

## VERIFICATION AND MEANING: A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION

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### **Abstract**

*In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, philosopher A. J. Ayer introduced the principle of verification in his seminal work, Language, Truth, and Logic. This principle, a cornerstone of logical positivism, asserts that metaphysical statements are literally meaningless due to their unverifiable nature. Ayer and like-minded logical positivists contend that metaphysical problems are pseudo-problems, rendering them unanswerable or meaningless. They challenge metaphysics from the perspective of propositional meaning, tying truth and meaning to empirical experience. According to logical positivism, sentence meaning derives from sensory experience, making language a product of sense experience. Consequently, the principle of verification posits that a sentence is meaningful only if it is empirically verifiable or meets specific conditions. This paper aims to demonstrate that Ayer's verification theory of meaning is a significant empiricist milestone.*

### **Keywords**

*Empiricism, meaning, verification*

Reference to this paper should

be made as follows:

**Received: 22/11/25**

**Approved: 12/12/25**

**Pallabi Sarma**

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A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION*

*RJPSSs 2025, Vol. LI,*

*No. 2, pg. 467-472*

*Article No. 53*

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**DOI:** *[https://doi.org/10.31995/  
rjpss.2025v51i02.53](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2025v51i02.53)*

The idea that metaphysics is unnecessary or meaningless has its roots in ancient Greece, where skeptics and sophists questioned the value of speculating about the nature of reality. This idea continued into modern times, with philosophers like David Hume arguing that metaphysical claims cannot be proven or disproven and are therefore meaningless. Hume built on the ideas of Locke and Berkeley, who emphasized the importance of sensory experience. Immanuel Kant also rejected metaphysics as a pseudo-science, but only opposed speculative metaphysics. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, philosophers like logical positivists and linguistic philosophers completely dismissed metaphysics as nonsense. They wanted to focus on empirical evidence and the scientific method, and saw metaphysics as unnecessary. Thus, there is no question of doubt that this anti-metaphysical stance was largely influenced by the scientific method and the desire to ground philosophy in empirical evidence.

The logical positivists and linguistic philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century took a more radical approach, rejecting metaphysics as not just unwarranted but as meaningless. They argued that metaphysical statements are neither true nor false, but rather devoid of any cognitive significance. This stance was a result of the influence of science and the desire to make philosophy more rigorous and empirical. In contrast to Hume and Kant, who saw metaphysics as an imagination or a speculative endeavour, logical positivists and linguistic philosophers saw it as a non-starter. They argued that metaphysics is not a legitimate area of inquiry, as it is not grounded in empirical evidence and is therefore, meaningless. Thus, the anti-metaphysical trend in philosophy has had a significant impact on the development of modern philosophy, leading to a focus on empirical evidence, scientific methodology, and linguistic analysis. While some philosophers continue to argue for the relevance of metaphysics, the anti-metaphysical sentiment remains a dominant force in contemporary philosophy.

The philosophical underpinnings of metaphysics faced significant challenges from prominent thinkers like G.E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Moore and Russell opposed idealism, with Russell arguing that it contradicts fundamental logical and mathematical principles. Wittgenstein took a more radical stance, declaring metaphysics to be meaningless and asserting that metaphysical problems fail to meet basic meaningfulness criteria. Alongside Russell and Moore, Wittgenstein concluded that metaphysical sentences lack meaning as they are neither empirically verifiable nor tautological.<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein's anti-metaphysical views influenced the Vienna Circle, a group of philosophers united by their commitment to scientific inquiry and verification. Moritz Schlick, a leading figure in the Vienna Circle, posited that metaphysics comprises meaningless statements. He argued that

a sentence's meaning is inextricably linked to its method of verification, rendering metaphysical statements are meaningless. Succinctly speaking, logical positivism, an offshoot of the Vienna Circle, critically evaluated metaphysics. Philosophers like Rudolf Carnap contended that metaphysical statements purport to convey knowledge beyond experience, rendering them meaningless. This anti-metaphysical sentiment, which originated with Moore, Russell, and Wittgenstein, gained significant traction with the rise of logical positivism and the Vienna Circle.

The movement to eliminate metaphysics originated from the Vienna Circle, but A.J. Ayer's work provided the philosophical foundation for this elimination. Ayer's rejection of metaphysics is unique, as he argues that metaphysicians produce sentences that fail to meet the conditions for literal significance.<sup>2</sup> In other words, metaphysical statements about reality are meaningless because they cannot be verified. Ayer introduces a verification criterion to determine whether a sentence is literally meaningful. According to this criterion, "a sentence has literal meaning if and only if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable."<sup>3</sup> If a sentence fails to meet this criterion, it does not express a proposition, as a proposition is a meaningful sentence that can be either true or false. Similarly, a sentence is only considered meaningful if it can be either true or false; otherwise, it is not meaningful. Ayer's central claim is that metaphysics lacks meaning because its statements cannot be verified, and therefore, do not meet the conditions for literal significance.

Moreover, the verification theory of meaning posits that verification is the cornerstone of determining the truth or falsity of a statement, as well as its meaning. According to Ayer and logical positivism, the inability to verify metaphysical statements renders them nonsensical. The principle of verification provides "a criterion for assessing the meaningfulness of sentences,"<sup>4</sup> wherein meaning is an empirical fact that can be confirmed or disconfirmed through empirical evidence. A proposition is considered meaningful if it can be verified or falsified by empirical facts. If a proposition cannot be tested against empirical facts, it is deemed senseless. In other words, a fact is what makes a proposition true or false, and an empirical fact is what renders a proposition meaningful. If a proposition fails to correspond to any empirical fact, it becomes meaningless. Analytic statements, such as those in mathematics and logic, are considered meaningful. However, the meaning of scientific statements can only be tested through experience. Ayer emphasizes that verifiability is the criterion used to evaluate the genuineness of apparent statements of fact. A sentence is factually significant to an individual if they know how to verify the proposition it expresses, that is, if they know what observations would lead them to accept or reject the proposition as true or false under certain conditions.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the verification theory of meaning posits that meaning and verification are inextricably linked, and that empirical evidence is the ultimate arbiter of a proposition's truth or falsity.

Logical positivism champions science over metaphysics, advocating for the verification of meaningful statements through experience. Unlike humanistic disciplines, scientific statements are empirically verifiable, making them cognitively meaningful. In contrast, metaphysical statements lack cognitive import as they are neither analytic nor empirically verifiable, rendering them nonsensical. However, the concept of verification is complex, with multiple layers of meaning. It may refer to verification by an individual, the speaker, or the entire speech community. For instance, scientific language must be validated by the scientific community. Ayer emphasizes that verification in principle, or in the ideal sense, is what matters, where meaning is equivalent to acceptability by the scientific community. He states, "...the proposition is verifiable in principle, if not in practice, and is accordingly significant."<sup>6</sup> This implies that even if practical verification is impossible, the possibility of verification serves as the criterion for meaning. In essence, logical positivism posits that meaningful statements must be empirically verifiable, and if verification is impossible, the statement lacks cognitive import. However, the concept of verification is nuanced, and Ayer's emphasis on verification in principle highlights the importance of acceptability by the scientific community.

Ayer's principle of verification categorizes propositions into three groups:

- i. Propositions that are directly verifiable through sense experience (strong verifiability).
- ii. Propositions that are not directly verifiable but may be verified through future experience or technological advancements (weak verifiability).
- iii. Propositions that are impossible to verify through experience (non-cognitive).

Ayer argues that only propositions that are verifiable in either the strong or weak sense are meaningful.<sup>7</sup> Metaphysical propositions, which are impossible to verify, are therefore meaningless. For instance, the statement "X is a rose" can be verified through visual, olfactory, and tactile experiences. In contrast, the statement "There is life on Mars" is not directly verifiable but may be verified in the future through technological advancements. However, the statement "God is wise" is impossible to verify and is therefore meaningless. What it reveals here is that Ayer emphasizes that verification requires propositions to be relevant to experience, specifically sense experience. This means that metaphysical statements, which are

not grounded in experience, are not cognitively significant. Thus, there is no question of doubt that Ayer's principle of verification distinguishes between strong and weak verifiability, and concludes that metaphysical propositions are meaningless because they are impossible to verify through experience. This highlights the importance of empirical evidence in determining the meaning and significance of propositions.

Now, the relationship between language and experience is crucial in understanding the empiricist perspective. According to Ayer, sense-experience directly records some statements, while others can be reduced or translated into direct observation statements. Direct observation statements form the foundation of empirical language and serve as the source of meaning for statements that can be reduced to them. Ayer defines an experiential proposition as one that records an actual or possible experience. He then states that a genuine factual proposition should be such that some experiential propositions can be deduced from it, in conjunction with other premises, without being deduced from those premises alone.<sup>8</sup> This formulation of the verifiability criterion of meaning allows for an indirect relationship between observation sentences and the rest of language.

However, Hempel notes that even this moderate formulation is not without difficulties. There exists a gap between observation statements and non-observation statements, which is bridged by a series of premises that remain unverifiable. To address this issue, Hempel proposes a "translatability"<sup>9</sup> criterion of meaning, which establishes a working relation between observation statements and non-observation statements, thereby managing entire empirical knowledge. Thus, the empiricist perspective posits that language is connected to experience through direct observation statements, which form the foundation of empirical language. While Ayer's moderate formulation of the verifiability criterion of meaning allows for an indirect relationship between observation sentences and the rest of language, Hempel's translatability criterion of meaning provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between language and experience.

In view of the above, it can be said that the verification theory of meaning aimed to establish empiricism on a scientific foundation, eliminating metaphysical concepts. Logical positivism views scientific propositions as cognitive, meaning they can be true or false. Ayer believes that truth is the only means of validating a proposition, making meaning cognitive. Unless a proposition is cognitive, it's nonsense. Meaning is always cognitive, never non-cognitive. Logical positivists, following the Frege-Wittgensteinian tradition, introduced a linguistic turn, emphasizing that meaning is cognitive. This approach was considered a milestone in empiricism by Willard Van Orman Quine. However, Quine criticizes the

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verification theory of meaning as radical reductionism, the second dogma of empiricism. Nonetheless, in simple words, the verification theory of meaning states that language is primarily about experience, and meaning is verified through experience. This approach focuses on sentences rather than individual words, making it a critique of truths and beliefs rather than concepts.

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