

A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Chapter VI: “Critique of Ethics and Theology”

I. Context: Ayer’s Verificationism

1. The Verification Principle

- Ayer was a leading figure of **logical positivism**, influenced by the Vienna Circle.
- According to his **verification principle**,

“A statement is meaningful if and only if it is empirically verifiable or analytically true.”
- **Analytic truths**: true by definition (e.g., “All bachelors are unmarried”).
- **Empirical (synthetic) truths**: verifiable through observation (e.g., “The cat is on the mat”).
- Anything that is **neither analytic nor empirically testable** is **literally meaningless**—it expresses no genuine proposition.
- This eliminates as “nonsense” the traditional claims of **metaphysics, theology, and much of ethics**.

2. Ayer’s Aim

- To apply this criterion of meaning to ethics and religion.
 - His goal is not to show that moral or religious statements are false, but that they **lack cognitive meaning**—they do not state facts that could be true or false.
-

II. The Four Types of Ethical Propositions (pp. 102–104)

Ayer distinguishes several kinds of ethical utterances:

1. **Definitions of ethical terms** – philosophical analysis (“‘good’ means...”).

2. **Descriptions of moral experience** – psychological or sociological (“People feel guilt when...”).
3. **Exhortations or commands** – imperatives (“Be honest!”).
4. **Actual ethical judgments** – normative claims (“Stealing is wrong”).

Only the first type belongs to *ethical philosophy proper*; the others are outside philosophy in Ayer’s sense.

III. Critique of Naturalistic and Subjectivist Ethics (pp. 104–106)

- Ayer rejects **utilitarian** and **subjectivist** attempts to define moral terms in empirical or psychological terms:
 - Against utilitarianism: it is not self-contradictory to say that the action causing the greatest happiness is wrong.
 - Against subjectivism: it is not self-contradictory to say that people approve of bad things.
- Therefore, moral judgments **cannot be reduced to empirical propositions**.

IV. The Emotive Theory of Ethics (pp. 106–110)

Ayer’s central thesis: Ethical statements do not state facts; they express emotions.

- Saying “Stealing is wrong” is equivalent to saying “Stealing!!” with a tone of disapproval.
- Ethical terms like “good,” “bad,” “ought,” etc., **express feelings and evoke similar feelings** in others.
- They are neither true nor false, since they do not describe the world—they are **noncognitive**.
- Disagreement in ethics is not about facts but about attitudes or emotions.

V. Implications for Ethical Argument (pp. 110–112)

- There can be **no rational argument about moral values** themselves—only about empirical facts that might underlie them.
 - If two people share basic moral values, they can reason about what actions fit those values.
 - But **pure value disagreements** cannot be resolved by evidence or logic.
-

VI. Consequences for Ethics and Aesthetics (pp. 112–113)

- Ethics and aesthetics both concern **expressions of feeling**, not knowledge of objective value.
 - Scientific study of ethics or aesthetics reduces to psychology or sociology—describing why we feel and act as we do.
 - There can be no “science of morals” or “knowledge of beauty.”
-

VII. Critique of Theology (pp. 113–120)

Ayer applies the verification principle to **religious language**:

- Claims like “God exists” or “God is good” are **not empirically verifiable**.
 - They are **not false**—they are **meaningless** (they make no factual claim).
 - Even atheism and agnosticism presuppose the *meaningfulness* of “God exists,” so they too are mistaken if they treat it as a genuine proposition.
 - The same holds for claims about the **soul**, **afterlife**, or **religious experience**—these cannot be verified and thus have no cognitive content.
-

VIII. Summary Table

Type of Statement	Example	Cognitive Status	Verification	Ayer's Verdict
Analytic	"All bachelors are unmarried."	Meaningful	True by definition	✓
Empirical	"Water boils at 100°C."	Meaningful	Observable	✓
Ethical	"Stealing is wrong."	Noncognitive	Not observable	✗ (emotive only)
Theological	"God exists."	Noncognitive	Not observable	✗ (meaningless)