

EVALUATION OF ALFRED JULES AYER'S CRITICISM OF METAPHYSICS

Mark Imoter Shenge
Department of Philosophy
Benue State University

Oche Augustine Okwa
Department of Philosophy
Benue State University

Abstract

Ayer's criticism of Metaphysics is premised on his criterion of meaning, namely, a modified verification principle. Ayer comes from a tradition of thinkers who uphold that unless a proposition is an a priori statement or an empirical statement, such a statement can neither be true nor false. The consequence of this is that such a statement is literally nonsensical. Such a statement cannot, therefore be used to refer to anything real. It is merely a statement that expresses one's emotional inclination towards the subject. The argument followed that unless such statements can be empirically verified, such statements are meaningless. However, this approach has been viewed to be not just reductionist in its essence but limiting as well. It is conceived as such on the grounds that when subjected to itself, such a criterion defeats itself like the proverbial ouroboros. Ayer, consequently, reformulated the principle to shield it from these limitations. He proposed that statements ought not to be conclusively verifiable in experience before they are regarded as being imbued with meaning. Ayer thus summated that so long as some possible sense-experience is relevant to the determination of a proposition's truth or falsehood, such a statement can be termed meaningful. While there are many ways of defining what the concept of meaning implies, Ayer makes a distinction between "literal meaning" and "factual meaning". He uses "literal meaning" to distinguish his form of meaning from other implications of the concept of meaning, while the expression "factual meaning" refers to the case of statements which satisfy the modified verification principle without being analytic. This paper adopts the expository and evaluative methods of philosophical research. Premised on this, the paper sets out to evaluate Ayer's critique of Metaphysics and thus concludes that Ayer's criticism is plausible but has been misread. This paper is thus a call for a reconsideration of the criticisms Ayer proposed, from this, it will become clearer the kinds of statements Ayer believes are nonsensical.

Keywords: Metaphysics, Verification Principle, A priori, Empirical

Introduction

The task of this paper is the evaluation of Alfred Jules Ayer's criticism of Metaphysics that is built on the foundation of what he calls "A Modified Verification Principle" (Ayer 2). A background understanding of the Verification Principle is, however, imperative for understanding how Ayer modified it. The Principle of Verification sits at the foundation upon which Ayer built his criticisms against metaphysics. The sole responsibility of the Principle of Verification is to make a distinction between that which is significant and that which is not. According to Ayer,

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. (6)

One is inclined to summate that we are confined to categorize only the observations we can make within our experiential world as both significant and meaningful. It is from this that the principle of verification was born. Therefore, the Verification Principle is intended to provide a criterion for determining whether a sentence is literally meaningful or not. The principle states “A sentence has literal meaning if and only if the proposition it expressed was either analytic or empirically verifiable” (Ayer 106). This position of the verification principle is built on the assumption that every statement is either true or false. If, therefore, a statement cannot be categorized as either being true or false, then such a statement does not have literal meaning, and consequently is nonsensical.

Sequel to Ayer’s dissatisfaction with the Principle, Ayer believes that if the verification principle were formulated in this manner, it could be argued not only that it was insufficient as a criterion of meaning, because it would not cover the case of sentences that did not express any propositions at all, but also that it was otiose, because the question that it was designed to ensure had to already be answered before the principle could be applied (107). One readily begins to see the points of weakness that were inherent in the principle prior to Ayer. For example, Ayer pointed out that “For the fact that a conclusion does not follow from its putative premise is not sufficient to show that it is false” (5). That is to say, that one cannot simply say that metaphysical statements are meaningless on the grounds of the manner to which they come into being. Beginning every enquiry from sense evidence shall render every conception of a transcendental world false. However, a false premise does not imply a false conclusion. Consequently, it is a matter of these statements themselves rather than the origin of the formulation of these statements. It is the strive to eliminate these weaknesses that led to Ayer’s modification of the Verification Principle. According to Ayer, “I require of an empirical hypothesis not indeed that it should be conclusively verifiable, but that some possible sense-experience should be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood” (2).

In the attempt to tread on the part of caution, Ayer held that this principle, however, can be proposed in two senses, ‘Strong Verification Principle’ and ‘Weak Verification Principle’:

A proposition is said to be verifiable in the strong sense of the term, if and only if its truth could be conclusively established in experience, but that it is verifiable, in the weak sense, if it is possible for experience to render it probable. (176)

It is very difficult to sustain a belief in something that cannot be verified. It is, however, more difficult to provide an account for the claim of knowledge of a *suprasensible* reality. Little wonder then that Ayer is not hesitant in referring to some metaphysical statements

as nonsensical. Ayer's Criticism is based on the formulation of certain grounds that account for statements which have meaning and statements which are devoid of meaning. Ayer's criticism of metaphysics has received little attention and this paper is a call for a reconsideration of the criticisms proffered by Ayer.

This paper meets Ayer on three fronts. First, the study agrees with Ayer to disagree that philosophy affords us knowledge of a reality transcending the 'world of science and common sense'. Secondly, the study also agrees with Ayer that it is possible to be a metaphysician as strictly as materialist. Thirdly, the study seeks to establish that the 'Weak Verification Principle' as proposed by Ayer is deeply rooted in Metaphysics.

Foundation of Ayer's Criticism

The Analytical Movement is a 20th century philosophical ideology that laid emphasis on breaking phenomena into its constituent parts for the purpose of understanding. The idea of "analytic" has its root in the term "analysis" which literally means "to break up". According to Ekwutosi, "analytical procedures aim to reveal the nature of something by breaking up the matter in question into its constituent parts" (1). The idea of 'analytic' philosophy found today has its origin in Aristotle, who primarily employed it in explaining the methods of logical analysis. For instance, Onyeocha notes that "Aristotle's prior analytics contains his analysis of the syllogism, while his posterior analytics contains his analysis of the conditions of the scientific or the demonstrable (Onyeocha, 4).

In its modern usage, Analytic philosophy was a philosophical development of the 20th century in the English speaking world. The analytic philosophers were hugely influenced by the writings of Gottlob Frege, G.E. Moore, B. Russell and L. Wittgenstein. Within this circle are thinkers such as A.J. Ayer, John Austin, Gilbert Ryle. True to their name, the analytic philosophers adopted the analytic method which seeks to clarify by analysis, the meaning of unclear statements or ambiguous propositions. The central desire and need for this clarification had been that traditional philosophy lacks clarity.

It is argued that Analytic Philosophy is neither a school nor doctrine, hence, one can simply call it a 'movement'. Stumpf for instance corroborates that to call it [Analytic philosophy] a movement rather than a school underscores the fact that although analytic philosophy has certain clear distinguishing characteristics, the sources out of which it emerged, the changes it has undergone, and the variety of ways in which it pursued are many (446). Similarly, Ammerman maintains that, "indeed, it is misleading to speaking of analytic philosophy as if it were homogenous and monolithic...The word "analysis" is used here as a way of grouping together a number of heterogeneous philosophers who share certain interests and procedures" (Ammerman, 2).

Mark Woodhouse in support of this position points out that analytic approach to philosophizing poses objectives that in some ways contrast sharply with those of the oriental views. He adds that, "its emphasis is not on fitting the pieces (isolated beliefs and concepts) into a picture of the whole employing principles but rather on clarifying the pieces in the first place" (Woodhouse, 20). It is really difficult to find a consensus in the ranks of analytic philosophers, nevertheless, there is still a thin cord of similarity between them, in that they placed great premium upon the study of

language and its complexities, they also have implicit respect for arguments and clarity of words as according to them, the function of philosophy is to clarify the meaning of language. Stumpf points out that, “what unifies all analytic philosophers is their agreement concerning the central task of philosophy. The task of philosophy, they said is to clarify the meaning of language” (446). Wittgenstein also asserts that:

Philosophy aims at the logical clarifications of thoughts...A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidation. Philosophy does not result in ‘philosophical propositions’, but rather in the clarification of propositions. Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries. (49)

Analytic philosophy has since metamorphosed into various nuances in its eagerness to solve philosophical problems. Thus, Stumpf concludes that “the major facets of analytic philosophy are to be found then, in Bertrand Russell’s logical atomism, the Vienna circle’s logical positivism and the later Wittgenstein philosophical analysis” (449).

The term positivism was first used by Henri de Saint Simon to designate scientific method and its extension to philosophy (Ome and Amam, 342). Later August Comte adopted and popularized positivism to the extent that it later developed into what has become “logical positivism”. Logical positivism also called the ‘Vienna Circle’ could be classified as a school of science which came into existence in the 1920’s when Moritz Schlick around whom it centered came to Vienna as a professor of philosophy. Ekwutosi points out that “logical positivism is the name given in 1931 by A.E. Blumberg and Herbert Feigl to a set of philosophical ideas put forward by the Vienna circle” (52).

Schlick was directly influenced by Ernst Mach who was a physicist and whose chair he occupied at Mach’s death in 1922. It (Vienna circle) was a seminal discussion group that composed of philosophically-interested mathematicians and scientists in the persons of Philip Frank, Karl Menger, Kurt Godel, Hans Hahn and Scientifically trained philosophers, among whom are; Moritz Schlick, Rudolf Carnap, Otto Neurath, Herbert Feigl, Friedrich Waisman, Edger Zilgel and Victor Kraft. In the United States, there were positivist minded thinkers like Charles W. Morris, Ernest Nagel and W.V.O Quine. It is often observed that no philosopher radicalized the ideas of this group any more than A.J. Ayer who was also the foremost exponent of this philosophical trend in Britain. Ayer in his book *Language, Truth and Logic* published in 1936 paraded what could be called the basic tenets of logical positivism.

In 1929, the logical positivists published a pamphlet which was titled “Scientific conception of the World: the Vienna circle”, their target and position came to limelight with this publication. The pamphlet summarises logical positivism as philosophy to end all philosophical problems”. This is so because the Vienna circle members believed that the philosophical problems were nothing but linguistic problems arising from ambiguities and lack of clarity in the use of words. When such lack of clarity and ambiguities are cleared in our use of words, the apparent philosophical problems would have been proved to be pseudo problems, and this would be the end of all philosophical controversies (Ekwutosi, 8).

To clear philosophy of its problems was for the logical positivists to eliminate metaphysics. They brought out a principle to this effect which was called the principle of verification. The basic tenets of logical positivism were that; the sole source of knowledge is science or experience based on public verification. It denies that knowledge about existents can be obtained a priori. Only observable phenomena qualify as object of knowledge. Logical positivism denies that there are universal and necessary truths and dismisses metaphysics as false and meaningless, nonsensical and therefore a pseudo-discipline. Accordingly, the main business of philosophy is not speculation about reality but clarification of the language of science. They held that the verification principle is the criterion of meaningfulness and so any philosophy that does not pass the crucible of being verifiable is nonsensical and meaningless. Metaphysics for them could not pass this litmus test and so it is to be eliminated (Obiefuna, 65).

The characteristics of logical positivism include; (a) a blanket rejection of metaphysics on logical grounds as not just false but meaningless; (b) a thorough-going empiricism backed by the resources of modern logic tempered only by an exaggerated respect for the achievements and capabilities of modern sciences; (c) A restriction of philosophy to the task of eliminating its own pseudo problems by clarifying the language employed in framing them.

The Principle of Verification and Ayer's Modified Principle

The verification principle was used by the logical positivists to test which sentences did and which did not express a genuine proposition about a matter of fact. This is against the backdrop that they believed that the metaphysical language, propositions or sentences were meaningless or as Wittgenstein said in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, senseless. Wittgenstein asserts that certain statements especially those regarding metaphysics, ethics, or aesthetics are nonsensical because they attempt to say what cannot be said within the confines of logical propositions. Such statements, for Wittgenstein lack meaning because they do not represent possible states of affairs in the world. Little wonder then he purported that "all philosophy is a critique of language... and the result of philosophy is not philosophical propositions, but to make proposition clear" (*Tractatus*, 4.003). Consequently, the logical positivists developed the verification principle to serve as a basic yardstick for the meaningfulness or literal significance of any proposition.

A proposition was to be considered meaningful if such proposition passes the acid test of this criterion by way of fulfilling its requirements which consists in the notion that "...the meaning of a statement is the method of its verification" (Stumpf, 457). The motive behind this assumption was based on the fact that verification must always rely upon empirical observation, which is in sense experience. Inferentially, any statement that could not be verified under the observational method is meaningless. For Schlick then, the principle of verification has to serve as a method of verifying the conditions under which a proposition is to be regarded as false and those under which the proposition will be true (82). Giving the above view a sure foundation, Oswald Hanfling proposed that,

When we ask about a sentence what does it mean? What we expect is instruction as to the circumstances in which the sentence is to be used. We want a description

of the condition under which the sentence will form a true proposition and of those which will make it false (Hanfling, 17).

Apparently, the verification principle centers on the method for examining whether a proposition is meaningless or not. Statement of logic and mathematics are as they were meaningful because according to the logical positivists, their meaning can be proved by purely formal means since they do not make claims about states of affairs. The principle of verification in its undiluted form holds that the meaning of a statement is the method of its verification. This principle was adopted by the logical positivists to aid them distil meaningful statements from meaningless ones. To know the meaning of a statement is to know how to verify it, put differently, “A statement is meaning if and only if it is possible to verify it” (Ozumba, 27). Thus, any proposition that is not empirically verifiably is meaningless.

A.J. Ayer elaborated the criterion of verifiability in his book *Language, Truth and Logic* which is to be used in testing the genuineness of statements of facts. The criterion states thus:

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 observation would lead him, under certain conditions to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false. If, on the other hand, the putative proposition is of such a character that the assumption of its truth, or falsehood, is consistent with any assumption whatsoever concerning the nature of its future experience, then as far as he is concerned, it is if, not a tautology, a mere pseudo- proposition. The sentence expressing it may be emotionally significant to him, but it is not literally significant (Ayer, 16).

Ayer, thus, held the believe that the meaningfulness of any proposition depends on its ability to be empirically verifiable. Deductively, there must be some grounds on which this can be done. The criterion is therefore constituted of two main features: Observation and Analysis. A proposition is meaningful if, first, it is a statement that is observable in experience and/or, second, if the fact stated by the proposition when analyzed is either a tautology or an analytical statement whose predicate is subsumed in the subject of the statement.

The principle of verification is, hence, concerned with answering questions that have to do with knowing what meaning is. It also tries to articulate what the meaning of a statement consists in. But the verification criterion deals with the way of deciding whether a given statement has meaning or not. Simply put, while the criterion of verifiability shows us how a proposition can be verified, the principle of verification shows us what the proposition means. This means that while the principle of verification deals with the ‘what’ of meaning verifiability criterion deals with the ‘how’ of meaning (Ozumba, 28).

While these are the basic tenets of the verifiability criterion, Ayer went further to modify and make provisions for some nuanced perspectives to the criterion in order not to have the criterion consume itself; this is what he calls the “modified verification principle”. The modified

verification principle is simple a devotion to what Ayer refers to as the weak form of verification principle. On this note, it is sacrosanct to delineate the distinction between the 'strong' sense of the verification principle and the 'weak' sense of it. It is premised on this that the logical reason behind why Ayer advocates for the weak sense of the verification principle will become clear. Consequently, Ayer made a distinction between the 'strong' and the 'weak' sense of the verifiable. In his words, "A proposition is said to be verifiable, in the strong sense of the term, if, and only if, its truth could be conclusively established in experience. But it is verifiable in the weak sense, if it is possible for experience to render it probable" (Ayer, 18). From the foregoing, the strong sense of verification vouches for conclusive verification which according to Ayer harbours an inherent problem such that when taken as a criterion of significance will make the logical positivists to have much to prove in their arguments. Consider for example such propositions namely, as 'arsenic is poisonous', all men are mortal; 'a body tends to expand when it is heated'. According to Ayer,

It is of the very nature of these propositions that their truth cannot be established with certainty by any finite sense of observation... it must be admitted that they cannot, even in principle, be verified conclusively. And then, if we adopted conclusive verifiability as our criterion of significance, we are logically obliged to treat these general propositions of law in the same fashion as we treat the statements of the metaphysicians. (18)

The logical positivists could not account for the universal affirmative statements through the conclusive verification; Ayer, thus, adopts the weaker form of verification which hinges on partial verification and also renders the truth of any assertion probable. The weaker sense of verification seeks to find out whether any observation would be relevant to the determination of the truth or falsehood of a given statement.

In furtherance to the above, Ayer made a clear-cut distinction between practical verifiability and verifiability in principle. It was his view that there are propositions which we use in ordinary life which we understand and believe and which we could verify if we take steps to verify them. Albeit, we could verify some if we give ourselves the trouble. That notwithstanding, he insisted that there are some "...which we could not verify even if we choose to, simply because we lack the practical means of placing ourselves in the situation where the relevant observations could be made" (Ayer, 17). An example of such proposition was cited when he referred to mountains that are on the farther side of the moon. No rocket has been invented which would go to the farther side of the moon to verify the truth or falsehood of such an assertion by matter of actual observation. Notwithstanding, Ayer maintained, "I do know what observation would decide for me, if, as is theoretically conceivable, I were once in a position to make" (Ayer, 17). With recourse to the above, Ayer finally submits that the proposition though not verifiable by any factual observation, is therefore verifiable in principle, if not in practice and is accordingly significant.

In Ayer's thoughts, such a metaphysical proposition as "the absolute enters into, but is itself incapable of, evolution and progress" (18) is practically verifiable nor is it verifiable in principle. The proposition in contention fails to communicate or lack literal significance if according to Ayer; it is not accompanied by the procedures of verifiability which is how to verify its truth or falsity.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Metaphysics, the philosophical study of fundamental reality, has been both a cornerstone and a subject of intense scrutiny within philosophical discourse. While it has contributed significantly to shaping our understanding of existence, it has also faced criticism for its abstract nature, lack of empirical grounding, and susceptibility to circular reasoning. One of the most common criticisms of speculative metaphysics is its apparent detachment from empirical evidence. Unlike the empirical sciences, which rely on observation, experimentation, and measurable outcomes, speculative metaphysics often deals with abstract concepts that resist direct empirical verification. Upon this backdrop, one can dismiss speculative metaphysical inquiries as mere flights of fantasy.

Metaphysics as the science of general principles cannot be eliminated because even our scientific method involves conjectures and it is in this way that the frontiers of knowledge are expanded.

Those who are clamoring for the elimination of metaphysics are also calling for the crucifixion of philosophy. Philosophy without metaphysics is a corpse and any eulogy to philosophy that has been divested of metaphysics is like a requiem hymn that is sung to the corpse of the dead (Ekwutosi, 7).

It is on this note that one can acknowledge both the extent and the type of Metaphysics that Ayer's modified verification principle attempts to eliminate. Ayer's critique of metaphysics is strictly channeled towards speculative metaphysics and the claims of having knowledge of transcendent realities. He avers that "One way of attacking a metaphysician who claims to have knowledge of a reality which transcends the phenomenal world would be to inquire what premises his propositions deduced. Must he not begin, as other men do, with the evidence of his sense?" (Ayer 13).

Ayer and the logical positivists asserted that meaningful statements must either be empirically verifiable or analytically true. This principle, known as the "verification principle," became a foundational cornerstone of their philosophical approach. According to Ayer, statements that lack empirical verification or logical necessity are devoid of cognitive content and are, in essence, meaningless. This principle served as a potent weapon in Ayer's criticism of metaphysics.

Speculative metaphysics frequently engages with concepts that resist empirical verification, such as the nature of the soul, the existence of God, or the ultimate purpose of existence. Ayer contended that these non-empirical claims, while potentially intriguing and thought-provoking, lack the necessary empirical grounding to be considered meaningful propositions. According to the verification principle, these kinds of metaphysical statements fall into the category of "pseudo-statements," being neither empirically testable nor analytically true, and thus rendered devoid of cognitive content.

Ayer's criticism extended beyond empirical verifiability to the concept of analyticity. He argued that meaningful statements could be either empirically verifiable or tautological in nature. Analytically true statements derive their meaning solely from the logical relations between terms

and are, therefore, true by definition. While some metaphysical claims may appear to be tautological, Ayer believed that they often hide disguised empirical content.

Ayer's criticism of metaphysics sparked significant debate within the philosophical community. While his rigorous adherence to the verification principle provided a clear and systematic method for evaluating meaningfulness, it also posed challenges for metaphysical inquiries. If metaphysical claims cannot be empirically verified or reduced to analytic truths, then, according to Ayer's criteria, they would be labeled as meaningless pseudo-statements. This led to a reevaluation of the role and status of metaphysics in the realm of philosophy. Some scholars argued that Ayer's critique marked a necessary shift towards a more empirically grounded and rigorous approach to philosophical inquiry. Others, however, raised concerns about the limitations of Ayer's verification principle, suggesting that it might exclude valuable philosophical discussions that go beyond the scope of empirical evidence.

Alfred Jules Ayer's criticism of metaphysics, grounded in the verification principle of logical positivism, challenged the legitimacy of non-empirical and speculative inquiries within philosophy. His emphasis on empirical verifiability and analyticity raised important questions about the meaningfulness of metaphysical claims. While Ayer's critique sparked vigorous discussions and prompted a reevaluation of metaphysical discourse, it also sparked criticism and raised concerns about the potential limitations of his perspective. Ayer's work remains a significant landmark in the ongoing debate about the nature, scope, and value of metaphysics in the landscape of philosophical inquiry.

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