

A Critical Analysis of Alfred Jules Ayer's Critique of Metaphysics

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Abstract

Metaphysics is the philosophical investigation of the nature of ultimate reality and truth. There are, however, critiques of metaphysics, and A.J Ayer is one of them. He is one of the leading representatives of the Logical Positivists in their criticism of metaphysics. “His arguments against metaphysics are reflected in the first chapter of his book, *Language, Truth and Logic*”. Ayer, A.J. Penguin, 1946, pp. 31-45). In this book, he expounds the standpoint of Logical Positivism against metaphysics, which was one of the most remarkable and controversial theories of 20th-century philosophy. Therefore, his exposition of the logical positivist critique of metaphysics is not only historical but also has contemporary significance. In this context, this paper explores his criticisms of the basic assumptions and concerns of the metaphysical enterprise. The aim of this discourse is to focus on the Logical Positivists’ and Ayer’s critique of metaphysics in his book *Language, Truth and Logic*.

Keywords: Logical Positivism, Verifiability, Weak Verification, Strong Verification, Elimination of Metaphysics

Introduction:

Metaphysics, as the study of ultimate reality and truth, occupies center stage in philosophical thought. “Aristotle referred to metaphysics as the “first philosophy,” the study of being”. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1924, 1003a21–24). Metaphysics often requires speculation and postulation about an ultimate reality beyond existential and empirical facts. In this way, metaphysics provides the foundations for epistemology and ethics. Metaphysical inquiry, description, speculations, etc., though they refer to the truth or reality beyond the empirical realm, i.e., transcendental, they themselves are expressed in the sentences and propositions that bear the forms, structures, and language of the empirical realm. This

becomes problematic to those who cannot accept the beyond, the transcendental; nevertheless, try to find the meaning of the metaphysical proposals and propositions in the realm of the empirical and ordinary language analysis. At the advent of modern science, all problems were sought to be tested by the scientific method for proof or disproof. Empirical meaningfulness, ordinary-language analysis, and scientific provability have become the standard for testing metaphysics. This raises the issue of incompatibility in understanding metaphysics, because metaphysics concerns the transcendental aspects that lie beyond the empirical, ordinary language, and scientific texts. For this reason, the central problem of philosophy has been to resolve the incompatibilities between the propositions of philosophical theories on existence, knowledge, and morality since the 17th century. One of such cases is the Logical Positivists' attempt to test metaphysics. Logical positivism is a philosophical movement also called Viena circle that emerged in the 1920s, in the name of who formed the Vienna Circle comprising a group of scholars, including scientists, mathematicians, logicians, and philosophers, who tried to test the metaphysics within the bounds of empirical and scientific criteria, with their own verification principle, which they regarded as the sole criterion for verifying the meaningfulness of cognitive statements. "The acceptance and use of this principle led the positivists to reject as problematic many assertions of metaphysics alongside religion and ethics." Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language," in *Logical Positivism*, 1959, pp. 60–81). Alfred Jules Ayer, an ardent exponent of the logical positivist movement and its propagator in the English-speaking world, also criticized metaphysics along positivist lines.

The main aim of the Vienna Circle philosophers and Ayer was to show that all metaphysical views were meaningless. Ayer acknowledges his intellectual debt to them and clarifies the tradition to which he belongs. "His views are derived from the teachings of Russell and Wittgenstein, the logical consequence of Berkeley and Hume's empiricism." Wittgenstein, *TLP*. 1961, pp 3–15) Ayer remained faithful to empiricism and positivism throughout his life, although he felt the need to make some changes and corrections over time, taking into account criticisms of the arguments on which his philosophy was based that made it seem incomplete or erroneous.

Ayer first comes to terms with the philosophical traditions that preceded him, criticizes the errors he sees in them, and then determines what his own philosophy can exclude from its boundaries and basic assumptions. The idea to which he will direct his arrows of criticism is made clear in the title of the first chapter of the work, '*The Elimination of Metaphysics*'.

The empirical basis of the elimination of metaphysics

For the empiricist, there could be only one medium through which knowledge can be acquired, and that is through sense experience or the data presented to the mind, the evidence of the senses. “Whatever can be known is that which can be said to be empirically verifiable through the method of scientific investigation.” (Locke, *An Essay*. 1997, pp. 18–35). Ayer argued that when metaphysical propositions or statements are analyzed in line with this method, they would reveal their nonsensical nature. The target of most of positivism's devastating activities is metaphysics. The positivism of the 1920s and Ayer's logical empiricism, for instance, made no pretense that metaphysics was the disease of which philosophy and positive sciences must be cured. One of Ayer's intentions is to show that there cannot be any non-empirical world of values, or that men have immortal souls. This strand of atheism is based on the grounds that any religious discourse is meaningless. He believed that religious language was unverifiable and, as such, literally nonsensical. Consequently, “God exists” and “There is no God” are both equally meaningless utterances, because neither can be verified empirically. Though Ayer could not give assent to the declaration “There is no God,” he was an atheist in the sense that he withheld assents from both these stances, taking the statement “God exists” as a meaningful hypothesis which Ayer himself does not see as such. Ayer's empiricism was consistent. A cursory analysis of Ayer's arguments will reveal that his criticism has an empirical basis. Obviously, the empiricist basis of Ayer's attitude to meaning was laid first in his reading of Hume. The bias stems from logical positivism and Ayer's Verification Principle. Hence, in order to reveal the bias, the verification principle needs to be discussed.

Ayer's Verification Principle:

In Alfred Jules Ayer's popular work, *Language, Truth and Logic*, published in 1936, he discusses at length the verification principle in chapter one under the sub-title “The Elimination of Metaphysics”. He rejected the epistemological premise on which Kant's metaphysics was predicated, maintaining that what needed to be attacked was rather the linguistic content of metaphysical claims. According to him, the only way of doing this is by invoking the verifiability criterion. Ayer held that a sentence becomes factually or literally significant only when it successfully passes the scrutiny of verification; otherwise, it is significant only in terms of emotional significance. In his words, “A proposition is verifiable if some observations would be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood” (Ayer, Dover, 1946, p. 13).

Ayer narrated the logical Positivists 'practical verifiability' and 'verifiability in principle' (Ayer, Penguin, 1946, p. 13). 'Practical verifiability' has to do with propositions that can be exhaustively and demonstratively verified 'here and now' by human effort. 'Verifiability in principle' is applied to

propositions that cannot be verified immediately, “because we lack the practical means of placing ourselves in the situation where the relevant observations could be made”, but can be possibly verified. Ayer further puts ‘practical verifiability’ and “verifiability in principle” into better wording, such as ‘strong verification’ and ‘weak verification’. For the first one, if and only if the truth of something could be conclusively established in experience, that is strong verification. For example, “There is a book on the table.” (Ayer, Dover, 1946, pp. 12-13) It is a direct verification. On the other hand, a proposition is verifiable in the weak sense if it is possible for experience. i.e., to render it probable. For Example, “There are mountains on the far side of the moon.” This can possibly be verified by going to the far side of the moon. On the other hand, a sentence that does not come under these two types of verification is considered meaningless. If the statement “The Absolute is perfect” is considered meaningless, for no empirical observation could conform to or refute it. (Ayer, Dover, 1946, pp. 34-36). Ayer gave the verification principle an entirely new outlook by introducing several terms into its basic tenets. His own formulation of the principle could be said to be unique among those of the positivists, given to the detailed attention he devoted to it in his *Language, Truth and Logic*. While the Positivists emphasize strict or conclusive verification through empirical methods, Ayer accepted weak verification as a possible verification. For the Positivists, a statement, if synthetic, is meaningful if it is conclusively verified by empirical methods, whereas for Ayer, empirical statements are meaningful if empirically verifiable in principle or only partially. Despite Ayer’s unique but controversial formulation of the principle, it must be noted that “observation” remains the central force in the verification principle, and a common property which it shares in common with all other versions as propagated by different authors within the logical positivists circle.

Verification principle as a tool for the analysis of Metaphysical Language for Meaning

Alfred Jules Ayer’s language, truth, and logic define and explain the verification principle of logical positivism. The treatise explains how the principle of verifiability may be applied to the problems and aims of philosophy. To be meaningful, a statement must be either analytic or capable of being verified. According to Ayer, analytic statements are tautologies. A tautology is a statement that is necessarily true, true by definition, and true under any conditions. A tautology is a repetition of the meaning of a statement, using different words or symbols. For Ayer, the statements of logic and mathematics are tautologies. Tautologies are true by definition, and their validity does not depend on empirical testing. Some philosophers make claims about a reality transcending sense experience. Ayer’s chief objection to this is that such claims are meaningless. Genuine issues must be capable of being

resolved by appealing to an empirical test or to how we use language. According to Ayer, if a statement expresses an empirical proposition, then the validity of the proposition is established by its empirical verifiability. Propositions are statements that have conditions under which they can be verified. By the verification principle, meaningful statements have conditions under which their validity can be affirmed or denied. Statements that are not meaningful cannot be expressed as propositions. Every proposition is meaningful, although it may be either true or false. Propositions that lack a practical means of verification may still be meaningful if they can be verified in principle.

Ayer explains that the principle of verifiability may be used as a criterion for determining whether a statement is meaningful. Verification must always rest upon empirical observation that is in sense-experience. On the basis of this criterion, Ayer analyzes the language in general that can express any meaning. If the language is verified, then meaningfulness is asserted. According to Ayer, until the metaphysician makes us understand how the proposition that he wishes to express would be verified, he fails to communicate anything to us. Ayer argues that metaphysical utterances result from logical errors rather than from metaphysicians' conscious desire to go beyond the limits of experience. By this criterion, he rules out not only metaphysical, but also ethical and religious propositions. He goes to the extreme, where "Ethics is reduced to no more than the analysis and clarification of moral terms." (Ayer, 1946, pp. 102-120) For him, the function of ethics is not to construct theories but to analyze and clarify moral language.

Philosophical Legacy of Alfred Ayer's rejection of metaphysics:

Ayer agrees with Hume that there are two main classes of propositions: those which concern 'relation of ideas' and those which concern 'matters of fact'. Propositions about 'relations of ideas' include the a priori propositions of logic and mathematics. Propositions about 'matters of fact' make assertions about the empirical world. Ayer argues that philosophic propositions are analytic, and they are concerned with 'relations of ideas'. The task of philosophy is to clarify the logical relationships of empirical propositions. Ayer rejects the metaphysical thesis that philosophy can give us knowledge of a transcendental reality. He dismisses metaphysical arguments, calling them nonsense and also said that they cannot be empirically verified. He argues that metaphysical statements have no literal meaning, and they cannot be subjected to criteria of truth or falsehood.

Ayer agrees with and elaborates Kant's explanation of the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments. "According to Ayer, a proposition is analytic if its validity depends only on the definitions of the symbols it contains" (Kant, 1929, pp. 52-68). A proposition is synthetic if its validity is determined by the facts of experience. Ayer defines truth as the criterion by which empirical propositions

are validated. Truth and falsehood are signs of assertion or denial of empirical propositions. For Ayer, ethical or aesthetic judgments are subjective rather than objective, and they cannot be demonstrated to be true or false. Ethical or aesthetic judgments express feelings, not propositions, and have no objective validity. One cannot argue about something that cannot be expressed as a proposition, but can only argue about something that can be analytically or empirically verified. For Ayer, metaphysical statements lack objective validity and are meaningless.

According to Ayer, no proposition concerning ‘matters of fact’ can ever be shown to be necessarily true, because there is always a possibility that it may be refuted by further empirical testing. Ayer explains that his radical empiricism is opposed to rationalism, which asserts that there are truths about the world that can be known a priori. According to the principle of verifiability, propositions about “matters of fact” can be meaningful only if they are capable of being empirically verified. A significant consequence of abandoning metaphysics as a concern of philosophy is a rejection of the view that the function of philosophy is to propose basic principles of meaning and to construct a deductive system by offering the consequences of these principles of meaning as a complete picture of reality.

Conclusion:

Ayer holds that all facts are particular or represent conjunctions of separate events, so that any generalization of such facts can only be purely formal. Relations between facts can only be external. Consequent upon the critical appraisal of Ayer’s criticism of metaphysics, this paper shall conclude in defense of metaphysics due to the fact that the positivists’ critique of metaphysics does not repudiate the idea of metaphysics. “John Heil observes that metaphysics is gradually mounting a comeback to the age-long skeptical challenge by the logical positivists.” (Heil, 2003, pp. 1-10). After decades of attempting to keep the subject at arm’s length, philosophers are discovering that progress on fundamental issues in philosophy of mind requires delving into metaphysics. Questions about the nature of minds and their contents, such as those concerning free action, personal identity, or the existence of God, belong to applied metaphysics. Metaphysics is partly an attempt to spell out a system of fundamental categories of being. The metaphysical categories we unselfconsciously deploy are, after all, the product of ways of thinking about the world that have proved adaptive. They enable us to sort out and make sense of our experience. Thus, Ayer’s criticism, although strongly advocated, does not take into consideration the importance of metaphysics to human life.

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