

A DEFENSE OF EPISTEMIC VERIFICATIONISM

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INTRODUCTION

The verifiability criterion of meaningfulness (VCM) has been in disrepute for decades. Although the logical positivists wielded it with righteous fury, I doubt that anyone employs it any longer, or even respects it.¹ Metaphysics of the sort the positivists would have scorned is alive and kicking among our analytic colleagues, but logical positivism is dead; now only of historical interest. Nevertheless I believe that there is something basically right about VCM and that an epistemic version of it can be defended against the crucial criticisms that have been leveled against it. This defense breathes new life into a moderate empiricism not too different from the sort of empiricism embraced by the logical positivists and their allies, such as Carl Hempel, even if VCM is beyond resuscitation.

Just for the record here is a simple version of VCM: “A putative proposition is cognitively meaningful if and only if it is empirically verifiable or falsifiable or it is a tautology or self-contradictory.” Since I will not defend a verifiability criterion in this form, we need not ponder the well known obscurities and difficulties with this formulation.² In fact any formulation of VCM, no matter how structured to avoid problems, has been subject to three crippling objections:

- 1) VCM does not meet its own definition of meaningfulness. VCM is neither empirically verifiable nor falsifiable nor is it a tautology. Thus it fatally falls victim to itself. It turns out to be meaningless according to its own criterion, no better off than any metaphysical nonsense.
- 2) The metaphysical and theological propositions that the positivists wished to eliminate by deploying VCM are in fact cognitively meaningful—they are at least *meaningful*, even if not scientific or very fruitful. The logical positivists were denying the obvious.
- 3) The simple version of VCM quoted above eliminates the statements of scientific laws, historical claims, and other general propositions that positivists agree are meaningful and that they had no wish to eliminate. None of these are verifiable if conclusive verification is required. When VCM is suitably revised to allow these propositions it no longer eliminates any putative propositions. All the metaphysics and theology that the positivists intended to eliminate are then counted as meaningful. VCM becomes pointless. This objection can be put as a dilemma addressed to positivists: Either your favorite version of VCM eliminates too much or it eliminates nothing at all.³

My claim is that VCM can be revised in such a way that it does what the positivists wanted it to do and avoids these counterarguments. My strategy will consist of three parts. In part one I elaborate the positivists' underlying motivation for VCM and what they wanted VCM to do. In part two I formulate a verificationist principle different from VCM that satisfies these positivist motivations. In part three I argue that my replacement for VCM meets the three crippling objections outlined above.

The fundamental problem with VCM in any of its familiar versions is that it is formulated as a criterion of meaningfulness. As such it cannot answer the three objections; it is doomed to failure. Since VCM is a semantic principle—it is about meaningfulness—the three objections are semantic objections. No verifiability criterion can succeed as a semantic principle, but it can be reformulated as an epistemological principle which can do the work originally intended for VCM. As an epistemological principle it avoids the three semantic objections.⁴

PART ONE—THE POSITIVISTS' MOTIVATION FOR VCM

Hempel (1950, p. 41) begins with a sentence that summarizes the heart of the positivists' motivation: "The fundamental tenet of modern empiricism is the view that all non-analytic knowledge is based on experience."⁵

Hempel's admirably direct statement suggests but does not entail that *analytic* knowledge is not based on experience. Of course, the modern empiricists following Russell, Whitehead, and Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* held that mathematics, logic, and geometry are analytic or tautological and that analytic propositions do not represent full-bodied knowledge, they do not represent any matters of fact beyond the meanings of terms or conventions about their meanings. Bertrand Russell (1973, p.303), although not fully committed to empiricism, expresses this view concisely:

The further property needed to make a proposition one of mathematics or logic ... is the property traditionally expressed by saying that the propositions concerned are 'analytic' or 'logically necessary'. Or we may say that the propositions of logic or mathematics are 'true in virtue of their form'. If I say 'Socrates was wise', I say something substantial, which is known from history and cannot be known otherwise. But if I say 'Socrates was wise or not wise', I say something which requires no knowledge of history; its truth follows from the meanings of the words.

The positivists' claim is that mathematics, although fascinating and surprising, is not substantial and knowledge of mathematical truths is not knowledge of substantial matters, not knowledge of matters of fact. Empiricists have a choice about how to treat such analytic knowledge. They can claim that it is not really knowledge but only called "knowledge" by courtesy as it were or if not inclined to deny the ordinary use of words they can grant that it is knowledge but insist that its only source is the meanings of words or symbols. In either case positivists can accept Hempel's formulation as long as it is clear that analytic propositions do not pose any threat to empiricist epistemology. The positivists' claims about mathematics being analytic may not be correct; there may be no

analytic propositions; or the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions may be bogus. While each of these claims has been the subject of intense debate, all of this is irrelevant to the purpose at hand. The point is that we are interested in non-analytic propositions and our knowledge of them. This is what modern empiricists and their modern opponents were contending about.

“Based on experience” is itself an unclear phrase and empiricists have disagreed about how to understand it. Clearly Hempel means “sensory experience and experience of our own conscious mental states” but beyond that not much is clear.⁶ Does all knowledge of the external world need to be reduced to my present sense data? Are there sense data? Does experience include memory? What forms of introspection are included in experience? Do we experience physical objects and who are “we”? And so on. Despite disagreements among modern empiricists about these issues, there is agreement that certain supposed sources of knowledge are illusory. In particular, according to modern empiricists there is no possibility of knowledge based on pure intellectual intuition, pure reason, recollection of platonic forms, mystical insight, or anything that is claimed to be entirely independent of the senses and introspection into our own mental contents. The one formulation that all of the logical positivists would have accepted is that there are no non-analytic propositions that can be known *a priori*. No substantial knowledge of facts beyond logic, mathematics, geometry, and formal propositions such as “All grandmothers have or have had children” and “Nothing can be both entirely red and entirely green at the same time” is *a priori*.

It is not necessary to arrive at a more precise definition of “based on experience” since the metaphysicians themselves would not dispute the claim that their assertions were not based on experience in the sense in which this phrase is being used in Hempel’s empiricist slogan. To the extent that the metaphysicians themselves would have held that their claims were *a priori* or self-evident, or based on intuition, or pure intellectual perception of the forms, they would have agreed with the positivists that their metaphysical claims are not based on experience. Let us call sensory experiences, observations, experiments, surveys, and outcomes of any scientific procedure “empirical sources of knowledge.” Then both the positivists and the metaphysicians agree that the metaphysicians’ assertions are not based on empirical sources of knowledge. Where the positivists and metaphysicians disagree is over whether there are non-empirical sources of knowledge of substantive, non-analytic propositions. The positivists’ claim is that there are no such sources of knowledge. This is the motivation for VCM—the claim that there are no non-empirical sources of knowledge of non-analytic propositions. Or equivalently: “All sources of non-analytic knowledge are empirical.”

PART TWO—EPISTEMIC VERIFICATIONISM

As Hempel points out in the same article (1950, p. 41), the claim that there are no non-empirical sources of non-analytic knowledge does not entail VCM.

According to the latter [the principle of empiricism], a sentence expresses knowledge only if it is either analytic or corroborated by empirical evidence; the former [VCM] goes further and identifies the domain of cognitively significant discourse with that of

potential knowledge; i.e., it grants cognitive import only to sentences for which—unless they are either analytic or contradictory—a test by empirical evidence is conceivable.

Since VCM is not entailed by the claim that there are no non-empirical sources of knowledge, we do not need to embrace VCM in order to honor the positivists' motivation for it. VCM can be reformulated as, or rather replaced by an epistemic principle of verificationism—the verifiability criterion of knowledge, VCK: “No proposition that is independent of empirical sources of knowledge can be known to be true or known to be false.”⁷ In order to be true to the empiricists' motivation for VCM and their critique of metaphysics, we should understand VCK as leaving no room for rational belief or rational disbelief in any proposition that is not based on empirical sources of knowledge. The fundamental claim of modern empiricism—that there are no non-empirical sources of knowledge—should be understood to mean that there is no possibility of any non-empirical evidence for or against any proposition. So VCK should be understood to assert that there is no possibility of even the tiniest shred of evidence or support for or evidence against any proposition that is not empirical evidence or support. Any proposition that is completely immune to support or undermining by empirical evidence is immune to any and all support or undermining.

PART THREE—VCK AND THE THREE OBJECTIONS

Answer to Objection 1: Does VCK entail that it itself is its own victim? Is epistemic verificationism self-refuting like semantic verificationism? No, because VCK is an empirical claim for which, in fact, there is a good deal of empirical support. Our common empirical experience and experimental psychology offer evidence that humans do not have any capacity to garner knowledge except by empirical sources. In particular we do not have any capacity for *a priori* non-analytic knowledge. There is no known mechanism by which such knowledge would be made possible. The empirical support for this empirical claim is diffuse but salient. Our common empirical experience and experimental psychology offer evidence that humans do not have any capacity to garner knowledge⁸ except by empirical sources. Empiricists believe that there is no source of knowledge, information, or evidence apart from observation, empirical scientific investigations, and our sensory experience of the world, and we believe this on the basis of our empirical *a posteriori* experiences and our general empirical view of how things work. For example, we believe on empirical evidence that humans are continuous with the rest of nature and that we rely like other animals on our senses to tell us how things are. If humans are more successful than other animals, it is not because we possess special non-experiential ways of knowing, but because we are better at cooperating, collating, and inferring. In particular we do not have any capacity for substantive *a priori* knowledge. There is no known mechanism by which such knowledge would be made possible. This is an empirical claim.

There is no need to canvass all of the evidence for VCK here, since the only relevant claim at this point is that VCK is an empirical hypothesis, not that it is true. Nevertheless the history of human thought gives delightful support to VCK. Whenever

metaphysicians or theologians, mystics or seers, have claimed self-evidence or pure insight into the Truth or the Nature of Reality, other metaphysicians, theologians, mystics, or seers have just as confidently denied their claims. In the history of philosophy we have the spectacle of classical rationalists asserting many propositions on the basis of their pure rational insight and using this as support for their claim that humans have the capacity for pure rational insight while at the same time other rationalists are disagreeing with them about almost everything—except for the claim that what we conceive clearly and distinctly is true in the way we conceive it. The fact that philosophers have never been able to agree at all about *a priori* metaphysical claims is some empirical evidence that we do not have the capacity for such knowledge that the rationalists claimed we do. On the other hand, the rationalists themselves offered empirical support for the claim that we have the capacity for *a priori* knowledge, namely our capacity for pure mathematics. The positivists in turn attempt to deflect this move by claiming that mathematics is nothing but tautologies. Kurt Gödel (1964, pp. 271-272) argued that our capacity for mathematics demonstrates that humans can “perceive” abstract eternal mathematical objects as clearly as we perceive physical objects. More recently Noam Chomsky has argued for a version of Cartesian rationalism based on innate ideas. His evidence for his theory of innate ideas is empirical.⁹ Clearly, then, VCK is not self-refuting nor should it be treated as just a proposal or recommendation as Ayer and Hempel claimed about VCM. VCK is an empirical hypothesis that can be, and is being, investigated empirically.

Although VCK construed as an empirical claim does not fall victim to the self-refutation objections, perhaps circularity is now a problem. Supporting VCK empirically might seem to involve circular reasoning. Isn't this presupposing empiricism to support empiricism? Not exactly. The argument would be circular only if it presupposed VCK but it does not. All that it supposes is that VCK can be supported by and undermined by empirical investigations and evidence. It is not *presupposing* that there are no non-empirical sources of knowledge—it is arguing for that claim based on empirical evidence. That there are no non-empirical sources of non-analytic knowledge is an empirical claim comparable to the claim that the Sun has eight major planets or that the Earth has only one natural satellite. VCK is just another empirical claim, according to my view, and unless the metaphysician rejects all empirical claims and any possibility of empirical support for any claims, he or she must confront VCK empirically. This, of course, has been and is being done as I illustrated in the preceding paragraph.

Answer to Objection 2: Objection 2 is the quite reasonable claim that many of the metaphysical sentences that the logical positivists wanted to eliminate as meaningless are in fact meaningful. For example, Ayer claimed that assertions about the Judeo-Christian god are meaningless. The positivists by insisting on VCM seemed to be petulantly denying the obvious. Unlike VCM, VCK does not claim nor entail that metaphysical, theological, or other assertions that are not based on empirical sources are meaningless, so it easily ducks this objection. Nor, on the other hand, need empiricists, in order to answer objection 2, admit all metaphysical sentences as meaningful. VCK is neutral on the question of the meaningfulness of metaphysical and theological sentences. Recall that VCK is supposed to be true to the empiricist motivation for VCM. Hempel (1950) correctly pointed out that the fundamental principle of empiricism—that there no non-

empirical sources of knowledge—does not entail VCM. So VCK does not need to entail any view about the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of metaphysical sentences, and indeed does not.

Nevertheless there is still a puzzle. Why did the logical positivists feel compelled to claim that metaphysical sentences are cognitively meaningless, with all of the annoying difficulties of this invidious claim? Why didn't they simply dismiss metaphysics as fruitless speculation as the pragmatists such as Pierce did (and as VCK does)? Why did the positivists go beyond the claim embodied in VCK? The answer is not given by Hempel nor was this issue widely discussed by the positivists; it was assumed that they needed VCM.¹⁰

Their reasoning must have been something like the following: If a proposition is meaningful, then it must be true or false and not both at once. If a proposition is true, there must be something which makes it true, and if a proposition is false, then there must be something which makes it false. What makes a proposition true or false would be a fact or state of affairs. This view of language was taken over by the positivists from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Consider a putative metaphysical proposition that is not based on empirical sources of knowledge (and is not analytic); for example "The Absolute is timeless." If we grant that this is cognitively meaningful, then we must grant that there is something that makes it true (false) if it is true (false)—that is, following the *Tractatus*, that it is a "picture" of a fact. The obvious theory would be that there is a fact or state of affairs which if it obtains makes "'The Absolute is timeless'" true, and false if it does not obtain. We would naturally be led to suppose that there is an entity that the phrase "the Absolute" denotes and this entity has or fails to have the property of being temporal.

Obviously, this line of reasoning is going places that no empiricist wants to go, so the positivists attempted to cut it off right at the beginning, before any non-empirical, non-physical, non-causal, metaphysical entities, facts, or states of affairs begin lurking in the wings. Along these same lines the positivists following Russell and Wittgenstein were intent on denying that there are pure mathematical and geometrical objects.

The positivists' move from the fundamental principle of empiricism to VCM is, nevertheless, still weak in the sense that VCM is clearly a victim of objection 2. An unverifiable proposition need not contain terms referring to ideas that are empty or non-empirical. To use classical empiricist terminology, it could contain only ideas that are compounded out of ideas of sensation and ideas of reflection. For example, someone could claim that there are angels that are blissfully happy. Such a claim need not be empirically verifiable nor falsifiable (even weakly in principle), but it is composed of simple ideas derived empirically.¹¹ Furthermore, the modern empiricists in denying meaningfulness to metaphysical assertions are being suspiciously metaphysical themselves. Part of the motivation of the empiricists in adopting VCM, whether they would admit it or not, is to avoid commitment to any non-empirical, non-physical, non-causal, metaphysical entities, facts, or states of affairs. The empiricists cannot abide the supposition that there are metaphysical facts that are in principle unknowable, or that there are Meinongian objects that are outside the causal nexus. So (wink wink) the empiricists do not just hold that "...all non-analytic knowledge is based on experience"; they are also harboring ontological views. This is not just epistemology, here is metaphysics of the sort the positivists would eschew. We might well call this the "crypto-metaphysical foundations of modern empiricism."¹²

If this entire line of argument is correct, then modern empiricists are in a rather unpleasant dilemma. Either grant that metaphysical propositions are meaningful or stand condemned of indulging in metaphysics. However, despite its plausibility when spelled out in this fashion, the dilemma is based on a view of meaning that is too strict. Indeed, the logical positivists were plagued in many ways, e.g. in their views about analyticity, by a too-strict view of meaning inherited mostly from the classical empiricists and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.

We have learned from more pragmatically inclined empiricists such as Quine that the notion of "meaning" cannot be regimented in the way the positivists wanted nor can it do the work that they wanted it to do. More specifically for the current concern we have ready to hand clearly meaningful claims that do not have something that makes them either true or false. For example, consider claims about fictional characters that go beyond the content of the stories in which the characters appear. "Sherlock Holmes liked Earl Grey Tea" or "Hamlet's favorite horse was named Charger" are claims that are beyond the story in the sense that there is no evidence in the stories either to support or undermine them, nevertheless they are meaningful.¹³ "Sherlock Holmes liked Earl Grey Tea" or "Hamlet's favorite horse was named Charger" are not meaningless, and yet we should have no tendency to suppose that we would have any reason to believe or disbelieve them. A claim such as "Sherlock Holmes liked Earl Grey Tea" or "Hamlet's favorite horse was named Charger" can have no support of any kind and cannot represent knowledge.

Granted, in replying to objection 2 in this way we are depending to a large extent on the vagueness of "meaning" and "meaningful." The concept of cognitive meaningfulness is vague enough or flexible enough to be stretched to include sentences like "Hamlet's favorite horse was Charger" and "The Absolute is timeless" without distorting it too much. These expressions undeniably have a "surface" meaningfulness. If "cognitive" is meant merely to be opposed to "emotive," then we can also say they are cognitively meaningful without doing any harm. Sentences such as these lack some of the features of meaningfulness, but have others. They lack impact and do not have truth conditions other than formal Tarski-type ones, but they are composed in standard grammatical ways with mostly familiar terms—"Hamlet" and "The Absolute" being proper names grammatically—and have fairly stable uses and participate in standard inferential patterns. Even the abstrusest metaphysical or theological sentences occur in organized webs of discourse that appear to be ruled governed and structured. They are not just chatter (although some of the writings of metaphysicians do seem to be nothing but word salads). The fact is that once we abandon the picture theory merely admitting that metaphysical claims are meaningful by itself does no harm and is not some sort of validation of the non-empirical to be feared by empiricists. As van Fraassen (2002, p. 27) puts it in his critique of analytic metaphysics:

The unfortunate negative verdict forced on us ... which grants sufficiency to such lenient standards, is that it is very easy, all too easy, to make sense. We can sit in our closets and in a perfectly meaningful way, kneading and manipulating language, create new theories of everything and thereby important contributions to ontology. In other words, to put it a little more bluntly, this "world play" we engaged in here is but idle word play; although shown to be meaningful, it is merely idle word play nev-

ertheless.

Answer to Objection 3: VCK would seem to admit too much to the realm of the rationally supportable or underminable. After all, VCK requires that a claim, to represent possible knowledge, only be subject to support or undermining by empirical evidence. It does not require conclusive verification or falsification. There is no reason why an empiricist cannot take a moderate line and include among empirical evidence our general views about how the world works garnered from our life experience, inference to the best explanation, and a moderate empiricist can even allow such “superempirical” virtues as simplicity and elegance to be tie-breakers among empirical theories underdetermined by data.¹⁴ These forms of empirical evidence may be able to give no more than soft support to claims. The only sorts of propositions that VCK says are beyond the realm of the possibly knowable, for which there can be no possibility of rational belief or disbelief, are propositions for which there is absolutely no empirical support whatsoever, no matter how liberally “empirical support” is construed. Such a liberal criterion admits much of traditional philosophy as rationally believable or unbelievable.¹⁵ For example, Cartesian dualism is undermined by advances in neurophysiology; Locke’s claims that no ideas or principles are innate in the mind are challenged by Chomsky on the basis of empirical linguistics; Hegel’s claim that the Prussian state was the end of history was another casualty on the Western Front in 1918; many of Marx’s assertions have turned out to be empirically false; Nietzsche’s analysis of slave and master morality is based on historical documents; and so on. Nevertheless I suppose if we trolled the deep waters of Plato, Leibniz, Spinoza, and Hegel, not to mention Bergson, Whitehead, and Bradley, we would find claims that are absolutely independent of any empirical support or challenge whatsoever and that are presented as such by the philosophers themselves. Any such claims cannot be rationally believed or disbelieved according to VCK. They are meaningful, with the possible exception of the outright gibberish of Hegel, but never worthy of the name knowledge (or even rational belief), and neither are their denials.

Since unlike the Absolute we are not timeless, our time would not be well spent in trolling the murkier waters of the history of philosophy for examples. Rather I propose to rest my case on instances from contemporary philosophy. In this way objection 3 will be answered.

Following Kripke’s seminal works (1971 & 1980) many philosophers have been given to talk of alternative possible worlds. Such talk and reasoning reached its apotheosis with David Lewis’ *On the Plurality of Worlds* (1986). Many questions about what is possible or impossible can be asked and answered in various ways. For example, Lewis considers the question whether there is a possible world in which Saul Kripke is the son of Rudolf Carnap. Could Saul Kripke have been the son of Rudolf Carnap? Is this possible? In asking this question this way Lewis is not asking whether it is logically possible that Saul Kripke is the son of Rudolf Carnap. That’s too easy. It is logically possible, because “logically possible” just means does not entail an explicit contradiction. Nor is Lewis asking an epistemic question, such as can we imagine that we discover that Kripke is the son of Carnap. Nor is he asking whether, given the actual physical laws and natural facts about genetics and so on, Saul Kripke could have been the son of Rudolf Carnap. I gather that this is physically impossible given their differing genetics and so

on. (I assume that Lewis means “natural son.”) Lewis is asking a metaphysical question. Nor, poignantly, does Lewis give an answer to this question.

Lewis’ metaphysics have been amply criticized from roughly the same sort of epistemological view point that I am arguing for here.¹⁶ Lewis defends his claims to knowledge of metaphysical possible worlds almost entirely on the basis of our knowledge of mathematics. I do not think this ploy, typical of rationalists, should move us. Unless there is the sort of agreement that we have in mathematics and the sort of reliable methods that we have in mathematics, we should not view investigations into metaphysics on analogy with that vastly firmer subject. Clearly we can see huge differences between metaphysics and mathematics. Mathematics has immense areas of universal agreement, universally agreed upon methods of proceeding, and endless practical applications.

In any case, we need not at this point embroil ourselves in the epistemological dispute between Lewis and his critics. The question before is whether VCK falls victim to objection 3, and the answer is “No!” Lewis’ claims are non-empirical, nor are they purely formal. Lewis and we agree about that. According to VCK they are not available to be rationally believed or disbelieved. Here we and Lewis disagree. So it is not the case that VCK fails, or would fail, to eliminate any metaphysical claims. In particular VCK would eliminate many of Lewis’ metaphysical claims and I hold that the question whether there is a possible world in which Kripke is the son of Carnap is a question that cannot rationally be answered, if it is asked in the sense in which Lewis is asking it. If Lewis is right that these sorts of metaphysical questions can be answered, then VCK is false, but that is a different issue which must be investigated empirically as I argued in my reply to objection 1.

David Lewis’ claims are not isolated examples of contemporary metaphysics that are rejected by VCK. Consider the claim that Aristotle turned into a toadstool when he was twenty-seven years old and lived as a toadstool until he died at ninety-five. This claim is logically possible since it does not entail an explicit contradiction. However Aristotle turning into a toadstool when he was twenty-seven years old and living as a toadstool until he dies at ninety-five is not physically or naturally possible. Of course, this is an empirical hypothesis based on the apparent empirical fact that human beings cannot, physically, turn into toadstools. There is no physical mechanism by which that could occur.¹⁷ Nevertheless, philosophers do make such metaphysical claims or similar ones. For example, Penelope Mackie (2007) claims that Aristotle could have been a toadstool throughout his entire existence. She is not claiming that this is physically possible, nor merely that it is logically possible. She claims that it is possible in the *de re* sense that Aristotle that very man could have not been a man and instead been a toadstool for his entire existence. This is a metaphysical claim that Mackie asserts. On the contrary, I claim that only three things are knowable about (rationally assertible or deniable about) “Aristotle is (or was) a toadstool”: it is empirically false, it is physically or naturally impossible, and it is logically possible. Nothing else. We do not have, and cannot have, any rational way of assessing the truth or falsity of Mackie’s claim.¹⁸

In fact, we do not have to go to such extremes to find claims that violate VCK. Even the sorts of claims that Kripkians were fond of violate VCK; for example, that Aristotle being male could not have been female throughout his entire existence. Again, this is not meant to be an empirical claim at all, nor a claim that the statement “Aristotle

being male could not have been female throughout his entire existence” is merely logically possible.

If we were to embrace VCK, as I would propose, we would have grounds for rejecting all such metaphysical propositions—not as meaningless, but as being beyond rational belief or disbelief. Of course, any such proposition is logically possible unless it entails a self-contradiction, but that is all that we can rationally say about it. Scientists, our experience and observation, tell us what is physically possible or impossible, and the logicians tell us what is logically possible or impossible. There is no work for metaphysicians to do. We understand pretty clearly questions about what is physically or naturally possible and these questions are answered by empirical science or our common experience and observation. We also understand questions about logical possibility and these questions can be settled by logicians. On the other hand a metaphysical question that is not asking whether some supposed state of affairs is naturally possible nor whether it is logical possible is, in the words of van Fraassen, “idle word play.”

What about intuition? As an empiricist I hold that there can only be two sources of intuition—empirical, in which case its deliverances would be supportable by empirical evidence—or purely linguistic in which case it will issue in analytic or linguistic propositions. There is no such thing as pure rational intuition of the truth or falsity of metaphysical claims—no known mechanism by which humans could accomplish such feats of intellection. Of course, this is an empirical claim. Epistemic verificationism would allow a sort of descriptive metaphysics reminiscent of that pursued by Peter Strawson. I suppose this project would proceed by something like Rawlsian reflective deliberation using our metaphysical intuitions, but these metaphysical intuitions would be conceptual in the Strawsonian approach, not based on pure reason. According to Strawson (1963, p. xii.) descriptive metaphysics is a form of conceptual analysis.

The idea of descriptive metaphysics is liable to be met with scepticism. How should it differ from what is called philosophical, or logical, or conceptual analysis? It does not differ in kind of intention, but only in scope and generality. Aiming to lay bare the most general features of our conceptual structure,...

Strawson (ibid.) distinguishes descriptive metaphysics from revisionary metaphysics and seems to suggest that this division is exhaustive.

Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure.... [W]e can distinguish broadly: Descartes, Leibniz, Berkeley are revisionary, Aristotle and Kant descriptive.

Surely this is wrong history of philosophy. Metaphysicians traditionally were engaged in an attempt to discover and argue for truths about the ultimate nature of ourselves, God, and reality. Descartes, Leibniz, Berkeley, and Aristotle would be shocked and disgusted to be told that they were just about conceptual description or revision. In a series of BBC discussions on the nature of metaphysics that took place around the time that Strawson published *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* and that included Strawson and other famous Oxford philosophers¹⁹ Ryle (1960, p. 114) admonishes the other

discussants for treating traditional metaphysics as conceptual analysis.

GILBERT RYLE. This is all very well. But a philosopher would not usually rank as a metaphysician just for his contributions to the task of conceptual revision; and he might very well rank as a metaphysician even though the navigators of the sciences got no advice from him in setting their theoretical courses. What is commonly expected of a metaphysician is that he should assert the existence or occurrence of things unseen and give for these assertions purely philosophical or conceptual reasons. If he is not an ontologist he is not a metaphysician.

More specifically, the metaphysician is widely expected to argue for existence-conclusions which either belong to theology or are at least theologically interesting. Sometimes these conclusions are theologically interesting because, like Materialism, Deism and Pantheism, they are theologically shocking. After all, 'theology' was the word that Aristotle himself used for the constructive core of what was posthumously entitled his 'Metaphysics'.

Ryle is right. There is nothing wrong in principle with revisionary metaphysics, but it is not metaphysics. The same goes for descriptive metaphysics. These projects may even be useful. VCK rejects as beyond the possibility of rational belief or disbelief the claims of the genuine metaphysicians that Ryle is talking about, and there are plenty of them. So VCK does not fall victim to objection 3.

Brief Answer to One Final Objection: VCM has well-known problems with truth-functional compounds.

If under a given criterion of cognitive significance, a sentence N is nonsignificant, then so must be all truth-functional compound sentences in which N occurs nonvacuously as a component. For if N cannot be significantly assigned a truth value, then it is impossible to assign truth values to the compound sentences containing N ; hence, they should be qualified as nonsignificant as well. (Hempel 1965, p. 102.)

The problem is that S , a significant observation sentence, logically entails $S \vee N$. And S & N logically entails S . Thus if S is empirically true, then so is $S \vee N$, and if S is empirically false, then so is $S \& N$. "All swans are white and the Absolute is timeless" turns out to be false and thus cognitively significant, and this is unacceptable to the positivists. Epistemic verificationism is not doomed by this problem in the way that semantic verificationism is, because VCK does not entail that N is nonsignificant, so the significance of $S \& N$ and $S \vee N$ is no threat. Furthermore we can give conditions for rational believability or disbelievability for $S \& N$ and $S \vee N$. Let us suppose that N is, according to VCK, not rationally believable or rationally disbelievable. In that case, $S \& N$ is rationally disbelievable, but not rationally believable and $S \vee N$ is rationally believable but not rationally disbelievable. Not rationally believable does not entail rationally disbelievable, and rationally believable does not entail not rationally disbelievable. This does present a slight problem for VCK, because a statement of the form $S \vee N$ could be immune to any possible empirical disconfirmation but be empirically confirmable and vice versa for $S \& N$. Some might be tempted to argue that

when S is empirically true, that offers some empirical support to $S \& N$. This is a puzzle case. The answer will be the same as to the question how are we to evaluate “Snow is white and Hamlet’s favorite horse was named Charger”? As formulated VCK is mute about such truth functional compounds, and there is no reason to alter VCK to accommodate or exclude them. They are cognitively meaningful and we understand what our cognitive situation is with respect to them in some situations, in others it is puzzling. I do not see that a metaphysician who was driven to accept the point of view embodied in VCK would find much solace in those truth functional compounds. Certainly he could make all of his statements rationally believable by adding “... \vee Snow is white ” to them, but why not go further and add “... $\vee 2+2=4$ ” to everything one is tempted to assert. Then all one’s statements will be disjunctions and all necessarily true.

CONCLUSION

Is VCK correct? I believe that it is. Should we embrace epistemic verificationism as a guide to philosophizing? I propose that we do. Where does this leave the practice of philosophy? I think that we should dispense with non-empirical metaphysics and return to a more empiricist, even positivist epistemology. The advantages of the empiricist approach are manifold. 1)It is in tune with our noble British empiricist heritage without being subservient to it. 2)It avoids the epistemological problems of metaphysical intuition, pure rational insight, pure metaphysical reason. Natural scientists tell us what is physically possible, and logicians, purely formally, tell us what is logically possible. 3)For all reasoning in real life physical and logical possibilities will suffice. We need logical possibility for the concept of valid argument and we need physical modalities for things like fixing blame and knowing what to regret, admire, and for interpreting counterfactual claims, but I do not see that we need to confuse ourselves endlessly with questions about metaphysical possibilities.

Many of us have been suffering from metaphysical intoxication for the last thirty years or so, mainly brought on by the work of Kripke and Lewis. We’ve had a ball these last thirty years with metaphysics, now it’s time to return to our senses.

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Endnotes

¹ See Scott Soames (2003) for a thorough discussion of the development and demise of VCM. “The Empiricist Criterion of Meaning” is, of course, another name for VCM.

² See for example the introduction to A.J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth, and Logic* pp. 5-16. Also Carl Hempel (1950) gives a detailed account of the difficulties of formulating an acceptable version of VCM. Another updated version is Hempel 1965. Also on this Soames, *ibid*.

³ A recent and forceful expressions of these objections to VCM see Hilary Putnam 1983, pp. 184-185 and 190-191. Also Hempel (1950) states objections 1) and 3). Ayer (*ibid*) states objection 2 to VCM. Both Ayer and Hempel end up asserting that the empiricist criterion of meaningfulness is neither true nor false but is a proposal, an elucidation. Putnam (1983, p. 191) also dismisses this move. “The positivists, I will be reminded, *conceded* that the verification principle was ‘cognitively meaningless’. They said it was a *proposal*, and as such not true or false. But they *argued* for their proposal, and the arguments were (and had to be) non-starters.”

⁴ This strategy is somewhat familiar. See Boghossian (1996). Boghossian argues that analyticity cannot work as a semantic notion, but is a useful epistemic notion. His arguments are perhaps extendible to the present case.

⁵ A word about terminology: I believe that Hempel when he uses the term “modern empiricists” is referring to the logical positivists and their allies. In any case, that is how I will understand and use the term. Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are classical modern empiricists or, perhaps better, just classical empiricists. The logical positivists include the Vienna Circle and their direct followers such as A.J. Ayer.

⁶ Van Fraassen (1995, p. 69) offers a detailed and accurate explication of the fundamental principle of empiricism. His elaboration is very helpful in relieving the obscurities and vaguenesses in the principle. Rather than indulge in such an explication here, I refer the interested reader to van Fraassen. Van Fraassen finds the principle, even thus elaborated, to be objectionable for reasons that need not detain us at this point.

⁷ Recall that in the present context “proposition” means “non-analytic substantial proposition.”

⁸ Here and in the following by “knowledge” and the like I mean knowledge of propositions other than those of logic, mathematics, and formal ones such as those mentioned above.

⁹ For a careful and, I believe decisive, refutation of Chomsky on innate ideas see Hilary Putnam 1967, pp. 12-22.

¹⁰ Carnap in his lengthy and classical statement “The Elimination of Metaphysics through the Logical Analysis of Language” (1959/1932) says only this in explanation of the motivation for treating metaphysical (including all theological and ethical) sentences as meaningless: “The development of *modern logic* has made it possible to give a new and sharper answer to the question of the validity and justification of metaphysics.... In the domain of *metaphysics*, including all philosophy of value and normative theory, logical analysis yields the negative result *that the alleged statements in this domain are entirely meaningless*.” (1959, pp60-61. Emphasis in the original.)

¹¹ But note that Wittgenstein (1964, p10) discusses just this sort of case. He says although we do understand the individual terms, and could give the whole a sense, we do not understand it in this context (or without a context). Here’s the quote: “We don’t say that the man who tells us he feels the visual image two inches behind the bridge of his nose is telling a lie or talking nonsense. But we say that we don’t understand the meaning of such a phrase. It combines well-known words, but combines them in a way we don’t yet understand. The grammar of this phrase has yet to be explained to us.”

¹² There is much more to this issue than can be discussed here. Many positivists followed Wittgenstein in holding that the meaning of a statement is the method by which it would be verified or falsified. Obviously VCK must be severed from this latter claim. Also there is the question of holism. The positivists were

convinced by Frege's and Wittgenstein's view that the unit of meaning is the statement not the term. Quine went further and argued that the unit of meaning is the embedding theory or even the whole of science. I, perhaps naively, have avoided discussion of Quinean holism. Epistemologists and the rest of us typically use and discuss expressions such as "X knows that p" and "X believes that p" where "p" stands for some individual proposition or other. Epistemologists attempt to give conditions for such expressions. I am availing myself of the same privilege in elaborating VCK. If someone claims to know, believe, or assert a proposition, they must have grounds. Either such grounds can be traced back to empirical sources or not. Difficulties would arise if the adherent of VCK were committed to the claim that a proposition must be empirically confirmable or disconfirmable directly and in isolation. No such commitment is presupposed by VCK, however.

¹³ I am assuming by hypothesis that there is no evidence at all either for or against these claims. If this is incorrect, then just pick other examples. Surely not every meaningful claim about Holmes has something for it or against it in Doyle's writings. These sentences are not like the one that Wittgenstein (1964, p10) is discussing. See note 13. We perfectly well understand these claims in or out of context.

¹⁴ The empiricist who adopts VCK holds that the only sort of evidence that there is is empirical evidence, but he need not hold that the only reasons to accept or reject a claim are empirical. No claim that could possibly represent knowledge could be completely immune to empirical support or undermining, nor could one rationally hold a proposition contrary to empirical evidence.

¹⁵ van Fraassen (2002 & 1995) argues that empiricism founders because it cannot carry out a radical critique of metaphysics without engaging in metaphysics itself. But empiricism as I conceive it need not engage in a radical critique of metaphysics. A moderate critique which leaves some of metaphysics intact will do just fine.

¹⁶ See especially the section "How can we know" in Lewis 1986, pp. 108-115, where Lewis cites such critics and attempts to answer them. In this same section Lewis discusses the metaphysical question of whether Kripke could have been the son of Carnap.

¹⁷ Someone might urge that the reason that Aristotle could not turn into a toadstool has to do with the existence and persistence conditions for human beings. Even if we do invoke persistence and existence conditions to explain the impossibility of a human turning into a toadstool, these conditions are based empirically on the kinds in question and our empirical knowledge of them.

¹⁸ I should note for the record that Mackie's arguments for her claim about Aristotle are almost entirely negative. I believe these are excellent arguments. There is no reason to rule out the purely metaphysical claim that Aristotle could have been a toadstool throughout his entire existence in some other possible world. Her positive arguments for the claim about Aristotle are that it makes sense and is useful for rounding out metaphysics in various ways. I refer the interested reader to her book.

¹⁹ Among them Grice, Murdoch, Quinton, Mary Warnock, Bernard Williams, Pears, Hampshire, P.L. Gardiner, and G. Buchdahl, besides Ryle and Strawson.