

## A FINITISTIC APPROACH TO PHILOSOPHICAL THESES

### I

**I**N SPITE of their disparagement of the efforts of more massive metaphysicians, our wiry and tough-minded analysts have advanced large and universal claims which are reminiscent of more heroic philosophies. And although they are often modest and disarming when they present illustrations of philosophy to the uninitiated — I have in mind those who turn compulsively to “Being a brother is identical with being a male sibling” or “Man is a rational animal” in their writings and lectures — very often they hold doctrines which are more worthy of sages than of philosophers. While they tend to abandon certain habits of more traditional philosophers, they continue to announce theses which are universal in form and which are in the tradition of the great *isms* of the past. They maintain that *all* mathematical expressions are definable in terms of logical expressions; that *all* empirical statements about material objects are reducible to statements about sense-data; that *no* ethical statement is translatable into an empirical statement; that *no* empirical statement is certain. This interest in universality is obviously a link with the great tradition, a link which is strong enough to resist the divisive pressures created by the contemporary tendency to talk about words and sentences rather than about concepts and propositions.

I wish to challenge even this vestige of community with tradition and to urge that such universal theses frequently rest on disguised conjunctions of a finite number of definitional statements. I shall argue that a number of those which have not been formulated so that they depend on a finite number of such statements are trivial or vague. Such a view may be called “finitism” without implying any commitment on the similarly named philosophy of mathematics. While defending this view I shall compare a number of philosophical claims of the twentieth century in an effort to see which of them are finitistic as usually defended