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Refutation of Logical Positivism's Views on Meaning and Verifiability

Some ideas after reading Ayer's article: *Language, Truth, and Logic*

A. J. Ayer (29 October 1910 – 27 June 1989) was an English philosopher known for his promotion of logical positivism, and his article can be used as an important reference for the central thesis of logical positivism to some extent. After reading his article, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, and combining the materials I have read before, I want to make an argument about the logical positivist definition of meaning at the same time, I will also give my own view about meaning in my paper.

Before moving on to my argument, I would like to raise an objection to the point of view of logical positivism. Logical positivist (LP) view of meaning can be concluded that for a statement to be meaningful, it must be either an analytic statement that is true solely in virtue of its meaning, or a synthetic statement that is verifiable by experience. However, even if we only focus on this sentence/definition itself, we could also come up with 2 questions. First, is this sentence a synthetic statement? If it is, then it must be verifiable by experience, but it seems no observations will support it. Well, is it an analytic statement? If it is, then it would have to be

true solely in virtue of its meaning. Still, it seems not. At this point, we find a serious problem that the “principle” provided by logical positivism is neither verifiable nor analytic, then the sentence itself is meaningless, so how can we use a meaningless principle as a criterion to judge whether a statement is meaningful or not? So here, I conclude that I have enough reasons to believe that we need to formulate a more complete and accurate definition of meaning.

First of all, although the view of logical positivism is vulnerable, I still decide to think along this line of thought at the beginning, because the establishment of a new definition entirely seems impossible, and then, the point of view of logical positivism, in fact, is still valuable, so maybe I can build a new standard based on the original point of view. Now, I want to take a simple example which the statement is meaningful for logical positivist: red is a color. This statement seems verifiable no matter in which condition. However, thinking about this question: regardless of the definition from LP, does this statement really make sense in any condition? Certainly not, if I am discussing with others about math problems, or just talking with my mother and greeting her, this sentence will be meaningless, even though according to LP, it is meaningful. Can you imagine when you talk with you Math professor or your classmates, they suddenly start discussing color with you. One thing to note is that I am not saying you cannot talk about this topic, rather the topic of color has nothing to do with mathematics. Of course, some people may argue that color may also be mentioned as an example to explain some mathematical theories; I will elaborate on this argument in the following paragraph.

with the above-mentioned considerations, I come to a conclusion that whether a statement is meaningful or not depends on the context of the statement. In other words, if the statement is relevant to the topic you are talking about, then it is meaningful. However, now there is a new question: how do you judge whether the statement itself is related to what you are talking about. In my opinion, if a statement is intended to relate to your topic, it can be used as an argument/example to prove or support your topic,

Here, I would like to respond to, and make an explanation of the possible rebuttal of my point in the third paragraph; in that argument, if the discussion about color is used as an example, then it is meaningful, because it is related to the topic, math. After discussing the problem I have mentioned before, there seems to be another problem that it is possible for people to make any pertinent statements they want, and all these statements are meaningful. In my opinion, it is impossible, so here I want to add another criteria to the point I made earlier that the statements people make should also be an analytic statement which means it is true solely in virtue of its meaning, and the reason people provide should also be logical. More specifically, every statement people provide should have a reason: why he or she makes this statement?

So at this point, I have a clearer understanding of meaningfulness for the time being. However, another question bothers me: is experience the only way to verify meaningfulness? My answer should be no. In my point of view, experience cannot be the only standard to determine meaningfulness. The reason is that the verification theory of meaning attempts to use individual examples to prove or summarize statements, and how can we prove the statement through these individual examples? A single experience, no matter whose, is always limited and biased.

Consequently, counterexample will always be found. Although logical positivism proposes strong verifiability and weak verifiability as supplements, these two supplements themselves are still problematic. For strong verifiability, it is mentioned that a statement is strongly verifiable if and only if its truth could be conclusively established in experience, so it brings up the problem that experience is still used as the standard. Besides, if the strong verifiability is true, then scientific laws turn out to be meaningless according to this criterion, because these scientific laws are universal generalization which can never be conclusively established based on observation. For the weak verifiability, it is suggested that a statement is weakly verifiable if and only if some experiential propositions can be deduced from it in conjunction with certain other premises without being deducible from those other premises alone. However, if this criterion is possible, there will be a problem that the weak verifiability is too weak; every statement turns out to be verifiable according to the weak verification criterion.

From the above discussion, I think the logical positivism criterion of meaningful judgment is wrong, and their criterion of verify through experience is also problematic. In my opinion, whether a statement is meaningful depends on the specific context and actual situation and can be verified from multiple aspects rather than just through experience. And for the strong and weak verifiability proposed by A. J. Ayer, I also think that they still have their own problems, and I refute these problems in detail in my last paragraph.

Reference

Ayer, A. J. *Language, Truth, and Logic*. 2d ed., Gollancz, 1953.