

Intuition, Nonsense, and Hot Ayer

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A.J. Ayer holds in *Language, Truth, and Logic* that not only is it the case that all the arguments for the existence of God fail, but Ayer goes on to make an even stronger claim that no such argument can possibly succeed because any talk about God is evidently nonsense. Ayer thinks this can be shown “easily” by pointing out that the proposition “God exists” cannot be empirically verified. Since such a claim cannot be empirically verified, it can be neither true nor false, and so is a meaningless utterance. Thus, since no utterance about God can be empirically verified, all utterances about God are nonsensical, there cannot be any transcendent truths about religion since these sentences cannot be literally significant. So too then this is even the case with a direct experience of God, as in the case of a mystic. These experiences are also unintelligible. Unless the mystic can formulate a proposition that is empirically verifiable, then he really has nothing intelligible or factual to say. To sum up Ayer’s view, “No act of intuition can be said to reveal a truth about any matter of fact unless it issues in verifiable propositions.”

But clearly there are big problems with Ayer’s epistemology and verificationist assertions. I limit myself to three. First, Ayer’s demand for empirical verification 1) begs the question 2) leads to a vicious infinite regress and 3) is self-contradictory. I will take each point in turn.

That Ayer’s Position Begs the Question by Assuming Materialism

Truth is an agreement between mind and reality. A proposition is true when it harmonizes with reality. If, as Ayer says, the only true statements are ones that can be empirically verified, this amounts to saying that the only acceptable agreement that can be allowed to concur with a proposition is empirical reality. But Ayer offers no justification for limiting reality in this way. It is the theist’s contention that reality is not limited to physicality and so for Ayer to assume that only physical reality counts as an adequate correspondence to veridical thought is to presuppose materialism and so begs the very question under consideration by saying in effect, “God-talk is meaningless because materialism is true.”

That Ayer’s Position Leads to an Infinite Regress Rendering All Knowledge Impossible

Aristotle made the decisive point in the *Posterior Analytics* that all knowledge must rely on intuitively known “first principles” that cannot themselves be doubted. This is not merely limited to “necessary truths” were there is a correlation between the definition of the subject/predicate to one another, but also to obvious facts of our experience – such as the data provided in sensation. In other words, all knowledge must have certain “givens” which are not in themselves in need of any further proof outside of being understood or directly experienced. Many later thinkers such as St Thomas Aquinas, John Henry Newman, and most recently Roderick Chisholm, have reiterated Aristotle’s point.

To deny Aristotle’s point is to render knowledge impossible. If there are no starting points for knowledge then given any proposition p, p cannot be known unless it is supported by p’. And again if we iterate and ask how p’ is known, it cannot be known unless supported by p’’, etc., *ad infinitum*, and thus the original p cannot be known. The reason Ayer falls victim to this problem is because he holds that “No act of intuition can be said to reveal a truth about any matter of fact unless it issues in verifiable propositions.” If all intuitions by themselves are inadequate for revealing truth, then this is indistinguishable from saying there are no starting points of knowledge unless they are empirically verifiable. This places a qualification or criterion on any starting point of knowledge. For example, Ayer’s scenario would run:

P is meaningful if and only if empirically verifiable in p', but p' is meaningful if and only if empirically verifiable in p'', but p'' is meaningful if and only if empirically verifiable in p''', etc., etc., *ad infinitum*.

When the regress is infinite the meaningfulness of the original p cannot be accounted for, and this makes all knowledge impossible, including the knowledge that verificationism is true.

Suppose one rejects this by saying all that is needed for a proposition to be meaningful is for it to be *in principle* empirically verifiable. I respond that it is impossible for every meaningful proposition to be empirically verifiable, even in principle. If what Ayer says is true, we would have to be able, in principle, to empirically verify all of our empirical verifications. Taking proposition p as empirically verifiable by experience e would implicitly entail the truth of a meta-proposition "I am empirically experiencing e" which of course would itself, in principle, have to be empirically verifiable entailing another experience e' entailing the proposition, "I am empirically experiencing the empirical experience of e". If we then iterate and ask what accounts for the meaning of this proposition, we come to a series of metaⁿ propositions with n tending to infinity.

All of this underscores Aristotle's contention that there must be conditionless starting points for knowledge.

That Ayer's Position is Self-Refuting

If we take Ayer's statement "No act of intuition can be said to reveal a truth about any matter of fact unless it issues in verifiable propositions" I ask if this proposition itself is empirically verifiable or just an act of intuition alone? If Ayer says it is an act of intuition alone, then the principle is self-refuting. If Ayer says this proposition itself issues in verifiable propositions, I then ask what possible empirical verification could there be for such a proposition? This is a universal proposition, no matter how many instances one can bring forth to show that a proposition is empirically verifiable; there is no warrant for inferring from that that therefore "*all* meaningful propositions must be empirically verifiable." So it seems the verificationist principle cannot live by its own rules, the empirical verification principle is itself not empirically verifiable and is therefore self-refuting.

In the end, Ayer's verificationist attempt to rule out the knowledge of God begs the question, is self-refuting, and rules out any kind of knowledge whatsoever, including the knowledge of the truth of verificationism. So far from rendering language about God meaningless, Ayer's verificationism is an ironic testament to the truth of Christ's words, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).