

A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF AYER'S VERIFICATION PRINCIPLE

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Abstract

Alfred Jules Ayer, an ardent member of the logical positivist movement and the propagator of the movement in the English speaking world, discussed at length the principle of verification—a theme that dominates his work on Language, Truth and Logic. In this work, Ayer argues that the principle of verification is a criterion of meaning that requires every meaningful statement to be capable of being verified. For Ayer, only empirical, tautological or mathematical statements that can be demonstrated to be true or false using either scientific method or logic. He asserts that any effort to have any discussion on anything whose truth cannot be ascertained through science or logic is an outright waste of time. Ayer considers statements whose truth or falsehood cannot be verified as meaningless. However, upon critical assessment, this principle collapses since it offers us only an aspect of reality. Some recent philosophers such as W.V.O Quine and N. Goodman, are convinced that the inadequacy of this principle derive from the questionable dichotomy between analytic and synthetic statements, or Hume's dichotomy between logical and actual statements. This highly questionable dichotomy is one that underpins all of Ayer's thought and the thought of the logical positivists in general. And as most scholars argue, the verification principle is simply a theory which consists in misconstruing the denial of the synthetic a priori as a criterion of meaningfulness.

Introduction

Logical positivism, a philosophical movement that sprang up in the 1920s, was one inspired and driven by empiricism and verificationism. The driving force of this movement was their adherence to their own 'Verification Principle' which they prided and adored as the sole criterion for verifying the meaningfulness of cognitive statements. The acceptance and use of this principle led the positivists to rejecting as problematic many assertions of metaphysics alongside religion and ethics. Alfred Jules Ayer, an ardent member of the logical positivist movement and the propagator of the movement in the English speaking world, discussed at length the 'Verification Principle' in his polemical publication, *Language, Truth and Logic*. In this work, Ayer, following the logical positivist tradition, insisted that, to be cognitively meaningful as descriptive or factual knowledge, every proposition must, at least in principle, be testable by empirical observation. Consequently, the metaphysical thesis that there is knowledge of a reality transcending the world of science and common sense is brushed aside because they can hardly be distilled into practical architecture which is the hallmark of science and common sense. In other words, metaphysical theses are perceived as nonsense and meaningless for want of empirical verifiability, just as propositions of normative ethics and religion also drop out of the picture.

By his insistence on the verification principle, Ayer, like the other logical positivists, wished to bring about a unification of knowledge, or a unification of the sciences, through the creation of a common scientific descriptive language (Walsh 506). Hence, he was bent on stripping philosophy of its speculative character while ascribing to it an entirely new function which "must not attempt to formulate speculative truths, or to look for first principles, or to make a priori judgements about the validity of our empirical beliefs" (Ayer 9). The philosopher, according to him, "must, in fact, confine himself to works of clarification and analysis". Therefore, because metaphysics does not seem to operate within the

parameter or confines of this new function of philosophy, and because the work or activity of the metaphysician consists more in a speculative enterprise, which contrary to the principle of verification is not testable by empirical observation, Ayer relegated metaphysics to the dustbin of meaninglessness and irrelevance. But to what extent can the verification principle validly serve as a criterion for the dismissal of metaphysics as meaningless and irrelevant? To what extent can this principle as discussed by Ayer offer us a complete knowledge of reality? This work will undertake an appraisal of the significant and implications Alfred Jules Ayer's verification principle on human existence in general.

Ayer: A Brief Biographical Sketch and Philosophy

Alfred Jules Ayer (1910-1989), a contemporary British philosopher and later Wykeham Professor of logic at Oxford, emerged a very strong and influential positivist philosopher whose writings greatly contributed in expounding the doctrine of logical positivism. According to professor Hilary Kernblith, interim chairman of the University of Vermont's philosophy department, who spoke to New York Times on Ayer's death, "Ayer is chiefly responsible for bringing the philosophy of logical positivism...to the English-speaking world" (Page 21). Ayer was not a member of the Vienna Circle, but he visited Vienna and had contact with the members of the circle. On his return to England from Vienna, he published his famous book, *Language, Truth and Logic*, a book which established him as the leading English representative of logical positivism.

Ayer's philosophical ideas were deeply influenced by those of the Vienna Circle and David Hume as well as Locke, Mill, Moore, Russell and Wittgenstein. His clear, vibrant and polemical exposition of them makes *Language, Truth and Logic* essential reading on the tenets of logical empiricism (Onyeocha 69). Ayer's primary concern was language and meaning, and like the Viennese logical positivists, he asserted that for an utterance to be meaningful it must be verifiable either by sense experience or by scrutiny of the conventions governing the use of them (Walsh 506). The major thesis of logical positivism defended by Ayer was that literally meaningful propositions were either analytic or verifiable by experience. Thus, the verification theory of meaning was used by Ayer to deny the literal significance of any metaphysical propositions, including those that affirmed or denied the existence of God (Copleston 5-7). Ayer further claimed that the propositions of logic and mathematics were analytic truths and that was no natural necessity, necessity being a purely logical notion (Macdonald, 72). In line with the positivists, he argued outside this is not philosophy. He held like other positivists that the meaningfulness of a sentence is in its verification.

Logical Positivism: Meaning and Central Thesis

Logical positivism is a philosophical movement formed by a group of mathematicians, scientists and philosophers in Vienna in the 1920. This group of intellectuals known as the Vienna Circle was originally constituted by scholars of repute such as Moritz Schlick (reputed as its founder), Rudolph Carnap, Friedrich Walsman, Herbert Feigl, Otto Neurath and Hans Reichenbach (Oyeshile 139). The term positivism was first use by Henri de Saint-Simon to designate scientific method and its extension to philosophy (Ome and Amam 342). It was adopted by Auguste Comte to designate a great philosophical movement which in second half of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century was influential in the countries of the western world. The appellation 'Logical Positivism' was given in 1913 by A.E. Blumberg and Herbert Feigl to designate a set of philosophical ideas put forward by the Vienna Circle (Passmore52).

Also known as logical empiricism or neo-positivism, the central thesis of the positivists is riveted in empirical orientation which rejects "metaphysical and theological statements" in its entire residue (Olusanjo 55-56). The doctrine of logical positivism is contained in their famous Verification Principle. It is probably fair to say that all its tenets are corollaries of the principle. They hold that a statement can have meaning either in virtue of saying something verifiable about the world, or in virtue of following from the meaning of the words occurring in it. Thus, the usual way of presenting logical positivism, first of all to make a distinction between "analytic propositions and empirical or synthetic propositions" (Copleston 33). Analytic sentences contain no factual information, and they are true, tautologies or false (contradictions) by reason of their logical form alone. For instance, "A husband is a married man", "4+4=8", "a red cap is red" are analytic statements; they are tautologies as they give no new concept or

knowledge. Synthetic or empirical propositions are factual reports of some observation or generalization based on empirical observation. For instance, “The road is 5 kilometers”, this is meaningful, for one only has to measure the road to verify it. The positivists maintain that all meaningful sentences must either be analytic or synthetic. The ideal for philosophy of the Vienna Circle that produced the logical positivist was a unification of science, hoping thereby to produce a unified system of meaningful and valid knowledge (Gellner 101).

The logical positivists, says Martin J. Walsh, thought themselves as containing the 19th century empirical tradition which was closely linked to British empirical thought, especially that of David Hume (Walsh 504). They were greatly influenced by Wittgenstein’s concept of philosophy as no more than analysis and clarification of language. Thus, the concept of philosophy, according to them, is entirely analytical. They were strongly opposed to metaphysics, speculative or theoretical ethics, as well as theology. According to Jean Mercier, the term ‘positive’, in the light of the logical positivist philosophy, means ‘scientific’, endowed by five qualities: real, useful, certain, precise and relative. It is opposed to ‘metaphysics’ which is unreal, useless, doubtful, vague, and absolute (Mercier 84).

Logical Positivism, Verifiability Criterion and the Elimination of Metaphysics

The whole of the logical positivist doctrine reflects a summary dismissal of traditional philosophy. The logical positivists thought themselves as extending the range of science over the whole era of systematic truth and as needing for that purpose to destroy the claim of idealist philosophers to have a special kind of supra-scientific access to truth. In this bid to unify science, their aim was to get rid of all metaphysical elements, redefine and reposition philosophy to serve as an instrument of logical analysis and clarification of language contents. Carnap wrote that “we give no answer to philosophical questions and instead reject all philosophical questions, whether Metaphysics, Ethics, or Epistemology.

The positivists were men who had extreme confidence in science and maintained that genuine knowledge about the world can only be knowledge of observable phenomenon and must be attained by means of scientific method. Metaphysics and speculations do not qualify as knowledge, nor do they in any way increase knowledge about reality. With the use of the “Verification Principle”, the positivists sought to show that the propositions of traditional metaphysics depend not upon the nature of what could be known (as for example, Kant) but upon the nature of what he said – the nature of propositions (Aja 11). Their charge against the metaphysician was that he breaks the rule which any utterance must satisfy (i.e. the verification principle) if it is to be literally significant. Critics however challenge this claim (Titus 284). The positivists rejected transcended metaphysics on the ground that its assertions were meaningless, since there was no possible way of verifying them in experience. The principle of verification restricts meaningful propositions to those which not only have a truth value (as in Russell) but those whose truth or falsity can, in principle, be decided. Nothing that we could possibly experience, the positivist argue, would serve to verify such metaphysical assertions as “The Absolute is beyond time”. Therefore, they held that it tells us nothing.

Metaphysical propositions, according to Carnap, are not verifiable when subjected to logical analysis; but if an attempt at verification is made the results are always negative (Onyeocha 48). Carnap further argued that if one takes, for example, the proposition propounded by Thales that “the principle of the world is Water”, one cannot deduce any proposition asserting any perceptions whatsoever that may be expected in the future. Such proposition therefore asserts nothing at all.

The Meaning and Nature of the Verification Principle

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 (Aja 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 294). For the logical positivist, the verification principle serves as the main sword

for the elimination of metaphysics. This principle was first formulated by the founder and leader of the logical positivist school, Moritz Schlick, and it reads: “The meaning of a proposition is the method by which it is verified (Omoregbe 12).

The principle of verification restricts meaningful propositions to those which not only have a truth value (as in Russell) 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”.

Moritz Schlick and the Verification Principle

Moritz Friedrich Albert Schlick (1882 – 1936), usually reputed as the leader of the circle, made some important contributions to the logical positivist philosophical movement. In the debates that flourished within the Vienna circle, he is famous for his commitment to his Principle of Verifiability and his defense of the correspondence theory of truth. Schlick briefly defined the verification principle thus: “the meaning of a proposition is the method of its verification (Ayer 172)”. In other words, the principle of verification serves as the method of verifying the condition under which a proposition will be true.

In his Positivism and Realism, Schlick held under what he called “The Verification Theory of Meaning”, that the meaning of every proposition is completely contained within its verification in the given. This principle, according to him, does not imply that only the given is real, as such an assertion does not make sense” (Fredman). Schlick however further produces a striking example to illustrate his idea of the verification principle:

Suppose somebody asserted, “The universe is shrinking uniform”. Suppose further that by uniform he meant that everything would remain exactly propositional to everything else; all our measuring sticks would shrink at the same rate; all people would grow smaller propositionally; and thus there would be no discernible or measuring difference between things after the universe had shrunk and things before it had. Would it then make sense to say the universe has shrunk? Obviously not, since no possible observation could prove him that exists no one- even in principle- could get outside of it; thus no one could measure any such shrinkage; and thus to assert such a set of words is to assert something nonsensical (Popkin 294).

Schlick further made a distinction between “the criterion of verifiability” and “the verification principle”. While the former consists in a way of deciding whether a statement has meaning or not, the latter has to do with answering questions that have to do with knowing what the meaning of a statement consists in.

Rudolph Carnap and the Verification Principle

Rudolph Carnap (1891 – 1970) is a German-born American philosopher and one of the prominent leaders of the Vienna Circle. He made fundamental contributions to semantics and philosophy of science, as well as the foundations of probability and inductive logic. He was a staunch advocate of, and active figure in, the unity of scientific movement. In his own formulation of the verification principle, Carnap championed the notion that the method of verification of a proposition is either direct or indirect, if a proposition, said Carnap, asserts something about a perception I am having, for example, I see a house, this proposition is effectively tested or verified by my present perception. On the other hand, he further stated that there are propositions which cannot be verified so directly. To say, for example, “that this key is made of iron” requires an indirect method of verification. For one way to verify the assertion that the key is made of iron is to place it near a magnet which enables one to perceive that the key is attracted (Onyeocha 46).

However, reacting to criticisms arising as objections to his formulation of the verification principle, Carnap made a swift shift from ‘verification’ to ‘confirmation’ (Stumpf 423). In two important articles entitled “Testability and Meaning” (1937 – 1937), Carnap distinguished the testing of a sentence from its

confirmation; a sentence is “testable” if we know a particular procedure (for example, the carrying out of experiments) that would confirm to some degree either the statement or its negation. A sentence is “confirmable” if we know what kind of evidence would confirm it, even though we do not know of a particular procedure for obtaining that evidence (Ashby 243).

Carnap considered four different criteria of significance, namely: complete testability, complete conformability, degree of testability, and degree of conformability. All of these exclude metaphysical statement as meaningless. The fourth criterion is the most liberal and admits into the class of meaningful statement of conclusive verification or the requirement of conclusive falsifiability. Each of Carnap’s criteria determines more or less a restrictive form of empiricist language, and this, according to Carnap, is the same thing as a more or less restrictive form of empiricism.

Ayer’s Verification Principle

In his popular work, *Language, Truth and Logic* published in 1936, 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 48).

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 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).

Ayer gave the verification principle an entirely new outlook by his introduction of several terms into the basic tenets of the principle. His own formulation of the principle could be said to be unique among those of the positivists given to the detailed attention he devoted to it in his *Language, Truth and Logic*, and in his intellectual discussion of the principle. However, despite Ayer’s unique but controversial formulation of the principle, it must be noted that “observation” remains the central force in the verification principle, and a common property which it shares in common with all other versions as propagated by different authors within the logical positivists circle.

The Verification Principle as the Basis for Ayer’s rejection of Metaphysics: the transmutation from epistemological premise to linguistic premise

Alfred Jules Ayer’s anti-metaphysics project is strongly anchored on the verification principle. The verification principle furnishes him with the ground for the rejection of metaphysics. In dismissing metaphysics within the parameters of the verification principle, Ayer made a shift from earlier criticisms of metaphysics which were based on epistemological premise while introducing a new ground on which metaphysics could be successfully deconstructed, and this is the linguistic premise which has the principle of verification strongly at its service. For instance, he rejected Hume and Kant’s epistemologist attacks on metaphysics. Hume had argued that there are no abstract general ideas, and metaphysics must be committed to flames because it does not lead to knowledge but only sophistry and illusion (Copleston 272). On the other hand, Kant had held that metaphysics, belonging to the domain of noumena-which he said is unknowable- is bankrupt of knowledge and is impossible as a science but possible as a natural disposition (Okogbuo 61).

But Ayer argues on the contrary that epistemological premise will not suffice for the rejection of metaphysics, neither the one found in Kant or in Hume. He advocates for a revision of the basis of the rejection of metaphysics, insisting that:

One way of attacking a metaphysician who claimed to have knowledge of reality which transcended the phenomenal world would be to inquire from what premise his propositions were deduced... Consequently, one cannot overthrow a system of transcendent metaphysics by merely criticizing the way in which it comes into being. What is required is rather a criticism of the nature of the actual statements which comprise it. And this is the line of argument we shall, in fact, pursue (Ayer 45-46).

Based on this, in line with the positivist tradition, shifted the ground for the elimination of metaphysics from epistemological premise to linguistic premise. Ayer's primary concerns, were language and meaning (Onyeocha 69). He also believed that 'logic' is another essential factor to be considered in the business of attacking metaphysicians.

While epistemological premise is based on the interrogation of knowledge on which the rejection of metaphysics is decided, in linguistic premise, the interrogation pertains to the nature and logic of language. In explaining what linguistic premise involves, Ayer's basic consideration is the nature or criterion of meaningfulness. For Ayer, not all utterances are meaningful. Meaningful statements must be literal significant utterances. The rationality of philosophical statements, he believes, should be assessed not just based on their epistemic significance but on their literal significance. He rejects metaphysics utterances as being bereft of literal significance (Ayer 46). Ayer's interest was to demarcate meaningful utterances (literal significant statements) from non-meaningful ones (emotional significant statements). In doing this, he set a standard of the verifiability Criterion for distinguishing between the two.

The Elimination of Metaphysics: Verification Principle as a Tool

The principle of verification represents the principal weapon which Ayer deploys to the service of eliminating metaphysics and its likes. The assumption behind this principle, says, is that verification must always rest upon empirical observation, that is, 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, he fails to communicate anything to us (Ayer 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 (Ayer 47).

Ayer, for example, 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 (Ayer 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" is nonsensical (Ayer 56). Ayer had told the Jesuit philosopher, Frederick Copleston in a BBC debate programme that:

...one thing which those of us who are called logical positivists tend to have in common is that we deny the possibility of philosophy as a speculative discipline... Consequently we reject metaphysics... as an attempt to gain knowledge about the world by non-scientific means. In as much as metaphysical statements are not testable by observation, we hold they are not descriptive of anything (Ayer 45).

A Critical Assessment of Ayer's Verification Principle

Ayer's project on the elimination of metaphysics heavily stands on the verification principle; it is this principle that furnishes him with the ground for dismissing metaphysics. What this means is that the validity of Ayer's rejection of metaphysics will heavily depend on the validity of the verification principle- his criterion of meaningfulness. If the credibility of the verification principle is unequivocal, the metaphysics is thrown out outright. But, if, on the other hand, the verification principle is fraught with inadequate (as we are going to see that it does), then its credibility would be problematic and questionable, and this will follow that Ayer's criticism of metaphysics will also be problematic and questionable.

Between Empiricism and the Problem of Meaningfulness in Ayer's Verification Principle

It is obvious that the verification principle as championed by Ayer is heavily correlated with the principle of empiricism. The principle of verification claims that any meaningful proposition, in respect to its truth, must be empirically verifiable (Ayer 35). But this exposes the verification principle to a number of objections given that it boldly presupposes that all reality is given in sense experience. But to what extent can we validate the claim that all reality is given in sense experience? Does truth and meaningfulness consist in sense experience? In this regard, we can argue that there are some forces working against the verification principle and which render it impotent in eliminating metaphysics. The philosophical defects of the doctrine of empiricism (the major driving force of the principle of verification) here also bedevil the verification principle. Jerry Obi-Okogbuo has argued that part of the theoretical difficulties of empiricism is the non-realization of empiricists that parts of human knowledge seem to be indeed a priori (Okogbuo 95). When applied to the context of the empirically based verification principle, we can argue that there are propositions, statements or sentences which are inherently true and meaningful but empirically unverifiable. For instance, statements of mind expression like, "I am happy", "I love you", "I am sad", etc. could be true and meaningful sentences yet they cannot be empirically verified since verifying them would mean to have access to one's state of mind, which of course we know is difficult, that is, if not impossible. Again given Ayer's stand on metaphysics, juxtaposed with the position of the five men of indolence that interpreted the elephant as being a rope, a fan, a spear, a tree, a wall... how may we not approximate the truth except it is empirically verified?

Carl Hempel had once argued in his *The Logical Analysis of Psychology* that mental statements of this nature could be empirically verified following the theory of logical behaviourism (Hempel 41). The theory of logical behaviourism holds that mental state can only be verified through behaviour. But his theory however is not without its inherent problems that render it unfit to verify empirically the above mental statements. The problematic questions that have ever riddled this theory of behaviourism are: Does bodily behaviour, facial appearance, always correctly portray what is going on in the mind? Is it not possible for one to claim to be happy and smiling but yet he is deeply sad within? Is it not possible for one to express love for the other, yet his heart is full of hatred and vendetta. There is no act to find a man's mind constructed on his face- this issue of appearance and reality is another point to the behavioural thesis.

On the basis of the foregoing, therefore, Ayer will need to explain how else we can verify some of these mental statements of reality which can be true and meaningful but yet empirically unverifiable. It therefore becomes apparent that Ayer's insistence on empirical verification of propositions as the sole constitution of meaningfulness is fundamentally flawed by the possibility of the reality of true and meaningful but unverifiable propositions.

The Problem of Solipsism and Objectivity in Ayer's Verification Principle

"Solipsism" comes from the Latin words: *solus* meaning "alone" and *ipse* meaning "self". Thus, solipsism could be said to mean "self alone" (Ewelu 40). It is a kind of "myseltism" (Ozumba 97). From the epistemological standpoint, it is the doctrine that only my existence and my experience can be known for certain. Knowledge is not an exclusive preserve of a person, it is rather a statement which correspond to an object that lies outside of us. In describing the object, we merely abstract using language as a verifiable tool. But to what extent can language be empirically verified more so when taken as an

arbitrary vocal symbol by which one make meaning and communicate with each other? Ayer's verification principle, as the sole criterion for validating the meaningfulness and veracity of cognitive propositions, is again obviously fraught with the problem associated with solipsism. In other words, by insisting on sense experience as the only valid means of verification, we venture to argue here that the verification principle collapses in solipsism and ipso facto makes knowledge impossible. If what constitutes verification is sense experience, then Ayer will need to answer the question: whose sense experience? Is our observational verification of a statement of fact a subjective of that, or is it a pure picture of that fact? Is it possible to translate a person's internal experience into a statement about a physical object, or vice versa?

The problem of solipsism emerges in the verification principle given the subjective nature of what we call empirical verification. The result of one's empirical verification of a statement of fact is very likely not to be the same with that of another. Sense perception, according to Francis Bacon, is generally influenced by what we call idols (Kakures et al 103). Put differently, the way we perceive things with our senses can be influenced by our habit, our environment, prejudices, emotions, prior conceptions, etc. These however come in when we are given interpretation and meaning to what we perceive. Empirical knowledge puts us in the problematic dilemma of determining whether things are perceived exactly the way they are. To this, we may ask, do the qualities we perceive in thing really exist in these things or are they producers of our object? Given the problem of accompanying and defining characteristics, how may we place Ayer and the logical positivists interns of rigid application of verification principle. This is one question Ayer and the entire logical positivists will need to answer with adequate conviction before one can validate the legitimacy of the empirically oriented verification principle.

For Berkeley, the qualities we perceive in things are not really inherent in them (Walter 128). This means that it is the mind that bestows qualified on the things we perceive. Therefore, if the verification principle of Ayer is mainly driven by sense perception in its certification of the meaningfulness and veracity of cognitive statements, then it runs us into the problem of whose mind is capable of giving us the objective interpretation of reality. This may further degenerate to a more complicated level where we may experience the dangerous problem of relativism with its attendant ethical consequences that are very deleterious to man and his society. In other words, the verification principle develops into truth-relativism (where Mr. A's account of verification of cognitive statement may completely differ from that of Mr. B) given to its subjective and solipsistic nature. This makes knowledge difficult, or rather impossible. In mathematics, the truth is close to zero than plus one. All probabilities are in terms of fraction and not whole number. Therefore, if verification principle develops into truth-relation, then the tool of logical positivism of Ayer and other positivists would lead to a jig-saw puzzle. This could be further understood in the sense that a solipsistic language is *ipso facto* a private language, and in private language, truth remains at the subjective level.

Between Verifiability and Interpretation of Sentences in Ayer's Verification Principle: the Problem of Meaningfulness

Another strong objection that we can raise against Ayer's verification principle as the sole criterion of meaningfulness tends to arise from the one-way interpretation of sentences or statements of reality the principle purports. The critique which Ayer and the entire logical positivists levelled against metaphysical sentences or statements using the principle of verifiability could approximately be presented in the following argument schema (i) A sentence is meaningful if and only if it is empirically verifiable (ii) Y is not empirically verifiably (iii) Hence, Y is meaningless.

Our problem with this argument is the categorical statement of (i) from where (iii) mainly draws its force for dismissing Y as meaningless. We venture to assert and correctly too, and of course, further demonstrate here that premise (i) is indeed inherently a problematic statement which on a closer assessment would only have a weak force for dismissing Y in (iii) merely because Y in (ii) fails to meet the criterion set in place in (i). Our major aim here is to show that the ground on which Ayer rejects metaphysical sentences as succinctly expressed in (i) "A sentence is meaningful if and only if it is empirically verifiable". Champions a one-sided interpretation of sentences. But there could be no one way of interpretation of sentences or statements of reality. Considering the fact that sentences are forms

of language and if language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which human beings make meaning and communicates with each other. Even where language is ordered and the sounds which it comprises corresponds to meaning, the question which Ayer may still answer is how do we empirically verify this sound which corresponds to meaning since it is seen as an arbitrary vocal sound. Obviously, we can argue that a sentence cannot, in absolute sense, be said to possess or lack empirical verifiability and by implication becomes meaningful or meaningless. Its verifiability, and by implication its meaningfulness, depends on the “interpretation” given to it (Wedberg 206). For instance in statements as these (i) Tamunobelema came here (ii) Tamunobelema must come here (iii) Tamunobelema, must you come here? They are all statements of facts whether as a request in the first instance or a command as in the third. The onus is on the interpretation – via meaningfulness or otherwise.

To illustrate our point, let us take for instance, the sentence: “My little angels are inside the house”. Ayer and the logical positivist with their one-sided interpretation of sentences will quickly dismiss this sentence since the word “angel” is a metaphysical word that lacks empirical verifiability and as such is meaningless in the tradition of logical positivism. But it is worth knowing that another interpretation of the above sentence may give us its meaning as one that is referring to one’s little kids who are inside the house. In this sense, the above sentence becomes both empirically verifiable and meaningful since one can go inside the house to verify the truth of the sentence. Now we see that there is a problem of meaningfulness in the so-called verification principle since it could be established that the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of a sentence is not necessarily constituted by one way interpretation of the sentence.

A further illustration of this could be found in some of the transcendental and existential questions such as: Does God exist? What is the nature of God? Does eternal world exist? Do space and time exist? Do universals exist? Ayer in the tradition of logical positivism will rule out categorical questions of this sort with the claim that they are meaningless since they lack empirical verifiability. Again, what is at issue is a question of interpretation with its consequences of the problem of meaningfulness. If the above questions are interpreted mainly on the basis of verifiability, they may be said to be meaningless. But another interpretation of them would rather not only render them meaningful but intelligible and indispensable for human intellectual development. How many of such transcendental and existential questions have been in the impulse to fruitful research? How many of them have been capable of elicit interesting research? For instance, the question of the existence of God or the external world could become meaningful when interpreted in the context of its ability to elicit a great deal of intellectual research or debate that could lead man to a more self-discovery of the reality of his existence and truth of his environment. Discarding these questions on the basis of Ayer’s one-way interpretation that has the verifiability criterion as its major orientation will only have us become narrow minded if not ignorant.

Kwasi Wiredu will maintain in his remarks on logical positivism in *The Third Way in African Philosophy* that verification has nothing to do with the meaningfulness of a statement, and the insistence of the verification principle that a statement is meaningless unless it is empirically verifiable is one “an extremely careless and misleading formulation” (Wiredu 316). The thrust of our argument here therefore remains that the concept if meaningfulness or meaninglessness of a sentence is dependent on the interpretation of such and not necessarily on what is given by the verification principle, since sentence or statement of reality may be verifiable upon one interpretation and unverifiable upon another.

Verification Principle, Science and the Problem of Scientific Induction

One of the banners under which logical positivism rallied in the 1930s was “the unity of science”. This slogan called especially for close contact between philosophy and the various sciences. With the use of the verification principle, Ayer and the logical positivist sought to use philosophy to ground science, such that philosophy is placed at the service of science. Walsh rightly remarked in his work *A History of Philosophy* that “Ayer, like the other logical positivists, wished to bring about a unification of knowledge, or a unification of science, through the creation of a common scientific descriptive language” (Wash 506). But it could be argued (as Karl Popper would maintain in his *Logic of Scientific Discovery*) that one of the most central and devastating criticisms of logical positivism is that logical positivism with its doctrine of verifiability seems to end up destroying the whole of science. Stumpf rightly noted this

when he remarked that “it was in the very area where this principle was presumed to have its greatest relevance, in the sciences, that its greatest difficulty arose” (Stumpf 430). This difficulty is the reality of “scientific induction” which the verification principle, in its strict application, would naturally never accommodate.

It is not an overstatement to say that science is an enterprise that stands on induction. Remove induction, what remains to be seen is the collapse of science. Scientific knowledge is frequently expressed in the form of universal laws, and these “laws” are the basis for scientific prediction-induction. Now, given the basic doctrine of the verification principle, the logical positivists face the problem of scientific statements as meaningful. With the verifiability criterion with which they intend to ground science, how can they verify scientific predictions? For the fact that science anchors its activities on induction after making series of experiments, by predicting from facts of present occurrence of natural phenomenon to future occurrence, the verification principle, following its own doctrine, would rule out scientific statements since they are full of predictions of future occurrences that cannot be verified at the moment.

The major problem here is that universal claims which scientific statements express could apparently never be verified. How can we tell that “All ravens are black” unless we have haunted down every raven ever, including those in the past and future? (Fredrick 16-24). How could we tell that “All men are mortal” unless we have killed all men in the world, including those in the present and future? This is the kind of universal statements science presents us with and these statements cannot be verified if we must apply the verification principle in its strict sense. One major critic of logical positivism in this regard is Karl Popper who argues in his *Logic of Scientific Discovery* that from the verification principle, it follows that scientific laws are meaningless statements, and are empty of informational content (Chalmers 47). The verification principle rules out all scientific laws, and therefore the whole of science. He argues that the positivists’ criterion of *verifiability* was too strong a criterion for science, and should be replaced by a criterion of falsifiability (Okasha 23). Popper thought that falsifiability was a better criterion because it did not invite the philosophical problems inherent in verifying an induction, and it allowed statements from the physical sciences which seemed scientific but which did not meet the verification orientation.

David Hume was the first to kick against science and induction. With all his customary lucidity, he argues that from no finite number of observations, however large, could any unrestrictedly general conclusion be drawn that would be defensible in logic (Copleston 265). For instance, it might well be that, if every time I let go of something when it falls, I conclude eventually that all unsupported objects fall, but if so the conclusion has been reached from the premises not by a logical process but by a psychological one. If you see an “A” and it has the characteristic “X”, it does not follow logically from this that the next “A” you see will also have the characteristic “X”. But science, which the verification principle seeks to protect, makes this kind of fallacious, inductive assertions by means of scientific predictions. These scientific predictions – as Hume will also accuse science- make metaphysical claims which the principle of verifiability in its nature abhors and condemns with vigour.

Therefore, while logical positivism is said to be a direct decent of Hume’s empiricism, it nonetheless ceases to follow Hume’s empiricist patrimony in its endorsement of science, and it is on the basis of this deviation, which makes it less empiricist and unfaithful to the doctrine of empiricism, that its critics have nailed it. For this reason, as Harold Titus will rightly remake “logical positivism, insofar as it insists that every descriptive or factual term must be in the language of science, and that propositions must be verifiable by sensory observation, is asserting a metaphysical doctrine” (Titus 294). All these arise from its supportive affiliation with science whose method, many believe, is problematic given to the problem of induction which it creates. The dilemma of the verifiability criterion here, which again is due to its problematic lopsided nature, is that, if it must be unbiased in applying its principle, then the propositions of science which it seeks to ground are dismissed as meaningless so far as scientific induction is concerned. And if it refuses to dismiss science on the basis of its definition of meaningfulness, then it cannot but be falling into the pit of metaphysics for which it is mainly designed to eliminate.

The Problem of Knowledge in Ayer's Notion of Strong and Weak Verification

This arises as an aftermath of the problem of scientific induction inherent in the basic tenets of the verification principle. We have seen that universal claims could apparently never be verified if we must stick faithfully to the doctrine of verifiability since it would, for instance, be unreasonable and stupid to attempt to slaughter all men in the world just to conclusively verify by experience or observation the proposition that "All men are mortal". Ayer recognizes this problem of verifiability and in order to respond to the objection raised against the verification principle on this basis, he introduces a new term into the verifiability doctrine by setting out a distinction between "strong" and "weak" senses of verification, thus stripping the principle of the rigidity of its original formulation.

In the Chapter One of his *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer held that a proposition could either be verifiable in the strong sense or in the real sense. He explained that "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", and 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). While the strong sense of verification could be understood as the original sense of the verifiability doctrine, which also gives rise to the problem of verifying universal statements like "All men are mortal", the weak sense of verification could be understood as a later modification of the original sense of the verifiability doctrine and it makes way for escaping the problem of verifying universal statements, since we only need experience to render probable, and not necessarily conclusive, the truth of the proposition that "All men are mortal".

But we can still pinpoint some problem that arises in this latter distinction between strong and weak verification and this is the problem of knowledge. This problem lies mainly in Ayer's description of what constitutes weak verification. If by weak verification Ayer means that we only need experience to render certain cognitive statements probable, then we can argue that the introduction of this term to the basic tenets of the verifiability doctrine ends up stripping the verification principle of its epistemic status. Can that which is probable constitute a valid knowledge claim? Does knowledge consist in probability or certainty? As I have earlier pointed out, in mathematics the truth (certainty) is closer to zero than plus one and this being the case, we cannot verify anything. If humans are to grow up ignorant all through their life time, then the world would have been a terrible place. The world "probable" is said to mean that which "is likely to be true or likely to happen".

It refers to that which is "likely to happen, to exist or to be true" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 6th Edition). If this is what the word "probable" means, then we can argue that one thing is for something to be likely to be true and another is for it to be certain to be true. That which is likely to be true can only remain at the level of probability; for it may or may not be true. Hence there is a conspicuous demarcation between likelihood and certitude. But what is required for authentic knowledge claim is certitude and not likelihood. It is a well-recognized fact that one indispensable condition for authentic knowledge claim is certitude. That which must be known with certainty, for without certainty all our claims to knowledge must be suspect (Nozick 172 – 178). Hence, it is said that knowledge does not co-exist with doubt, and this is one point of agreement between the epistemologists and their most tough rivals, the sceptics. Operating from this one premise or agreement, both will later diverge on the argument concerning the probability of knowing with certainty- why the epistemologists believe that knowledge is possible because we can know for certain, the sceptics argue on the contrary that knowledge is not possible because we cannot know for certain. But whether we can know for certain or not, what is important in the contention between epistemologists and sceptics is the recognition of the fact by both parties that certitude is indispensable for any knowledge claim. To be ignorant of many things is possible. But to know the level of which one is ignorant is no more ignorant but knowledge. The Ethiopian Enoch in the scripture best illustrates this point. Understandest thou what thou readest? How can I understand when there is none to teach me? He knew he was ignorant. But he's understanding and acknowledgement was his beginning of wisdom which Philip supplied. Ayer by his concept of weak verification, however, does not seem to remain faithful to this epistemic condition for knowledge. That which is possible for experience to render probable, as purported in the weak sense of the verification principle, can only remain at the level of probability; for it may or may not be true. Therefore because it may or may not be true, it gives room for the entertainment of doubt in the verification principle, hence

the principle collapse as it becomes incapable of leading us to authentic knowledge since knowledge does not and cannot co-exist with doubt. This argument becomes a very strong point against Ayer's verification as he makes it clear himself that it is only the weak sense of the term that is required by his principle of verification. His reason for this subscription as he says is because "all empirical propositions are hypotheses which are continually subject to the test of further experience..."

The Self-destructive nature of the Verification Principle and the Problem of Logical Inconsistency

Among the internal defects of the verification principle, the most common seem to be the objection that the verification principle is itself not empirically verifiable. This is what I consider the self-destructive nature of the verification principle. Allied to this is the problem of logical inconsistency that bedevils the principle in question. If what Ayer means by the principle of verification, on which ground he shoots metaphysics, is that a proposition is meaningful if, and only if, it is empirically verifiable, then the verification principle appears to be one that first shoots itself on the foot before targeting to kill metaphysics. This is because, given the central claim of the principle, it is left for us to see whether it is itself verifiable since the truth or meaningfulness of its claim, going by its own rules, must also be dependent on empirical verifiability.

But the verification principle itself appears not verifiable. The principle peddles a self-destructive and ridiculous tenet because it is neither logico-mathematical nor empirical and by this accepted definition of meaning is itself undermined. Hence, as Harold Titus argues "if no metaphysical statements are permitted, the assumptions and statements on which logical positivism rests are also meaningless (Titus 293). Pantaleon Iroegbu in this regard also remarks favourably in defense of metaphysics, arguing that this is where Ayer and other logical positivists suffer a death-blow. He states thus:

If any proposition, to be significant, must be verifiable... The challenge Ayer and other logical positivists must address is: The verifiability principle is meant to be a significant, therefore a usable proposition. On its criterion, it is not verifiable. We cannot test it on empirical grounds to see that it is true. This is because it is a metaphysical claim. It is not an empirical statement. Nor is it analytic, for it is not tautologous. Since it is unverifiable, it is nonsense. With this, the entire logical positivistic architecture collapse (Iroegbu 240).

The main critique which we try to set forth here is that the verifiability criterion does not itself seem verifiable, neither is it simply a logical tautology. By this single fact, the verifiability criterion is confronted with severe problems for the logical consistency of the theory. We can therefore summarily argue that the theory, going by this particular defect of its lack of self-verifiability, seems logically inconsistent with itself and therefore cannot be used as a valid philosophical argument for deconstructing the enterprise of metaphysics. If we must evaluate it from this perspective, we cannot but agree with ease that it is nothing but a logical knockout.

Summary and Conclusion

Facts so far on ground hold enough indices that the whole burden of the logical positivists doctrine seems to rest heavily on the verification principle. From the resources of this principle, logical positivism seems to draw its life, strength and authority to operate as a philosophical movement. It means that the movement is apparently built on a very delicate foundation since any successful attempt to deconstruct the principle of verifiability will see the outright collapse of the entire philosophical position of logical positivism. Nonetheless, gleanings from the previous discussion reveal in clear and deducible term that the anti-metaphysics project of logical positivism as pursued more vigorously by Ayer in Britain, cannot hold water if assessed from the standpoint of the verification principle.

We must quickly observe here that the internal inconsistencies of the logical positivists programme greatly saw to the disintegration of the movement and the collapse of its tenets including the verification principle itself. Critics of this principle have contended that the verifiability criterion is too exclusive and arbitrary (Danto 78). It generates much problem in the field of philosophy than it attempted to solve. We must first realise here that not all reality is given in empirical expression. Reality does not coalesce in

one dimension-we can talk about the metaphysical dimension of reality, the religious/spiritual dimension of reality and even the psychological dimension. Therefore, ignoring such dimension of reality would amount to a partial view of reality; a partial conception of truth, meaning, experience and knowledge. But man seeks to have a wholistic knowledge of reality, a knowledge that represents reality in its two fold-the material and the immaterial. Philosophers like Descartes, Berkeley, Leibniz among others have held that there is both spiritual and material dimension to the being of man. Descartes for instance talked about the mind as representing the immaterial aspect of man while the body exist as the material part of man (Descartes 1-62). "I Think therefore, I am", is a clear affirmation (mind/body) of material and immaterial nature, of existence which the verifiability of the logical positivist has not come in tandem with.

Consequently, against the backdrop of the basic tenets of the verification principle which downplay the non-empirical and unverifiable, there emerges the crass rejection of ethical propositions, as ethics is reduced to know more than emotive significance. But this holds some destructive implications for the existence of man in the cosmos. Life in utter divorce of ethical principles give us nothing but Nietzsche's "superman", Thrasymachus "Might is Right" the freeman for whom noting is forbidden except what obstructs the "will to power". This makes man a morally unguided being, thus taking him backward to Hobbes State of Nature. The result of this as we experience in our contemporary epoch is the high influence of relativism and subjectivism and the dethronement of the "Absolute".

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