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Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims at exposing and appraising the arguments of A.J. Ayer against metaphysics, as reflected in the first chapter of his book, *Language, Truth and Logic*. It shall explore the basic assumptions, content and concerns of the metaphysical enterprise, and place them in careful juxtaposition with A.J. Ayer's positivist assumptions in order to discover whether the claims he makes regarding metaphysics are really valid or not. The conclusion will emphasize the relevance and irrefutability of metaphysics.

Methodology: The work is expository, analytic, critical and evaluative, in its methodology.

Findings: Sir Alfred Julius Ayer was an English philosopher who developed key features of logical positivism. His book *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936) is one of the most influential philosophy books in the 20th century, addressing questions of reality, perception, knowledge and meaning. In it Ayer explains important positivist ideas, like the *principle of verifiability* as a criterion of meaning, the rejection of metaphysics, and the emotivist theory of ethics. In Ayer's logical empiricism, philosophy is no longer seen as a metaphysical concern, nor as an attempt to provide speculative truths about the nature of ultimate reality. Instead, philosophy is seen as an activity of defining and clarifying the logical relationships of empirical propositions.

Unique Contribution to theory, practice and policy (recommendation): The ratiocinative discussion of A. J. Ayer's rejection of Metaphysics, offers an alternative perspective on how Metaphysics should be construed, given its centrality to, and in-eliminability in philosophical discourses.

Keywords: *Assessment, metaphysics, ratiocinative, rejection.*

1.0 Introduction

The term *metaphysics* originally referred to the writings of Aristotle that came after his writings on *physics*, in the arrangement made by Andronicus of Rhodes about three centuries after Aristotle's death. Aristotle says:

There is a science which investigates *being as being* (*being qua being*) and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature. Now this is not the same as any of the so-called special sciences; for none of these others treats universally of being as being. They cut off a part of being and investigate the attribute of this part; this is what the mathematical sciences for instance do. Now since we are seeking the first principles and the highest causes, clearly there must be something to which these belong in virtue of its own nature. If then those who sought the elements of existing things were seeking these same principles, it is necessary that the elements must be elements of being not by accident but just because it is being. Therefore it pertains to being as being, that its first causes must also be properly grasped.¹

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle seems at different times to have held opposing views on the two most important questions in the book, namely, the *nature of primary being*, and the *possibility of having scientific knowledge* of this kind of being. He agrees with Plato that universals are objectively real (that is, that they are present in the natural world, and not just abstraction in our minds). But he does not agree that universals exist separated from matter, as self-existing forms. The *Metaphysics* is consequently concerned with the two problems related to Plato's theory of Ideas. Aristotle's early formulation of these problems was as follows: "Do supersensible forms really exist? And is a science which has such forms as its subject matter possible?" Traditionally, *metaphysics* refers to the branch of philosophy that attempts to understand the fundamental nature of all reality, whether visible or invisible. It seeks a description so basic, so essentially simple, so all-inclusive that it applies to everything, whether divine or human or anything else. It attempts to tell what anything must be like in order to be at all. It is a branch of philosophy that studies the ultimate structure and constitution of reality—i.e., of that which is real, insofar as it is real. The term, which means literally "what comes after physics," was used to refer to the treatise by Aristotle on what he himself called "first philosophy."

1.1 The Basic Assumptions and Concerns of Metaphysics

In the history of Western philosophy, metaphysics has been understood in various ways: as an inquiry into what basic categories of things there are (e.g., the mental and the physical); as the study of reality, as opposed to appearance; as the study of the world as a whole; and as a theory of first principles. Some basic problems in the history of metaphysics are the problem of universals—i.e., the problem of the nature of universals and their relation to so-called particulars; the existence of God; the mind-body problem; and the problem of the nature of material, or external, objects. Major types of metaphysical theory include Platonism, Aristotelianism, Thomism, Cartesianism (dualism), idealism, realism, materialism, etc.

To call one a metaphysician in this traditional, philosophical sense indicates nothing more than his or her interest in attempting to discover what underlies everything. Metaphysics is commonly characterized as the study of the most general features of reality: existence, identity,

¹ Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Bk. IV, Part 2. The word "metaphysics" comes from the Greek words: 'meta' meaning "after" and "phusika" meaning "physical things." Aristotle never called his science of being 'metaphysics' or "after physical things."

dependence, causation, change, modality, and so on. But since such features have specific manifestations (there are specific existences, dependencies, causes, changes, possibilities) it would be more accurate to say that metaphysics is the study of these features at a certain general level of investigation. Metaphysicians seek to understand, in general terms, what exists (properties and substantial particulars), what dependency relations there are (composition, logical entailment), what causation is (a relation whereby one event raises the probability of another), and so on. Hence it is that metaphysics is defined not only by its subject matter, but also by its aspirations to provide general accounts of this subject matter.

Metaphysics aims at the identification and characterization of the most general things that there are, in terms of their categories, properties and relations. Metaphysics is the science of *being qua being* (*general metaphysics*). But it is also the consideration of being from a variety of perspectives, (*special metaphysics*).² And indeed, to the extent that one can give metaphysical accounts of less general features of reality (eg. of fictional characters, or political institutions), by identifying the general characteristics of these features, there is a case to be made for metaphysics being defined primarily by the distinctively general approach it takes, to understanding pretty much any subject matter. So far, most metaphysicians would probably agree. It seems to me, however, that there is room for disagreement about how one should go about arriving at an appropriately general metaphysical account of some feature of reality. On the usual conception, a general metaphysical account is the product of conceptual analysis, proceeding roughly as follows. One starts with the concept associated with the feature in question—that is, by thinking about the feature—with the goal of determining the contours of application of the concept—that is, of determining when the feature in question does or does not occur, across a wide range of candidate scenarios.

These contours are determined primarily via conceivability considerations, of the sort characteristic of “thought experiments”: the metaphysician imagines, or conceives, a given scenario (as taking place in a “possible world”), and assesses their intuitions regarding whether the feature in question does or does not occur in the feature in question, the goal is then to provide an account of the feature (usually, in terms of conditions that are necessary sufficient for its occurrence) that appropriately tracks the contours of the concept, as revealed by conceptual analysis. Metaphysics is, in a sense, simply the special science of the most prior sphere, i.e., “first philosophy.” Given the causal dependence of all other spheres on the first one, metaphysics is also the science of the first and most universal principles (*archai*) and causes of being as such. Hence metaphysical knowledge serves to ground and unify the special sciences. It grounds them because, whereas their practitioners know each the members of a certain region of being, only the metaphysician knows the first causes and principles of those beings. And it unifies them because those first causes and principles belong in every case to the single, primary region. In knowing that region, the metaphysician knows all subject matters together; the metaphysician knows all beings, in particular, just insofar as they are beings (knows them, that is, with respect to their “transcendental” predicates).

1.2 On the Basic Assumptions Logical Positivism

The pursuit of the philosophical ideal has rarely been more focused or promising than during the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century. During that period, Technological idealism was on the rise as never before. Thinkers sought for concepts that would link the increasing alienation of technology to the traditional comfort of philosophy. Science and technology were becoming fragmented into specialty areas, and knowledge in these realms was burgeoning with new theories, paradigms, and world views. The philosophical community saw it was time for unification. In the late 1920's, a new guild of thinkers was formed, mostly in

rebellion to the traditional nineteenth-century world views. This new, so-called “Vienna Circle” was formed in part by Moritz Schlick, whose background was in relativistic physics under Max Planck. Schlick, along with other scientists and philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Reichenbach, and Hempel, shared a discontent with traditional Viennese philosophy and German idealism that had dominated philosophical thinking. The traditional Germanic ways of Hegel, Schelling, and the neo-Kantians were seen to focus on speculative, ethical, and esthetical considerations. Schlick and his colleagues saw all this as undesirable and unnecessary. They named their camp “logical positivism” and set out to define the territorial boundaries.

The central goal of the Vienna Circle positivists was no less than the unification of all science. They perceived that to attain this goal meant revising the philosophies of their day along three fundamental principles. First, philosophy should be scientific, that is, it should consist of clear and rigorous statements and arguments, and contain no “whys” or metaphysical speculations of ultimate being or reality (ontology). This led to Carnap’s project to reduce language itself to a basic algorithm, a set of elementary concepts and rules that would describe how language is built from relationships of those elements. His “logical analysis of language” concluded by rejecting metaphysics completely. Second, philosophy should follow an empiricist tradition, as derived from the English heritage of Hume, Russell, and Whitehead. In this tradition, statements about the world generally fall into two categories: *meaningful* and *emotive*. “Meaningful” (or “cognitive”) statements, as they were defined, can be validated with real-world experience *a posteriori*. “Meaningless” (or “emotive”) statements are essentially unverifiable, and include much of the realms of metaphysics, poetry, and ontology (the study of being).

One objective of the Vienna Circle was to build a self-consistent and externally complete philosophy from meaningful statements only, and to eliminate all emotive statements. This became the central efforts of Russell, Whitehead, and Wittgenstein. Third, philosophy should be based explicitly on Russell and Whitehead’s logical framework and analyses in their work *Principia Mathematica*. This volume was an attempt to devise a completely general, formal system of symbolic logic and explicit rules for manipulating the symbols and logical operators. Also, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was used by Carnap to derive a linguistic base of positivism. Carnap’s thesis was that language is a logical, syntactical system that consists of universally true rules and elementary, atomic statements that are not dependent on contexts of semantics. Syntax and definition alone would build the complexities of language. In this endeavor, Carnap explicitly excluded “emotive” type statements.

1.3 Alfred J. Ayer’s Rejection of Metaphysics

Alfred J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) defines and explains the *verification principle* of logical positivism². The treatise explains how the principle of verifiability may be applied to the problems and aims of philosophy. The text has eight chapters, entitled: “Ch. I. The Elimination of Metaphysics,” “Ch. II. The Function of Philosophy,” “Ch. III. The Nature of Philosophical Analysis,” “Ch. IV. The A Priori,” “Ch. V. Truth and Probability,” “Ch. VI. Critique of Ethics and Theology,” “Ch. VII. The Self and the Common World,” “Ch. VIII. Solutions of Outstanding Philosophical Disputes.” On the first page of chapter I, Ayer points

² The logical positivists thought that philosophers often debated nonsensical issues. They proposed this principle (the “verifiability criterion of meaning” VCM) to test if a statement makes a genuine truth claim. Any genuine truth claim is either empirically verifiable (testable by sense experience) or analytic (true by definition). Any statement that fails this test is “cognitively meaningless” — neither true nor false. Ayer claimed, for example, that “God exists” is neither empirically verifiable nor analytic - and so fails the test. So “God exists” is not true or false; it lacks cognitive meaning and has only emotive meaning. So Ayer called “God” a pseudo-concept.

out his dissatisfaction with metaphysical claims, by saying:

We must begin by criticizing the metaphysical thesis that philosophy affords us knowledge of a reality transcending the world of science and common sense. Later on, when we come to define metaphysics and account for its existence, we shall find that it is possible to be a metaphysician without believing in a transcendent reality; for we shall see that many metaphysical utterances are due to the commission of logical errors, rather than to a conscious desire on the part of their authors to go beyond the limits of experience. But it is convenient for us to take the case of those who believe that it is possible to have knowledge of a transcendent reality as a starting point for our discussion. The arguments which we use to refute them will subsequently be found to apply to the whole of Metaphysics.³

Ayer explains that the principle of verifiability may be used as a criterion to determine whether or not a statement is meaningful. 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 which 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 thus their validity does not depend on empirical testing. Some philosophers make claims about a reality transcending sense experience. For example, they talk about God, or about immaterial souls, or about objective values. Ayer's chief objection to this is that such claims are meaningless (they're neither true nor false). Genuine issues must be capable of being resolved by appealing to an empirical test or to how we use language. Metaphysical issues can't be resolved in either way. Hence metaphysics is nonsense. For a statement to be empirically verifiable, some possible observations must be able to make it highly probable. Ayer gave "There are mountains on the other side of the moon" as an example. When he wrote, people couldn't actually test this statement. But still the statement was empirically testable (in principle), since we could describe possible observations that would make the statement probable. This is enough to make the claim meaningful. Examples of metaphysical statements that Ayer would reject include:

- { 1 } - "Redness and other universals are independently existing entities."
- { 2 } - "Pegasus and all fictional beings are possible beings that lack actuality."
- { 3 } - "Each of us has an immaterial and immortal soul."
- { 4 } - "A material object is just a set of ideas in our mind or in God's mind."
- { 6 } - "An immaterial God created the universe."

All these are "metaphysical" claims (claims that are neither empirically verifiable, testable by sense experience) nor analytic (true by definition), and so are nonsensical according to Ayer. Ayer requires that empirical statements must be able to be verified in practice. For a statement to be empirical, it suffices that we can describe what an empirical test would be like. But, due to practical limitations, we might not be able to perform the test. Ayer used "There are mountains on the far side of the moon" as an example. When he wrote, it wasn't technically possible to test the truth of this statement. But still, we could describe what such a test would be like. So the statement is meaningful; it's objectively true or objectively false, even though

³ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1936), p. 1.

we might not yet know which it is. So Ayer requires only that an empirical statement be able in principle to be verified. Some philosophers, who believe in a higher order of reality, say “The world of sense experience is entirely unreal.” According to Ayer, their claim is neither true nor false. This claim (as understood by its defenders) can be neither confirmed nor disconfirmed by sense experience. But then, since the claim is not analytic (true by definition), it must be meaningless, and hence neither true nor false. An “observation statement” is one that records an actual or possible observation (like “The arrow points to the number 5”). Ayer requires of a genuine factual proposition that some observation statement can be deduced from it in conjunction with certain other premises without being deducible from those other premises alone. “The battery has 1.5 volts” is a genuine factual proposition ~ since it, together with other premises, entails “The arrow on the voltmeter points to 1.5,” without the latter being deducible from the other premises alone.⁴ Ayer thinks that confusion about language can lead us into metaphysics.

He uses this as examples of such a confusion:

{ 1 } - “We can only know the properties of a thing (that it’s white, for example); so we can’t know the thing itself — the substance underlying these properties.”

{ 2 } - “When we say ‘unicorns don’t exist,’ we must be talking about something; so unicorns are possible beings who don’t have actuality.”

{ 3 } - “Since we can speak about nothing, this nothing must exist; thus the nothingness is real.”

They all show how language analysis can be used to attack metaphysics. Ayer thinks that metaphysicians are misplaced poets. Metaphysicians generally intend to speak the literal truth about reality; but they produce only nonsensical sentences. Poets, on the other hand, care more about the emotional impact of their words. Poets seldom speak nonsense; when they do, it’s for the sake of the emotional impact of language. So metaphysicians and poets have very different aims. An analytic statement is one that is true because of logical connections and the meaning of terms. An example would be “All bachelors are single.” We know that this is true, not by doing an empirical investigation, but by understanding the terms and logical connections. Since “bachelor” means “single man,” the statement means “All single men are single.” Ayer recognizes that analytic statements don’t have to be empirically verifiable in order to make truth claims.⁵ Ayer requires only “weak verifiability.” For a statement to be empirical, it suffices that experience can show the statement to be probably true. Synthetic statements, or empirical propositions, assert or deny something about the real world. The validity of synthetic statements is not established merely by the definition of the words or symbols which they contain.

⁴ The human mind is so constituted that, when it goes beyond the limits of what we could experience, it loses itself in contradictions, so we could just as plausibly prove one thing (e.g. that there is a God) as prove the opposite (e.g. that there is no God). This was the objection of Immanuel Kant, the great 18th century German philosopher. Ayer’s objection is different. Ayer argues, not from psychological limitations of the human mind, but from logical considerations about the meaningfulness of statements. Ayer claims that non-analytic statements that can’t be tested by experience are meaningless, and hence are neither true nor false. Ayer says “All metaphysical assertions are nonsensical.” By “metaphysical assertion,” he means - “statement that is neither empirically verifiable (testable by sense experience) nor analytic (true by definition).” According to Ayer, any statement that is neither empirically verifiable nor analytic is cognitively meaningless, it makes no claim that could be either true or false.

⁵ Ayer requires that empirical statements must be able to be established conclusively by experience. This is too strong, since we can’t establish any universal principles (like “All men are mortal”) conclusively by any finite series of observations, since the future could always bring up an exception. So this idea would lead us to conclude that no scientific laws are empirical.

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 which 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 which are not meaningful cannot be expressed as propositions. Every proposition is meaningful, although it may be either true or false. Every proposition asserts or denies something, and thus is either true or false. Ayer distinguishes between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ verification, noting that there is a limit to how conclusively a proposition can be verified. ‘Strong’ (conclusive) verification is not possible for any empirical proposition, because the validity of any proposition always depends upon further experience.⁶ ‘Weak’ (probable) verification, on the other hand, is possible for any empirical proposition. Ayer also distinguishes between practical and theoretical verifiability. Propositions which lack a practical means of verification may still be meaningful if verified in principle. Literal meaning must also be distinguished from factual meaning. Literal meaning is an attribute of statements which are either analytic or empirically verifiable. Factual meaning is an attribute of statements which are meaningful without being analytic. Thus, statements which have factual meaning are statements which say something about the real world.

Ayer agrees with Hume that there are two main classes of propositions: those which concern ‘relations of ideas,’ and those which concern ‘matters of fact.’ Propositions about ‘relations of ideas’ include the *a priori* propositions of logic and mathematics.⁷ Propositions about ‘matters of fact,’ on the other hand, make assertions about the empirical world. Ayer argues that philosophic propositions are analytic, and that they are concerned with ‘relations of ideas.’ The task of philosophy is to clarify the logical relationships of empirical propositions. If the meaning of propositions is defined by verifiability, then philosophy cannot provide speculative truths about metaphysical statements which cannot be empirically verified.⁸ Ayer rejects the metaphysical thesis that philosophy can give us knowledge of a transcendent reality. He dismisses metaphysical arguments, calling them nonsense, and saying that they cannot be empirically verified. He argues that metaphysical statements have no literal meaning, and that they cannot be subjected to criteria of truth or falsehood.

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.” But this is, in fact, what Ayer does, in presenting the principle of verifiability as a criterion of meaningfulness for any empirical proposition. 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. Logical certainty is possible only for analytic observations, which are tautologies, and not for empirical observations concerning ‘matters of fact.’ Ayer explains that his radical empiricism is opposed to rationalism, which asserts that there are truths about the world which can be known by *a priori* reasoning, or independently of experience. According to the principle of verifiability, propositions about ‘matters of fact’ can be meaningful only if they are capable of being empirically verified.⁹ Ayer agrees with, and elaborates on, Kant’s explanation of the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments.

Alfred Julius Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 9.

⁷ Alfred Julius Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 31.

⁸ Alfred Julius Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 31-32.

⁹ Alfred Julius Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 78.

According to Ayer, a proposition is analytic if its validity depends only on the definitions of the symbols it contains. A proposition is synthetic if its validity is determined by the facts of experience.¹⁰ Analytic observations give us new knowledge, because they reveal unsuspected implications of our statements and beliefs.¹¹ But analytic observations also do not give us new knowledge, because they only tell us what is already known. Ayer defines truth as the criterion by which empirical propositions are validated. To say that a proposition is true is simply to assert it, and to say that a proposition is false is simply to assert a contradictory proposition. Thus, truth and falsehood are simply signs of assertion or denial of empirical propositions.¹² In the same manner, assertions of value have meaning only insofar as they are verifiable. If an ethical or aesthetic judgment cannot be subjected to empirical testing, then it is meaningless. An empirical test may be practical or theoretical. For Ayer, ethical or aesthetic judgments are subjective rather than objective, and cannot be demonstrated to be true or false. Ethical or aesthetic judgments express feelings, not propositions, and have no objective validity. Value-judgments are not analytic, and are not verifiable as 'matters of fact.' According to Ayer, when one argues about whether a value-judgment is right or wrong, one is really arguing about the empirical facts on which a value-judgment is based, or about the logical interpretation of empirical facts.

One cannot argue about something which cannot be expressed as a proposition, but can only argue about something which can be analytically or empirically verified. For Ayer, metaphysical statements, such as statements about transcendent reality, have no objective validity, and therefore are meaningless. Examples of this lack of meaning include statements about the existence or non-existence of God. According to Ayer, such statements can be neither proven nor unproven, and cannot be validated or invalidated by empirical testing. Ayer's logical empiricism makes an important contribution to philosophy in that it provides a method of putting an end to otherwise irresolvable philosophical disputes. In Ayer's logical empiricism, philosophy is no longer seen as a metaphysical concern, nor as an attempt to provide speculative truths about the nature of ultimate reality. Instead, philosophy is seen as an activity of defining and clarifying the logical relationships of empirical propositions.¹³

1.4 An Appraisal of Ayer's Rejection of Metaphysics

(a) Verifiability Principle: With that disrespect towards philosophical forebears that is so typical of radical empiricists, Ayer and his fellow logical positivists felt that traditional philosophical problems were distinguished by their insolubility. Neither logical argument nor empirical investigation could settle the debate in traditional metaphysics between nominalists and essentialists, for instance. Nor would partisans of either view expect the truth or falsity of their adopted positions to have any practical relevance. The very impossibility of resolving this debate-in contrast to the solubility of scientific problems-suggested to the logical positivists that there is no factual point at issue between nominalists and essentialists. Anti-metaphysical

¹⁰ Alfred Julius Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 80.

¹¹ Alfred Julius Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 88.

¹² Alfred Julius Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 88-89.

¹³The principle of verifiability, however, may become a means to arbitrarily reject any abstract or transcendent concept, such as "truth," "justice," or "virtue." Such concepts are seen as having no literal meaning. Thus, Ayer's viewpoint may become a radical skepticism. Ethics, aesthetics, and religion are all viewed as meaningless, as having no literal meaning. Ethical concepts are seen merely as expressions of feeling. Ethical or aesthetic concepts are seen as having no factual content, and therefore cannot be accepted as valid or invalid. Ayer is careful to explain that the *verification principle* is a definition of meaning, and that it is not an empirical proposition. He admits that there are other possible definitions of meaning. However, it seems somewhat contradictory to assert that no proposition is valid without empirical verification, and yet to propose a definition of meaning which itself is not empirically verifiable.

stances had been adopted before, but what was novel about the logical positivists' approach was the linguistic orientation of their programme: to apply recent advances in symbolic logic in an analysis of language that would dissolve traditional philosophical problems, by showing that the disputed questions were meaningless, mere pseudo-problems.¹⁴ Ayer is undoubtedly a great 20th Century philosopher within a definable tradition which strong inclinations towards the Humean tradition of the 18th Century. Hume's discontent with metaphysics was very profound, as reflected in one of his writings:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask? Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity in number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing else but sophistry and illusion.¹⁵

It is clear that both Hume and Ayer are concerned somehow to dismiss or demote utterances that are neither necessarily true nor empirical (utterances, as some say, that are neither logical nor mathematical nor scientific). But it is not clear what Hume took their 'sophistry and illusion' to be, precisely speaking. It is not clear, either, to what extent his own philosophical practice and propositions require us to revise and loosen his two criteria for what is not sophistry and illusion. The meaningfulness of metaphysical and religious language has come under attack in philosophical circles in two ways during this century. We need to look at each one of them. The first can be designated the "verificationist" challenge to religious discourse, and the second designated the "falsificationist" challenge. Neither has proven successful. The heart of *Language, Truth and Logic*, and of Logical Positivism,¹⁶ is indeed the *verification principle of meaningfulness*, which, in a wide understanding, is to the effect that any utterance outside of these two categories is to be dismissed as inferior and indeed hopeless. The Verification Principle does not lose its philosophical force when so understood. It cannot be much consolation to metaphysicians, religious believers and many moralists to be reassured that their utterances are not gibberish, if it is added that those utterances are neither true nor false ~ that they do not even come up to the level of being false. It needs to be remembered in this and other connections that Ayer's and Logical Positivism's whole enterprise does not

¹⁴ On a historical note, it should be kept in mind that the positivists' principle targets were on the one hand the great idealistic system-builders of the nineteenth-century German philosophy (e.g. Hegel), and on the other, the anti-science and anti-logic stances of some of their contemporaries (e.g. Heidegger).

¹⁵ David Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Tom L. Beauchamp, (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 165.

¹⁶ Logical positivism acknowledged two different kinds of meaningful sentences. Certain sentences in a language will be known to be true simply by means of analyzing them logically and linguistically (for instance: "all bachelors are unmarried" can be verified by reference to laws of logic and semantic definitions). However, such truths (called "analytical") are devoid of significant information about the world of experience or observation, and thus are trivial. For a sentence to tell us something interesting or have a factual component to it, its truth must be verifiable by looking beyond logic and meaning to one's observations or experiences in the world. Thus a significant (non-trivial) sentence is meaningful, according to the verificationist, only if it can be empirically confirmed; its truth or falsity would make a difference in our experience of the world. Meaningful sentences should be translatable either into observation terms alone (descriptions of immediate experience) or into a procedure used to confirm the sentence empirically. The effect of applying the verification principle, the positivists concluded, would be the dismissal of all metaphysical claims (including theology) and all ethical claims as non-sense from a scientific standpoint. Since the religious language of Christians is filled with terms which are not taken from observation (e.g., God, omnipotence, sin, atonement) and claims for which there is no empirical means of confirmation (e.g., God is triune, Jesus intercedes for the saints), logical positivism's verification principle seemed to rule out the meaningfulness of the religious utterances of Christians.

ultimately have to do with language.

The enterprise is certainly not linguistic analysis in a common understanding of that term. Its concern is with what language is about — realities, as you can say. Some language purports to be about a transcendent reality, or God, or facts of the good and the right. To say that utterances that purport to assert or presuppose the existence of these things are not true or false is in effect to subtract these things from a prior and wider class of things: just possibly existing things, candidates for reality. The 1936 edition of *Language, Truth and Logic*, mainly in the preface and first chapter, attempts an explicit statement of the principle. It became clear that it was open to objection by way of a logician's device, involving a conditional statement. In fact, by the use of the objection, the principle could be seen as allowing any utterance at all to be true or false. The 1946 introduction reports the objection and reformulates the Verification Principle. Unfortunately, however, this reformulation is open to a related objection. If the objection is very much a logician's, and invites the idea that it can be avoided by some further contrivance, this was not clearly demonstrated.

Ayer very much gives the impression, that the verification principle is a premise or basis from which there follows or on which there rests the conclusion that metaphysics, morality and religion is neither true nor false. If so, we need to know about the premise or basis. What can be said for it? After all, it is not at all self-recommending, not near to the truth that A is A or the truth that nothing is both X and not-X. Ayer promises at the beginning that his book will provide a demonstration or proof of the *verification principle*. What he has in mind, evidently, is a reflection in Ch. 5 on the very nature of the non-analytic propositions that are admitted as respectable by the principle. They are taken in themselves, in their very nature, to be bound up with verification by sense-experience. It is possible to think that this line of reflection is circular or begs the question. It is also possible to wonder, more radically, if the whole philosophical situation in which we are involved by Ayer is otherwise. At any rate, is it better described in a very different way? Does the whole argument really go in the other direction? Might it be that the supposed premise or basis mentioned above is the conclusion, and the supposed conclusion is the premise or basis? That is, an examination without presupposition of particular utterances of metaphysicians, moralists and religious people shows the utterances to be other than propositions or statements, other than true or false. And this is summed up in or provides good reason for the generalization that is the *verification principle*.

(b) Distinctions Regarding Meaningfulness: The positivists distinguished between different kinds of 'meaningfulness.' As originally understood, a sentence is cognitively significant if its truth value can be decided. However, a sentence that turns out not to be cognitively significant may nevertheless be emotively significant, and therefore meaningful in a wider sense. For instance, despite its grammatical structure, the sentence 'Kicking dogs is wrong' has no factual content, yet I might meaningfully utter it to induce others to change their behaviour. Aside from imperative force, a sentence might have certain associations: it might be used to express certain feelings I experience when (for instance) I see others committing acts from which I would prefer them to refrain. It would be a mistake, however, to confuse emotive significance with cognitive significance, and the positivists sought only to show that metaphysical claims failed to be cognitively significant. It is difficult to formulate just what the positivists wanted to say about cognitive significance (henceforth 'meaningfulness'): the intuitive idea is that if we don't have some means to settle a question (at least in principle), then there is no genuine question at issue.

Some of the pitfalls inherent in making this more precise are displayed in Schlick's formulation: 'the meaning of a statement is the method of its verification'. This formulation

would do the job of eliminating metaphysics (no method of verification, no meaning), but it is surely a mistake to identify the meaning of a sentence with an act.¹⁷ A further set of objections that are commonly raised concern the status of the verifiability principle itself: was it (i) an empirical statement (about common usage of the term ‘meaningful’ for instance); (ii) an analysis of the pre-theoretically understood word ‘meaning’ or (iii) a proposal for language reform? The positivists’ intentions were a mix of the last two. We have seen in the case of cognitive and emotive significance that there are at least two distinct notions of meaningfulness. Which should we make the target of our analysis of language? The positivists wished to explicate and clarify something close to the pre-analytic notion of “cognitive” meaningfulness, but one can imagine opposing analyses that sought to retain the ‘emotive’ part of meaningfulness. Such alternative proposals should be rejected as unhelpful, or pointless, rather than ‘wrong’ in some stronger sense.

(c) Problems with the Linguistic Programme: By explicating the meaning of all scientific statements in terms of a common basis, the positivists hoped to unify the disparate sciences with a common language. This would enable statements from different sciences to be compared in a way that would be far more difficult if different sciences were conducted in different languages. It would also allow for the resolution (rather than dissolution) of some ‘philosophical’ problems that arise from the use by different sciences of different languages (e.g. what Carnap sometimes calls the ‘psychophysical’ problem which arises from distinct mental and physical vocabularies).¹⁸ It will show how significant sentences in science obtain their meaning, and explicate that meaning. It will also show that metaphysical statements fail to be cognitively significant. This endeavour left out an important dimension of reality. Mere linguistic analysis does not give us an exhaustive explanation of reality.

(d) The Problem of the Empirical Basis: The positivists are usually accused of having a very naive account of observation, assuming a sharp distinction between “observational and ‘theoretical’ terms that accords with usage in neither ordinary language, nor science itself. But this is far from the position adopted by all. According to early accounts, we must, given some experience, be certain (enough) of the truth of the sentence. Thus in early versions, the empirical basis was identified by epistemological criteria. It is possible to doubt ‘there is a table in front of me’, even when I am having table-like experiences. Nor can I verify whether my table-experience corresponds to the actual presence of a table. Sentences of this form are therefore unsuitable as an empirical basis. Now the fact of my having the relevant experiences is beyond doubt. So we can be sure of the truth of sentences like ‘experience of a table now’, ‘brown patch on the left of visual field’ and so on. At last we have an incorrigible basis. If we

¹⁷ Cf., Moritz Schlick, “The Foundation of Knowledge,” trans. David Rynin, in *Logical Positivism*, pp. 209-227. Schlick made a second series of (what have come to be regarded as) errors: (i) conflating the speech acts of verification and ostensive definition (these are different); (ii) conflating the specification of the meaning of a sentence by describing its truth conditions with the verification that those truth conditions obtain. The intuitive idea is that it is the content of the experiences that accompany an act of verification that embody the content of the sentence so verified.

¹⁸ Following Hume, one can conceive of two ways to decide the truth value of sentences: logical analysis and empirical investigation. Within a particular language, therefore, cognitively significant sentences must therefore either be: (i) Logical truths or falsehoods of that language (and thus devoid of “factual” content); or (ii) Empirically significant: translatable into sentences about possible experiences. By analogy with Wittgenstein’s project in the *Tractatus*, (in which, in contrast, tautologies are not significant) a programme of linguistic reform would require the following: (i) The identification of an empirical basis: a set of sentences whose meaning can be shown, in that they are conclusively verifiable by empirical means, (ii) Rules which govern the logical relationships that other sentences must bear to members of the empirical basis in order that they count as empirically significant.

add remembered similarity of experiences as an experienced relation between experiences, one could stipulate that significant sentences be built out of this solipsistic basis. This view of the basis was variously termed psychologism, phenomenism and methodological solipsism, the idea being that we begin with what is epistemically secure, and work ‘upwards’, defining first statements about relations among ‘sense data’, then moving on to physical objects and so on.¹⁹ Firstly, could such a basis furnish scientific statements with any descriptive content? How can we infer statements about tables from table-like experiences? A second and more telling problem concerns communicability. Under a phenomenistic interpretation, basic statements report what is conclusively verifiable by experience, which must mean that ‘There seems to be table in front of me’ reports only my private experience. But this means that I cannot verify a report of another person’s private experiences: are such reports then meaningless for me? Secondly, as Carnap recognized, epistemological accounts of observation should take into account scientific investigations, and Carnap was impressed by Gestalt psychology. Suppose, instead, that the basic statements are given a physicalistic interpretation, the chief argument for which is intersubjective communicability: physicalism explains how it is possible for science to be pursued within communities. Thus a basic statement is a fallible report of the presence of an actual (physical) table. The debate between the physicalists and the phenomenists (and it is important not to interpret these terms in their usual philosophical senses) is therefore essentially a debate about whether the analysis of language should proceed on the basis of a foundationalist or a coherentist epistemology.²⁰

(e) The Problem of the Relation: The task before Ayer, and indeed other positivists, is to provide a defensible criterion of verifiability that rules out metaphysics and yet squares with scientific practice. It is this task that proved to be beyond logical positivism. Various criteria were proposed of which the following is but a brief selective survey: (1) *Conclusive Verifiability*. Far too narrow (even on a physicalistic version of the empirical basis), because universal statements and references to historical events would have to be rejected as meaningless. More hopeful (liberal) criteria required only an evidential connection with sentences of the empirical basis. The problem was to state the criteria for such connections that would still rule out the ‘pseudo-propositions’ of metaphysics. (2) *Construction from Observational Terms*: Only names of objects and predicates that can appear in basic statements (or names and properties defined in terms of such terms and properties) would be allowed. So (given physicalism) only names of medium-sized physical objects and the properties that they observably possess would appear.

Theoretical terms would have to be introduced by explicit definitions. The chief problem here is that it is extremely difficult to construct explicit definitions for dispositional predicates like ‘solubility’ and theoretical terms like ‘electron’ that are not open to simple objections. *Law-Cluster Theory of Meaning*: This is a more liberal vision in which only networks of laws and definitions are required to be cognitively significant. Theoretical terms would derive their meaning from their place in such a cognitively significant theoretical framework via a network of linguistic conventions. Questions of the existence of theoretical entities would only be a significant (that is factual, empirical) issue within a conventionally-adopted framework. Of course, with such an approach many problems abound, for example: (i) Supposedly ‘analytic’

¹⁹If there is no incorrigible foundation for the scientific edifice, then we are like mariners at sea, who have no access to a dry dock (in Neurath’s famous analogy). If we want to keep afloat, we must rebuild the ship piecemeal, plank by plank.

²⁰ Rudolf Carnap, *Der logische Aufbau der Welt (Logical Structure of the World)*, 1928, contains an ambitious attempt to construct a scientific language on such a basis (although there is some debate as to whether Carnap’s aims in the Aufbau were reductive and foundationalist).

reduction sentences jointly enjoy empirical (i.e. synthetic) consequences, (ii) Assertions about theoretical entities have a transparently factual status that is independent of any particular theory: they remain unchanged even across radical changes of theoretical framework.

1.5 On the Relevance and Irrefutability of Metaphysics

Metaphysics encompasses all knowledge of being and possibility. Metaphysics constitutes a foundational aspect of the experiments in the transformation of being. Every organism can in fact be considered to have an intrinsic metaphysics (i.e. a representation or a being in its own world, its own environment; every context and society, every science assumes some metaphysics which may be unspoken and loosely definite). It may be that the metaphysics of an individual human being should be left unspoken - perhaps this is true for some individuals and there may be others who choose to leave their metaphysics unspoken but it is also true that there are others whose lives are bettered and changed by making explicit and explicitly re-working their metaphysics. Metaphysics as a specific set of traditional philosophical problems derives, according to positivism, from the recognition of some unique reality which does not lend itself to scientific cognition and can only be apprehended with the help of the metaphysical, speculative faculties of the mind. "A more ambitious conception of metaphysics is one that places it in competition with the natural sciences," says Ayer. "The suggestion is that the sciences deal only with appearances: the metaphysician penetrates to the underlying reality."

All positivists irrespective of the school to which they belong hold that traditional philosophy postulates the existence of some transcendental reality which is different from and independent of the sensual world, but which determines its main features. The pretension to know something beyond possible experience presupposes the existence of an extra-empirical source of knowledge. The only method whereby metaphysical philosophers obtain their truths can be the method of *a priori* speculative reflection. For instance, Russell considered that one of the essential features of the classical tradition in philosophy consisted in a conviction that *a priori* reflection alone was capable of penetrating the mysteries of the universe. Nothing but an *a priori* method was capable of proving that reality was different from what appeared to direct observation. Emphasizing that the *a priori* principle was the essence of traditional philosophy, and as soon as one speaks of reaching beyond experience and of the disclosure of the true core, one appeals to the existence of extra-empirical sources of knowledge.²¹ There is nothing, asserts Ayer, which cannot be expressed in the language of observations, and everything beyond these limits is of a mystic nature. In point of fact, however, along with mystic entities Ayer throws overboard everything that cannot be perceived by senses.

It should be noted that positivism denouncing the so-called extra- scientific metaphysics is in effect carrying out a programme based on entirely "extra- scientific" principles. It is wrong to take for granted the assertions of the positivists that their philosophy is free from metaphysics as the premises of positivism, unlike those of other forms of philosophy, are allegedly self-evident. Positivism is shy of declaring and exposing to analysis the postulates underlying the entire system of its arguments. The metaphysical content of the philosophy of science is admitted retrospectively by the positivists themselves. It has become a peculiar tradition with the positivist philosophers to accuse their predecessors of metaphysicism, inconsistency in the struggle with metaphysics, various concessions to metaphysics and deviations from the principle of "neutrality" in philosophy. It will be shown later that despite all attempts of

²¹ Richard von Mises, *Positivism. A study in Human Understanding*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 277.

positivism to discard such problems as the relation of man to being, consciousness to matter, interdependence of space, time and movement, causality, the nature of contradictions, etc. it is in fact unable to ignore them altogether and has to tackle them in one way or another, often in a disguised form. Moreover, the more persistent the attempts of each new generation of positivist philosophers to dismiss the above problems as metaphysical and nonsensical, the more obvious their importance for science and philosophy.

All positivist theories invariably started from some sort of denunciation—be it the denunciation of metaphysics, idealism, dualism or materialism. Yet all their criticism designed to clear the way for the new “scientific” methodology always contains in a hidden form some positive, assertory elements. The metaphysics of positivism is all the more dangerous as it is concealed behind loud phrases about the need to fight it and rid science of the cobweb of the past. The oversimplified idea of scientific knowledge and the disregard of its hierarchical multi-layer structure, as well as the primitive understanding of the nature of the scientific reflection of the world that leaves no room for the throbbing thought proved detrimental to positivism even in its self-evaluation and prevented it from understanding the hidden purpose of its own dogmas. Not only did positivism fail to uncover its social face and state its social aims, it proved unable even to define its place in the general process of cognition. The hidden part of the positivist programme, its basic general postulates covered up by loud and pretentious declarations have never been brought to light for open examination. Yet for the purpose of this analysis it is advisable that acquaintance he made of these ghosts of metaphysics kept from the public eye in the backyard.

1.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

Ayer’s doctrine all facts are particular or represent conjunctions of separate events so that any generalization of such facts can only be purely formal. Causality has no other empirical basis than permanent conjunction since, according to Ayer, there can be no obvious links between them. Hence, relations between facts can only be external. Even if one speaks of “internal relations”, the phrase can only mean a combination of simple elements as component parts of larger objects. Ayer avers that even if the process of identifying an element in the system carries some reference to other elements, there will be no two elements of which it can be said that they are necessarily related. Hence, the obvious paradox consists in that positivism, despite its own declarations about the need to overcome metaphysics and free philosophy from myths and Utopias remains itself metaphysical and even a mythological system substituting speculative logical schemes both for objective reality and for the real processes of cognition. Advocating a strictly scientific approach to knowledge and demanding the elimination of all *a priori* propositions from scientific analysis, the positivists proceed from a very definite system of values which were established way back in the ideological battles with scholastic metaphysics. One sees that positivism, even in its latest forms, has not been averse to the classical tradition in philosophy and in science in general.

On the contrary, it has proved its strong affinity, remote in time but not in spirit, for this tradition, attempting to reconcile Locke’s and Hume’s views, incompatible in many respects as they are. The inherent metaphysics of positivist philosophy, incapable of critical self-analysis, combines in itself some characteristic features of 18th century natural philosophy and mechanistic materialism manifesting themselves in the irresistible urge of positivism towards formal simplicity, rigidity and completeness of scientific knowledge, with the principles of Hume’s and Berkeley’s subjective idealistic philosophy underlying the positivist absolutization of empirical facts regarded as the only source of self-evident certitude and the true foundation

of scientific knowledge.²² Although in recent years analytical philosophy has sought to take up once again some of the themes of classical philosophy - for example, the Aristotelian definition of ontology - it nevertheless identifies philosophy with the analysis of language, with the result that the Aristotelian terms are given a different sense. The historical roots of this reduction are found in logical positivism, in which philosophy is transformed into an activity of clarifying language, and the assertions of metaphysics are denied meaning. But such an effort, instead of eliminating metaphysics, merely represents the old ontological problems under distinct formulations. Therefore, in many cases analytical philosophers have become the linguistic counterparts of the old metaphysicians that they initially wished to combat. It is recommended that, rather than wedge a futile war against metaphysics, there should be a deeper appreciation and openness to the fundamental importance it has in the whole enterprise of philosophy.

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²² ²³ A. J. Ayer, *The Central Questions of Philosophy*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), 1973, p. 4