History of Philosophy
77 A.J. Ayer — Language, Truth and Logic
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Abstract:

This text provides an overview of **A.J. Ayer's** influential work, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, and its role in popularizing **logical positivism**. It details Ayer's radical **elimination of metaphysics**, which he dismissed as factually meaningless because its claims cannot be empirically verified. The sources contrast this "hard-nosed" stance with later 20th-century movements that sought to rehabilitate **metaphysics** as a study of **conceptual schemes** or coordinating analogies rather than transcendent realities. Additionally, the text explains Ayer's **analytic function of philosophy**, which reduces philosophical inquiry to the logical clarification of language and definitions. This perspective culminates in an **emotivist theory of ethics**, asserting that moral judgments are merely expressions of feeling rather than factual statements. Ultimately, the material traces how these ideas challenged traditional views on truth, perception, and theology, shifting the philosophical focus toward **linguistic analysis**.

Briefing Document:

A.J. Ayer and the Foundations of Logical Positivism: A Briefing on Language, Truth, and Logic

Executive Summary

A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1935) serves as the primary catalyst for the logical positivist movement, advocating for a radical redefinition of philosophy's scope. The central thesis of the work is the **elimination of metaphysics**, predicated on the "verifiability criterion of meaning." Ayer argues that any statement that cannot be empirically verified or is not an analytic tautology is factually meaningless. Consequently, the traditional roles of philosophy—such as building speculative

systems about transcendent reality—are discarded in favor of a "wholly critical" analytic function. Under this framework, ethics is reduced to "emotivism" (expressions of feeling), and mathematics and logic are relegated to linguistic tautologies that describe no external reality. While influential, the movement faced significant pushback, leading to a softening of Ayer's "hard-nosed" positivism in later editions and the eventually successful effort by contemporary philosophers to redefine metaphysics as a study of conceptual schemes rather than transcendent entities.

The Elimination of Metaphysics

The foundational goal of Ayer's work is to demonstrate that metaphysical assertions are not merely false, but literally meaningless.

- **The Rejection of Transcendence:** Ayer criticizes the view that philosophy can provide knowledge of a reality transcending the world of science and common sense.

- **The Target of Critique:** He specifically targets "transcendent metaphysics" as found in the works of Kant and F.H. Bradley (notably Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*).

- **Intellectual Intuition:** Ayer repudiates the idea that humans possess a faculty of "intellectual intuition" capable of identifying first axioms (as Descartes attempted). Without these axioms, the construction of a deductive metaphysical system becomes impossible.

- **Impact on Other Disciplines:** The elimination of metaphysics fundamentally alters other fields:
    - **Philosophy:** Shifts from speculative to analytic.
    - **Ethics:** Ceases to describe an "objective moral order."
    - **Theology:** Discards God as a metaphysical entity.
    - **A Priori Knowledge:** Reframed as purely tautological.

The Verifiability Criterion of Meaning

The "criterion of verifiability" is the tool used to determine if a sentence is factually significant.

- **Definition:** A sentence is significant if and only if the speaker knows what observations would lead them to accept the proposition as true or reject it as false.

- **Cognitive Meaning:** The question is not whether a statement is true or false, but whether it is *capable* of being verified. If it is not, it lacks cognitive meaning.

- **Strong vs. Weak Verification:**

    - **Strong:** Truth or falsehood can be established with certainty through observation.

    - **Weak:** A statement is significant if it is "at all amenable to any kind of support from empirical data." Ayer utilized this weaker sense to allow for scientific hypotheses.

The Function and Nature of Philosophy

With speculative philosophy overthrown, Ayer defines the remaining function of philosophy as "wholly critical."

- **Analytic Function:** Philosophy is not a source of factual propositions; that is the domain of the empirical sciences. Philosophical propositions are "linguistic in character," dealing with definitions and the formal consequences of those definitions.

- **Philosophy as Logic:** Philosophy is characterized as a department of logic, concerned with formal definitions rather than empirical facts.

- **Definitions in Use:** Ayer argues that philosophers should provide "definitions in use" rather than explicit dictionary definitions. This involves showing how sentences containing a symbol can be translated into equivalent sentences that are more accessible to empirical verification.

- **Example: Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions:** Ayer uses Bertrand Russell's analysis of sentences like "The author of Waverley was Scotch" to

illustrate how logical analysis can break a statement into its logical constituents to determine factual meaningfulness.

The Nature of the A Priori: Logic and Mathematics

Ayer rejects the empiricist view (such as John Stuart Mill's) that logic and math are empirical generalizations.

- **Analytic Tautologies:** Ayer maintains that the truths of logic and mathematics are "necessarily true" because they are analytic propositions or tautologies. We cannot abandon them without contradicting ourselves or violating the rules governing language.

- **Independence from Experience:** While we may discover these truths through induction, their validity does not depend on empirical verification. They are "true universally" because we do not allow them to be otherwise; they represent our commitment to using words uniformly.

- **Formal vs. Synthetic:**

    o **Synthetic Propositions:** Factual; their validity is determined by experience.

    o **Analytic Propositions:** Formal; their validity depends solely on the definition of the symbols used.

The Analysis of Perception and Truth

Ayer applies his analytic method to traditional problems of reality and truth, often resulting in a "phenomenalist" outlook.

- **The Problem of Perception:** Ayer attempts to reduce statements about "material bodies" into statements about "sense data" or "sense contents."

- **Phenomenalism:** He questions whether the reduction of physical objects to sense data is ever complete. He argues against "ostensive statements" (absolutely certain sense datum statements), suggesting that all empirical observations involve conditions (like lighting) that preclude absolute certainty.

- **The "I" Language:** In the mind-body debate, Ayer's positivism struggles with whether "mental state language" (I-language) can be translated into

"physical/brain state language" (it-language) without losing the dimension of self-referentiality.

- **Deflationary Theory of Truth:** Ayer argues that saying "P is true" adds nothing to the assertion of "P." Assertions of truth are "performative utterances" rather than cognitive statements about an extra-linguistic state of affairs.

The Critique of Ethics: Emotivism

Ayer's most controversial application of logical positivism is his "emotivist" theory of ethics, which denies the existence of moral facts.

Four Kinds of Ethical Utterances

Ayer distinguishes between different types of moral discourse:

1. **Definitions of ethical terms:** These are analytic/tautological conventions.

2. **Descriptions of moral experience:** These are psychological or sociological statements (e.g., "I feel bad" or "Society frowns on this").

3. **Exhortations to virtue:** These are commands or encouragements, not statements of fact.

4. **Actual ethical judgments:** Sentences like "X is wrong."

Emotivism vs. Subjectivism

- **Rejection of Subjectivism:** Unlike subjectivists (e.g., Hume), who translate "X is good" into a factual psychological statement ("I approve of X"), Ayer argues that ethical judgments are not statements at all.

- **Emotive Outbursts:** To Ayer, saying "X is wrong" is an emotive expression, similar to an exclamation or an outburst (e.g., "Don't!"). It has no factually meaningful predicate and cannot be true or false.

- **Rhetorical Effect:** Later thinkers like C.L. Stevenson added that these emotive outbursts also serve a "rhetorical act of persuasion." Moral arguments, therefore, are not about right or wrong, but about the facts of a case combined with emotive rhetoric.

Post-Positivist Redefinitions of Metaphysics

Following the decline of the verifiability criterion, contemporary philosophy saw a resurgence in metaphysics, though often redefined as "conceptual schemes."

Approach	Key Proponent	Definition of Metaphysics
Speculative Science	A.N. Whitehead	An extrapolation from scientific concepts and concrete experience to understand the whole of reality.
Coordinating Analogies	Dorothy Emmett	An attempt to coordinate experience through an analogy drawn from ordinary life.
Root Metaphors	Stephen Pepper	Metaphysical schemes developed from "root metaphors" (e.g., mechanistic or organismic models).
Conceptual Map Work	Ian Ramsey	Mapping how language (like the word "God" or "I") functions as a unifier of discourse and conceptualization.

Ayer's legacy remains centered on the shift toward **analytic philosophy**, which prioritizes the logical analysis of language over the construction of grand, speculative systems of thought.

Study Guide:

A.J. Ayer's Language, Truth and Logic: A Comprehensive Study Guide

This study guide provides an overview of A.J. Ayer's seminal work, *Language, Truth and Logic*, as analyzed in the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. It focuses on the tenets of logical positivism, the elimination of metaphysics, and the linguistic turn in philosophical analysis.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided source context.

1. What is the significance of the 1946 introduction to the second edition of *Language, Truth and Logic*?

2. Why is the "elimination of metaphysics" considered the underlying thesis of Ayer's entire book?

3. How does Ayer define the "verifiability criterion of meaning"?

4. What is the difference between "strong" and "weak" verification?

5. According to Ayer, what is the sole remaining function of philosophy once speculative metaphysics is discarded?

6. How does Ayer's view of the *a priori* (logic and mathematics) differ from that of John Stuart Mill?

7. What does Ayer mean by "definitions in use," and which philosopher's theory does he use as an illustration?

8. In the context of the problem of perception, what is the difference between physicalism and phenomenalism?

9. What does it mean to describe the assertion of truth as a "performative utterance"?

10. How does Ayer's "emotivism" distinguish itself from a "subjectivist" view of ethics?

Part II: Answer Key

1. The 1946 introduction was written ten years after the original text and was intended to soften the "hard-nosed scientific positivism" of the first edition. During the intervening decade, Ayer had been exposed to various criticisms and the emergence of the ordinary language tradition, leading him to refine his positions without changing the influential 1935 text.

2. The elimination of metaphysics is foundational because every other topic in the book—including the function of philosophy, the nature of ethics, and the

status of theology—depends on it. By removing the possibility of knowledge beyond experience, Ayer reframes philosophy as a strictly linguistic and analytical endeavor rather than a search for transcendent reality.

3. Ayer states that a sentence is factually significant if and only if a person knows how to verify the proposition it purports to express. This means the individual must understand what observations would lead them to accept the proposition as true or reject it as false.

4. Strong verification requires that observations make the truth or falsehood of a statement certain. Weak verification, which Ayer adopts for empirical statements, only asks if a statement is amenable to some kind of support from empirical data or if observations can render it probable.

5. With the overthrow of speculative philosophy, the function of philosophy becomes "wholly critical" rather than constructive. It is relegated to the analysis of concepts, the provision of definitions, and the exploration of the formal consequences of those definitions within a department of logic.

6. Mill argued that the laws of logic and mathematics are empirical generalizations based on induction. Ayer rejects this, maintaining that these truths are *a priori* tautologies that are necessarily true because we do not allow them to be otherwise without contradicting the rules of our own language.

7. A "definition in use" does not provide a simple synonym but shows how a sentence can be translated into an equivalent sentence that is more accessible to empirical verification. Ayer illustrates this with Bertrand Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions, such as analyzing "The author of Waverley was Scotch."

8. Physicalism, supported by positivists like Moritz Schlich, suggests that our knowledge of sense data is a direct knowledge of physical objects. Ayer leans toward phenomenalism, which questions if the reduction of material objects to sense data is ever complete, suggesting there may be "untranslatable ingredients" in the language of material bodies.

9. A performative utterance is one that performs a function rather than informing the listener of a fact. According to Ayer and later P.F. Strawson,

saying "P is true" does not add new cognitive content to "P" but serves as an act of assertion or a linguistic performance.

10. A subjectivist defines "the good" in terms of psychological feelings, effectively translating moral statements into psychological ones. Ayer's emotivism argues that moral judgments are not statements at all and have no factual predicates; instead, they are merely emotive outbursts or exclamations like saying "Don't!" or "Ouch!"

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Crisis of Metaphysics:** Compare Ayer's rejection of "transcendent" metaphysics with the "more modest" conceptual schemes proposed by Whitehead, Emmett, and Pepper. How do these later thinkers attempt to rehabilitate metaphysics after the positivist critique?

2. **The Linguistic Turn in Perception:** Discuss the attempt by logical positivists to reduce "material object statements" to "sense datum statements." What are the implications of this reduction for the mind-body problem, particularly in the work of Donald Mackay?

3. **The Analytic-Synthetic Distinction:** Analyze Ayer's division of cognitively meaningful propositions into analytic and synthetic categories. How does this distinction lead him to conclude that philosophy is a "department of logic"?

4. **Moral Discourse as Rhetoric:** Examine the development of Emotivism from Ayer to C.L. Stevenson. If moral judgments have no factual significance, what is the purpose of moral argument and "ethical language" in public life?

5. **Scientific Explanations of Metaphysics:** Evaluate the attempts by Morris Lazarowicz and J.O. Wisdom to explain why humans persist in making metaphysical statements despite their alleged lack of meaning. Why does the text suggest these "scientific" explanations might be self-refuting for a positivist?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
A Priori	Knowledge or truths that are independent of experience; for Ayer, these are limited to tautologies and logic.
Analytic Proposition	A statement whose validity depends solely on the definitions of the symbols it contains; a tautology.
Coordinating Analogy	A concept from Dorothy Emmett suggesting metaphysics is an attempt to coordinate experience using an analogy drawn from ordinary life.
Definite Descriptions	A theory by Bertrand Russell used to analyze the logical constituents of sentences to make them more accessible to empirical verification.
Emotivism	The ethical theory that moral judgments are not factual statements but expressions of emotion or feeling.
Logical Positivism	A movement (also called logical empiricism) that limits meaningful discourse to matters of empirical fact and the formal tensions of logic.
Metaphysics	In Ayer's critique, the thesis that philosophy provides knowledge of a reality transcending the world of science and common sense.
Naturalistic Fallacy	The error of defining "the good" in terms of natural properties; a concept Ayer borrows from G.E. Moore to reject utilitarianism.
Ostensive Statements	Empirical sense datum statements that are supposedly so self-evident as to be absolutely certain; Ayer generally denies their possibility.
Performative Utterance	A linguistic act that performs a function (like a promise or a pronouncement) rather than making a factual report.

Phenomenalism	The view that physical objects are reducible to sense data or "sense contents," though the reduction may not be complete.
Root Metaphor	A concept from Stephen Pepper describing a fundamental image or model (like a machine or organism) used to build a metaphysical scheme.
Synthetic Proposition	A statement whose validity is determined by the facts of experience; a factual or empirical hypothesis.
Tautology	A logical statement that is necessarily true because its contradiction is self-contradictory; it provides no information about reality.
Verifiability Criterion	The principle that a statement is only meaningful if it can, in principle, be proven true or false through empirical observation.