Empirical Propositions and Hypothetical Statements

It is becoming the fashion among empiricist philosophers to assume that phenomenalism is really dead at last. Provoked into existence by non-naturalistic notions of material substance, it successfully undermined them; but it shared a sufficient number of fundamental metaphysical assumptions with its defeated rival to perish with it when the system of thought which nourished both was destroyed, in the very act of victory. A better ontology than that of Descartes or Locke, but still an ontology, it is therefore now held to be obsolete; and doubtless this is how it ought to be. But if phenomenalism is dead, the memory of it still haunts the writings of modern discussions of the nature of the external world to a surprising degree; from Eddington's notorious two desks, to the more refined and penetrating analysis of better equipped philosophical authors, it makes its presence clearly felt, usually taking the form of a sharp distinction; now between observation statements and those concerning material objects; now between two or more senses of the verb 'to see'; at other times between 'basic' or 'protocol' sentences and those of ordinary speech; or between various 'modes' of speech; or between 'strong' and 'weak' verification. Such versions of it are almost always formally guaranteed to carry no 'metaphysical' implications; nevertheless their striking resemblance to the older discredited variety is hard to overlook. Hence, an examination of its latest manifestations is not such a flogging of a dead horse as at first it may seem to be; for if it is dead, its ghost walks, and should, if possible, be laid.

Two further assumptions are made in the course of the following remarks:

1 The argument against the phenomenalist analysis of commonsense statements leaves open the question whether the information provided by the exact sciences such as physics can be translated without loss into phenomenalist terms. Perhaps it can; and perhaps this demonstrates something of importance; it has always been considered that the
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language of science could, with no alteration of its ‘meaning’, be translated into solipsistic terms; which, however, is not held to be an argument in favour of solipsism. But if such a ‘translation’ does not adequately render the empirical descriptions of ordinary language, this will affect the propositions of science only in so far as these claim to be an extension of ordinary language used to describe the world, and not a specialised method of referring to aspects of it for some narrower, predictive or other purposes — a specialised use of words which may be susceptible to a phenomenalist analysis. In any case the answer to the question whether this is so is, I believe, logically independent of the rest of my argument.

2. Nor do I wish to deny the historical achievement of phenomenalism. Whatever its defects — and I shall wish to say that they are fatal — it has made less excusable any return to those ancient delusions which the philosophers of substance from Thales to G. F. Stout have done much to promote. But beneficent as its influence has been, it has overstayed its welcome; its continued presence does more harm than good; and the argument set out below is intended to provide additional reasons for consigning it finally to an honoured grave.

Many forms of modern empiricism, and in particular modern phenomenalism, rest on the view that expressions describing material objects must in principle be capable of being translated (without residue) into sets of sentences about the data of actual or possible direct sensible acquaintance, past, present and future, on the part of real or possible observers (‘sensible’ is here used in the widest sense — to cover all states, activities or dispositions capable of being studied by empirical methods). Any alternative theories of how material object propositions are to be analysed tend to be rejected out of hand by modern empiricists on the ground that this must at some stage involve belief in the existence of non-sensible or transcendent entities or characteristics, and this is ruled out for the familiar reasons advanced, for example, by Berkeley, which rest on his theory of words; according to this, no expressions purporting to describe material objects can have any meaning, let alone be true, unless all the entities or characteristics to which they refer are either found in sensible experience — in the sense of ‘sensible’ defined above — or can be analysed into entities or characteristics so found. Since most empiricists hold that any alternative analysis of material object pro-
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positions involves the possibility of acquaintance with non-sensible entities or characteristics – and this they hold to be an unintelligible suggestion – phenomenalism appears to follow automatically. Disagreement can arise only about the adequacy of this or that suggested analysis of how material object sentences are to be ‘reduced’ (without residue) to sentences describing both what the observer does, or did, or will observe, as well as what he would, or would have, might or might have, observed under appropriate conditions; and the provision of alternative analyses on these lines has taxed the ingenuity of some of the acutest philosophers of our day. But common sense and the philosophers who are in sympathy with it have always felt dissatisfied. The reduction of material object sentences into what we may, for short, call sense datum sentences seemed to leave something out, to substitute something intermittent and attenuated for something solid and continuous. To dispel this sense of discomfort, phenomenalists began to explain that it was due to a confusion; the view that they were advocating was neither a metaphysical nor a scientific theory of what things were made of, or how they behaved, but something less adventurous – no more than an alternative language capable of rendering all that could be described in the material object language, and recommended for its therapeutic properties as an antidote to metaphysical hankering after non-sensible substrata. If translation into the sense datum language still seemed to leave something out – what some philosophers have called the ‘irreducible categorical element’ of material object propositions – this missing element was labelled emotive – a psychological residue – with no descriptive function; or else it was (with somewhat greater insight) connected with the legitimate demand for the kind and degree of vagueness, indefiniteness, and rich ambiguity of speech needed by the plain man for his normal, everyday purposes. But it was claimed that at any rate the hard core of descriptive meaning could be successfully transplanted, as it were, into the new language. The phenomenalist equivalent of a material object sentence might, like a new shoe, seem uncomfortable at first, but continued use would presently dissipate this feeling. The discomfort was only ‘psychological’, due to linguistic habits harmless in themselves, but tempting philosophers to false doctrines about language and the world.

Common sense continued to experience a certain discomfort, but found it difficult to formulate it in words. G. F. Stout1 complained that the opaqueness – the ‘permanent impossibility of sensation’ – of material

1 op. cit. (p. 27, note 1 above), pp. 136–7.
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objects had been unjustifiably eliminated. W. F. R. Hardie found it puzzling that 'hypothetical' causes could be said to cause 'actual' effects - but this was held, e.g. by A. J. Ayer, to be mainly due to a misunderstanding of the language which phenomenalists were trying to use or 'recommend'. What I propose to do is to try to articulate what the main source of the discomfort felt by common sense seems to me to be, since I think that in this case the doctor's diagnosis too often neglects the specific nature of the patient's complaint. For it seems to me to be more than a mere source of discomfort, namely a valid and fatal objection to the phenomenalist analysis. However, even if I am mistaken in this, the complaint itself still seems worth examining.

It may be worth adding that even if phenomenalism turns out to be unacceptable, some of the stock objections to it are not less so. For the familiar anti-phenomenalist theses are often, even when valid, formulated in such a way as to convey anxiety to salvage altogether too much from the ruins of the theory they are intended to destroy. Consider, for example, the four most familiar types of attack upon it.

1 One of the most familiar objections urged against, for example, Berkeley, or Mill or Russell, is that when converting sentences about material objects into sentences about sense data, they fail to 'convert the observer' who 'occurs' in the protasis of the hypothetical statement, into 'sense data' - he remains irredicibly 'material'. It has indeed been suggested that to 'dissolve the observer' a second proposition could be constructed which, presumably, would describe the activities of a second 'observer' who actually or potentially observes the body of the original 'observer'; this 'observer' in his turn requires a third 'observer' to observe him; and so we should get a Chinese box series of possible observers - referred to by a logically similar series of propositions, which would progressively 'reduce' or 'dissolve' the residual material object content of the original protasis. This asymptotic process of gradual whittling would tend to the ideal limit of pure phenomenalism. Then by somehow integrating the series, one might represent the material

3 This argument was first developed to the best of my belief by H. H. Price. A somewhat more complicated method of the progressive 'elimination' of material bodies is propounded by R. B. Braithwaite, 'Propositions about Material Objects', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 38 (1938), 269–90.
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object as definable in terms of it. A criticism related to the original objection is that such ideal 'observers' and their behaviour could not be properly described without perpetual reference to material objects, e.g. those which determine 'their' position in space, movements etc. Each of which again, for its analysis, at every point presupposes yet other material objects, so that the attempted analysis cannot get going without breaking down at any and every point in the process. Some philosophers try to soften the force of this objection by saying that such theoretically infinite theories have pragmatic limits set by the context and the practical needs of the situation, and sometimes1 hold that sufficiently painstaking analysis (and most analysts are too lazy or bored to do the plodding required) could go a long way towards achieving pure phenomenalism. What both these kinds of objection, whether they are valid or not, suggest is that if phenomenalism fails, it very nearly achieves its result – the unresolved residue can be got down to almost vanishing point – which is perhaps as much as one can reasonably hope for.

2 Another often heard objection is that the hypothetical propositions about the experiences of observers which are indispensable to the phenomenalist analysis seem to involve something like the existence or reality of 'hypothetical facts' or 'hypothetical sense data' or 'unsensed sensibilia'. For otherwise, what do hypotheticals describe? Surely not nothing? And these postulated entities, unknown and unknowable to science and common sense, are, so it is urged, at least as mythological as the Lockean substratum which they were invoked to exercise. Phenomenalism is accused of breeding new metaphysical entities – with their own pseudo-problems; but if we could only get rid of these somehow, say by an improved, non-correspondence theory of meaning, all might still be well.

3 It has also frequently been asserted that the promised 'reduction' of commonsense language by such methods as those of Descriptions, Logical Constructions etc. cannot in fact be performed successfully. Phenomenalists are challenged to provide an equivalent in sense datum currency of propositions about material objects, and when they decline to produce the precise equivalent, they are accused of uttering counterfeit cheques: and this is said to hold even more obviously of scientific entities – the promise to construct 'many-storied'2 logical constructions, with sense data as foundations, and gamma particles two or three floors

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2 ibid.
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above – has not been kept. Phenomenalists are accused of maintaining that, although phenomenalist language might be intolerably clumsy and prolix, it could in principle always be substituted for the ellipses of common speech: that normal language has the character it has in order to serve the use that it serves; that sense datum language would doubtless be inconveniently precise and definite and intolerably lengthy and tedious, and would have its own unfamiliar ‘grammar’, but that in principle the translation could be effected, although by sacrificing so much customary vagueness, ambiguity, indefiniteness etc. as would render it useless for everyday purposes. Against this, the opposition maintains that it is only necessary to try to put this programme into practice to see that it is a labour of Sisyphus and will not work; vagueness, ambiguity etc. are inalienable properties of commonsense language; but for this, the programme could perhaps be carried out; but as it is, the claim to reduce – plausible enough prima facie – turns out to be hollow once the bluff is called. Yet the reason for this is still the comparatively weak one that we should lose too much in the way of nuances, range, implied meanings of words; the feeling remains that the ‘hard core’ of meaning might still be ‘reduced’ or translated.

4. Finally, there are the difficulties about dealing with propositions about other minds, communication etc. in the appropriate Humean manner, too familiar to be repeated; which theoretically leaves open the possibility of the programme advanced by Berkeley whereby phenomenalism works for material objects and breaks down only in the case of persons.

The above is a characteristic selection from the, by now traditional, array of anti-phenomenalist arguments. I should like to suggest that, formidable and indeed fatal as some of them may be, they are usually so formulated as to convey a misleading impression, for despite their anti-phenomenalist air they are all in effect so much concealed pro-phenomenalist propaganda. The suggestion implicit in all these criticisms is that, while the phenomenalist goal is and must be striven towards – for the alternative is a metaphysical morass – the particular avenues thus far offered by phenomenalists are unfortunately blocked by various types of logical or epistemological obstacles: in other words that some such operation is desperately needed if we are ever to eliminate unverifiable or indescribable entities, but that the techniques offered by various philosophers have all, so far, broken down. This position is not unlike the situation with regard to, say, Fermat’s theorem: what
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the theorem asserts is considered as being very likely true, at any rate
not demonstrably fallacious, and in any case as being the kind of
assertion which should be capable of demonstration or refutation by
normal mathematical techniques. Similarly all phenomenalist operations
so far conducted have indeed ended in failure; but they, and only they,
are the kind of processes which can, in principle, be applied. Some kind
of phenomenalist analysis must be correct, for the only alternative is a
return to Locke, or Descartes, or Kant, and that, in this enlightened
age, is surely not a thinkable course.

This is the bogey used to drive philosophers back to make yet another
gallant attempt to break out of the impasse — to find a ‘viable’ translation
into the sense datum language. The impression conveyed throughout,
possibly because of a faulty theory of meaning and truth, is that pheno-
menalism is, after all, the only possible valid view, beset though it may
be by grave objections and exaggerations; the problem is one of technical
skill: once it is reformulated with sufficient ingenuity the problem will
be solved, or dissolved. My thesis is that phenomenalism is not even
prima facie plausible — let alone indispensable — and minor improvements,
i.e. tinkering, cannot make it moreso. Instead, therefore, of re-exami-
ning the all too familiar current objections to phenomenalism, and the
answers to them, I should like to suggest that it might be valuable to
try to find out what it is that makes common sense so uncomfortable —
in order to see whether this discomfort is merely ‘psychological’, and
perhaps due to the relatively accidental properties of ordinary language,
or whether it is a symptom of some fatal defect in the theory.

II

What common sense, from Dr Johnson onwards, finds paradoxical in
all phenomenalist analyses is, I believe, this: I say ‘There is a brown
table in the next room.’ This, I am told, should mean a set or range of
propositions of the type ‘If “a normal observer” were to go next door
and look, he would, in normal light, other normal conditions etc., see
such and such brown-coloured data etc.’ I say ‘But supposing no one
goes next door, what have we then? Is the apodosis false? Are there
no brown data and no table?’ I am told ‘Of course not. Nothing regarding
the consequent follows from denying the antecedent. In a sense, nothing
follows at all. It still remains true that if someone looked, etc., he would
see brown data etc.’ I accept all this and remain dissatisfied. If I believe
that there was in prehistorical times a land bridge between Africa and
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America, then I agree – and possibly this is analytic – that if there had been an observer at that time suitably placed, he would have seen the land bridge or a portion of it. But I may wish to assert that, in fact, no such observer existed, and that the land bridge was nevertheless there, whether or not this is true. What I think common sense and G. F. Stout wish to say is that the question of the existence of the land bridge, like the existence of the table next door, is one thing, and the question of the presence or absence, even hypothetically, of an observer, is another. The statement that if there had been (and there was not) any observer, he would have observed (and no one did observe) certain data, seems to them not equivalent to asserting the past existence of material objects. Categorical propositions about material objects are replaced by unfulfilled ‘counter-factual’ hypothetical propositions about observers, and what troubles the plain man is the thought that if the hypotheticals are unfulfilled, if no observers were in fact observing, then if the phenomenalist analysis is correct, there was – in a sense datum sense – nothing at all, and, moreover, that this sense of ‘existence’ is basic; because the alleged material object sense in which the non-existence of actual sense data nevertheless can be ‘translated into’ the existence of material objects, is not a sense in which the word ‘exist’ is commonly understood. So if he is told that to say there was a material object – the land bridge in prehistoric times – is to say something about data there would have been if . . ., he feels cheated. For these data appear to depend on the activity of observers; so that the material object becomes analysed into a series of either purely hypothetical, i.e. non-existent, or at best intermittent, data occurring and disappearing as the observer observes and ceases to observe. And this seems empirically a different picture of the world from that which he started by believing; and in no sense merely a description of the old picture though in different words.

I shall now try to make this clearer. To analyse material objects in terms of the hypothetical data of observers is, in effect, to turn the statements about them into statements about the dispositional characteristics of observers. ‘The table next door exists’ on this view means that you or I or x, who are in this room, are possible or potential table-data observers. This asserts the existence of a dispositional characteristic; but dispositional characteristics are so called in order to contrast them with non-dispositional characteristics, the ‘grammar’ of which is rightly said to be different. If I ask ‘Does he look much the same when he is asleep?’ that is a plain, empirical question, the answer
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to which can be discovered by ordinary empirical means, i.e. by looking. But if I ask ‘Is he clever even when he is asleep?’ this sounds quite wrong – I am rightly told that I evidently do not understand how the word ‘clever’ is commonly used; surely, I am told, to say that someone is clever is to say something of the following sort: that if certain sorts of questions are put to him, he will easily and correctly answer them, or that he grasps certain types of data and makes inferences from them more successfully than most people, and so on. When he is asleep, these conditions do not occur and the question is therefore inappropriate to the situation. How does all this apply to the table next door? The assertion that there is a table next door is made equivalent to what the observer would see if he looked, etc., i.e. a collection of hypothetical, i.e. dispositional-causal propositions about the observer; but when the causes do not materialise, neither, as a rule, do their effects, and when neither exists, there is a gap in the series of sense datum events. We accept this quite naturally in the case of normal dispositional characteristics: ‘x is irritable’ is compatible with, indeed it is compatible only with, ‘He flies into tempers on slight provocation, or sometimes when there is no provocation at all’; i.e. at other times there are no bursts of temper, no continuing real substratum – there does not literally exist, in the ordinary sense of ‘exist’, something called potential irritation going on like volcanic activity underneath the surface; we do speak of unconscious or suppressed irritation, but to take this literally is to confuse words with things, to confuse the mythology of psychoanalysis with the furniture of the real world, to fall into Locke’s errors. But if I say ‘The table is next door [or ‘The table has a back to it’ or ‘The table was here two hours ago’] even with no one looking’, do I mean ‘There are table-data whenever people look; but at other times, when no one is looking, nothing at all’? This is precisely what common sense does not believe to be true about tables. Common sense endows them with ‘actual’, i.e. non-dispositional characteristics in the absence of observers. The table is seen intermittently or not at all: the intermittent presence or non-existence of observers is a part of the intermittent or unrealised series of causes or conditions of its being seen; but it – the table – is assumed to have some characteristics continuously; it differs from irritability precisely in this respect – that unlike irritability it is believed to exist continuously in the literal sense when there are no intermittent data, no glances directed at the table. To analyse material object statements as statements about dispositional characteristics of observers, therefore, is to represent the material object as being, at most,
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an intermittent series of actual data with the gaps filled by hypothetical ‘non-actualised’ entities, i.e. in the sense datum sense by nothing at all. This, for common sense, is tantamount to destroying the continuity of the table – its history before and after it is observed, its unseen portion, its presence next door. Of course, phenomenalists stoutly and indignantly denounce this conclusion as a confusion of two senses of ‘existence’, a crude misunderstanding of the very notion of logical constructions. Tables, we might be answered, are logical constructions as irritability is: in both cases, the essential task is to eliminate Locke’s substratum and to substitute for it a set of intermittent and hypothetical data. The unobserved table, or its unobserved back, continue to be as someone’s irritability continues to be. Yet common sense does not raise difficulties of this type about the analysis of irritability; it accepts easily enough that irritability does not exist in the same sense as an actual burst of temper is said to do, that to speak of irritability is to use a kind of shorthand for a complex of causal laws and observation propositions. But when I say ‘There exists a table such as you describe’, am I really saying that it exists in the same sense of ‘exists’ as someone’s irritable temper? Some characteristics of tables may, of course, genuinely be described as dispositional; i.e. in speaking of them I am referring to certain causal laws and hypothetical or intermittent data – e.g. when I say a table is combustible or useful or expensive. But this only means something by contrast with those properties of the table which are not dispositional, and perhaps a good many intermediate properties which we do not think of as either definitely dispositional or definitely ‘actual’. The suggestion that every characteristic of the table is merely possible or intermittent or depends on dispositions of observers – that everything is dispositional, nothing actual – is exactly what common sense and Dr Johnson revolt against, not as being untrue, but as coming close to being meaningless, and certainly as suspiciously approaching some kind of solipsism – and one not very easy to describe in empirical (or any other intelligible) language.

What common sense dislikes is precisely the crucial role played by hypotheticals in the phenomenalist analysis, and it seems to me to display a sound instinct in so doing.

For this is the central point of this entire issue: that the translation of categorical existential statements into hypotheticals (of whatever ‘level’) is a dangerous operation and cannot be left to the mechanical operation of ‘syntactical’ rules, because different types of sentence do have certain normal uses in ordinary language – at any rate in most
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modern European languages – which we ignore at our peril; Humpty-Dumpty’s nominalism goes too far: words are sometimes masters if we are to communicate without perpetual recourse to redefinition, i.e. if we are to communicate at all; and as we use words, categorical sentences, on the whole, tend to convey that the object referred to has occurred or is occurring or will occur in time; existed, is in existence, will exist; they have a non-descriptive, existential, ostensive element; they seem to invite us to look for the entity they purport to be about, and only when there is none such in any normal sense, e.g. in the case of a sentence like ‘Bad temper is unattractive’, do we avoid pseudo-problems by turning to the hypothetical mode of expression as the more natural, as likely to elucidate what is being asserted in words better adapted to expressing it. Existential propositions expressed categorically – in indicative sentences – tend, as it were, to ‘point’ towards their ‘objects’; and demonstratives which appear in existential propositions, like ‘this is’, ‘there is’, ‘here we have’ etc., often function as substitutes for such acts of pointing to things or persons or processes. The characteristic force of the categorical mode of expression is often exactly this – that it acts in lieu of a gesture, of an ‘act of ostension’: ‘Here is the book’ I say to someone looking for it, or I could point to it and say ‘The book’, and convey roughly the same information by both methods. But hypotheticals normally do the opposite of this. Hypotheticals, whatever they describe or mean, whatever they entail or convey or evince, in whatever way they are verified or fail to be verified, do not as a general rule directly assert that something has been, is being, or will be occurring, or existing, or being characterised in some way: this is precisely the force of the conditional mood, and it is realisation of this which probably led Ramsey, for example, to assert that causal propositions were not descriptive at all, but commands or rules. Ramsey’s analysis can easily be shown to be unsatisfactory, since it seems to rest on a fatally false view of the nature of meaning; but the feeling which led him to so strong a separation of general and hypothetical forms of expression from, say, singular categorical sentences, did not altogether lead him astray. For this gulf does divide categorical and hypotheticals in our normal usage: whereas the first is normally used to describe the furniture of the world – what is, was or will be – the second is not; consequently, whenever a categorical (indicative) form of expression is used, often quite idiomatically, to convey something other than what is, or was, or will be, it is easily and without resistance on the part of common sense replaceable by a hypothetical (conditional) sentence – as in the case of indicative sentences
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referring directly or indirectly to dispositions, or general propositions of the 'all', 'every', 'any' type. But even this is in need of a significant qualification. If the general terms are so used as to suggest that they possess extension of any kind, the hypothetical form is felt to be to that extent insufficient, and categorical expressions are required to complete the analysis. Thus 'Anyone who was there at three o'clock saw the meteor fall', because it is compatible with 'and no one in fact was', can be translated into 'If anyone was there, or had been there, etc., then he saw, or would have seen, etc.'; whereas 'He gave away his books to anyone who asked for them' is not equivalent to 'If anyone asked for, had asked for, etc., his books he was, or would have been given, etc.', but needs in addition 'and some persons did ask'. It seems clear that in this last instance a conditional or hypothetical sentence by itself tells us nothing about what in fact happened, and an indicative or categorical one is therefore required by ordinary usage to convey 'existential import' – to refer to actual events which are believed to have taken place.

All this may seem altogether too trite and obvious, but there is a corollary which is evidently less obvious, namely that no direct translation from categoricals into hypotheticals is, as a general rule, and as our language is today ordinarily used, a correct analysis of, or substitute for them. And this seems to me to destroy one of the indispensable foundations of phenomenalism. For it is in this sense of the illicit substitution of hypotheticals for categoricals which is responsible for the obscure feeling on the part of common sense that something – an ersatz entity – is being palmed off upon it by phenomenalists. Such a categorical existential material object sentence as 'The table is next door' or 'There is a table next door' is used at the very least to describe something which is occurring or being characterised at the time of speaking, together (perhaps) with some sort of prediction (and what has been called retrodiction) about what has been or will be occurring or being characterised during unspecified periods of time before and after the period of speaking; and being characterised or occurring, unless the contrary is specifically stated or implied, not intermittently but continuously, and in any case not 'hypothetically'. For to say that something is occurring hypothetically is a very artificial and misleading way of saying that it is not, in the ordinary sense, occurring at all, but might or would occur if conditions were realised which in their turn may or may not be realised. Consequently, whatever common sense may mean by the sentence 'There is a table next door', it cannot accept as fully equivalent
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in meaning any sentence not asserting that something is now, or has been, or will be, occurring or being characterised. It may well be that categoricals systematically entail corresponding hypotheticals (or disjunctive sets of such) – that the proposition "The table is next door now" in some sense entails that if either observer A or observer B or C etc. were to go next door, one or other of them could see or touch such and such data; for invisible or intangible tables are not what we normally mean by 'table'. Likewise, it may be that hypotheticals in some cases may be said either to entail, or else to state conditions for the truth of, or else 'sufficiently justify', the assertion of categoricals; in other words, that if it is true that a normal observer (i.e. one free from hallucinations, etc.) sees, or has seen, or will see, or would see, or would have seen, certain data, under the appropriate conditions, it follows deductively and not inductively that there is a table next door. Something like this may be correct, and perhaps this is all that the phenomenalist requires as against Locke's insensible substance, or attenuated versions of it such as 'physical occupants'. For it is clear that if I am to explain under what circumstances I should normally assert material object sentences, I can do so only by invoking hypothetical observers and their cognitive states: if I am called upon to describe the conditions in which such and such sentences are appropriate, then I cannot fail to make use of hypotheticals. But to describe conditions in which alone I should be inclined to enunciate a sentence is certainly not equivalent to giving its meaning. For my point is that the hypothetical sense datum sentence cannot be equivalent to, or an analysis of, a material object sentence if the hypothetical (sense datum) sentence asserts only what would be, while the material object sentence sometimes asserts what occurs, occurred, or will occur in the world. Existential propositions about material objects assert what is, was or will be, and not what might be. Stout had every reason to be suspicious of the description of the material world in such dubious terms as 'The permanent possibility of sensation', because however modified and refined, it both suggests a kind of permanent grid-like world framework and denies it. Dr

1 And this is, without doubt, the great historical service of phenomenalism – that for more than two centuries it has been pressing home the paradoxical consequences of simultaneously holding both that material objects, if they exist, 'must' possess certain characteristics (although no one has been able to identify them at all clearly) which cannot, in principle, be empirically observed, and that these are among the characteristics with which the natural sciences necessarily deal.
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Johnson's well known attitude does not, after all, rest on such a very gross misunderstanding. That is the heart of the case against phenomenalism.

But what precisely, it may be asked, is it that such categorical existential sentences do that hypothetical ones fail to do? Certainly I wish to avoid saying that the former describe the facts while the latter do not, since the unhappy term 'fact' has been used in too many different senses to be illuminating in this connection. Nor do I wish to assert that hypotheticals and categoricals are never interchangeable and are mutually exclusive—as if the forms of propositions could be distinguished into natural kinds corresponding to 'ontological' or Kantian categories, or 'ultimate grooves in reality'. But I do suggest that systematic differences in verbal form are often pointers to differences in meaning which it is important not to obscure. Hence, as a tentative way of putting it, I submit that those categorical propositions which we seem to be unable to 'reduce' to other logical forms without doing apparent violence to normal usage tend to direct attention to—invite us to look for—things and events in a way in which other kinds of expressions do not. This is felt most clearly about expressions containing demonstratives like 'this', or 'that', or 'here', but applies no less to existential propositions without demonstratives which identify something in the time series. In the case of objects with some or all of which we claim to be acquainted by some kind of direct inspection, this relation—which for want of a better word I propose to call 'pointing'—can literally occur: in declaring that a particular table is here before me, a particular sound is now growing louder, a particular doubt is now tormenting me, I am pointing at, directing your attention to, something with which I am directly acquainted, an event or a thing. But if I say 'The table is next door', 'The cupboard has a wooden back which you cannot see', 'Napoleon wore a three-cornered hat', 'Napoleon felt a twinge of remorse before the battle', I cannot, of course, in the literal sense be said to be acquainted with, or point at, a thing or event, for it is, in the ordinary sense of the words, not present, not here, not before me, not within my ken. And this is perhaps what lends such plausibility as it seems to have to the phenomenalist procedure of offering me hypotheticals intended both to describe unobserved characteristics and to indicate methods of observing, i.e. in some sense verifying them. But this will not do, for whereas the difference between categoricals and hypotheticals is one of logical form, whether syntactical or semantic, the difference between being able and not being able to observe a given object is empirical or
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causal. I cannot point to the table next door, or at a point beneath its surface, because it is invisible: there is the intervening wall or surface which makes this act unhelpful. In saying 'There is a table next door' I am, as it were, trying to refer to the table 'through the wall' — or to the back or inside of the table as if it were not concealed but before me, in my sense field. If the wall becomes transparent the relevant difference between the table here, in front of me, and the further table next door disappears, for the only relevant difference between the two types of case is that I was originally in a better position in space (or time) to describe the table in front of me. There may be important semantic differences, e.g. in learning the use of symbols for present as opposed to absent entities,1 but there is no logical difference dividing sentences which describe things in my field of vision from those which describe things beyond the horizon.

The kind of communication which a demonstrative, categorical sentence, which purports to be true, seeks to perform in respect of unobserved objects and events may fail to achieve its object in at least one of two ways: the entity may not exist or possess the characteristics in terms of which it is denoted; or the failure may be due to some defect in my technique — if the relevant entity is not, for whatever reason, recognised by my audience; my effort to communicate is thwarted, but only by such empirical circumstances as physical walls, or the shape of the earth, or the limitations of my senses or imagination, or the date of my birth; thwarted by that and not by something incurably hypothetical, non-existent about the sentence itself. Let me give an example: when I say that Napoleon wore a three-cornered hat, or that on the evening before the battle of Borodino he had a twinge of remorse, I do not mean (though this is not strictly relevant to the argument) that one man and one man only was called Napoleon, and whoever was so called wore a three-cornered hat, or had a twinge of remorse. Proper names are not usually mere definite descriptions. My use of the word 'Napoleon' is, among other things, a substitute for a wave of the hand, an inclination of the head etc., because I cannot point in a literal sense, if only because I was born too late; and this is ultimately an empirical obstacle like the wall of a room or the nature of light or the structure of my brain. I am inviting you to direct your attention to Napoleon, or to physical or mental events in his history, and there is a non-descriptive and existential force in my use of the relevant words — and

1 I owe this point to F. Waismann.
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in particular of proper names — because I suggest or believe or know that such events have happened — that they are part of the collection of what was and is and will be. Certain types of categorical sentences in this way direct attention to things and events which therefore are taken to exist whether or not they are observed. The fact that they are in some sense capable of being directly observed, or verified, or that their existence can be supported by sense datum evidence, may be part of the meaning of such concepts as 'thing' or 'event', but it is not what is asserted when I say that they occur here or now, or have such and such characteristics; and the reason for this is that the hypotheticals which I am being offered in exchange for categoricals do not, even misleadingly and fatally, invite anyone (except it seems some philosophers) to look for any 'thing' or event in the time series. Whatever is being asserted by 'If it rains, I shall take my umbrella' or 'If Hitler had not wanted it, there would have been no war', it will not be found in the inventory of events, in the historical annals of the actual world, nor am I under any impression that I am being invited to look for any such entity. (Only philosophers have gone to the length of searching for or inventing ontological 'referends' of hypothetical propositions.) Hypothetical sentences do, of course, like other empirical expressions, involve the use of words which, to have any meaning, must themselves be capable of occurring in true ostensive sentences which do in some sense 'point' — words like 'rain' or 'umbrella' or 'Hitler', but in themselves hypotheticals do not 'point'; otherwise they would cease to be hypothetical, they would lose their conditional, non-actual-fact-asserting force.

At this point a critic might say (as A. J. Ayer did say to me in discussion) something like this: 'You rest your case on the generally felt distinction between what is dispositional and what is non-dispositional in the material world, and say that the latter cannot be described by hypotheticals, as the former can, without doing violence to normal usage. But this is not so. In the first place, many expressions which do not seem dispositional at first, turn out to be so on further analysis: for example, if we say that the table is heavy and six feet long, that seems at first categorical enough, but of course "heavy" means "if weighed according to a recognised technique, the instrument will record etc." and "six feet long" refers to the possible application of a ruler and so forth: these apparently categorical statements turn out, therefore, to need translation into hypotheticals to make them clear: from which it follows that the categorical form of statement by itself gives no sort
of indication of how sentences mean.' But this argument establishes less than it appears to do. I should not dream of maintaining that verbal or grammatical form is an infallible guide to logical form, i.e. kinds of ways in which sentences mean. Indeed, that is the whole point of exposing the dispositional character of expressions which prima facie appear non-dispositional. But because some or many categoricals are in this sense concealed hypotheticals (i.e. their meaning is made clearer, or certain errors are prevented, by the substitution of hypotheticals), because language is flexible and the frontiers shifting and vague, it cannot follow that the distinction does not exist at all, that the frontiers are invisible – for if that were so, such words as 'dispositional' and 'hypothetical' (there being nothing with which to contrast them) would not signify anything at all. And this is not what phenomenalists or defenders of the theory of logical constructions, if their own words are to mean anything, want to say. At this point the critic may say: 'But this is a sheer travesty of my position. Of course I do not wish to blur the useful distinction between hypotheticals and categoricals. What I am asserting is that all descriptive statements can in principle be translated into sense datum language: all material object statements will be transposed into hypothetical statements about sense data, and these are what they are by contrast with the only true ultimate, irreducible categoricals, those describing someone's actual sense experiences, e.g. Russell's basic propositions, Carnap's protocol sentences, etc. As for your distinction between dispositional and non-dispositional characteristics of material objects, or between hypothetical and categorical statements as applied to material objects, the sense datum language is perfectly well able to reproduce it in its own terminology: categorical material object statements will be translated into hypotheticals about sense data; hypotheticals about material objects will be rendered by hypotheticals about hypotheticals: thus to say that a given table looks brown is to say something about the dispositions of certain observers; to say that it is fragile is to say something about the dispositions of dispositions of those same observers; the distinction is one of degree of complexity of hypotheticals; but the whole pyramid of them only has descriptive force if they are about – if their ultimate subject is – the actual sense data of actual observers, about which all material object sentences, whether categorical or hypothetical, are in the end hypotheses or theories. For what else is there in the world but what people see and hear and imagine and do and suffer?' We are there at last: this really is what phenomenalism boils down to: that the only irreducibly
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categorical propositions, by contrast with which alone hypotheticals are what they are, are statements about immediate experience, capable of direct, strong, 'knock-down' verification. These are basic. All else is theory and speculation about their behaviour and incidence. We have returned to the many-tiered logical constructions, with material objects and perhaps their more obvious causal properties on the floors immediately above the 'basic' ground floor (or should it be basement?), and the upper levels occupied by positrons, nerve impulses, super-egos, and possibly vectors and non-Euclidean spaces and numbers too, as well as the Zeitgeist, and the British Constitution and the national character. In a sense, this position seems almost too academic in character: if phenomenologists find difficulty, in fact, in producing the sense datum equivalents of even plain categorical material object statements, their claim to produce two or more storeys of such - simple hypotheticals and over these rows of complex ones - hypotheticals about hypotheticals - seems somewhat unreal; but even if we do not press for cash in the form of basic sentences against phenomenalist cheques (as being unfair and against the spirit of the conventions in use of language) the argument still remains fallacious. For what this view comes to is that material object sentences - including existential ones - are so many general propositions or hypotheses or theories about the behaviour of sense data. And this is precisely what common sense finds so repugnant. For a general proposition or theory may be interpreted purely intensionally - i.e. irrespective of whether or not instances of the concepts involved in fact occur; whereas such a sentence as 'The table next door is brown' is existential and as such has extensional import, and asserts that something is occurring in a sense in which general or hypothetical propositions proper do not normally assert anything of this sort; if such general propositions are taken extensionally as well as intensionally, i.e. if general propositions about sense data are to be understood to assert more than a mere logical or causal nexus between the possible experiences of possible observers, namely the existence or occurrence of something or other which the nexus connects, then, to perform this task, unsensed sensa or sensibia must be introduced: and these are rightly as much taboo to phenomenologists as Lockean substances or physical occupants, and a good deal odder in character. The point is that existential material object propositions directly assert that something exists in a sense in which theories or hypotheses do not directly assert this. One can bring out this point most sharply (at the cost of some exaggeration) by asserting boldly that all theories, hypotheses, general and hypothetical propositions
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etc. may be true and yet nothing exist at all; for if the protases are unfulfilled, the apodoses have no application; whereas the proposition that some existential material object propositions are true is not compatible with the proposition that nothing exists at all.¹ What this oversimple paradox serves to bring out is that the essence of hypothetical or conditional sentences is to be in a peculiar way non-commital — in the sense in which, let us say, singular (empirical) existential categoricals normally commit the speaker to something which in principle can be directly verified. Now it is notoriously impossible directly to verify unfulfilled conditionals: but all conditionals must entail at least one such unfulfilled conditional, and consequently in this respect cannot be equivalent to statements asserting only what is directly verifiable by an act of observation. Existential categoricals on the other hand commit us, because there is normally an ostensive (pointing) property about existential categorical material object propositions.²

The same point may be brought out in yet another way. According to the phenomenalist analysis, sentences describing material objects will differ in logical type according to the presence (to my senses) or the absence of the object in question. If it is present, I am said to be acquainted with actual seen data, and my sentence is at least partially analysable into irreducibly categorical ("basic") propositions: if it is absent, it is wholly analysable into hypotheticals. But this is surely not the case: if I say that there is a brown, wooden table in this room, I can, if I like, go on to say that among the propositions which I can assert of it, some are obviously categorical, some plainly hypothetical, some perhaps of neither kind; and then it cannot make a logical difference, i.e. a difference of principle, whether the table is before me in the room, or hidden behind a wall: whatever is hypothetically true, i.e. dispositional, about the present table (or its visible portion) is doubtless equally hypothetical

¹ This is, of course, not literally true, since theories presuppose the existence of theorists with all that they need by way of a universe in order to fix the ‘grammar’ of their words, but this is not part of what the theories themselves assert, nor is it logically entailed by them.

² It may be worth adding that such demonstratives as ‘there is’ or ‘this is’ are seldom employed to refer to ‘sense data’ — for that is a term which is rarely of use in ordinary experience, and is more properly applicable to that aspect of things which concerns physiologists or occultists or impressionist painters, and is useful precisely because it contrasts that which interests these specialists — purely sensuous qualities — with material objects — things — the furniture of ordinary life.
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(dispositional) about the one next door (or its visible portion): but whatever is categorical about the first is categorical about the other — absent — one too. The actual steps which I am obliged to take in order to verify propositions about a given table will, of course, vary with circumstances: if the table is moved out of my ken, or someone blindfolds me, I cannot do what I could have done had this not happened; but the meaning of the sentence which I utter does not alter with the movements of the table or the condition of my eyes: the meaning of the sentence ‘There is a brown table in my study’ does not swing forwards and backwards from partially categorical to wholly hypothetical as I move around it, or saw it in half, or walk in and out of my study, or as the walls of my study change from opaque to transparent, and neither does it wholly consist of a cluster of hypotheticals compatible (if their antecedents are unfulfilled) with the non-existence of any experiences whatever. Perhaps we now see more clearly the confusion from which these odd consequences spring: namely the confounding of the meaning of what we are saying with the varying conditions under which we feel inclined to say it.

At this point, some uneasiness may be felt about the attribution to our language of a capacity to ‘point to’ objects in absence – as if the transition from pointing to objects directly perceived to this semi-metaphorical sense of pointing may not be quite legitimate. It is here that the phenomenalist may wish to play one of his strongest cards, for one of the most tempting advantages which his theory appears to offer is that by substituting logical constructions for inferred entities, he promises to describe the world solely in terms of the so-called data of immediate acquaintance. He undertakes, in effect, to describe everything by means of logical or linguistic rules, including rules for the use of conditional particles like ‘if’ and ‘provided that’, and otherwise confine himself solely to what we can directly and literally point to in our everyday experience. And to speak of the ostensive function of a sentence which purports to point towards, direct attention to, something — the table — real enough, indeed, but not here and not now, something unobserved, i.e. outside the field of direct acquaintance — is this not to go beyond and against the principle of not importing unfamiliar and dubious entities, to contravene the rule of the definability ostensively of all empirical terms? Are we not introducing something not met with face to face,
not directly verifiable, and consequently not directly descriptive, perhaps altogether non-empirical? And this may at first unnerve the strict empiricist; but his anxieties will be groundless. For the notion of ‘not here’, ‘not observed’, must in any case be introduced into language seeking to describe the world sooner or later, and how this is accomplished is a psychological rather than an epistemological question. It is one thing to admit that whatever in one’s descriptive language is not governed by syntactical rules must be capable of ostensive elucidation: and a very different one to say that I may not refer to anything unless I can establish the meaning of the variables of my language in terms of what I am actually experiencing here and now; if I adopt the latter principle, I become unable to refer to the past or the future or to the experiences of others in order to identify by contrast ‘here’ and ‘now’ and ‘observed by me’ and so on — that way lies the kind of verification theory of meaning which has more than once been shown to lead to an extravagantly solipsist analysis of the meanings of words, ending literally in nonsense. The meaning of such ‘basic’ words as ‘here’, ‘now’, ‘observed’, depends on the existence of an equally ‘basic’ use for ‘not here’, ‘not now’, ‘not observed’, in contrast with which alone the meanings of ‘here’, ‘now’ etc. can be established. There is no need to go on with this line of argument — such comparatively primitive notions as ‘not now’, or ‘beyond the horizon’, cannot be ‘constructed’ without circularity out of sense fields occurring in ‘specious presents’; but without such notions classification, and therefore language, in the ordinary sense, is demonstrably impossible. Hence, this kind of objection to the possibility in principle of pointing to objects in absence cannot be considered seriously, for it rests on the assumption (ultimately perhaps traceable to Aristotle’s doctrine of actual versus potential being) that what is not here does not exist in the same sense of ‘exist’ as that which is here, which rules out all possibility of descriptive symbolism. For what exists but is not here exists and is not here in exactly the same sense of ‘exists’ as what is — does exist — here. Without this, all words would lose their function of discriminating and classifying.

There is one more objection to be met. Supposing someone were to ask, ‘But how can we say anything about the table apart from the hypothetical sentences describing what an observer would see if he walked round it etc.? Is the table round or oval, dark or light brown,
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light or heavy? Surely the sense datum school of philosophy, if it has established nothing else, has made it clear beyond any doubt that these properties in some sense depend on the observer, his physical position, his physiological and psychological condition etc.? Surely the argument from illusion, for example, cannot be dismissed as showing nothing at all because of logical considerations of how different types of sentences are used? Does the gramophone play tunes in a desert, or to an audience which is stone deaf? How does the view advanced here differ from the most untenably naïve of all forms of naïve realism? This rejoinder rests on a serious and important confusion which may in part be responsible for the desperate feeling that only phenomenalism can somehow, in the end, be true. The theories advanced by physiologists, say about the indispensability of the mechanism of the ear to the hearing of sounds, are empirical theories, corroborated by observational and not linguistic tests: and to say, therefore, that a particular kind of hearer is necessary is to assert a causal, i.e. empirical, and not a semantic or logical proposition. I am saying that the event described as the hearing of a sound emitted by a gramophone depends on certain necessary conditions, and amongst these the structure of the hearer's brain or ear occurs in the same sort of way as, let us say, the physical properties of the needle attached to the sound box of the gramophone. But when I analyse propositions about the meaning of sentences, I am certainly not asserting, and need not necessarily be implying, propositions stating causes or conditions of the events which they describe. There may very well in particular cases exist a causal nexus between the person of the observer and a given material object — what this nexus is, it is the task of the natural sciences to investigate. But this causal nexus is precisely what the phenomenalist\(^1\) claims not to be discussing when he offers a reduction of categorical material object sentences to hypothetical sense datum sentences — if he were, his theory would amount to a queer kind of occasionalism, metaphysical or empirical, according to his view of connections in nature, whereby the observer who figures in the protasis of the phenomenalist hypothetical could destroy a table by avverting his gaze as surely as by setting it on fire.\(^2\) When I say that a material object exists or has certain characteristics, I am not, it seems to me, committing myself necessarily to any specific theory about the

\(^1\) For example, A. J. Ayer, op. cit. (p. 35, note 1 above).

\(^2\) This is one of the notorious absurdities of which Berkeley is at times guilty, and on which beginners in philosophy are often taught to practise their critical powers.
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necessary or sufficient conditions of the existence or character of the object. Hence, the question of when, or for how long, the table next door is coloured brown need not in principle ever affect the answer to the question ‘What do I mean when I say “There is a brown table next door”?’ This, of course, needs qualification: the meanings of words are affected, and often very deeply affected, by our explicit or implicit causal beliefs, and the analysis of what is meant by an expression may very well reveal all kinds of physical or social or psychological beliefs or assumptions prevalent in a given society, a change in which could affect the meaning of words. The degree to which the dispositional characteristics of observers, treated as persons in time and space, enter into the way in which we employ material object words will vary widely: thus, it seems to me reasonably clear that when we say that there is a table next door, we are not implying any particular beliefs about the presence or dispositional characteristics of the normal human observer, beyond the fact that if it is a table at all, it must be not wholly invisible, intangible to him etc. — since otherwise it would not be what we mean by a material object. It seems a little less obvious that I can today say that it is coloured brown when not observed, for perhaps by now rudimentary physiological knowledge is sufficiently widespread to have imported into the notion of being coloured certain causal beliefs about the effects in the visual field of changes in our nervous system, etc. It seems very much less clear that I can say that roses smell sweet when no one smells them, or that winds howl when no one hears them, and it seems clearly eccentric to say that heard melodies are sweet, while those unheard are literally sweeter. And all this is doubtless useful in throwing light on our normal usage with regard to such words as ‘smell sweet’, or ‘howl’, or ‘sweet melodies’, some of which do, while others do not, imply the presence of persons with certain psychological, physiological etc. attributes as observers. I am merely concerned to show that a quite sufficient number of material object sentences do not presuppose such dependence on the existence or behaviour of observers of this kind, that the relation of observers to material objects is more properly to be called an empirical and not a semantic question, however deeply verbal usage and empirical beliefs may be interconnected; and that consequently the view that nothing can in principle be significantly said to occur without explicit and implicit reference to observers is a major fallacy which rests on failure to distinguish between the causal propositions of natural science or common sense and propositions about meaning.

I return to my original point that phenomenalism, or at any rate the
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most prevalent modern form of it, seems to rest on a mistaken analysis of what normal existential material object statements state; they state that things or events existed, or exist, or will exist, or were, are, or will be, characterised by this or that characteristic; and not that something might exist or would exist, or would have existed, the truth (if not the assertion) of which is logically compatible with the non-existence of anything whatever. Even if hypothetical propositions alone describe the conditions without which we should not assert or be justified in asserting the relevant categoricals, yet the meaning of the former is not the same as the meaning of the latter. And this is so even if we go further and hold, as some do, that the two types of proposition strictly entail one another; since whatever the sense in which mutual entailment is regarded as tantamount to, or identical with, logical equivalence (as it is by some logicians), it is clearly not the same as the sense of identity of meaning in which two or more descriptive sentences can be said by common sense to mean the same; yet it is this last sense of ‘meaning the same’, as between the \textit{analysans} and the \textit{analytandum}, and it alone, that the best known variants of modern phenomenalism seek to establish and, if the above thesis is correct, seek in vain.