

**Philosophy 308**  
***The Language Revolution***  
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**Hamilton College, Fall 2015**

Class #15  
Finishing Logical Empiricism  
Starting Quine and Meaning Holism

# Business

- Paper #2 Assignment
- Quine for the next three classes
  - O Today
  - Michael Tuesday
- Then Kripkenstein
  - Brett
  - Pippa

# Verifiability

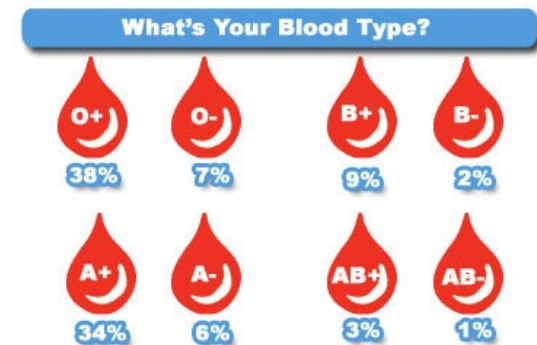
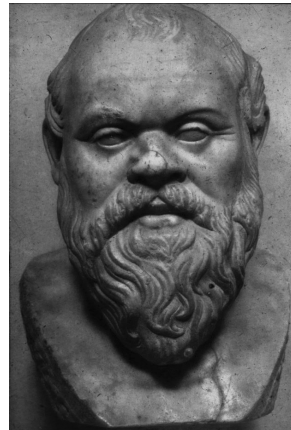
## Logical empiricism and the philosophy of language

- The meaning of a sentence/proposition is its method of verification.
- Ayer
  - A statement has meaning if and only if the proposition it expresses is either analytic or empirically verifiable.
- Hempel
  - A sentence has empirical meaning iff it is not analytic and follows logically from some finite and logically consistent class of observation sentences.
  - An *observation sentence* might be construed as a sentence - no matter whether true or false -which asserts or denies that a specified object, or group of objects, of macroscopic size has a particular *observable characteristic*, i.e. a characteristic whose presence or absence can, under favorable circumstances, be ascertained by direct observation.
- The exercise

# **Problems with the Verification Theory of Meaning**

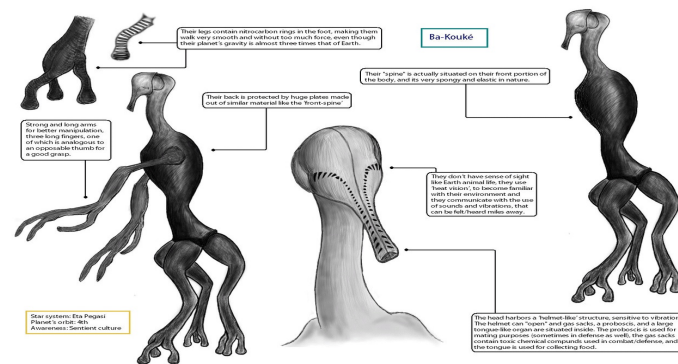
# Some Meaningful Claims Seem Unverifiable

- Socrates' blood type
  - ▶ No way for us to observe it.
  - ▶ Still, he certainly had one.
  - ▶ Uh-oh.



# Verifiability in Principle?

- Perhaps meaningful statements are verifiable, not in fact, but in principle.
  - ▶ We could, in principle, verify Socrates' blood type.
  - ▶ We could not, in principle, verify whether the Absolute is lazy, or whether the world was created five minutes ago.
  - ▶ “It [is] characteristic of the metaphysician, in my somewhat pejorative sense of the term, not only that his statements do not describe anything that is capable, even in principle, of being observed, but also that no dictionary is provided by means of which they can be transformed into statements that are directly or indirectly verifiable” (Ayer, 14).
- So, a factual statement is meaningful if it is, in some way, under some principle, connected to observation.
- But, the proposed amendment of ‘in-principle observation’ leads the logical empiricist back to the chauvinism of possible sense experience.
  - ▶ Return of the Martians



# The Circularity Objection

- The verification theory claims that a proposition is meaningless unless it is verifiable.
- But to know whether the statement is verifiable, we need to know what it means.
- “Kichwa chake kikubwa.”
  - If we it means that the meaning of life is 42, it is not verifiable.
  - If it is Swahili for ‘his head is big’, then it is verifiable.
- Are the toves in fact slithy?
- If we know what a proposition (or sentence or statement) means before we verify it, then verificationism is not doing any semantic work.
- Ayer sort of recognizes the problem.
  - “If a sentence expresses nothing there seems to be a contradiction in saying that what it expresses is empirically unverifiable; for even if the sentence is adjudged on this ground to be meaningless, the reference to “what it expresses” appears still to imply that something is expressed” (Ayer 6).
  - But: “This is, however, no more than a terminological difficulty...” (ibid).



# **Holism and the Verifiability Theory of Meaning**

The Real Problem



# Verification, Meaning, Foundationalism, Atomism

- The logical empiricists' theory of meaning requires immediate *knowledge* of basic empirical claims.
  - ▶ “There is a class of empirical propositions of which it is permissible to say that they can be verified conclusively. It is characteristic of these propositions, which I have elsewhere called “basic propositions,” that they refer solely to the content of a single experience, and what may be said to verify them conclusively is the occurrence of the experience to which they uniquely refer... Propositions of this kind are “incorrigible,”...[in that] it is impossible to be mistaken about them except in a verbal sense” (Ayer, 10).
- Such synthetic claims are, as we saw in the *Tractatus*, atomic and independent.
  - ▶ §1.2. The world divides into facts.
  - ▶ §2.06. From the existence or non-existence of one state of affairs, it is impossible to infer the existence or non-existence of another (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*).
  - ▶ The analytic/synthetic distinction
- Atomic Foundations
  - ▶ If I am standing to the right of you, we could have two atomic facts (my standing and your standing) and a logical relation (standing-to-the-right-of) between those facts.
  - ▶ I could stand to the right of you, or to the left of you, or on the other side of the planet, all of which are independent of you.



# Analysis and Atomism



- My standing in a place is not an atomic fact, it is a complex fact.
  - I am a complex
  - standing is a complex
  - you are a complex
- The true analysis of the world will involve analyzing these complexes into their simple (atomic) components.
  - Russell and his logically proper names
- A theory of the world that analyzes all of the myriad complexes into their atomic elements would present a veridical and secure picture of the world.
  - Analytic philosophy
- Quine's representations of the logical empiricist's atomism:
  - "The notion lingers that to each statement, or each synthetic statement, there is associated a unique range of possible sensory events such that the occurrence of any of them would add to the likelihood of truth of the statement..."
- Atomism and the analytic/synthetic distinction.
  - "As long as it is taken to be significant in general to speak of the confirmation and infirmation of a statement, it seems significant to speak also of a limiting kind of statement which is vacuously confirmed, *ipso facto*, come what may; and such a statement is analytic" (Quine).

# Holism

- Quine's holism devastated the logical empiricists' project.
  - ▶ The meaning of a single expression is elliptical, incomplete on its own.
  - ▶ One can not make a clear distinction between an observation statement and an analytic one.
- Worries about isolating observation statements are already present in Hempel's article.
  - ▶ "In the language of science, and for similar reasons even in prescientific discourse, a single statement usually has no experiential implications. A single sentence in a scientific theory does not, as a rule, entail any observations sentences; consequences asserting the occurrence of certain observable phenomena can be derived from it only by conjoining it with a set of other, subsidiary, hypotheses" (Hempel, 56).
  - ▶ "If...cognitive significance can be attributed to anything, then only to entire theoretical systems formulated in a language with a well-determined structure" (Hempel 57).
- Semantic holism: the unit of empirical significance is not the individual sentence, but the entire theory.
  - ▶ A claim requires, for its meaning, an entire linguistic framework, a theoretical context which forms the background to that expression.