

Logical Positivist Conception of Knowledge and the Verification Principle: A Reflection

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Abstract

The Logical positivist conception of knowledge holds that for any statement to be cognitively meaningful it should fall within the scope of the language of science. Thus meaningful statement of any sort can either be analytic or synthetic. By and large, the Vienna Circle of the logical positivists of the 1920s located its own world view of philosophy within the scientific world view with the establishment of the following theses viz:

- 1. The thesis of meaninglessness of Metaphysics*
- 2. The Verification Principle*
- 3. The Physicalist thesis.*

These theses therefore form the unifying factors among the continental logical positivists. And these theses by the language of the logical positivists are against the “traditional” and “metaphysical” conceptions of knowledge. The Logical analysis of Rudolf Carnap, one of the greatest members of logical positivism school makes several proclamations about these with a view to refining the language of philosophy in line with the physical and the scientific construction of language. It is in tune with this principle that the logical positivist conception of knowledge with its principle of verification is addressed and evaluated in this work.

Keywords: Verification Principle, Logical Positivist, Knowledge, Analytic, Synthetic.

Introduction

This paper conceptually examines and evaluates the attack on metaphysics using the various theses of the logical positivists. Besides, an effort is made to point out the inherent inconsistencies involved in the logical positivist principles as to their unanimous rejection of metaphysics. Here, the position to defend is that metaphysics is and would continue to be one of the central foundations upon which many intellectual and philosophical endeavors solely dependent.

Logical Positivist Conception of Metaphysics

The logical positivist conception of Metaphysics is that metaphysics with its propositions are meaningless and therefore metaphysics is a pseudo discipline. This is so because it is, the belief of Logical Positivists that any statement or proposition that cannot be verified with sense experience or that which cannot be experimented cannot stand as a genuine knowledge. The word metaphysics in the history of ideas has been popularly attributed to Aristotle. According to the ancient historians, Aristotle was said to be the originator of a discipline now come to be referred to as metaphysics. It was discovered that the term metaphysics was first revealed by Aristotle by a mere accident. Aristotle conceived metaphysics as the “first philosophy”¹. In 70 B.C. in Rome, one Andronicus of Rhodes was collecting the writings of Aristotle and he inadvertently placed the first philosophy of Aristotle’s treaties after physics thus becoming what we now come to refer to as metaphysics. The subject of physics was just all about the physical world; that is, the observable entities.

Consequently, the subject of metaphysics was then called “the treaties after the physical treatises”². And this literally refers to the study of transcendental substance or more simply put things over and beyond the physical world.

It is for this reason that scholars refer to Aristotle's metaphysics as a type of knowledge that aims at investigating 'wisdom' underlying ultimate realities and this work begins with the statement that "All men by nature desire to know"³. This desire says Aristotle, is not only a desire to know in order to do or make something. Rather the position is akin to the view maintained by Aristotle that knowledge is pursued to escape ignorance, in order to know, to acquire knowledge for knowing sake and not for any practical or social end⁴. In addition to these motives, there is indeed in a person, a desire to know certain kinds of things simply for the sake of knowing.

Given this background, we can say that metaphysics is about the knowledge of something or a phenomenon which is over or beyond all physical experiences. It is about the real essence of things, about things-in-themselves, the absolute, and such metaphysical theories whose objects are to arrange the most general propositions of various regions of scientific knowledge in a well-ordered system. Such theories may belong actually to the field of empirical science, not of philosophy; however, it is the task of metaphysics to investigate the conceptual issues underlying them. This is as we have in the *Metaphysico-empirical* conceptions that: the essence and the principle of the world is water, said Thales; while Heraclitus says it is change; Fire and Infinite says Anaximander, while Pythagoras posits that it is Number⁵ just as in the same manner Plato was of the view that "all things are nothing but shadows of eternal ideas which themselves are in space less and timeless sphere"⁶. It is in the same form that the monists proclaim that: "there is only one principle on which all that is, is founded" to the dualists "there are two principles"- mind and matter. The materialists on the other side believe that "all that is, is in its essence material", that is, something that can occupy space and time. In other words, the materialists are of the idea that for anything to exist it should be something that can either be seen, smelled, felt or touched and/or experienced by any of the five sense organs of man. However, the spiritualists on the other hand say: "all that is, is spiritual", that is, those which is timeless and could neither occupy space nor be experienced by sense organs. To Metaphysics (in our sense of the world) belong Spinoza one the rationalist theory, he offers a strikingly unique conception of God, in which he identifies God with the whole cosmos. His famous formula is *Dues sive Natura*, God or Nature, as if to say that these two words are interchangeable. He goes further to strip the idea of God of cognitive meanings by emphasizing not the relation between God and humanity but a basic unity between them: "Whatever is, is in God, and that nothing can exist or be conceived without God"⁷ just like Schelling, Hegel, and Bergson who share the same idea.

To the logical positivists, the above illustrations of metaphysical meaning and languages are meaningless and cannot be ascertained for obvious reason that:

Their propositions which make sense are those which copy or describe things in the world such that the totality of true proposition is on the whole depends on the natural science. This is based on the account of the picture theory that a proposition has sense only in so far as it can either be true or false and to the logical positivists such proposition should maintain a connection between the statement and the object of reference.

They also assert that propositions of logic do not describe or affirm things in the world. Rather they show the limit of the world, that is, the limit of language. In addition, it is maintained that the propositions of logic do not address something existential but things in the world of principia mathematical. This is to say that they only assert things in the world of numbers and logically possible worlds. For this reason, their propositions are not classified as nonsensical because they show the formal logical proof in the world of language and abstract entities. Thus, it is maintained that for the fact that the propositions of logic are analytic and a priori by nature, they are all meaningful. Besides, the propositions of Ethics, Aesthetics, Metaphysics, Religion according to the logical positivists are nonsensical because they all attempt to say things that are beyond the physical world and hence, beyond the limit of language. To the logical positivists, the metaphysical notions behind these disciplines are mystical in manner as they reveal themselves. Therefore, their assertions are rejected on the ground that they are meaningless statements which do not address cognitive things in the existential world.

Given this, we examine the position of the logical positivists from the point of view of verification principle adopted by the school. Given this principle, it is easy to know that metaphysical as well as ethical and religious propositions are not verifiable. Take for instance, the proposition that "God exists", and "It is immoral and unreligious to believe that the ancestors do not exist". For the fact that these propositions assert nothing at all existential and verifiable but they are mere propositional claims, it follows that they are meaningless though may not be senseless given the logical positivist principle of verifiability. Metaphysicians cannot avoid making the propositions of metaphysics non-verifiable because if they do, the decision about the truth or falsehood of their doctrines would depend upon experience and therefore belong to the region of empirical science.

This is the consequence they wish to avoid because they pretend to teach knowledge which is of a higher level than that of empirical science. Thus, they are compelled to cut all connections between their propositions and experience, and precisely by this procedure they deprive them of any sense.

In view of the position maintained about veracity of metaphysics as a study, it is important to stress that metaphysics is relevant to our daily lives. This is for a number of reasons. For instance, it promotes rational thinking. Richard Taylor opines that metaphysics, “promises wisdom essential to human life and therefore helps people out of their empty dreams and illusion”⁸. Besides, metaphysics reinforces religious assertions and its method is logical. The application of metaphysical reflection in our lives frees us from dogmatism, indoctrination and authoritarianism.

William James reinforces the above point when he conceives metaphysics as “nothing but an unusually obstinate effort to think clearly”⁹. What William James tries to unearth here is that to think metaphysically is to think without arbitrariness and dogmatism, to think with no obstacle or prejudice.

Muhammed Igbai, while emphasizing the importance of metaphysics on the Persian mind, asserts that: “the Persian mind, having adjusted itself to new political environment soon reasserts its innate freedom, and begins to retire from the field of objectivity, in order that it may come back to itself and reflect upon the material achieved in its journey out of its own inwardness”¹⁰.

Here, Igbai tries to emphasize the supremacy of individual-will to see things as it is rather than any arbitrary imposed injunction¹¹. In his own contributions, F.H. Bradley writes that the business of metaphysics is to justify the ultimate assumptions of the science and that in metaphysics alone, there are no unjustified assumptions¹². This clearly implies that metaphysics is the first principle underlying every assumption of things.

Reflections on Logical Positivism and the Principle of Verification

The charge against metaphysics is that its language, its proposition or statements are meaningless. Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* asserts that: to be able to say that a point is black or white, I must first know under what conditions a point is called white or black; in order to be able to say “P” is true (or false) I must have determined under what conditions I call “P” true thereby I determine the sense of the proposition¹³. Wittgenstein is said to have been the first to set up the measure of meaningfulness in verification. He regards the propositions in metaphysics to be meaningless and senseless, and such a charge required the use of some criteria by which we test which sentences do and sentences that do not express a genuine proposition about a matter of fact. Accordingly, the logical positivists formulate the verification principle as the basic criterion for testing the meaningfulness or the literal significance of a proposition in which it fulfills the requirement of this criterion otherwise it would be considered meaningless.

The verification principle of the logical positivists gives the notion that “the meaning of a statement is the method of its verification”¹⁴. According to Moritz Schlick on the principle of verification states that the meaning and verification amounts to stating the rules according to which the statement is to be used, and this is the same as stating the way in which it can be verified or falsified¹⁵.

The assumption behind this principle is that verification must always rest upon empirical observation, which is, based solely on sense experience. Any proposition, therefore, that could not be verified by the method of observation, would be considered as having no meaning. The case of mathematical propositions is treated in a special way, but it is clear that with such a rigorous criterion, metaphysical language could not pass the test of meaningfulness. Rudolf Carnap makes explicitly that this experience is of a sensuous character, as he puts it: “All concepts used in the science could be defined on the basis of observational or perceptual experience”, or still following Karl Popper, a string of words has no meaning except its derivability relations from protocol sentences (observational sentences) are given...”¹⁶. From Carnap, the method of verification of a proposition is either direct or indirect. If a proposition asserts something about a perception I am having for example, that I see a house, this proposition is effectively tested or verified by my present perception. On the other hand, 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.

The positivist while following the tradition of Hume and Kant, distinguishes two types of statements namely, analytic and synthetic. Each of these types has a different ground for its meaningfulness.

In this case, analytic statements derive their meaningfulness from the definitions of their words or symbols. So, to say that “all men are mortal” has literal significance because the word ‘men’ is defined in such a way as to include the idea of ‘mortal’. In general, in analytic statements the subject already contains or implies the predicate. For the most part of analytic statements do not increase our knowledge and for this reason they are tautologies¹⁷. Moreover, their meanings do not depend upon experience but only upon the consistent use of their clearly defined terms. If words with clearly define terms are used inconsistently, the result is a contradiction¹⁸. On the other hand, synthetic propositions are either true or false in each case and their truth or falsity can be discovered only by reference to some non-logical or non-linguistic data or a fact. Unlike analytic statements, which are necessarily either tautologies or contradictions, synthetic statements may be either true or false. Synthetic statements require some sense experience of the object that such statement refers to in order to advance from its possibility to its actual truth. It is from this distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions that the logical positivists formulated their conception of cognitive meaning or literal significance. Analytic propositions, they said, have a formal meaning, since their meanings derive not from facts but from the logical implications of words and ideas, as in mathematics, logic and the formal sciences. Also, synthetic propositions have a factual meaning because their meaning is based upon the empirical observation of the objects referred to in the statements. Synthetic statements are the language of the factual sciences, physics, biology, psychology, and the like. It is in this area that the principle of verification has its decisive application. It is on this note that the logical positivists concluded that there could be only two kinds of statements that could have any meaning at all, these are namely, “Analytic statements”, which are universally and necessarily true because the consistent use of words would never allow them to be anything else. Statements that are neither analytic nor synthetic have no cognitive meanings or literal significance as they can simply qualify as emotive statements. It takes only a brief reflection to realize that into this category of emotive or non-cognitive language would fall not only metaphysics but also ethics, morality, and religion.

Bertrand Russell, in his *Human Knowledge*¹⁹ criticizes the verification theory to the effect that a scientific hypothesis which is generally assumed to be meaningful may eventually turn out to be meaningless. This criticism of Russell was proclaimed by logical positivists to be invalid for the reason that it stands upon the confusion of verifiability and verification. He only rejects this thought on the ground that we cannot definitely know whether a proposition is verifiable or not, since verifiability contains the knowledge of an infinitely long future. Hence, his understandable remark: “that a proposition is verifiable is itself not verifiable”²⁰. Among the difficulties encountered by metaphysics is the serious question of what constituted verification. The positivists would answer “sense experience”²¹ which further raises fundamental question “of whose experience”²²? The assumption behind the verification principle is that whatever could be said to be meaningful would be stated in atomic or elementary statements. Scientific language would be reducible ultimately to observational statements. Is there any actual “fact” that an observational statement reports? Is it a subject experience about a physical object, or is it a pure picture of that object? Are we ever conscious of the relationship between our state of minds and the object of observation? The technical problem here is whether it is ever possible to translate a person’s internal experience into a statement about a physical object, or vice versa. This is the problem of solipsism; the view that the Self is the only object of real knowledge and therefore the experiences of one person cannot be the same as those of another. Each person’s experiences are different from the objectively real world. If this is the case, what does the verification principle amount to in the end? Verification statements would mean one thing to one person and something else to others.

In the second place, it is in the very area where verification principle is presumed to have its greatest relevance in the sciences that its greatest difficulty arose. Scientific knowledge is frequently expressed in the form of universal laws. These “laws” are the basis for the scientific predictions. But the problem the logical positivists face is whether to consider scientific statements meaningful. How can a statement that makes a prediction be verified? Can my present experience or experiment tell me anything about the future? Obviously, literal significance or meaning is one thing when we verify the statement “there is a black cow in Smith’s barn” and quite another thing when we say, as the scientist does, for example, that “when a moving body is not acted upon by external forces, its direction will remain constant”. While the first case is special and verifiable the second involves an indefinite number of cases to bring to limelight and any single case in the future is enough to bring the case to fruition without which the situation perpetually remains constantly meaningless. It is in the light of this that Schlick observes that for all propositions, “if not conclusively verifiable in principle, then they are not propositions”²³. This would have to apply to scientific as well as other forms of language.

In the third place and by way of reflection, the verification principle is not itself verifiable. The Vienna Circle does not seem to have answer to this question in any formal way. To the members of this circle, it may be that the verification principle is just a deliberate effort to rid out from scientific enterprise all non-experiential. Being all scientifically oriented, the logical positivists assume that only language that refers to physical objects and their interrelationship could have cognitive meaning. Moreover, the techniques of logic as they understand them imply the correspondence between words and facts, and also between the logical structure of language and the logical relation of facts. The logical positivists assume, furthermore, that through physicalism, their doctrine that calls for the compliance of all statements to physical facts could achieve the unity of science and that such a unified knowledge would give sciences a common language and tell us all there is to say. But the internal defects of the verification principle, namely, the difficulty of formulating the criterion of sense experience without falling into solipsism and the impossibility of verifying general scientific statements gradually led not only to a weak form of verification but also to the recognition that statement reflect many forms of experience. For this reason, the initial iconoclastic intensity of positivism is turned down. The blanket rejection of metaphysics and morals was reversed. Instead, analysts began to ask what kind of problem the metaphysicians and moralists are driving at. A .J Ayer describes this new temper by saying that “the metaphysician is treated no longer as a criminal but as a patient”²⁴. There may be good reasons why he maintains this position. After all, Ethics, by this view, is no longer nonsense but a discipline whose language is analyzed for its relation to fact and for its value.

Conclusion

So far, we have considered the position of the logical positivists on metaphysics and the application of the verifiable principle to the so called metaphysical statements. It is discovered that the application of the logical positivist criterion of assessment to issues not within the scope of scientific enterprise could hardly be defended and argued to the logical conclusion. So, the principle of verification adopted by the logical positivists is not only defective but also not adaptable. Therefore, its application to metaphysical issues as adopted by the logical positivists without doubt will do more damage to philosophy than the problem it tends to solve. Besides, it is an obvious fact that the restriction of statement analysis to the analytic and the synthetic group by the logical positivist conception cannot in any way accommodate all non-empirically verifiable but sensible and meaningful statements. This is because not all cognitively meaningful statements can easily be classifiable into the analytic and synthetic distinction.

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