

PHILOSOPHY

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CORRESPONDENCE

DEFINITION OF THE WORD "FACT"

To the Editor of *Philosophy*

DEAR SIR,

Whilst approving the principle that words of universal use should have a clear and precise meaning as suggested by Mr. G. Burniston Brown in the report of his address printed in the *Journal* for April, 1953, I cannot approve his definition of the word "fact" (i.e. propositions which are verifiable). It is my opinion that "fact" should be confined to the description of occurrences taking place "now."

If we accept Mr. Brown's assertion that past and future occurrences are hypotheses it is obvious that only occurrences immediately observable can be considered as facts; in which case propositions are statements inferred from facts.

The proposition "Napoleon died at St. Helena" is hypothetical and is a particular instance of the general inference contained in the proposition "All men are mortal." To draw a comparison therefore between a particular statement such as "Napoleon died at St. Helena" with a general inference such as "Sodium chloride melts at 801° C" is quite wrong. To be logical it is necessary to compare the historical statement with a particular scientific experiment which requires to be dated, and once such a scientific experiment has taken place it becomes historical and hypothetical equally with all other past occurrences.

The proposition "All men are mortal" cannot be verified: neither can the propositions of science. What is verified are particular instances which serve to confirm our belief in the general inference. If you deny the identity and validity of historical statements you deny the same of each and every scientific observation or experiment.

Yours faithfully,

A. D. MACKAY.

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June 4, 1953.

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