

Philosophy and Science- The Burden of Proof

In *Language, Truth, and Logic*, Alfred J. Ayer describes the revolutionary idea that philosophy is only useful and significant if it can be proven. This can be otherwise said as the elimination of metaphysics from the practice. While metaphysics focuses on a priori knowledge questions which are unanswerable to scientific observation and analysis, Ayer feels that one must at least be able to establish a “criterion of verifiability” of a statement- by which one can at least determine if truth or falsity can be discovered. This is also known as the verifiability principle.

“We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express-that is, if he knows what observations would lead him... to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false.” Pg. 35. In other words, Ayer and those who believed like him- the Logical Positivists, wanted philosophy to become much more black and white, because that which cannot be verified at least on some level has little credibility or meaning. After all, how can we make an assumption or criticism of a statement if we have no means by which to do so. Ayer believed sentences had to be either verifiable in their truth/falsity, or conceptual truths. The sentences that fit neither of these criteria are nonsensical. Looking back at past philosophers and their works, the large majority of their metaphysical claims are nonsensical.

In his dialogues Plato makes the claims that there exists a transcendent realm of forms which we cannot understand or relate to in this life, and that our souls are immortal. These are basic metaphysical statements. Neither of these statements fits the criterion of verifiability; that is to say that they are devoid of any literal truth. We cannot establish the means to verify that there is a transcendent realm of forms in another life because we have no experience with any other life. We accept something as “good” or “beautiful” because it is pleasing to us and those around us, not because we have established a way to prove their goodness or beauty. Ayer would not be convinced that either of these exist because we have no way of proving anything besides that which we see for ourselves and come. For the same reason, we cannot verify whether or not our souls live forever. We do not have the ability to even make assertions about what happens after death, because we have no possible way of even making an educated guess.

However, metaphysical statements that may lack any means for being literally true, can still have moral significance. People who truly believe something is true may still reap the benefits of their belief; such as the confidence or inspiration they might draw from it. These metaphysical claims “may still serve to express or arouse, emotion, and thus be subject to ethical or aesthetic standards.”

Another distinction that Ayer makes in his writings is the difference between strong and weak factually significant propositions. Strong propositions are those in which “its truth could be conclusively established in experience,” while weak propositions rely simply on probability. Pg. 37. The difference between strong and weak propositions provides another means of scientific analysis of philosophical claims. However those propositions which are strong are still not definite, which leads us once

again to the conclusion that the only truly verifiable statements are conceptual truths (tautologies). For example; a horse is a horse. Even when looked at scientifically, philosophy struggles to prove anything, but it is Ayer's opinion that the closer we can get to this verification the more successful and useful the practice will become.

Ayer believed that philosophy should not be the creative reconstruction of that which may or may not exist outside our world. Instead, it should be practical and applicable to situations within the earth in which we live, similar to a science. In science, a theory is not a theory unless there is sufficient evidence by which we can believe it to be true and that which is not a theory is useless and therefore ignored. Ayer felt that many previous philosophers had actually prevented new and significant ideas from being formed, because the focus of discussion was that which is not within this realm, and therefore no more than imaginary. As he said, "a number of the traditional "problems of philosophy" are metaphysical, and consequently fictitious." Pg. 44.

While metaphysical problems are certainly interesting and stimulate thinking on various levels, they can be considered "cognitively meaningless." They have no value as knowledge, because knowledge is simply a collection of true beliefs. When we do not have the ability to say a statement is true, we do not have the means to take it as knowledge; it is merely a musing. Ayer's beliefs undermine many of the philosophers before him. Until he came along, the vast majority of philosophy was metaphysical, and therefore unverifiable. It generally focused on that which exists outside of the realm of mortality, which by Ayer's principles means nothing. Because we have no experience of life outside this world, and no means to predict the future, these previous philosophers did not discover anything. What they accomplished, while useful perhaps on a moral or

inspirational level, means little more to society than a young child pondering what will happen after he dies. Philosophy can be beneficial to the world, but only when applied in a scientific or verifiable manner, because only then can anything “true” be established.