Meaning and Nonsense in “A Dialogue Betwixt the Body and the Mind”: Logical Empiricism and the Death of Poetics

The theory of meaning that one employs is, and has been, a foundational piece of philosophy of language in its service as a grounding sub-discipline of philosophy at large. While the philosophy of language no longer occupies its central role as “the” home of the first principles from which philosophy derives its truth, its importance cannot be understated. Logical Empiricism, as a research program, or, to use Kuhnian terminology, a “paradigm,” is receiving renewed interest. It is in the vein of this tradition that Margaret Cavendish’s “A Dialogue Betwixt the Body and the Mind” shall be examined. The Logical Empiricist thesis of Verificationism will be explained and employed in a critical analysis of Cavendish’s poem and the implications of this method for general poetics will be analyzed.

To begin, some historical information and a basic introduction to Verificationism will prove useful in the introduction of the Logical Empiricist method into the critical discourse. Logical Empiricism began in Vienna, Austria with the Vienna Circle; A.J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic* introduced the movement in England. The Vienna Circle was composed of a group of philosophically-minded scientists and scientifically-minded philosophers. The movement found its roots in the English Empiricism, the thesis that all of our knowledge is *a posteriori*, of philosophers such as David Hume and John Locke as well as Continental
philosophers such as Immanuel Kant. The movement began in the 1920s and steadily gained popularity for a few decades before falling out of philosophical vogue.

The groundwork of Logical Empiricism is its theory of meaning: Verificationism. Verificationism, as A.J. Ayer says, is:

The criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact … 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. (35)

The criterion of verifiability, simply put, is a mode by which one may analyze utterances, sentences, or “statements of fact.” To illustrate, an example of a meaningful sentence and a non-meaningful sentence will be analyzed. The proposition “the cat is on the mat” is meaningful because it is confirmable by certain observations (one may look at the cat and the mat; one may hear the cat make a given sound). In other words, there is empirical evidence that can confirm the proposition in question. The proposition, on the other hand, that “there are a class of objects properly called universals which are mind-independent, abstracta” is a pseudo-proposition. It is a pseudo-proposition because the statement is “unverifiable,” or, there is no empirical evidence that can confirm or refute the proposition.

The criterion of verifiability is a part of a larger system of the Logical Empiricist philosophy of language. Following Kant, the Logical Empiricists divide sentences into two sorts: analytic and synthetic. Analytic statements are those statements which are definable exclusively based on the meaning of their symbols. For example, the red barn is red is analytic because the predicate “red” is contained within the subject “red barn.” Another example would be “If P then
Q; P; Therefore Q.” This syllogism, modus ponens, is logically valid and analytic because based on the rules of inference in first-order logic and the definitions of “if,” “then,” and “therefore.” While this syllogism is analytic, and thus does not present any new cognitive content, it does clarify and show how a deduction may be made from certain definitions and propositions.

Synthetic statements, on the other hand, are those statements which say something new. The proposition “the cat is on the mat” is synthetic because the predicate “mat” is not contained within the subject “cat.”

Now that the necessary brush has been cleared, the analysis of “A Dialogue Betwixt the Body and the Mind” may begin. The poem takes the form of a dialogue written in heroic couplets (a,a,b,b). Its content refers to a view called “substance dualism.” Substance Dualism is the thesis that, according to the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, may be described as

[t]he material world is simply an indefinite series of variations in the shape, size, and motion of the single, simple, homogenous matter that he (Descartes) terms res extensa (extended substance) … [b]ut there is one class of phenomena that cannot, on Descartes’s view, be handled in this way namely conscious experience. (226)

To put it in more precise language, substance dualism posits two ontologically distinct substances: one termed “res extensa” and the other “res cognitans.” “Res extensa” is Latin for “extended substance.” In ontology, extended substances are things composed of matter and its relations: tables, chairs, fundamental particles, and electro-magnetism. On the other hand, “res cognitans” is comprised of nonmaterial entities and features: mind, intentionality (“aboutness”), and qualia (“what-isness”). Cavendish, who was friends with Descartes (“Margaret Cavendish” 1,) echoes this line of thought throughout her poem.
The body, for example, says things like “yet in mighty battles slain” in reference to itself while the mind says things like “the loadstone of attraction I find out. (4)” These statements of the attribution of properties and actions to the body and the mind is representative of the ontological dualism offered by the Cartesian framework.

The poem thus becomes an extended metaphor for conveying a particular, and at the time recent, philosophical development. The main function of philosophy, and thus Theory and literary criticism insofar as it is informed by philosophy, on the Logical Empiricist view is that of analysis. Philosophy and criticism ought to be focused on clarifying linguistic expressions and their relation to other expressions and determining whether an utterance is within the bounds of sense.

Given this methodological consideration, the analyst has a solid foundation on which to criticize “A Dialogue Betwixt the Body and the Mind.” The first critical question that must be asked is whether the content of the poem is meaningful or not given the criteria laid out earlier in the essay. According to the verification criterion of meaning, the issue of substance dualism is a pseudo-problem. It is empty, meaningless talk. Following the early Wittgenstein of the Tractatus, the critic must come to terms with the fact that:

To understand a proposition means to know what is the case, if it is true.

(One can therefore understand it without knowing whether it is true or not.)

One understands it if one understands its constituent parts. (43)

Wittgenstein is saying that in order to know what a proposition means one must know the conditions under which it may be the case. Given that there is no empirical evidence to support substance dualism, the critic is compelled to regard the thesis as a pseudo-thesis: empty squabble over the meaning of words that, in reality, have no meaning.
The implication of the Verificationist theory of meaning on Cavendish’s poem is drastic. The critic must come to view the poem as empty, devoid of content; however, the implications of Verificationism do not only lie in one poem. Rather, the implications apply to the entirety of the poetic program. Poetics, or the theory of poetry, falls on the same ground that “A Dialogue Betwixt the Body and the Mind” does. The central question of poetics is “what exactly is a poem?” Poetry, generally speaking, is a metrical composition (excluding blank verse) that is opposed to prose. The issue with poetry is that it cannot directly represent the images with which it deals. This is not a claim that poetry cannot be concrete, rather, it is a claim that poetry cannot be directly representational. Representationality, on the Verificationist theory of meaning, is the bedrock of propositions. To quote Wittgenstein again, he states in proposition 4.03 of the *Tractatus* that “[t]he proposition communicates to us a state of affairs, therefore it must be essentially connected with the state of affairs. (43)” Essentially, Wittgenstein is saying that a proposition’s job is to communicate something important to other people; therefore, the proposition must be grounded in the state of affairs that it is presenting. Given poetry’s inability to be grounded in the state of affairs in which it attempts to represent, poetry becomes an empty vessel: devoid of meaning. This leaves prose with the responsibility of conveying meaningful utterances about the world.

What does all of this mean? Poetics, as a research program, is dead. It is unable to convey meaning because it lacks representationality, or the grounding in a concrete state of affairs: relying on images, metaphors, and similes to convey potential meaning. The poet, in this case Cavendish, uses her poem to express a new philosophical development in her time; however, the content of that development is meaningless according to the criterion provided. Poetry is
incapable of submitting itself to empirical verification and therefore, as a collection of synthetic propositions, is beyond the bounds of sense.
Works Cited


