# **Verificationism, Part IA: Meaning**.

Lecture III, *Verificationism, A Priori and Analyticity*, 17th November.

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## 1. ***Introduction: Analytic/Synthetic, A Priori/A Posteriori, and Necessity/Contingent***

1.1. Broadly speaking, two factors go into whether a given statement is true or false: what the statement means—what the statement *states*—and the way the world in fact is. Suppose the following is true.

(1) Leo is in the library

* (1) is true in part because 'Leo', 'is', 'in', 'the library' are combined so that (1) *means that* Leo is in the library and, in part, because Leo *is* in the library. The meaning of (1) and the world match.

Synthetic statements are those which, loosely put, require that the world be a certain way for their truth. On the other hand, analytic statements, are those which are true (or false) in virtue of what they mean *alone*.

(2) No bachelor is married.

* (2) is true *wholly* because of the meaning of 'No', 'bachelor', and 'is married' and the way they combine to make (2). This makes (2) true in virtue of meaning alone, i.e., an analytic truth.

1.2. Statements also divide into those which are *a priori* and those which are *a posteriori*. This is an epistemic distinction: *a priori* statements can be known independently of experience and *a posteriori* statements cannot be known independently of experience. I can know that Lisbon is identical to Lisbon wthout recourse to experience, but I cannot know that Lisbon is the capital city of Portugal without recourse to experience. Many take the truths of pure mathematics and logic to be *a priori* knowable.

1.3. Finally, statements also divide into those which are necessary and those which are contingent. Necessary truths are claims which could not have been otherwise—they are true and must be true. For instance, it is necessary that 2+2=4. Contingent truths could have been otherwise. For instance, it is true that I am in Cambridge, but it is not necessarily so. Many necessities are *a priori* truths. But post Kripke (*Naming and Necessity*), many take some necessities as not knowable *a priori*, e.g., it is necessary that Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus or that Water is $H_2O$.

## 2. ***Verificationism and A Priority = Analyticity = Necessity***

2.1. At first glance, *a priori* statements pose a problem for the radical empiricism of verificationism. How is knowledge independent of experience even possible? One matter we have delayed discussing in detail is that verificationists proposed a highly influential view of the nature of *a priori* and analytic statements.

2.2. For verificationists, all *a priori* knowable statements are analytic. If all knowledge of the world is dependent on experience, then any *a priori* knowledge must not be knowledge about the world. Thinking of analytic statements as a limiting case where the way the world is plays no role, it's natural to think that *a priori* statements are simply analytic. As Soames (2003) stresses: for the verificationists *the reason* a statement is *a priori* knowable is found in its analyticity. Ayer writes:

> The principles of logic and mathematics are true universally simply because we never allow them to be anything else. And the reason for this is that we cannot abandon them without contradicting ourselves, **without sinning against the rules which govern the use of language** ... the truths of logic and mathematics are analytic propositions or tautologies. (Ayer, 1936: 77)

2.3. For the verificationists, all *a priori* statements (and thus analytic statements) are also necessary. That is, what explains the necessity of $2 + 2 = 4$ is that the statement is analytic: the source of necessity is analyticity. Necessary truths would seem to pose a problem to radical empiricists like the verificationists, since it is impossible to verify that $2 + 2 = 4$ holds given *every possible* state of the world. Their solution: all necessary statements are true solely in virtue of the meaning of the component parts.

2.4. There are three problems which put pressure on the verificationist's claim to identify analyticity with *a priority* and necessity. First, Kripke influentially argued that there are indeed necessities which are not knowable *a priori*. Second, there are Quine's influential arguments against the good standing of a notion like analyticity. Third, there are Quine's arguments against grounding *a priori* knowledge using analyticity.

**3. *Quine's Arguments in 'Truth by Convention'***

3.1. On the verificationist picture, the truth of the following *a priori* statement follows from its meaning.

(3) If John is unmarried, then John is a bachelor

So, according to verificationism, if I know what the terms involved mean, then I can know that (3) is true. In more detail, the thought is that since 'unmarried' and 'bachelor' are synonymous, (3) is synonymous with:

(4) If John is unmarried, then John is unmarried.

But how do we know that (4) is true? This might seem like a silly question, since we might just think that (4) is obviously true. Spelling this out further, (4) is of the *form* 'If $p$, then $p$' and it might be thought obvious that any claim of the form 'If $p$, then $p$' is true. However, this depends on the meaning of the logical 'if'.

3.2. So, the question we should ask: how do we know the meaning of logical constants like 'if'? As Ayer noted above, the verificationist thinks that we *stipulate* the truth of logical constants like 'if'. That is, their meaning is fixed by convention. But how precisely do we fix their meaning by convention? Quine (1976 [1935]) observed that this would only work if we define the conventional truths as those which fit the form of a particular scheme because there are infinitely many truths generated by such a convention. That is:

(C) All sentences of the form 'If $p$, then $p$' are stipulated to be true, and so true by convention.

Of course, we need more than just (C) to stipulate *all* the truths involving logical constants. But this is a start.

3.3. The problem that quickly emerges concerns how we move from (C) to the *a priori* truth of (3). As Soames (2003: 268) puts it, we have to operate using the following kind of argument.

(I) All sentences of the form 'If $p$, then $p$' are stipulated to be true, and so true by convention [i.e., (C)].
(II) 'If John is unmarried, then John is unmarried' is of the form 'If $p$, then $p$'.
(III) $\therefore$ 'If John is unmarried, then John is unmarried' is true by convention.

However, as Quine (1976 [1935]) argues, this doesn't secure the *a priori* truth of (3) from analyticity and convention *alone*. We have to *assume* that (I)–(III) is a valid argument. In other words, we have to assume some logic (and hence some *a priori* knowledge) in the first place to derive the truth of (3).

# References

Ayer, A. J. (1936). *Language, Truth, and Logic.*
Quine, W. V. (1976 [1935]). Truth by Convention. In: *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press, 77–106.
Soames, Scott (2003). *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century, Volume 1: The Dawn of Analysis.* Princeton University Press.