

Verificationism, Part IA: Meaning.

Lecture I, A. J. Ayer on *Verification*, 3rd November.

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1. Introduction: Verificationism

1.1. Why has there been so little progress in traditional philosophical disputes? Think about various metaphysical questions: is there a real external world beyond our senses? does God exist? what is the relationship between mind and body? We may have accumulated a lot of wrong answers to these questions, but it often doesn't seem like we are getting any closer to the truth. Philosophy can appear fruitless. This naturally prompts worries about the legitimacy of the claims of traditional philosophy. Is it relevant that the traditional claims of philosophy appear to be about matters beyond our experience of the world?

The traditional disputes of philosophers are, for the most part, as unwarranted as they are unfruitful. The surest way to end them is to establish beyond question what should be the purposes and method of a philosophical inquiry. And this is by no means so difficult a task as the history of philosophy would lead one to suppose. (Ayer, 1936: Chp. 1)

1.2. This is from Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*—a (fiery) book-length elaboration of **verificationism**. For verificationists, the futility of traditional philosophy and its transcending of experience go hand in hand. The basic idea of verificationism is that there is an important connection between a sentence's *meaning* and its *verifiability*. In particular, sentential meaning is constrained by the following.

The Criterion of Verifiability: A sentence is factually significant to any given person, if and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express—that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or it as being false.

More succinctly, a sentence is factually significant—meaningful—iff its content can be verified. To be clear:

Non-Conclusive: The constraint is not whether there is some possible experience which is conclusive evidence for the truth of the given statement. This is too strong. We are asking whether there are possible experiences which are relevant to the determination of the statement's truth or falsity.

Possible, Not Practical: The constraint is whether there is some possible experience *in principle*, not whether there are *practical* means of verifying it. Ayer's example: 'There are mountains on the dark side of the moon' is in principle verifiable, but (at the time Ayer was writing) not practically possible.

1.3. To get a handle on this, contrast the following two cases.

Cheese & Onion Pasty: Take the statement 'The café is selling cheese and onion pasties today'. It's clear what experience would verify this. I could go down to the cafe and look at what they are selling today and see whether or not that includes the relevant pasties.

Special Invisible Pasty: Take the statement 'The café is selling special invisible pasties today'. These invisible pasties also don't smell, have no extension in space, emit no heat, etc. In other words, there is *no experience* I could have to verify this statement about the invisible pasty.

2. *Metaphysics, Ethics, and Mathematics.*

2.1. With the qualifications that we are concerned with only possible verification, as well as verification that is not certain, the criterion of verifiability is not too implausibly strong. However, it is strong enough to knock down large swathes of traditional philosophy—metaphysics and ethics—as *meaningless*.

2.2. First, consider **the claims of metaphysics**. For Ayer, it is obvious that there is no possible experience which could verify any metaphysical claim—no experience could be relevant to the determination of such a claim's truth or falsity because such claims are about matters beyond the senses have no bearing on the likelihood of any possible experience. Take, for example:

The External World: How would things look different if there were an external world in contrast to how things would look if there weren't? Those who deny the external world still maintain that our experiences remain the same. Is there any possible experience which bears on such claims?

Monism: Monists assert that, fundamentally, there is only one thing. All the complexity of the world, they claim, should be thought of as arising, ultimately, from the nature of that one thing. Of course, those who disagree hold that reality contains more than one substance, but what possible experience could tell the two positions apart? Is there a possible experience to verify the monists or anti-monists claims?

It doesn't seem that there are possible experiences which have a bearing on these kinds of claims. Thus, such metaphysical claims are not just false. By the criterion of verifiability, such claims are meaningless!

2.3. Second, **the claims of ethics**. David Hume (in his *Treatise*) distinguishes 'is' statements from 'ought' statements and showed that the latter cannot be inferred from the former. Ethical statements like 'Murder is wrong' *appear* to be stating facts. But what possible experiences could verify 'Murder is wrong' as opposed to some distinct factual statement about murder, e.g., that murder causes suffering etc.?

2.4. Crucially, Ayer does not take ethical statements to be *utterly meaningless*. As statements of fact, they are not verifiable and thus not meaningful. But, Ayer still takes them to have an important role in our lives. For Ayer, ethical statements do not report facts, but are complex *expressions* of feelings. This is a version of **moral expressivism**, sometimes known as the Boo/Hurray! theory: a statement like 'Murder is wrong' amounts to something like 'Boo! Murder' and 'Charity is good' amounts to something like 'Hurray: Charity!'.

2.5. There are significant problems with this theory. For one, it makes ethical disagreement impossible. They amount to differences in preferences. Another problem is known as the 'Frege-Geach' problem: ethical statements figure in more logically complex statements and it is difficult to see how this is going to work if they are merely expressions of preferences. For example, 'Either stealing is good or bad' means something like 'Either boo: stealing or hurray: stealing'. However, it's very unclear how we understand this second statement, or disjunctions of preferences/attitudes more generally.

2.6. Finally, consider **the claims of mathematics**. By the criterion of verifiability, statements such as '2+2=4' are not factually significant. There are no possible experiences which can have a bearing on mathematical statements. However, Ayer avoids saying that they are meaningless by instead claiming that they are analytic. Analytic statements are *true in virtue of the meaning* of the component parts of the statement. Thus, mathematical statements are no more informative than statements like 'All bachelors are unmarried'.

References