

Handout: A.J. Ayer – *Language, Truth, and Logic*, Chapter 6

Summary:

Problems and Solution

Problem: A.J. Ayer, in his work, "Language, Truth, and Logic," extends his critique of metaphysics to the realms of ethics and theology. He argues that ethical and theological statements, like metaphysical statements, are meaningless because they cannot be empirically verified.

Solution: Ayer's solution is to apply the principle of verification to ethical and theological statements. He asserts that these statements are not meaningful because they cannot be verified through sensory experience. Instead, he suggests that ethical statements are expressions of emotion and theological statements are nonsensical.

Background: Logical Positivism and Verificationism

A.J. Ayer, a key figure in logical positivism, argues that **only two kinds of statements are meaningful**:

1. **Analytic statements** – True by definition (e.g., "All bachelors are unmarried").
2. **Synthetic statements** – Empirically verifiable (e.g., "Water boils at 100°C").

Any claim that **fails to be either analytic or empirically verifiable is meaningless**. This leads Ayer to **reject both ethical and theological discourse** as non-cognitive and devoid of factual content.

Are Ethical Statements Meaningful?

Ayer challenges the assumption that ethical statements are **genuine synthetic propositions**.

- Ethical philosophers often assume that moral judgments **express truths about the world**.
- Ayer denies this, claiming that **ethical statements cannot be verified empirically**.
- He distinguishes between **four types of ethical discourse**:

1. **Definitions of ethical terms** (e.g., "Good means promoting happiness").
 2. **Descriptions of moral psychology** (studied by psychology/sociology).
 3. **Moral exhortations** (commands, not truth-apt statements).
 4. **Moral judgments**—the focus of Ayer's critique.
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Ayer's Emotivism: Ethical Statements Express Emotions

Ayer argues that **ethical statements are not factual claims but expressions of emotion**.

- **Example:** "*Stealing is wrong.*"
 - This does **not** state a verifiable fact.
 - Instead, it functions like saying "*Stealing!!*" in a disapproving tone.
 - Ethical statements are **neither true nor false**—they merely express attitudes.

Key Quote:

"If I say to someone, 'You acted wrongly in stealing that money,' I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, 'You stole that money.' In adding that this action is wrong, I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it."

Thus, **moral language is emotive rather than cognitive**—it expresses approval or disapproval rather than asserting facts.

Rejection of Ethical Naturalism

Ayer rejects **attempts to define moral terms in empirical terms**, including:

1. **Utilitarianism:** Defining "good" as maximizing happiness.
 - It is **not self-contradictory** to say, "*Something that maximizes happiness is not good,*" showing that "good" is not analytically reducible to happiness.
2. **Subjectivism:** Defining moral claims as reports of personal feelings.
 - Saying "*I disapprove of lying*" is a verifiable psychological statement.
 - However, Ayer argues that when we **express** moral disapproval, we are not **asserting** a psychological fact—we are simply evincing emotion.

Conclusion: Ethical terms cannot be reduced to empirical terms, meaning **moral statements are not factual claims**.

Moral Disagreement and Ayer's Response

A common objection to emotivism is that people **disagree about moral issues**, which suggests moral statements have truth-values.

Ayer's response:

- Moral disputes **are really disputes over factual matters**.
- Example: Disagreement over abortion often hinges on **whether a fetus is a person**, rather than moral principles.
- If two people **fully agree on the facts but still disagree morally**, Ayer claims the discussion **ends in an impasse**.
- At this point, disagreement **is just a clash of emotional attitudes**, not a factual debate.

Theological Claims as Meaningless

Ayer extends his critique to **theological language**, arguing that statements like "*God exists*" are **neither true nor false** but **meaningless metaphysical utterances**.

- **Traditional Arguments for God's Existence**
 - Empirical arguments for God's existence (e.g., design arguments) fail because they assume that "God exists" is a verifiable hypothesis.
 - However, the term "**God**" **is not empirically definable**, making the claim meaningless.
- **Atheism and Agnosticism**
 - Atheists assert that "*God does not exist*."
 - Agnostics assert that "*God's existence is uncertain*."
 - Ayer argues that **both positions assume "God exists" is a meaningful proposition**, which he denies.
 - Instead, he claims **both theism and atheism are equally nonsensical**, since "God" refers to an unverifiable concept.

Implications for Aesthetics and Religious Experience

Ayer's argument applies to **aesthetics** and **mysticism** as well:

1. **Aesthetic Judgments:**
 - Like ethical judgments, statements like "*This painting is beautiful*" are

expressions of subjective feeling, not factual claims.

2. **Religious Experience:**

- Ayer acknowledges that people **feel religious experiences**.
 - However, he argues that **such experiences provide no factual knowledge**.
 - Mystics may claim ineffable knowledge of God, but since **they cannot express this in verifiable propositions, it is meaningless**.
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Conclusion: The Radical Consequences of Ayer's Emotivism

1. **Ethical, theological, and aesthetic statements are neither true nor false—they lack cognitive meaning.**
2. **Moral statements express emotions, not objective truths.**
3. **Religious and mystical claims are metaphysical and therefore meaningless.**
4. **Morality and religion should be studied as psychological and sociological phenomena, not as sources of knowledge.**

Ultimately, Ayer's position reduces moral and theological discourse to **emotional expression rather than rational argument**. His radical verificationism eliminates entire domains of traditional philosophy from factual discourse.

Key Takeaways

- **Verification Principle:** Only analytic and empirically verifiable statements are meaningful.
- **Emotivism:** Moral claims express emotions, not truths.
- **Theology and Aesthetics:** Religious and aesthetic statements are non-cognitive.
- **Critique of Ethical Naturalism:** Utilitarianism and subjectivism fail because they assume moral claims can be reduced to empirical claims.
- **Moral Disagreement:** Disputes about ethics are actually **disputes about empirical facts**, not about values themselves.

Ayer's critique of ethics and theology presents **a major challenge to traditional moral philosophy and religious belief**, dismissing them as **non-cognitive expressions of feeling rather than sources of knowledge**.
