

# AN EXAMINATION OF A. J. AYER'S LOGICAL POSITIVISM AND IT'S IMPLICATIONS FOR METAPHYSICS

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## **Abstract:**

This paper examines A. J. Ayer's logical positivism and its implications for metaphysics, with particular focus on his defense of the verification principle as a criterion of meaning. It highlights the evolution of analytic philosophy through logical atomism, logical positivism, and ordinary language philosophy, emphasizing their collective contribution to clarity and rigor in contemporary thought. According to Ayer, a proposition is meaningful only if it is either analytically true or empirically verifiable, a position that leads to the rejection of traditional metaphysical claims as cognitively meaningless. The study finds that while Ayer's verification principle successfully promotes precision and scientific orientation in philosophical discourse, it is self-referentially problematic and overly restrictive, as it excludes significant areas of human inquiry, including ethics, religion, and metaphysics itself. It also reveals that metaphysical statements, though not empirically verifiable, may still possess interpretive or existential significance. The paper recommends a more moderate approach that accommodates both empirical verification and meaningful non-empirical discourse, allowing metaphysics to retain relevance within philosophical inquiry. It concludes that although Ayer's logical verificationism significantly reshaped philosophical methodology, its limitations necessitate a broader understanding of meaning beyond strict empiricism.

**Keywords:** Alfred Jules Ayer, Logical positivism, Verificationism, and metaphysics.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Alfred Jules Ayer was one of the most influential philosophers responsible for introducing and popularizing logical positivism in the English-speaking world. Though not a founding member of the Vienna Circle, Ayer played a decisive role in interpreting, systematizing, and defending its central doctrines. In his book titled: *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) which stands as one of the most important texts of twentieth-century analytic philosophy and remains the clearest exposition of logical positivist ideas maintenance that any statement not empirically verifiable or analytically true is meaningless, thereby dismissing metaphysical claims as nonsensical. He rejected the epistemological premise on which Kant's criticism of metaphysics was predicated, holding that, what needed to be attacked was rather the linguistic content of metaphysics utterances. Although each philosophical school is marked by distinctive features shaped by its methods of seeking truth, thereby setting it apart from others, analytic philosophy stands out as a clear example of such uniqueness. Its defining character goes beyond mere methodology and is deeply rooted in its commitment to clarity, logical rigor, and the analysis of language. Within this tradition, logical positivism, as advanced by Alfred Jules Ayer, occupies a special place due to its strong emphasis on linguistic analysis and the principle of verification. This principle holds

that a statement is meaningful only if it can be empirically tested and confirmed through observation. In this sense, logical positivism emerges as a modern epistemological approach that progresses through systematic observation, experimentation, and comparison.

### **LOGICAL POSITIVISM AND THE PRINCIPLE OF VERIFICATION**

The logical positivist movement emerged as a pivotal Philosophical movement within the Vienna Circle in the 1920s. This group of intellectuals known as the Vienna Circle was originally constituted by scholars of repute such as Moritz Schlick, Rudolph Carnap, Friedrich Walsman, Herbert Feigl, Otto Neurath and Hans Reichenbach (Ogan and Christantus 24). The verification principle can simply be defined as the logical positivists' criterion of meaning which states that "a statement has factual meaning, if and only if, it is empirically verifiable" (Ilodigwe 11). The principle is an indispensable tool of the logical positivists. The point of the principle is that it must be possible to describe what sorts of observation would have to be made in order to determine whether a proposition is true or false. If some observation can be described that would be relevant in determining the truth or falsity of a proposition, then the proposition would be significant, if not, it will be meaningless (Popkin in Ekong 294). For the logical positivist, the verification principle serves as the main sword for the elimination of metaphysics.

The principle of verification restricts meaningful propositions to those which not only have a truth value but whose truth or falsity can, in principle be decided. Thus, the principle, which stands historically in line of direct descent from the empiricism of Hume, J.S. Mill, and Ernest Mach (Ashby 242) claims that any meaningful proposition, in respect of its truth, must be verifiable. The purpose for which this principle was originally introduced was to demarcate sentences that are apt to make significant statement of fact from nonsensical or pseudo sentences.

### **AYER'S VERIFICATION PRINCIPLE**

In one of his major works, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer 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 criticism of metaphysics was predicated, maintaining that, what needed to be attacked was rather the linguistic content of metaphysics utterances. 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 through the scrutiny of verification, otherwise it remains at the level of emotional significant (Ayer 24).

Ayer also made a distinction between practical verifiability and verifiability in principle. While practical verifiability has to do with propositions that can be verified here and now by human effort, verifiability in principle can be 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 (Ayer in Ariche 45-49). A further distinction in Ayer's version of the verification principle is the distinction between "strong" and "weak" senses of the term, if, and only if, its truth could be conclusively established in experience. On the other hand, a proposition is verifiable in the weak sense of it, if it is possible for experience to render it probable (Ayer 50).

### **A.J. AYER'S REJECTION OF METAPHYSICS**

The principle of verification serves as the principal tool Ayer employed in eliminating metaphysics. The principle is based on the idea that verification must ultimately depend on empirical observation—that is, it must be grounded in sense experience.. (Stumpf 428). On the basis of this criterion, Ayer rules out not only metaphysical but also ethical and religious propositions. Ethics is reduced to no more than the analysis and clarification of moral terms. The function of ethics is not to construct theories but simply to analyze and clarify moral language. According to Ayer, until the metaphysician ¶ makes us to understand how the proposition that he wishes to express would be verified (45). Ayer argues that metaphysical utterances are due to commission of logical errors, rather than conscious desires of the metaphysicians to go beyond the limit of experience. On their face value, they sound reasonable, but their errors are only revealed when they are subjected to verifiability test which reveals their non-literal significance (47).

Ayer, argues that the metaphysical proposition, ¶ the Absolute enters into, but is itself incapable of evolution and progress¶ , is not even in principle verifiable, for according to him, one cannot conceive of an observation which would enable one to determine whether the Absolute did, or did not, enter into evolution and progress. ¶ Of course, it is possible that the author of such a remark is using English words in a way which they are not commonly used by English-speaking people¶ , he adds (49). Thus Ayer denigrated the metaphysician as a ¶ misplaced poet¶ whose statement has no literal meaning. He further dismissed their utterances as lacking both analytic and synthetic characters and, as a consequence, amounting to nonsense. Ayer, resting on the verification principle, further maintained that ¶ the metaphysical thesis that philosophy affords us knowledge of reality transcending the world of science and common sense¶ are nonsensical (56).

Ayer vehemently rejects metaphysical statements, characterized by their unverifiable nature, as they lack grounding in empirical data and facts that can be subjected to verification. According to Ayer, metaphysical beliefs cannot withstand logical scrutiny due to their inherent unverifiability. He adamantly maintains that there is no valid reason to question the concept of God, a position aligned with Wittgenstein¶ s approach to determining the validity of philosophical discourse. Wittgenstein¶ s doctrine, encapsulated by the phrase ¶ to say what can be said,¶ advocates silence as the appropriate response to subjects that lie beyond the realm of discussion. Metaphysics falls under this category, as the signs of metaphysical propositions inherently lack the capacity to prove their veracity or falsity.

### **A. J. AYER¶ S CONTRIBUTION TO LOGICAL POSITIVISM**

Ayer¶ s contribution to logical positivism lies chiefly in his formulation and defense of the verification principle, his critique of metaphysics, his analysis of ethical and religious language, and his view of philosophy as logical clarification rather than speculative theory. Ayer¶ s most significant contribution is his articulation of the verification principle of meaning, which became the cornerstone of logical positivism. According to this principle, a statement is meaningful only if it is either analytic, true by virtue of meanings and definitions, or empirically verifiable through sense experience. Any statement that does not meet either of these conditions lacks cognitive meaning. Ayer insists that ¶ the criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability¶ (*Language*,

*Truth and Logic* 35). By grounding meaning in experience and logic, Ayer sought to align philosophy closely with the methods of the natural sciences.

This principle led Ayer to a radical rejection of traditional metaphysics. He argued that metaphysical propositions about ultimate reality, substance, God, or the absolute cannot be verified by experience and are therefore meaningless. For Ayer, metaphysics does not fail because it is false but because it is nonsensical. He famously claims that metaphysical statements are not even false, but literally senseless (41). In this way, Ayer reinforced the logical positivist aim of eliminating metaphysics from philosophy and replacing it with scientifically grounded analysis. Ayer extended the verification principle to the realm of religious language, arguing that theological statements do not assert facts about the world and thus lack cognitive significance. Claims such as "God exists" cannot be empirically verified or analytically proven, and therefore do not function as genuine propositions. According to Ayer, religious utterances express emotional attitudes or commitments rather than factual knowledge (115). This position had a lasting impact on twentieth-century philosophy of religion and encouraged later debates about religious language and meaning.

Moreover, Ayer also contributed to logical positivism in his theory of ethics, particularly his defense of emotivism. In ethical discourse, Ayer argued that moral judgments are not statements of fact and cannot be verified empirically. Instead, they serve to express feelings or emotions and to influence behavior. When a person says "Stealing is wrong," they are not describing a moral property but expressing disapproval of stealing (Ayer 102–103). This view challenged moral realism and reinforced the positivist claim that only empirically verifiable statements can convey factual knowledge. He maintained that philosophy is not a speculative discipline aimed at discovering new truths about reality. Rather, its task is to clarify concepts, analyze language, and eliminate confusion caused by misuse of words. Philosophy, for Ayer, is an activity of logical analysis rather than a body of doctrines (33). This view helped establish analytic philosophy as the dominant philosophical tradition in Britain and influenced generations of philosophers.

### **IMPLICATIONS OF VERIFICATIONISM FOR METAPHYSICS**

The principle of verificationism has far-reaching implications for metaphysics, fundamentally challenging its traditional status and methods. The most significant implication of verificationism is its rejection of metaphysical propositions as cognitively meaningless. Verificationism shifts philosophy away from speculative metaphysical inquiry toward logical analysis and the clarification of language. Metaphysics is replaced by the logical examination of scientific language and propositions. Rudolf Carnap similarly contends that metaphysical statements arise from misuse of language and conceptual confusion, rather than from genuine insight into reality (Carnap 60). Consequently, metaphysics is viewed as an obstacle to philosophical progress rather than a legitimate discipline.

Verificationism also undermines metaphysical debates concerning ultimate reality, causation, and existence beyond experience. Questions such as "What is the essence of being?" or "Does reality exist independently of perception?" are considered pseudo-problems because no possible observation could confirm or disconfirm their answers.

Furthermore, verificationism promotes the supremacy of science over metaphysics. Since scientific statements are empirically testable, they are regarded as meaningful and informative, whereas metaphysical claims are excluded from serious discourse. This elevates empirical science as the primary source of knowledge and marginalizes metaphysics to the realms of poetry, theology, or personal belief. Ayer explicitly maintains that metaphysics has no place within empirical knowledge and should be eliminated from philosophy (41).

### **THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF PHILOSOPHY WITHOUT METAPHYSICS**

Metaphysics has traditionally been regarded as the core of philosophical inquiry, concerned with questions about being, existence, reality, and the ultimate structure of the world. Despite attempts by empiricists and logical positivists to eliminate metaphysics from philosophy, it remains deeply embedded in philosophical reasoning.

The question of whether philosophy can be practiced without metaphysics has been one of the most persistent debates in modern philosophy. Metaphysics, traditionally understood as the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of reality, being, and existence, has often been regarded as the foundation of philosophical inquiry. It is a branch of philosophy which deals with fundamental questions of reality, right from the pre-Socratic period down to contemporary era. It addresses questions like, why are there things the way they are, what is the fundamental stuff of the universe, what is the universe made of and who is responsible for the making of the universe. Those questions triggered the pre-socratic philosophers, Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Prothagoas, Plato, Heraclitus and Parmenides to go beyond the physical looking for the fundamental stuff behind all things. However, with the rise of empiricism, logical positivism, and linguistic philosophy in the twentieth century, several philosophers have argued that metaphysics is meaningless, speculative, or unnecessary. This work argues that although some philosophical movements have attempted to eliminate metaphysics, philosophy cannot entirely dispense with metaphysical assumptions, even when it claims to reject them.

However, the attempt to eliminate metaphysics by the logical positivist as championed by A. J Ayer has itself been widely criticized. One major problem is that the verification principle of Ayer is not empirically verifiable and therefore fails its own criterion of meaning. Critics such as Karl Popper and W. V. O. Quine have argued that the positivist rejection of metaphysics rests on hidden metaphysical assumptions about meaning, truth, and reality. Quine, in particular, challenges the analytic, synthetic distinction upon which positivism relies, arguing that our knowledge forms a web of beliefs that cannot be neatly divided into empirical and non-empirical statements (Quine 37). This suggests that metaphysical commitments are unavoidable, even in philosophies that deny them.

### **Conclusion:**

While certain philosophical movements have attempted to eliminate metaphysics from philosophy, these efforts ultimately fail to remove metaphysical assumptions altogether. Philosophy can minimize speculative metaphysics or reformulate it in more rigorous terms, but it cannot completely dispense with metaphysical questions. To ask about knowledge, meaning, morality, or language is already to assume something about reality and existence. Therefore, metaphysics may be criticized, revised, or transformed, but it cannot be entirely eliminated from philosophy without undermining philosophy itself.

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