Carnap's choice of Heidegger as his target, and in dispelling the idea that there is some abstract irreconcilable opposition between the views of the two philosophers. Carnap's subtle engagement with Heidegger's thought occurs in the margins of his attack, while avoiding the trap of falling into the meaninglessness which he attributes to Heidegger.²³ Carnap's anti-metaphysical stance responded not only to its philosophical, but also its political and cultural context, and his choice of Heidegger as a targeted "metaphysician" was connected with such wider concerns.²⁴ The relation of Heidegger and Carnap to their Germanophone philosophical predecessors (e.g. their views on the philosophy of logic)²⁵ is one which was not, at the time, readily obvious to an outsider to the various tensions within Germanophone philosophy, such as Ayer.

Whereas Carnap had been personally acquainted with Heidegger, had been a student of Husserl, and had studied Heidegger quite closely,²⁶ Ayer shows few signs of having read Heidegger during the thirties. Thus Ayer's repetition of Carnap's criticism of Heidegger in 1936 served to strip the original of any hint of subtly pointing to this wider context. In attempting to summarise Carnap's argument, Ayer's exposition created a kind of overstated hostility towards Heidegger in particular, as well as towards the "metaphysical" philosophy that Heidegger was thought to represent. Such philosophical hostility is not as straightforward in Carnap's writing, from which Ayer had derived it. The over-statement of Carnap's criticism in Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* was fortified by its publication date (and subsequent popularity),²⁷ while Carnap's article was only translated in 1959, by which time Ayer's hostility towards Heidegger as a metaphysician had become part and parcel of the overall Anglophone reception of the Vienna Circle.²⁸

Ayer only mentions Heidegger in passing in his chapter on "The Elimination of Metaphysics." The chapter title itself already shows the ambitiousness of Ayer's project in relation to the outlook of the Vienna Circle: Ayer used the term "elimination" where Carnap had talked of *Überwindung*, which is more aptly translated as "overcoming" (with all its intended Nietzschean²⁹ connotations). Ayer mentions Heidegger in dis-

²² See [Dahms, 2004].

²³ See [Stone, 2006].

²⁴ See e.g. [Friedman, 2000, 15–21].

²⁵ See [Kaufer, 2005].

²⁶ See [Friedman, 2000, 8].

²⁷ In other words, whereas in 1931 when Carnap published the article Hitler had not yet come to power, by 1936 and the publication of *Language, Truth, and Logic*, Heidegger had already failed in his attempt at becoming the official philosopher of Nazism.

²⁸ This was despite Wittgenstein's now famously sympathetic remarks on Heidegger, most likely produced under the influence of Ryle's partly sympathetic (and partly polemical) 1929 review of *Sein und Zeit* for *Mind*.

²⁹ See [Carnap, 1959, 80].

cussing non-existent entities (a theme already familiar to his English audience through Russell's discussion of Meinong in "On Denoting").³⁰ According to Ayer,

the postulation of non-existent entities results from the superstition [...] that, to every word or phrase that can be the grammatical subject of a sentence, there must somewhere be a real entity corresponding. For as there is no place in the empirical world for so many of these "entities," a special non-empirical world is invoked to house them. To this error must be attributed, not only the utterances of a Heidegger, who bases his metaphysics on the assumption that "Nothing" is a name which is used to denote something peculiarly mysterious, but also the prevalence of such problems as those concerning the reality of propositions and universals whose senselessness, though less obvious, is no less complete. [Ayer, 1936, 35–36]

Contrasted to Carnap's use of Heidegger as an example, which has allowed at least some of its readers to see it as closely related to Heidegger's own critique of metaphysics,³¹ Ayer's restatement of Carnap is brief and polemical. Whereas Carnap is careful in limiting his comments on Heidegger's sentences, and from there generalising to some of Heidegger's results, Ayer all too quickly and mistakenly interprets Heidegger's work as a metaphysical system founded on a nonsensical view of nothingness.³² Furthermore, whereas in Carnap the distinction between traditional and postKantian metaphysics is crucial (though vague) as a response to the Davos disputation, in Ayer's commentary we find these bundled together. Thus, even if the method Ayer is using to criticise Heidegger, i.e. the accusation of being nonsensical, were to be interpreted as identical to that developed by Carnap, the view that is being attacked as nonsensical metaphysics seems to be different.

3. Ayer's Criticism of Sartre's "le Neant"

Ayer's encounter with the Parisian intellectual fashion of existentialism was thus marked by his prior visit to Vienna and his involvement with the Vienna Circle. The influence of Heidegger's thought on this new vogue allowed Ayer to apply, in 1945, the critique of metaphysics, which he had already developed in 1936, to the yet uncharted

³⁰ Russell's import of Meinong into an Anglophone context led to the use of the phrase Meinongian to mean, among other things, someone who thinks "nothing" is a name, a view which, as Oliver shows, was closer to those held by early Russell [Oliver, 1999, 263–264] than by Meinong [Oliver, 1999, 265–267].

³¹ E.g. [Friedman, 2000], [Gabriel, 2003], [Stone, 2006].

³² Heidegger's project of the *Destruktion* of metaphysics was announced at Davos [Heidegger, 1997, 192], in Carnap's presence, while prior to this we find talk of Being rather than nothing being at the basis of Heideggerian fundamental ontology. Contrary to Ayer who seems to imply the opposite, Carnap followed Heidegger's clue in placing him in a post-critical, i.e. non-traditional, line of "European" metaphysicians [Carnap, 1959, 80].

thought of existentialist thinkers, particularly to the newly published philosophical writings of Jean-Paul Sartre.³³

With the liberation of Paris, existentialism was on its way towards becoming the intellectual expression of a greater cultural upheaval that came as a result of the end of the occupation. Existentialism was part and parcel of the cultural climate of Parisian cafes, of jazz, of youthful revolt, of all things associated with the expression of a newly found freedom. Its basic tenets were largely determined by the need for an intellectual formulation of this wider cultural expression. Although initially a French fad, existentialism soon came to be disseminated globally, finding different expressions in various locales. For example, in the English speaking world it predominantly influenced literary and artistic culture rather than philosophy, to a great extent due to Ayer's criticism and other similar approaches, which denigrated its status as philosophy without rejecting its relevance to other fields.³⁴

The philosophical, literary, artistic and wider cultural modernism which it would form and participate in can be seen as parallel to the modernistic climate which gave rise to and was supported by Logical Positivism. Where Logical Positivism was the predominant philosophical attempt towards modernism prior to the Second World War (and was gradually to become less adamant in its modernistic tendencies in its subsequent evolution following the war), existentialism came to be a contending modernistic alternative to Logical Positivism.³⁵

Sartre was the major proponent of existentialism and a major Parisian intellectual. Already in 1945 with the liberation of Paris, his lectures were carried out in overcrowded large theatres.³⁶ His 1943 *L'Être et le néant* achieved instant success (even greater than that which Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* was gradually gaining at the time). Its central position was seen as an ethical one, which furthermore seemed to express its contemporary *Zeitgeist*. For most of its audience at the time, Sartre's writings proposed an ethical theory according to which freedom is inherent to humans. Humans are free to make decisions, to determine the course of their lives, to act accord-

³³ Ayer draws a line between religiously-minded Heideggerian phenomenology and Sartrean atheistic existentialism, being perhaps more sympathetic to Sartre than to Heidegger precisely because of his disagreement with the latter on the moral implications of his claims. For example, he claims that "Sartre is not so ponderous as Heidegger, but his method is basically the same. On the subject of time and negation he follows Heidegger closely, though without the extravagancies of the 'clear night of the nothing.' But he has some views of his own [...]" [Ayer, 1969, 214]. Ayer is ambiguous on the difference between Sartre's concept of nothingness and Heidegger's. Although he appears, as late as 1969, to bundle them together, in a later text, perhaps catching up with Sartre scholarship, he claims that Heidegger's "*Das Nichts selbst Nichtet*" ("the nothing itself nothings") was "mistranslated by Sartre [...] as '*le néant se néantise*' ('the nothing negates itself)" [Ayer, 1984, 229].

³⁴ See [Ree, 1993]. As Ree points out, the quintessential work of British existentialism was Colin Wilson's 1956 *The Outsider*.

³⁵ A discussion of the relation between these two philosophical movements and modernism (in which the title of modernism is claimed for the Logical Positivists) is given in [Quinton, 1982].

³⁶ E.g. [Sartre, 1946].

ing to their will. Humans are fundamentally free to reject any will imposed upon them, to make their own choices, to be responsible for themselves. In the absence of God, freedom becomes the most difficult task for humans — a task one has to decide for oneself, in the absence of externally imposed moral imperatives, without the necessity of any moral law.

Ayer found in this approach to ethics compelling, even perhaps something which resonated with his own work on ethics.³⁷ In a later article on Sartre, he commented:

It is one of Sartre's merits that he sees no system of values can be binding on anyone unless he chooses to make it so. I may indeed look to some authority to tell me what I ought to do, but then my decision consists in acknowledging that authority. The authority has the characteristics that it has; if they were different perhaps I should not give it my allegiance; but the possession of these characteristics does not in itself constitute it an authority either for me or for anyone else. Whatever my motives, and they may be various, it becomes an authority for me only through my acceptance of it. [Ayer, 1950, 634]

In this expression of the *Zeitgeist* of the newly liberated Paris, Ayer found no fault. Sartre's fundamental ethical insight is not incompatible with the radical social programme of a large part of the Vienna Circle, who had nevertheless aimed to liberate ethics from any metaphysical constraints it had traditionally been bound by. At the foundations of Sartre's ethical insights Ayer saw a grand metaphysical edifice, which was for him on the one hand a meaningless philosophical construct, and on the other hand not necessary for deriving the particular ethical insight for which Sartre deserved praise.³⁸

[Sartre's] metaphysical pessimism, which is well in the existentialist tradition, is no doubt appropriate for our time, but I do not think it is logically well founded. In particular, Sartre's reasoning on the subject of *le neant* [his belief that every state of consciousness is necessarily separated from itself by "nothing"] seems to me exactly on a par with that of the King in *Through the Looking Glass*. "I see nobody on the road," said Alice. "I only wish that I had such eyes," remarked the King. "To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too!" And again, if I remember rightly: "Nobody passed me on the road." "He cannot have done that, or he would have been here first." In these cases the fallacy is easy enough to detect, but although

³⁷ A review of the fundamental points of agreement between positivistic and existentialist approaches to ethics is given in [Meyerhoff, 1951]. See also [Wiggins, 1988].

³⁸ The radical separation between Sartre's work in *Being and Nothingness* on metaphysics and the philosophy of mind on the one hand and his ethics on the other, is perhaps more problematic than Ayer found it to be; see [Glendinning, 2007, 100–118].

Sartre’s reasoning is less engagingly naive, I do not think that it is any better. The point is that words like “nothing” and “nobody” are not used as names of something insubstantial and mysterious; they are not used to *name* anything at all. To say that two objects are separated by nothing is to say that they are *not* separated; and that is all that it amounts to. What Sartre does, however, is to say that, being separated by Nothing, the objects are both united and divided. There is a thread between them; only, it is a very peculiar thread, both invisible and intangible. But it is a trick that should not deceive anyone. The confusion is then still further increased by the attempt to endow Nothing with an activity, the fruit of which is found in such statements as Heidegger’s “*das Nichts nichtet*” and Sartre’s “*le Neant est neantise.*” For whatever may be the affective value of these statements, I cannot but think that they are literally nonsensical. [Ayer, 1945, 18–19]³⁹

Here we see that Ayer’s criticism of Sartre’s existentialism⁴⁰ is almost identical to that which he inherited from Carnap, and which was directed against Heidegger’s “metaphysics.”⁴¹ The strategy behind both approaches is to point out a certain misuse of language, which in turn is shown to be the source of the confusion that causes grand metaphysical speculation regarding concepts which are eventually shown to be meaningless. The prime example of such a case is the word “nothing.” Ayer’s objection relies on pointing out that Sartre’s use of the concept of “nothingness,” the nothing (*le*

³⁹ A concise polemic against Ayer’s criticisms may be found in [Knight, 1958, 190].

⁴⁰ The critique of Sartre’s concept of nothingness as nonsensical is only one of the criticisms which Ayer, in 1944, levelled against Sartre’s doctrine. He also objects to Sartre’s use of Husserlian intentionality [Ayer, 1945, 13] and more generally to his distinction between *l’en-soi* (which he translates as “object-in-itself” opposing it to Kant’s “thing-in-itself”) and *le pour-soi* [Ayer, 1945, 12–15] with its consequent account of sincerity and *mauvais-foi* [Ayer, 1945, 1618]. Also, following his critique of Sartre’s account of the Nothing, Ayer dismisses Sartre’s account of temporality [Ayer, 1945, 20–26]. It is interesting to note that Ayer’s criticism of the Sartrean account of temporality based on his objection to Sartre’s use of “nothing” is very much in parallel with the debate between Ayer and Merleau-Ponty which is discussed in the following pages. Ayer believes that, since Sartre’s conception of nothingness is nonsensical (and since his distinction between *l’en-soi* and *le pour-soi* is not sustainable), then Sartre cannot meaningfully distinguish between a temporality which exists for *le pour-soi* only, and *l’en-soi* which does not occupy any temporal realm. Merleau-Ponty also criticised Sartre’s distinction between *l’en-soi* and *le pour-soi*, although along different lines than those taken by Ayer. Merleau-Ponty’s account of temporality is one which is at least partly a consequence of his criticism of Sartre’s dichotomy.

⁴¹ A similar use of Carnap and Lewis Carroll is made by Quine in his *Word and Object* [Quine, 1960, 133], where he also links this confusion regarding the use of the word nothing to Plato’s *Parmenides* and to Hume’s unsympathetic interpretation of Locke’s defence of universal causality. As in Ayer’s use, this further complicates what Carnap’s argument is taken to imply, since the cases Quine discusses are quite distinct from that of Heidegger. Whereas for example Hume’s interpretation of Locke concerns the use of “nothing” where a contradiction ensues if nothing is considered as something, [Heidegger, 1998, 85] is well aware of this contradiction, and in fact [Carnap, 1959, 71] distinguishes between nonsense and absurdity when he accuses Heidegger of uttering nonsense.

neant),⁴² presupposes that “nothing” can be treated as a meaningful expression, which Ayer thinks is impossible in the particular case.

In the above quoted passage, Ayer seems to confuse two possible methods of approaching the particular issue. One would have been to say, as Ayer seems to be saying, that “nothing” is treated in metaphysical language as if it were a thing, something. This would in turn amount to saying that the treatment of the term “nothing” by metaphysicians constitutes a contradiction (and not nonsense), i.e. that in the use of the term nothing what is really meant is also simultaneously not nothing, which would constitute a breach of the fundamental law of logic. This is what seems to be demonstrated by Lewis Carroll’s tale, when the king takes Alice’s use of the term nothing to imply that nothing is something, and thus something which he cannot see.⁴³ Of course, this contradiction is one that both Sartre (particularly, as we shall see, in his response to Bataille) and Heidegger take seriously into account. For both, the fact that “nothing” cannot, without absurdity, be treated as if it were some thing, the fact that “nothing” is radically different from all objects or things encountered in experience, is very important in their accounts of nothingness.⁴⁴ It would have been a case of serious misreading, thus, if one were to attribute to either the fault of having fallen into contradiction.

Rather, what Ayer meant, is what we have already encountered in Carnap’s critique of Heidegger, namely that claims regarding “nothing” are nonsensical rather than merely absurd or contradictory. Such metaphysical expressions are pseudostatements, neither true nor false. This is part of what one can assume Ayer intended when he cited the example of Lewis Carroll’s king. The king, rather than being seen as assuming that “nothing” is something, should be understood to be making the claim, which is also made by metaphysicians, that “nothing” holds some degree of reality in some supra-sensory realm. What Ayer is trying to point to here is what he purported to demonstrate in *Language, Truth, and Logic*, where he saw Heidegger as treating “nothing” as “a name which is used to denote something peculiarly mysterious” [Ayer, 1936, 36]. But to talk, like Carroll’s king does, of “nothing” as a term that denotes anything is, according to Ayer, senseless.

Here, still, Ayer’s objection to Sartre looks as if it came from a superficial encounter with his thought (in contrast to Carnap’s reading of Heidegger). But it is clear from Ayer’s various texts on Sartre that, on the contrary, he had been willing to come face-to-face with the thought of one of the intellectual giants of his time. Ayer’s com-

⁴² See [Richmond, 2002].

⁴³ [Manser, 1961], perhaps confused by Ayer’s formulation of his objection, claims that Sartre could not have made the elementary *contradiction* (i.e. the mistake of confusing nothing for something) which Ayer attributes to him.

⁴⁴ There is, of course, a fundamental difference between Sartre and Heidegger’s accounts of nothingness, which eventually leads to their dispute over humanism. It is perhaps important here to note that Sartre’s criticism of Heidegger’s use of nothing amounts to the claim that Heidegger treats nothing as if *it* did something (rather than man, who is the real doer according to Sartre).

mitment to the “elimination” of metaphysics, perhaps itself partly a product of Ayer’s over-eagerness to demonstrate the applicability of the Logical Positivist elimination of metaphysics to all and any doctrine that may be named “metaphysical,” prevented him from taking philosophical statements regarding the meaning of the term “nothing” seriously.

The effect of Ayer’s critique can be seen in its dissemination and acceptance within the English-speaking world.⁴⁵ For example, Iris Murdoch and Mary Warnock, though they have both produced work that was to a great degree indebted to the existentialist tradition in philosophy, both follow Ayer in embracing the various consequences of existentialism (e.g. ethical, aesthetic, etc) while at the same time rejecting existentialism as (“metaphysical”) philosophy.⁴⁶ It is perhaps partly due to Ayer that existentialism was to be seen as culturally important but somehow philosophically flawed, a view which would in turn influence the wide dissemination of existentialism within literary circles and discourage its spread among philosophers.

4. Ayer Encounters Merleau-Ponty

Ayer’s criticism of Sartre’s work had as its effect the growth of Sartre’s personal dislike of him. When a meeting was to be arranged between the two figures, Sartre refused the invitation, remarking that “*Ayer est un con*” [Rogers, 2002, 193]. Perhaps Sartre disliked the potential for the applicability of the principle of verification to his concept of nothingness — or perhaps he disliked separating his philosophical differences from his personal relations.

The opposite of the latter is true of the relation between Ayer and Merleau-Ponty. As already noted, the two had met during Ayer’s stay in Paris. According to Ayer’s autobiography, they had made a decision to sustain a friendship despite their seemingly unbridgeable philosophical differences.

Though it is often conducted in terms of which it is difficult to make much sense, the investigation of concepts by Husserl and his followers bears some affinity to the sort of conceptual analysis that G. E. Moore engaged in,⁴⁷ and it might therefore have been expected that Merleau-Ponty and I should find

⁴⁵ Ayer’s review was summarised by [Acton, 1947, 164]. To an extent the effect was negative; for example C. A. Mace wrote a highly polemic review of P. J. R. Dempsey’s 1950 *The Psychology of Sartre*, in which Sartre is ridiculed (see [Ree, 1993, 14]), while in 1954, Russell included “The Existentialist’s Nightmare: The Achievement of Existence” [Russell, 1954, 36–39] in a collection of quasi-satirical stories.

⁴⁶ See e.g. [Murdoch, 1953]; [Warnock, 1965]; [Plantinga, 1958]. According to Murdoch, Ayer is (despite not claiming the title) an existentialist as much as Sartre, the common characteristic being “the identification of the true person with the empty choosing will” [Murdoch, 2001, 34]. Collini calls him “*plus Existentialiste que l’Ex-istentialiste*” [Collini, 2006, 398].

⁴⁷ Gilbert Ryle had previously compared Husserl’s philosophical endeavours to the early work of Moore and Russell, as well as Frege; see [Ryle, Hodges and Acton, 1932]; [Ryle, 1971]. Similar views were expressed by T. E. Hulme as early as 1915 [Hulme, 1915, 187] and [Hulme, 1916]. It is not clear

some common ground for philosophical discussion. We did indeed attempt it on several occasions, but we never got very far before we began to wrangle over some point of principle, on which neither of us would yield. Since these arguments tended to be acrimonious, we tacitly agreed to drop them and meet on a purely social level, which still left us quite enough to talk about. [Ayer, 1977, 285]

The acrimonious arguments between Merleau-Ponty and Ayer are not given in Ayer's biography, although having seen Ayer's stance towards Sartre, one might suppose that the nature of their arguments might have been similar.⁴⁸ If there is some particular "point of principle" which we can pinpoint as causing the impossibility of a sustained dialogue between the two philosophers, our prime suspect should be Ayer's stance toward metaphysics, and particularly his criticism of Heidegger and Sartre's use of the term "nothing."

In order to reject both Heidegger and Sartre's use of the term "nothing," Ayer has to assume that it is somehow, in its meaninglessness, equivocal. In other words, Ayer has classified all metaphysical speculation about the nature of nothingness as meaningless, which consequently disables him from meaningfully distinguishing between different types of metaphysical discourse about nothingness. This, in turn, meant that the disagreement between Heidegger and Sartre over the question of humanism was one that was largely inaccessible to Ayer.⁴⁹ (Admittedly his *Horizon* piece on Sartre was published in 1945, prior to Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism;"⁵⁰ but Ayer did continue writing on Sartre up to the late sixties, having possibly become aware of the Heidegger-Sartre exchange by that time.)

The question of the relation between existentialism and humanism is intimately connected with the examination of the concept of nothingness. For Sartre, following his misunderstanding of Heidegger (which is the subject of the Heidegger-Sartre exchange mentioned above), nothingness is something characteristic of and exclusive to human existence. Sartre claims that what is particular to humans is the fact that they allow for nothingness to enter their world: in order to be human, one must be able to think of nothingness besides Being. Sartre extends this metaphysical doctrine to his ethics, by

whether Ayer had already come to such a conclusion independently in 1951; it is possible that he learned that forms of analytic philosophy might be related to phenomenology from the 1958 Royaumont colloquium. He expressed a similar view in 1959, when he argued that linguistic analysis is comparable to phenomenology [Taylor and Ayer, 1959, 121–123].

⁴⁸ Nevertheless, this is not altogether true; Ayer's attempts at criticising Merleau-Ponty's views [Taylor and Ayer, 1959]; [Ayer, 1984] are much more detailed, sustained (and perhaps plausible) than his all too quick attacks on Heidegger.

⁴⁹ Ayer comes close to this point when he notes that Merleau-Ponty's quasi-idealistic thesis (i.e. the position over which the two were arguing in 1951) is a form of anthropocentrism [Ayer, 1984, 225–226], which he also links to pragmatism; unfortunately, Ayer in 1984 does not elaborate on the relation of this thesis to the Heidegger-Sartre dispute which he had earlier rejected as nonsense.

⁵⁰ Heidegger's letter [Heidegger, 1998, 239–276], written to Jean Beaufret in 1946, was published in 1947.

attempting to show how freedom is possible only through the potential of nothingness: the essence of freedom is negativity.⁵¹

A large part of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical efforts were directed towards a demonstration of the problems arising from Sartrean existentialist humanism. Merleau-Ponty developed what he calls a phenomenology of perception partly in opposition to Sartre's focus on consciousness in his account of existentialist phenomenology. Sartre utilises a Hegelian differentiation between consciousness-in-itself (*en-soi*) and consciousness-for-itself (*pour-soi*), identified on the one hand with human subjectivity and on the other hand with a kind of objectivity of Being. Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty after him, go on to discuss how mediation between this dichotomy is possible. Whereas Sartre's focus on consciousness leads him towards a discussion of freedom, Merleau-Ponty's answer through his examination of perception involves, as we shall see, the question of meaning.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological methodology leads him towards rejecting the above Hegelian dichotomy. According to Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology "is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analyzing" [Merleau-Ponty, 2002, ix], it is a method of "returning to the things themselves."⁵² What this effectively implies is that phenomenology is a method which consists of the double rejection of the philosophical position of realism (which Merleau-Ponty associates with scientific explanation)⁵³ and that of idealism⁵⁴ (which is bound to analytic reflection).⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty launches a similar attack against both, which we may call here a critique of "objective thought."⁵⁶

Briefly put, Merleau-Ponty's attack on both "scientific" realism and idealistic analysis (what Merleau-Ponty often refers to as "intellectualism") consists in pointing out how both polar opposites fail to give an explanation for a crucial element which they

⁵¹ Sartre's quite elaborate conception of nothingness exceeds the bounds of this study. A more complete introduction, followed by an account of Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Sartre's humanism, is given in [Descombes, 1980, 48–74].

⁵² See [Taylor and Ayer, 1959, 123–124].

⁵³ Merleau-Ponty correlates the notion of "scientific explanation" with both the metaphysical position of realism, and more generally with empiricism (though he does acknowledge that empiricism leads to idealism); see e.g. [Priest, 2003, 90–92]; [Martin, 2003]; [James, 2007]. Empiricism is connected with what Merleau-Ponty calls realism insofar as it holds that a world that exists independently of any subject is the cause of perceptual experience.

⁵⁴ By this Merleau-Ponty has been seen as responding to NeoKantian idealism as primarily developed in France by Leon Brunschvicg. See e.g. [Flynn, 2004].

⁵⁵ The *aporia* between realism and idealism was one that played a central role in shaping the phenomenological tradition, particularly since the early Husserl thought phenomenology overcame this metaphysical issue; see [Zahavi, 2003]. Heidegger and Carnap, both students of Husserl, similarly saw this *aporia* as a paradigmatic pseudoproblem. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty did not reject the problem itself, but rather the opposed theses associated with it. The drive towards rejecting metaphysics may be seen to derive from nineteenth century science, from Fourier to Mach and beyond, and its move away from claims as to the ultimate reality of its objects. Thus it is strange that Merleau-Ponty associates scientific explanation with realism, given the actual rejection of such a view by scientists (who came closer to his own middle-ground between realism and idealism).

⁵⁶ See [Hammond, Howarth & Kent, 1995, chapter 5].

both presuppose, namely a conception of what “objective” means. Realism assumes that it is possible to give scientific explanations of an “external,” empirically discernible objective reality, this reality’s existence being independent of and not alterable by its otherwise meaning-bestowing explanations. Idealism, with its insistence on analytic reflection, similarly posits a subject which constructs the meaning of a world that is assumed to be originally deprived of any meaning.⁵⁷ Both idealist subjectivism and realist objectivism share the presuppositions of a subjectless world and a worldless subject, interchanging the explanatory priorities between these two poles: the former thinks of the objective world as constituted by consciousness while the latter considers the objective world to be the cause of perception.

But, according to Merleau-Ponty, there is a pre-scientific realm (which phenomenology examines) in which meanings are already manifested. Merleau-Ponty draws on the insights of Gestalt psychology in order to assert that the fundamental building blocks of perception consist of figures against a ground, which means that perception at its most basic is not perception of an undifferentiated flux, but is imbued with some form of intentionality — it is the perception of some “figure” against the “ground” of its world. Perception is undertaken by a subject that is thrown in a world, a world in which meaning is always “already there.”⁵⁸

5. Merleau-Ponty’s Answer

Having set the wider intellectual scene, we can now return to Bataille’s 1951 lecture and pose, with him, that very strange question which Bataille, Ayer, and Merleau-Ponty discussed one night in a bar. In the next day’s lecture, Bataille, presumably tired by the proceedings of the previous night, does not go into great detail in the description he gives of the discussion. He only offers us these few words:

We finally fell to discussing the following very strange question. Ayer had uttered the very simple proposition: there was a sun before men existed. And he saw no reason to doubt it. Merleau-Ponty, Ambrosino, and I disagreed with this proposition, and Ambrosino said that the sun had certainly

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty attempts to show the limitations of the idealist/realist dilemma by offering an account of “embodied subjectivity.” He finds the question of embodiment interesting precisely because he sees the body as a site which is neither in consciousness nor for it, neither subject nor object, but in between this bi-lateral opposition. Husserl’s attempt to describe the body in terms of an “ownness sphere” is not the strongest aspect of his phenomenology. Heidegger’s criticism of Husserl’s assumption of a pure consciousness opens up a path away from the purity of subject and object. Thus it becomes Merleau-Ponty’s task to follow this path, and to offer a phenomenological description of a consciousness that is not “pure,” but embodied.

⁵⁸ Baldwin claims (albeit very briefly) that this theory of meaning is made redundant by the discussions of meaning from Logical Positivism to Putnam and Kripke; see [Merleau-Ponty & Baldwin, 2004, 20].

not existed before the world. I, for my part, do not see how one can say so.
[Bataille, 1986, 80]

According to Bataille, these four thinkers could not come to an agreement regarding the existence of the sun prior to the evolution of the species *homo sapiens*. The conversation might sound like a parody of what philosophers do when they drink too much (and come up with versions of “if a tree falls in a forest”). Such discussion seems almost only possible outside the academic context, “socially,” among friends.

But despite the circumstances and the bizarre nature of the question, there appears to be a degree of severity and even a hint of academic rigor in the undertaking of the above discussion. There are historically sound grounds on which one may trace an outline of the significance of this question for the thinkers involved in its discussion. Its formulation may be sought out in the work of Merleau-Ponty, where he explicitly takes up a view opposed to Ayer’s proposition regarding the existence of the sun before men. In his discussion of temporality in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty upholds the seemingly idealist position that “there is no world without a being in the world” [Merleau-Ponty, 2002, 502].⁵⁹ In this passage, an imagined interlocutor criticises Merleau-Ponty’s theory of temporality by asserting that “the world preceded man, that the earth, to all appearances, is the only inhabited planet, and that philosophical views are thus shown to be incompatible with the most established facts” [Merleau-Ponty, 2002, 502].⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty proceeds to rebuke his own fictional criticism of his work by explaining what it means to say that the world did not exist without man.

In order to understand Merleau-Ponty’s explanation, we must here first attempt to understand its relation to his double criticism of idealism and realism. It might *prima facie* seem paradoxical that, although what Merleau-Ponty is asserting looks like an idealistic position, it is derived from his own critique of idealism. Of course, his critique of idealism and his critique of realism are inextricably connected, and in this peculiar way his critique of realism, which leads him to a seemingly idealist position, is simultaneously a critique of idealism. Thus one may not misinterpret Merleau-Ponty’s assertion as an idealist one at all.

Rather, Merleau-Ponty is here proposing a radical challenge to his position that there is a pre-scientific realm of meaning which scientific explanation must assume

⁵⁹ Note here that talk of a “world” (both by Merleau-Ponty and Sartre) refers to an anthropocentric concept, a *human* world.

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty subscribes to a species of phenomenological presentism, i.e. the view according to which one may only understand time from the inside, as it is lived. Merleau-Ponty uses the image of a boat floating in a river: from the perspective of the traveller, there is a kind of deceptively non-moving horizon (analogous to the distant past) which is contrasted with the visible motion of the nearby scenery (analogous to the movement towards the future). The past and the future are only accessible from the point of view of the present and do not exist independently of that perspective. This, in turn, implies that without such a perspective, there could be no meaningful reference to past or future time — there could be no “objective” past out there that existed prior to a being-in-the-world for which it would be meaningful. See also [Romdenh-Romluc, 2009, 218–250].

(whether or not it accepts its existence or not). If there is such a “lived world” which is imbued with meaning, it is one which is shared by humans only and thus can only be brought into existence along with the existence of humans.⁶¹

For what precisely is meant by saying that the world existed before any human consciousness? An example of what is meant is that the earth originally issued from a primitive nebula from which the combination of conditions necessary to life was absent. But every one of these words, like every equation in physics, presupposes *our* pre-scientific experience of the world, and this reference to the world in which we *live* goes to make up the proposition’s valid meaning. [...] Laplace’s nebula is not behind us, at our remote beginnings, but in front of us in the cultural world. What in fact do we mean when we say that there is no world without a being in the world? Not indeed that the world is constituted by consciousness, but on the contrary that consciousness always finds itself already at work in the world. [Merleau-Ponty, 2002, 502]

Around 30 years later, Ayer takes up the discussion from the Parisian bar again in an article on Merleau-Ponty, by quoting the above passage. Ayer seems puzzled by the fact that Merleau-Ponty accepts the seemingly idealist position they had argued over years ago⁶² — although he acknowledges that “it is not exactly a return to either absolute or to subjective idealism [...] but while solipsism is avoided, the outlook remains anthropocentric” [Ayer, 1984, 225-226]. Interestingly, he remarks that a possible way to understand Merleau-Ponty’s assertion is by showing there to be a surprising conjunction of phenomenology with pragmatism [Ayer, 1984, 226].⁶³

What is even more surprising about Ayer’s paper on Merleau-Ponty is that Ayer appears here to deem their purported disputes over matters of principle worthy of philosophical discussion. Leaving aside the dismissal of the Sartrean dichotomy between for-itself and in-itself, for which Ayer excuses Merleau-Ponty,⁶⁴ Ayer treats Merleau-Ponty in the same seriously critical manner in which he treats all his other interlocutors in

⁶¹ This is also Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Sartrean humanism, with its assumption of a strict dichotomy between being-for-itself and being-in-itself, in which the former only is identified with what is properly human.

⁶² Ayer’s puzzlement is undertaken in the context of his criticism of Merleau-Ponty’s account of temporality [Ayer, 1984, 224–226]. Ayer employs here the idea of two types of time series, (a) one in which events are related by being either before or after one another and (b) one in which events are related in terms of past, present and future; this idea may be originally found in [McTaggart, 1908]. Merleau-Ponty points out that series (b) is always relative to the temporal position of a subject. Ayer’s criticism consists in pointing out that series (a) need not be so. This, for Ayer, renders the “idealist thicket” [Ayer, 1984, 224] into which Merleau-Ponty is led redundant.

⁶³ Wahl, who was an important “existentialist,” introduced pragmatism and early analytic philosophy to France; see [Wahl, 1925]; [Wahl, 1932].

⁶⁴ “The depth of this distinction may be questioned, but the fact that he frames it in these terms does not diminish the force of Merleau-Ponty’s argument” [Ayer, 1984, 220].

1984. The ones which are too easily excluded from fair criticism are perhaps Heidegger and Sartre, both of whom he dismisses in almost the same superficial manner in which they had been dismissed in 1936 and 1945.

6. Ayer's Response: The Question of Empiricism

An earlier response to Merleau-Ponty's position by Ayer may be found in his 1959 presentation to the Aristotelian Society titled "Phenomenology and Linguistic Analysis." Here Ayer presents a fairly critical approach to several key concepts in phenomenology, including the idea of intentionality (which he calls "obscurantist," due to his view that it puts "a number of interesting and difficult problems on one side" [Taylor & Ayer, 1959, 112],⁶⁵ though he proceeds to claim that it may in fact be fruitful), the notion of essence, and, most interestingly, Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception.

In criticizing the latter, Ayer claims that the necessity of the "sense object" [Taylor & Ayer, 1959, 114] appearing in a sense-field (what Gestalt Psychology calls a figure appearing against a ground) does not imply a general rejection of an empirical theory of sense-data (i.e. what Merleau-Ponty elsewhere calls "scientific" realism), but rather only of a particular atomistic theory (e.g. Locke's). This is something Merleau-Ponty also claims: Gestalt Psychology is not inherently incompatible with empiricism. Yet if it is accepted by the empiricist, then according to Merleau-Ponty a dilemma arises:

It may well happen that empiricism abandons this atomistic manner of expression and begins to talk about pieces of space or pieces of duration, thus adding an experience of relationships to that of qualities. [...] Either the piece of space is traversed and inspected by a mind, in which case empiricism is abandoned, since consciousness is no longer defined in terms of the impression; or else it is itself given in the manner of an impression, when it becomes just as exclusive of any more extensive co-ordination as the atomistic impression first discussed. [Merleau-Ponty, 2002, 16–17]

Ayer responds by claiming that "even so economical an empiricist as Hume allowed as much as this" [Taylor & Ayer, 1959, 115], namely that impressions must come under concepts. The Humean empiricist, according to Ayer, thinks that the subsumption of impressions under concepts was ultimately explainable as caused by the association of ideas. Ayer claims that Hume's explanation of the subsumption of impressions under concepts led him towards thinking "that forming expectations was just a matter of having images" [Taylor & Ayer, 1959, 115]. Ayer considers the latter thesis to be wrong, because according to Ayer images can only give rise to expectations if they can "function as signs" [Taylor & Ayer, 1959, 115]. Thus, Ayer claims, even for a Humean

⁶⁵ See also [Carman, 2007] for comparison of analytic and continental notions of intentionality.

empiricist perception may be seen as involving intentionality, and describing the exact role intentionality plays in perception will depend on one's understanding of the nature of signs. Ayer claims that in the attempt to understand the nature of signs he finds preferable "a behavioural theory, which would eliminate intentionality" [Taylor & Ayer, 1959, 115].⁶⁶ Ayer points out that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology does not favour the eliminativist approach, thus insisting on the notion of intentionality which Ayer thinks disables its proponent from doing work on the interesting problems which arise from its elimination in favour of behaviourism.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the empiricist needs to turn to memory in order to explain the association of ideas in question.⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty's claim is, roughly, that there is no pure experience of sense-data in the present, but rather the association in question comes through our present experience selectively constituted in reference to our past experience. Ayer notes that Merleau-Ponty considers this circular: in order for memory to allow me to organise my experience, there must be something about the experience itself which allows me to recognise it as associated with some prior experience. In other words, my present experience is organised in such a way as to allow for this association with past experiences. The way to explain this, according to Merleau-Ponty, would be by rejecting the realist version of "objective thought," and recognizing that the association takes place in reference to a horizon of meaning — in other words, that which explains how I associate my present experience to the past is already in the world so that memory may recognise it.

Ayer concedes that Merleau-Ponty is right insofar as he claims that "there is never a sensible chaos" [Taylor & Ayer, 1959, 116], and that it is possible that even the first thing a child experiences is already somehow organised. Yet Ayer insists that even if one acknowledges this claim, this does not imply what Merleau-Ponty claims, namely it does not prove that picking out sense-data from a sense-field is *not* produced by association, nor does it prove that the sense-field (or perhaps, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, the world) is "in any degree a mental creation" [Taylor & Ayer, 1959, 116], since even a mindless computer can perform the kind of selective association in question.

Here we have an extended and serious response to Merleau-Ponty, one which in fact could have opened up an honest exchange between the two philosophers. The issue discussed in 1951 may thus be re-contextualised within the greater framework of replying to Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the "realist" thesis to which empiricism is reduced. Given the state of French philosophy during the fifties, a criticism of em-

⁶⁶ Ayer is here replying to Taylor's exposition of the phenomenological view that "perception is a kind of behaviour" [Taylor and Ayer, 1959, 96], i.e. that it is active. Taylor contrasts this phenomenological view with the empiricist view of perception as passive, whereby impressions acquire their significance by association "in the sense of a physiologically-defined stimulus" [Taylor and Ayer, 1959, 96]. Taylor sees empiricism as aligned with a problematic behaviourism; Ayer concedes that behaviourism "faces obvious difficulties, but I am not so easily persuaded by Mr. Taylor that they are insuperable" [Taylor and Ayer, 1959, 115].

⁶⁷ See [Merleau-Ponty, 2002, 17–18].

piricism might most potently have been answered from outside France. Unfortunately, Merleau-Ponty's early death in 1961 meant that no such dialogue was to take place.⁶⁸

7. The Abyss Stares Back at Bataille

This problematises even further what Bataille may have had in mind when, in 1951, he pointed out that:

I should say that yesterday's conversation produced an effect of shock. There exists between French and English philosophers a sort of abyss which we do not find between French and German philosophers. [Bataille, 1986, 80]

Bataille's statement is interesting in that it is the first explicit announcement, in the twentieth century, of the division between Anglophone and Continental philosophy.⁶⁹ Bataille's diagnosis of this gap has been taken by various commentators to refer to a general split between two ways of philosophising, a split which characterises the state of academic philosophy during the twentieth century.⁷⁰ It is clear that it would be a mistake to take Bataille's statement of such a split at face value, without examining the context in which it was made.⁷¹ For example, when Bataille is referring to German philosophers, he is excluding (perhaps due to ignorance) an array of Germanophone academics who had been forced to flee their homeland during the war and had, by 1951, already widely influenced the state of the Anglophone academic environment. This would include not only the obvious example of the Logical Positivists, but also a variety of academics ranging from the so-called Frankfurt school (with their heavy influence on the "New Left") to Ernst Cassirer.

The affinity between French and German philosophers that Bataille refers to was partly the outcome of the 1929 encounter between German and French philosophers at the Davos *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*. With hindsight one may see his statement as a consequence of the parallel rise to dominance, in both France and Germany, of various

⁶⁸ In 1961, Merleau-Ponty gave a lecture (hitherto unpublished) at Manchester on the subject of Wittgenstein's philosophy [Mays & Brown, 1972, 20].

⁶⁹ It is followed, a year later in Britain, by a brief statement made in a review of Croce's *My Philosophy* by Isaiah Berlin, who claims that "no student of contemporary philosophy, however superficial, can fail to observe that it is divided by a chasm which divides the main portion of the continent of Europe on the one hand, from the Anglo-American world with its Scandinavian, Austrian and Polish intellectual dependencies" [Berlin, 1952, 574]. Note the similarity in the imagery involved ("chasm," "abyss"), as well as the closeness of the dates; this might imply that Ayer had been Berlin's source. See [Ree, 1993].

⁷⁰ See [Himanka, 2000] and [Critchley, 2001, 35–36].

⁷¹ One phenomenon related to Bataille's claim is the lack of imports of French books into England during the Second World War; see [Acton, 1947]. (Note that Acton, in giving a survey of at least 8 years in which French philosophy had been neglected in England, cites Ayer's criticism of Sartre in *Horizon* — but no other authors critical of Sartre.)

offshoots of phenomenological approaches to philosophy which we can place under the banner of existentialism (ranging from Heidegger to Levinas).⁷²

If Bataille is referring to the lack of such a parallel philosophical development in England, his shock should not be diverted towards a general characterisation of a split between national philosophical cultures. One may see Bataille as politely trying to indicate that Ayer's position on the particular subject was formulated in such a way as to constitute that shocking chasm. It may be that Bataille implied that Ayer, being an English philosopher, would have found it impossible to allow himself to share the understanding of a question which French philosophers (or, perhaps, the particular French philosophers present at the bar during that night) took to be ultimately metaphysical. Ayer might have thought that the question had been mistakenly understood as one pertaining to metaphysics.

In any case, Bataille's text indicates to us, if only indirectly, that his formulation of such a statement regarding an "abyss" is to be read with serious caution. This is because Bataille, whether consciously or not, goes on to undermine this statement in at least two ways during his discussion of the previous night. These two ways interconnect in an interesting manner, which we shall see unfolding as we go along.

Firstly, in Bataille's presentation of his own approach to the matter at hand we can find an underlying engagement with Ayer, and perhaps there are also traces of Ayer's approach to philosophy in Bataille's formulation of his argument. Bataille, contrary to Ayer, Merleau-Ponty, and Ambrosino, held that the proposition "there was a sun before men existed" was neither true (as Ayer thought), nor false (as the others thought), but meaningless.

This proposition is such as to indicate the total meaninglessness that can be taken on by a rational statement. Common meaning should be totally meaningful in the sense in which any proposition one utters theoretically implies both subject and object. In the proposition, there was the sun and there are no men, we have a subject and no object [*sic*]. [Bataille, 1986, 80]⁷³

Bataille is here arguing that there is something about the proposition at hand (i.e. the fact that it contains an object but not a subject) which renders it meaningless, in the sense that it is neither true as Ayer thinks, nor false as Merleau-Ponty thinks. This strange position adopted by Bataille almost sounds like a bad imitation of some Logical Positivist doctrine, almost as if Bataille were repeating Ayer's (and Carnap's) argument against Sartre! In this way, Bataille seems partly infected by Ayer, even if only in taking the minute step of attempting to imitate Ayer's approach to philosophy by

⁷² But see [Gutting, 1999, 3].

⁷³ The text, most likely a transcription of Bataille's lecture, seems to either make an error or fall into contradiction here — Bataille most likely intended to claim that the sun is not a subject, but an object.

talking of propositions and meaninglessness. Bataille's proposal even seems to resemble the Logical Positivists' verification principle, insofar as it appears to set as a condition for meaningfulness the possibility of verification by a subject. Thus Bataille, having made the statement above regarding the abyss that exists between English and French philosophers, takes a minor plunge into the abyss in order to contradict his own claim. Bataille's failure to imitate Ayer in a philosophically interesting manner could, for some, demonstrate the existence of that abyss.

On the one hand, Bataille, an unlikely follower of Logical Positivism, takes on its language, even if only momentarily. Bataille takes on Ayer's approach and creatively deploys it against Ayer's position. On the other hand, he takes on that language only almost in parody — he only fails to employ it in an appropriate manner. He fails to object to Ayer's proposition from Ayer's point of view.

8. Unknowing the Nothing

Having attempted his parodic attempt at Logical Positivism, Bataille goes on to dispel the mimetic aspect of his approach, by further exposing his reasons for rejecting the proposition in question.

I am not sure that I have sufficiently clarified the humanly unacceptable character of that proposition according to which there existed something prior to man. I really believe that so long as we remain within the discursive, we can always declare that prior to man there could be no sun. And yet one can also feel troubled, for here is a proposition which is logically unassailable, but mentally disturbing, unbalancing — an object independent of any subject. [Bataille, 1986, 80–81]

Here, Bataille transforms his previous statement, which made it seem as if the meaninglessness of the proposition is to be derived from something that has to do with its grammatical syntax. Instead, Bataille clarifies that the lack of an object does not imply that the statement is not logically well-formed, but rather that it is “mentally disturbing” and “unbalancing.” Bataille's approach starts, here, to become difficult and obscure, particularly as he introduces his concept of “unknowing.” The mental disturbance caused by the sun, seen as a subjectless object, is due to this strange function of “unknowing.” Our approach to such a proposition is one in which any knowledge is feigned.

It is impossible to consider the sun's existence without men. When we state this we think we know, but we know nothing. This proposition was not exceptional in this respect. I can talk of any object, whereas I confront the subject, I am positioned facing the object, as if confronting a foreign body which represents, somehow, something scandalous for me, because objects

are useful. A given object enters into me insofar as I become dependent on objects. One thing that I cannot doubt is that I know myself. Finally, I wondered why I blamed that phrase of Ayer's. There are all sorts of facts of existence which would not have seemed quite as debatable to me. Which means that this unknowing, whose consequences I seek out by talking to you, is to be found everywhere. [Bataille, 1986, 81]

Bataille's concept of "unknowing" is one to which he had devoted a large part of his writings. A quasi-mystical anti-theological idea regarding a kind of "inner" experience, it was an aspect of his thought that Jean-Paul Sartre had focused on in his criticism of Bataille. Sartre's criticism of Bataille, and particularly of this concept of "unknowing" which Bataille seeks to relate to Ayer, is quite important here. Sartre accuses Bataille of being, in summary, a mystic.⁷⁴ The importance of Sartre's charge lies in the fact that the vocabulary employed by Sartre against Bataille closely resembles that which is used by Ayer against Sartre. Sartre's line of argument is remarkably close to that which Ayer takes against Sartre himself.

Mr. Bataille refuses to see that nonknowing remains immanently in thinking. Thinking that thinks that it is not knowing remains thinking. [...] The equivalent would be to make nothing into something under the pretext of giving it a name. However, our author goes on to do just that. It is hardly that difficult for him. You and I, we might write "I know nothing" quite sincerely. But let us assume, like Mr. Bataille, I write: "And above all it is 'nothing,' it is 'nothing' that I know." Here is a nothing that begins to look rather odd: it is detached and isolated, not far from having an existence on its own. For the present it will be enough to call it the unknown and the result will be attained. Nothing is what does not exist at all, and the unknown is what does not exist for me in any way. By naming nothing as the unknown, I turn it into an existence whose essence is to escape my knowing; and if I add that I know nothing, that signifies that I communicate with this existence in some other way than by knowing. [Bataille, 2004, 171]

Here, Sartre is objecting to Bataille's use of the term "nothing" as contradictory. He is claiming that Bataille's "unknowing" or "nonknowing," as a means of communication with some special kind of mystical entity called nothingness, is really the transformation of some cognitive state about something into its contrary. In other words, to think about "unknowing" is to think about something, and consequently it ultimately implies a reification of nothingness.

Sartre had written this in 1943, three years prior to the publication of Ayer's criticism of his own work. Although the similarity of subject-matter to Ayer's approach to

⁷⁴ See [Sartre, 1975]. See also [Heimonet, 1996]; [Hollywood, 2002, 25–36].

Sartre (and Heidegger) is striking, Sartre is not making the radical claim that Ayer is making, namely that the metaphysical use of the term “nothing” is meaningless. Sartre is explicitly attacking what he perceives to be a contradiction in Bataille’s text. This, in turn, presupposes that Bataille’s use of terms such as “nothing” or “unknowing” is meaningful, and thus can be shown to fall into contradiction. Nevertheless, Sartre’s criticism resembles Ayer’s initial formulation of Carnap’s objection to Heidegger, where he claims that Heidegger “bases his metaphysics on the assumption that ‘Nothing’ is a name which is used to denote something peculiarly mysterious,” relying on “the postulation of non-existent entities” [Ayer, 1936, 36].

Bataille, having been criticised by Sartre on his concept of “unknowing,” is thus in the peculiar position of relating this concept to an obscure dialogue with Ayer, who in turn had produced a criticism of Sartre which, had it held water, would cancel the validity of Sartre’s commentary on Bataille. The complexity of this relation reveals Bataille’s position regarding the “abyss” which separates English and French philosophers to be a troublingly simplified one. In this case, the abyss is not really constituted by a void, but by a complex of mediations and relations which are strangely interwoven into what superficially might appear as an abyss.

Bataille informs us that the outcome of the meeting of the previous night had been a kind of compromise between those present. It is unclear what kind of compromise could be reached regarding such a strange hypothesis. Nevertheless, as the above discussion has shown, even if the encounter between Ayer, Merleau-Ponty, and Bataille (together with Jean Wahl, and in the gleaming absence of Jean-Paul Sartre) initially appeared unlikely, there is a kind of logic at work behind it. What was at first deemed to be the chance encounter of representatives of absolutely heterogeneous cultural and philosophical movements has been shown to rely on a complex web of relations — a web in which the strict dichotomies which had rendered this encounter bizarre at the outset simply have no place. Ayer’s modernistic development of Viennese emotivism is not far removed in its outlook from Sartrean existentialist ethics; Merleau-Ponty and his phenomenology turn out not to be incommunicable to a British Logical Empiricist such as Ayer; the polemical exchange between Sartre and Bataille, as it turns out, is not dissimilar to the kind of attitude that Carnap had been perceived by Ayer as having taken against Heidegger a decade earlier.

In 1959, nine years after the meeting between Ayer, Merleau-Ponty, Bataille, and Wahl, three of them (excluding Bataille) were to attend the colloquium titled “La Philosophie Analytique” held at Royaumont abbey. The idea of the “abyss” that Bataille had introduced in 1951 seems to have been familiar to all three, played a central role in formulating the discussions that took place at the colloquium, which later come to be thought of as the *locus classicus* of the divide between analytic and continental philosophy.⁷⁵ Intriguingly, all three philosophers partly contributed to the efforts towards rapprochement. Most famously, Merleau-Ponty suggested the proxim-

⁷⁵ See [Glendinning, 2006, 70].

ity between phenomenology and Oxford linguistic analysis,⁷⁶ a suggestion which Ayer would later confirm.⁷⁷ Yet despite these attempts at rapprochement, or perhaps even due to the assumption of a divide that underlies them, Bataille’s problematic notion of an “abyss”⁷⁸ became after Royaumont the metaphilosophical norm that haunts philosophy to this day.

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Note that [Merleau-Ponty, 2002, 27] explicitly refers to the Vienna Circle’s atomism as an example of empiricism.

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⁷⁶ See [Merleau-Ponty, 2005, 65–68].

⁷⁷ See [Taylor and Ayer, 1959, 121].

⁷⁸ “Gulf” was the preferred term at Royaumont.

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