



Pointlessness

Description

What is the average weight of residents of Vienna with telephone numbers ending in 3456? In arguing for clear logic, the prominent philosopher and logician Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970) cited the question above as *pointless* (p.61). Who cares, and who really wants to know anyway!

Of course, with the data deluge of the digital age, even information linking body weight to telephone numbers could be derived or inferred at relatively little cost. But it's still a pointless question, with a pointless answer. What possible use could anyone make of the conclusion? To force a weak geeky pun, are we immersed in pointless clouds of data?



But Carnap's real target was not pointless inference, but meaningless statements, i.e. statements that are neither true nor false, nor just pointless, but pseudo-statements that are meaningless, or simply nonsense.

Nonsense

We often reserve the term “nonsense” for things that are patently untrue, e.g. the earth’s crust rests on a core of molten lead, or I have the best IQ of anyone. But by some lights, such statements are not nonsense, nor meaningless. They are *meaningful* in that we can imagine a means of testing whether they are true or not.

With sufficient resource, someone could bore through the earth’s crust to find out if there’s lead there, and we could subject the person making the IQ claim to a test. The initial statement may be untrue, but not nonsense.

According to the philosopher A.J. Ayer (1910-1989), building on Carnap’s logic, a statement can be emotionally significant, but if it doesn’t meet the criterion of verifiability then it is “not literally significant” (16), i.e. *really* significant. In *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer asserts,

“The criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability. We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express – that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false” (16).

That’s the so-called *verification principle*, formulated to dispose of certain philosophical questions and philosophers. These logical positivists had philosophers such as Martin Heidegger in their sights.

Clouds of nothing

In his essay “The elimination of metaphysics,” Carnap quoted a series of excerpts from Heidegger’s *What is metaphysics?* the juxtaposition of which indeed could be construed as a cloud of meaningless nothingness in more than one sense, and in the syntax of the collation “if nothing else:

“What is to be investigated is being only *and* nothing else; being alone and *further-nothing*; solely being, and beyond being *nothing*. *What about this Nothing?* Does the *Nothing* exist only because the *Not*, i.e. the *Negation*, exists? Or is it the other way around? Does *Negation* and the *Not* exist only because the *Nothing* exists?

“We assert: *the Nothing* is prior to the *Not* and the *Negation*. . . . Where do we seek the *Nothing*? How do we find the *Nothing*? We know the *Nothing*. *Anxiety reveals the Nothing*. . . . That for which and because of which we were anxious, was *really-nothing*. Indeed: the *Noth.ing* itself-as such-was present. *What about this Nothing?*-*The Nothing itself nothings*” (69).

It seems as though it is Carnap’s exposition (and word cloud) that coloured the impression of subsequent generations of philosophers, such as Ayer, of Heidegger as a generator of meaningless, metaphysical pseudo-statements. On something about Heidegger’s writing style see post: [What buildings want](#).

Practicalities

I'm currently studying C.S. Peirce, and his indirect impacts on architectural thinking, and so the verification principle of the logical positivists is of interest as it seems to parallel Peirce's *maxim of pragmatism*. See previous post on [Being clear and distinct](#).

Though Peirce's philosophy predates the logical positivists (the Vienna Circle) and the verification principle, his philosophy came late to their attention. Ayer wrote a critical account of Peirce and pragmatism (1968) (though he was much more sympathetic than Carnap on Heidegger).

Albert Atkin provides a helpful account of the similarities and differences between the verification principle and the maxim of pragmatism. I summarise the similarities here.

1. Many of a logical school of thought see Peirce's maxim as a progenitor to the verification principle (post-hoc).
2. Both equate meaning with verification, observation and experience in some measure. Both respect the evidence of the senses to arbitrate in what's true, as opposed to a Cartesian styled abstract reasoning.
3. Both draw on science, its methods, importance, findings and sense of progress, as a model of reason, and both favour examples from science rather than ethics, aesthetics or other philosophical discourses.
4. Both are strict in how they define what is appropriate for philosophical discussion, according to their principles.

On the latter it is worth noting Ayer's subtle declaration of the superior nature of his own position. He sought to clarify the logical relationships within science and philosophy: "Consequently I maintain that there is nothing in the nature of philosophy to warrant the existence of conflicting philosophical schools" (LT&L 10). So he would resolve all disputes through logic.

By most accounts, even from its former adherents, logical positivism and the verification principle have fallen into disrepute, due to internal contradiction, the impossibility of verifying the verification principle by its own criterion, and its impracticality as a guiding principle for distinguishing truth, falsity, lies, meaning, relevance and pointlessness.

Needless to say, though they had their day amongst architectural technologists, Carnap and Ayer have less cache in architectural education at least than thinkers such as Heidegger.

Does pragmatism and its maxim fall by the same petard, or dissolve into a cloud of nothingness. Atkin thinks not, and I agree!

References

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Note

- In *The Origins of Pragmatism*, Ayer summarises Peirce: “Electricity is what electricity does. With everything brought into the open, we are spared any nonsense about occult qualities. The theory forbids us to search for the current in the wire, or the leprechaun in the watch. In short, it allows no truck with metaphysics. Its standpoint is very closely akin to that which was later to be adopted by the logical positivists. Peirce’s pragmatic maxim is indeed identical, for all practical purposes, with the physicalist interpretation of the verification principle” (55).

Category

1. Ethics

Tags

1. logical positivism
2. Peirce
3. pragmatism
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