

ON THE LOGIC OF LOGICAL POSITIVISM AND THE EXTENT OF ITS NEGATION OF METAPHYSICS

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Abstract

The logic of Logical Positivism rests in the verification principle which holds that the meaning of a statement is the method of its verification. The logical positivists in tandem with their principle of verification posit that whatever that is must be verifiable. This implies that whatever that fails the principle of verification will be regarded as meaningless and nonsensical. Therefore, it is only that which passes the test of the verification principle that will be regarded as meaningful. This way, logical positivists employed the tool of verification principle to negate the possibility of metaphysics. Consequently, this study seeks to adopt the method of analysis to examine the logic of logical positivism with a view to finding out whether its argument is sufficient to negate the existence of metaphysics. Or put differently, to what extent could logical positivism go in its negation of metaphysics? This study concludes that the verification principle that was put forward by the logical positivists does not possess the potency to deal a blow on the possibility of metaphysics.

Keywords: Logical Positivism, Verification Principle.

Introduction

Logical positivism is the view that statements are meaningful only if they can be verified either directly or indirectly in experience. The terminology was first used by Henri de Saint Simon. He used it to designate scientific method and its extension to philosophy. It was Auguste Comte that however popularized positivism so much it later developed into what is known today as “Logical Positivism”. Logical positivism is out to analyse all claims to knowledge as well as all assertions of science. As a matter of importance, Logical Positivism originated in Vienna, in the 1920s. P. Edwards describing logical positivism said that “it is the name given to a set of philosophical ideals put forward by the Vienna circle” (P.Edwards. ed., in Encyclopedia of Philosophy, vol. V, p. 52): As a corollary, Stumpf was of the views that:

The men who formed the Vienna circle were by temperament attracted to the methods of science and mathematics. They were disposed to reject metaphysics, as had the earlier positivists who considered metaphysics, as Comte did, as outdated by science. Now they had the additional argument, because of Russell’s work in logic and Wittgenstein’s powerful formulation of the relation of logic and language in the Tractatus, that metaphysics is impossible as shown by the logical and essential character of language. To differentiate themselves from the earlier Comtean positivists and to emphasize that they would combine the rigorous techniques of the new logic with the empirical temper of Hume, they called themselves “logical positivists” or sometimes logical empiricists. (Stumpf: 1994:417-418).

The logical positivists in 1929, published a pamphlet which was titled *Scientific Conception of the World*. Their target and position came to limelight with the publication of this pamphlet which summarises logical positivism as:

Philosophy to end all philosophies. How? This is so because the Vienna circle members believed that the philosophical problems arise from ambiguities and lack of clarity in the use of words. When such lack of clarity and ambiguities are cleared in our use of words, the apparent philosophical problems would have been proved to be pseudo problems, and this would be the end of all philosophies. (Ekwutosi: 2007:1).

The logical positivists believed that to clear philosophy of its problems would tantamount to elimination of metaphysics. To this effect, they propounded a principle known as the “verification Principle”. They used the verification principle to test which sentence does and which does not express a genuine proposition about a matter of fact. This is against the backdrop that they believed that the metaphysical languages and propositions were meaningless or senseless as Ludwig Wittgenstein said in the *Tractacus*. The logical positivists as a result of this developed the verification principle to serve as a basic yardstick for ascertaining the meaningfulness of any given proposition. A proposition can only be considered meaningful if such proposition passes the acid test of this criterion by way of fulfilling its requirements which consists in the notion that the meaning of a statement is the method of its verification. (Hangling: 2010:17). The motive behind this assumption was based on the fact that verification must always rely upon empirical observations, which is in sense experience. By inference, any statement that could not be verified under the observational method is meaningless. The principle of verification has to serve as a method of verifying the conditions under which a proposition is to be regarded as false and those under which the proposition would be true. Regarding this, the Logical Positivists explained that: *When we ask about a sentence, what does it mean? What we expect is instruction as to the circumstances in which the sentence is to be used. We want a description of the condition under which the sentence will form a true proposition and of those which will make it false.* Apparently, the verification principle centers on the method for examining whether a proposition is meaningless or not. Statements of logic and mathematics are as they were meaningful because according to the logical positivists, their meaning can be proved by purely formal means since they do not make claims about state of affairs.

Verification principle in its undiluted form holds that the meaning of a statement is the method of its verification. This principle was adopted by the logical positivists to aid them sift meaningful statements from the ones that are meaningless. To know the meaning of a statement is to know how to verify it, put differently, "a statement has meaning if and only if it is possible to verify it. (Onyeocha: 2000: 33). This implies that any proposition that is not empirically verifiable is meaningless. Expatiating further, A.J. Ayer has this to say:

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 observation he would under certain conditions accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being

false. If, on the other hand, the putative proposition is of such a character that the assumption of its truth, or falsehood, is consistent with any assumption whatsoever concerning the nature of its future experience, then as far as he is concerned, it is, if not a tautology, a mere pseudo- proposition. The sentence expressing it may be emotionally significant to him, but it is not literally significant. (Ayer: 1990: 14).

Hence, the logical positivists believed that the meaningfulness of any proposition depends on its ability to be empirically verifiable; there must be some grounds on which this can be done. They gave two grounds for this which are “Observation and Analysis”. A proposition is meaningful if the fact stated by the proposition when analyzed must, either be a tautology or a contradiction for it to be meaningful.

Logical Positivism

Logical Positivism is a movement that arose in Vienna in the 1920s. It was characterized by the view that scientific knowledge is the only kind of actual knowledge and that all traditional metaphysical doctrines should be rejected as meaningless. With time, logical positivism became a theory in Epistemology with central thesis as verificationism, which asserts that only statements that are verifiable by means of empirical observation are cognitively meaningful. “Logical positivism seeks to analyze all claims to knowledge, all assertions of science and life, and only those assertions have meaning which are verified by empirical facts or are connected logically with such facts and therefore verifiable” (Martinich and Sosa: 2005:1)

Verification Principle

This is a philosophical doctrine that emanated from school of Logical Positivism. It holds that only statements that are empirically verifiable are cognitively meaningful. That is to say that the principle of verification discards as meaningless all metaphysical statements of traditional philosophy and even other kinds of philosophical statements like ethical, aesthetic and religious statements, on the ground that they do not pass the test of verificationism. The logical positivists used the verification principle to test which sentence did and which did not express a genuine proposition about a matter of fact. This is against the backdrop that they believed that the metaphysical language, propositions were meaningless or senseless as Ludwig Wittgenstein said in the tractacus. The logical positivists as a result of this, developed the verification principle to serve as a basic yardstick for ascertaining the meaningfulness of any given proposition. Thus, erification Principle holds that “a proposition can only be considered meaningful if such proposition passes the acid text of this criterion by way of fulfilling its requirements which consists in the notion that the meaning of a statement is the method of its verification” (Martinich and Sosa: 2005:1) The motive behind this assumption was based on the fact that verification must always rely upon empirical observations, which is in sense experience. By inference, any statement that could not be verified under the observational method is meaningless.

Logical Positivism, Verication Principle and Negation of Metaphysics

The logical positivists made so much effort to get metaphysics eliminated. “The reason is that they see metaphysics as a problem which philosophy has carried for a long time and from which philosophy must be liberated (Ozumba: 2001: 43)” Simply because metaphysics is regarded

by the logical positivists to be meaningless, philosophers who associate themselves with it are considered to have committed sacrilege and in order to stop this, they tagged metaphysics a taboo and as such must be pushed out from the philosophical realm. They debunked metaphysics on the ground that its statements are emotive and conveys only imageries. To them, therefore, every statement which could not be reduced to the simplest statements about the empirically given, was dismissed as empty of meaning. They are suspicious of abstract entities like substance, relations, classes and so their effort is to decipher whether those works are cognitively significant. For instance, Ayer opposed the metaphysicians vehemently on two count charges, firstly, that his statement does not point to anything which could be empirically verified, secondly, that the metaphysician did not provide a dictionary which would help transform metaphysical statements into statements that are directly or indirectly verifiable.

On his own part, R. Carnap, formulated two ways through which a proposition can be meaningful. First, a sentence which is meaningless may not at face value be meaningful. Sentence like “cax, bax, and jax” are meaningless in English language, but because the words are followed by “and”, we may think that it is a meaningful statement. Second, meaningless sentences emanate from putting together words which are in counter syntactical fashion. Sentence like “what been this you” neglected the rules of syntax (i.e. sentence building) in English language and so means nothing. Carnap maintained that any sentence about metaphysical entities that suffers from either of the above defects is to be termed meaningless. Metaphysical statements are therefore found wanting with respect to the first criterion as they always purports to designate something which in actual fact they do not. To this end, Metaphysical statements are referred to as pseudo statements.

The assumption that there must be some kind of reality which will correspond to every descriptive phrase has always acted like the *Vampire and blood* relationship on which metaphysical speculation thrives on. Bertrand Russell being suspicious of the above said that there are some phrases that have meaning but no content, no reference and are empty symbols. He therefore, calls for the exclusion of definite descriptive phrases that have no reference by way of analysis. Example of such is “the mayor of Nigeria” when there is nothing of such like that. Even though statements containing such descriptive phrase may have meaning, they are empty and have no content and as such refer to nothing. Metaphysical speculation has more often than not been accused of falling into this quagmire situation. J. Passmore in support of the logical positivists, posits that:

To argue against Metaphysics in details, they concluded, was a complete waste of time if one Metaphysician say, “reality is the Absolute” and another that “Reality is a plurality of spirits”, the empiricist need not trouble himself to reply to their arguments. He needs only to say to them what possible experience could settle the issue between you? To this question Metaphysician have no answer, and from this, it follows, according to the verifiability principle, that their assertions are quite without meaning. It is as senseless on this view, to say that “Reality is not Absolute” as to say “reality is the absolute” for neither assertion can be verified. Thus Metaphysical disputes are wholly pointless. (Passmore: 2008:368)

The principle of verification tried all it could to do away with metaphysics even with the least energy at its disposition but it could not because at a point, the principle found itself under

attacked. Carnap as a way of rescuing it came up with “Testability and Confirmability”. In the process of proving the validity of his theory, Carnap criticized the view of Schlick that the “Rivers flow up-hill” is verifiable because it is logically possible on the strength of his theory of confirmability as non-sequitor. In his thought, the sentence River flows up-hills is conformable, “not because of the logical possibility of the fact described in the sentence, but because of the physical possibility of the process of conformability; it is possible to test or to confirm the sentence or its negation by observation of rivers with the help of survey instruments”. (Ammerman: 2005:133). Sequel to this, he proposed the replacement of the principle of verification with the idea of testability and conformability. This is done to accommodate universal statements which the principle of verification could not verify.

The Implication of Negation of Metaphysics

As a result of the attempt at elimination of Metaphysical propositions by the logical positivists, implications abound pertaining to issues like ethics, aesthetics, religion, among others. In connection with this I.M. Onyeocha opines that "Logical positivists maintain that just as there is no possible way of verifying by empirical observation, of the statements of metaphysics and ethics, neither is there any way of empirically verifying the statements of theory of knowledge social philosophy of history, philosophy of religion or aesthetics" (Onyeocha: 2000:33).

This is as a result of the fact that the verification principle acknowledges only two kinds of meaningful statements, namely; the statements of the empirically observed fact and the abstract statements of logic and mathematics.

Again, Ayer, in his expatiation of his version of Logical Positivism postulated that to talk about the existence or the nature of God is to utter meaningless echo. Hear him:

The term ‘god’ is a metaphysical term. And if ‘god’ is a metaphysical term, then it cannot be even probable that a god exist for to say that ‘god exists’ is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance. If the assertion that there is God is nonsensical then the assertion that there is no God is equally nonsensical.(Ayer : 1990:14).

It may be of interest to note that Ayer includes the statements about the soul, mystical experiences, ethical judgments, etc., into the family of meaningless statements. He attacked ethical judgments and aesthetics on the grounds that they have no objective validity which is mysteriously independent of ordinary sense-experience. It is in line with this that he averred that “sentences which simply express moral judgments do not say anything. They are pure expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood”.(Ayer: 1990: 14).

As a corollary, Ludwig Wittgenstein referred to metaphysics, religion and ethics as the mystical and ‘unsayable’ things. He was credited with these words, "there are indeed, things that cannot be put into words, they make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical"(Wittgenstein: 1974:7). What Wittgenstein is saying here is that those things that cannot be put into words are manifestly clear even as they are mystical; as such, they are not subject to empirical observation nor verification. For instance, the ethical, religious and metaphysical questions that ask the questions - what is good?, does God exist?, what is real?, etc, according to Wittgenstein, are actually nonsensical, since they picture nothing about facts.

From what has been said above, it can be observed that the principle of verification put forward by Logical Positivists not only makes nonsense of metaphysical, ethical, religious and aesthetic statements such as "there is God", "it is wrong to kill" and "David is more handsome than Fred." The logical positivists went on to develop the emotive theory of ethics which states that "ethical statements are not really statements conveying knowledge at all, but are only expressions of our feelings or emotions"(Onyeocha: 2000:32). This statement interprets "killing is wrong" merely as expressing our feeling of disapproval of killing. Since they are solely interested in statements possessing the character of being empirically testable, they are holding onto this tagged emotive statement as cognitively meaningless.

Following from the above about the implication of elimination of metaphysics one can deduce that if metaphysical statements are eliminated in line with the logic of the Logical Positivists, it follows that metaphysical realities, ethical judgements and aesthetic judgements are nothing to go by. That means that metaphysical realities are put to rest, that religious statements are worthless and that ethical and moral judgements are baseless. It is better imagined what the human society would be like if their arguments were to hold water. Even Science which the Logical Positivists hold in high esteem, also makes use of the general statements such as *all men are mortal, all mammals have air, etc.* Every critically minded person would agree that those statements are not verifiable since to verify them would entail observing an infinite number of cases, which is logically impossible.

Limit of Logical Positivism on Negation of Metaphysics

To what extent could logical positivism go in its negation of metaphysics? This is the concern of this study at this juncture. Consequently, it is of utmost interest to observe that the verification principle in itself falls short of its own standard as it cannot be verified analytically or empirically: judging by its own axiomatic functionality, it is meaningless. This implies that the principle of verification is a self-defeating principle as well as a pseudo principle because it cannot be verified in any way at all. Thus, as a pseudo-principle, it cannot put an end to metaphysics because one should not expect a meaningless criterion to serve as a criterion for testing meaningfulness of other things. Logical Positivists should be made to understand that there can be statements of a special logical type to which the prescribed criterion of meaningfulness do not apply. Therefore, to say that metaphysics is nonsense is nonsense itself. Suffice it to say that logical positivists committed the fallacy of dimensional exclusivity and narrow mindedness in their understanding of the task of philosophy. They restricted philosophy to language or linguistic analysis only. Because of that, they excluded greatly, what has been traditionally included in philosophy.

Again, the logical positivists in their project failed to understand the spiritual nature of man. As such could not have succeeded in eliminating metaphysics. This is because "man as a psychosomatic being is involved in both sense experience and spiritual (metaphysical) experience".(Ekwutosi:2007:6). By eulogizing experiential knowledge, the logical positivists restricted the concept of truth, knowledge, verification and meaning to sense experience at the expense of all other categories of human experience. In the view of Popper, the attempt of the logical positivists to search for the criterion of meaning was a mistake. In developing this line of thought, he said that the greatest knowledge comes from the natural science and yet they have many terms that are undefined such as Mass, Energy, Atom, Light, Physics, Measurement, etc. In

consonance with this, he said that the notion that, “if we are to have worthwhile discussion, we need first to define our term, which is demonstrably self-contradictory. Every time we define a term, we have to at least introduce one new term into the definition, otherwise the definition is circular and so we are launched into an infinite regress”.(Magee:2004:59).

Furthermore, there is an ambiguity in the idea of significance as was advocated by the logical positivists. When we take this significance to mean “having meaning” or “being important”, then the arising problem is, “who determines the meaning of a term, the group, the community or the individual? Do the logical positivists really have the mandate to determine things that are significant to us? (Ozumba:2001:37)” These questions as they were, are begging for answers. It is absurd that a thing need not be significant for it to be meaningful or vice versa. As such, they have a faulted foundation.

As a matter of fact, it is very much arguable, that the logical positivists did not understand fully, that the experiential knowledge is not the only type of knowledge. This notwithstanding, their faith in experience as the ideal source of knowledge is not well grounded. This is because experience has proved itself to be unreliable. We often discover that we experience a particular thing only for it to be a mirage. The conventional problems of hallucination, misperception, illusion and phantasmagoria, etc, have a point to prove in this regard. With all these, we cannot assert dogmatically and conclusively too, that our sense experience is the only genuine and reliable knowledge.

More still, it is important to note that the attacks on metaphysics by the logical positivists were mainly drawn from early Wittgenstein *Tractatus* which was criticized by Wittgenstein himself as being myopic. He equally said that its argument must be thrown away in a sweeping argument as nonsensical. He criticized *Tractatus* based on its view on language that language consists essentially in picturing reality, that is one-to-one correspondence, also that language must state fact for it to be meaningful. Unfortunately, Wittgenstein ran into an error with the above assertions which the logical positivists myopically embraced. Interestingly, the later Wittgenstein reversed these earlier positions of his on language by saying that language has many usages other than picturing facts. According to him, "we do use language in many other ways-to give orders, to greet people, to make jokes, to play games, etc."(Wittgenstein: 1968: 11). The implication is that propositions are meaningful not because it pictures reality but according to how they are being used. However, the logical positivists restricted the concepts of meaning, knowledge, truth and verification to the empiricals alone. As a result, they incurred too many heart-rending questions such as: why must the meaningfulness of any proposition be restricted to the realm of empirical certification only? Why must truth be taken to be only truth cornering matters of fact about the empirical world? Why must the word “knowledge” be consigned only to information about matters of fact regarding the experiential world? These are some of the vital questions and issues that have rendered the endeavour of the logical positivists null and void. Indeed, F. Copleston was right when he stated thus: “it seems to me absurd to represent metaphysical systems and world views as illegitimate”.(Copleston:2003:9). Without mincing words, it is crystal clear that logical positivists failed to succeed in the attempt to eliminate metaphysics. Instead, they succeeded in demonstrating a peripheral understanding of metaphysics and metaphysical issues.

Metaphysics is Possible

Metaphysics is possible because it is a natural disposition. It deals with pure rational concepts which can never be given in any possible experience. For instance, when we accept the distinction between appearance and reality and that there is more to reality than we can perceive in our sense-perception, then we appreciate the role and value of metaphysics. According to Benjamin Ewelu, "Metaphysics is a natural disposition of human reason, metaphysics is not only possible, it is actual.(Ewelu: 2007:16). This is because it is in the nature of pure reason to seek the most complete and most permanent, for the unconditional, and for the most perfect and for the ultimate explanation of the whole reality. This natural tendency in man to raise questions about the metaphysical issues will ever be there. Hence, "that the human spirit will ever give up metaphysical researches is as little to be expected as that we should prefer to give up breathing altogether in order to avoid inhaling impure air.(Ewelu: 2007:16).

Even Immanuel Kant in his attack on metaphysics did agree at the end of the day, that man has within him the natural urge towards metaphysics. In as much as the human nature is composed of spiritual, psychological or metaphysical dimensions, any attempt to eliminate metaphysics will be futile and unproductive. Therefore, metaphysics is possible. Expatriating on the inseverable link between philosophy and metaphysics, G.O. Ozumba stated that "those who are clamoring for the elimination of metaphysics are also calling for the crucifixion and death of philosophy, Philosophy without metaphysics is a corpse and any eulogy to philosophy that has been divested of metaphysics is like a requiem hymn that is sang to the corpse of the dead."(Ozumba:2001:46).

Another important thing to note here is that science cannot do without metaphysics. Ozumba noted about Schlick, a member of Vienna circle, of making this clear when he said that "if we are to obtain any scientific knowledge at all, we must also accept as real some things that are not given, otherwise empirical science will come to an end."(Ozumba:2001:49). Metaphysics as the science of general principle cannot be eliminated and it is in this way that the frontiers of knowledge are expanded. The reason is that "while other disciplines study one aspect of being or the other, metaphysics studies being as being in all its ramification."(Omoregbe:2003:134).

There is no gainsaying the fact as to the indispensability of metaphysics. This is so since metaphysics searches for the ultimate cause of reality, and it arises out of its quest to understand the world. Afterall, what philosophy is interested in, in all the other disciplines is their metaphysical undertone. Therefore, because philosophy is possible it follows that metaphysics is possible. Such metaphysical questions about substance, God, causality, man and his place in the world, immorality, freedom are very important and real questions which the empirical sciences have no answer to. For this reason, man in his desire and hunger to answer these questions engages in metaphysics. To this effect, Metaphysics with this role cannot be dispensed because "by the desire towards it, it must endure."(Ekwutosi:2007:7).

Conclusion

Having examined the philosophy of logical positivism in which the proponents tried to negate the possibility of metaphysics with the tool of principle of verification, one can rightly say that they ventured into an impossible task. This is because their verification principle is replete with flaws which led to its collapse. Based on this, the principle has nothing to offer and the efforts of its proponents to eliminate metaphysics is a fruitless one because metaphysics forms part of every philosophy including logical positivism itself. On the other hand, although the principle of verification could not achieve its end which is to put an end to metaphysics, it

however, succeeded in making philosophers more awake especially in their use of language. It actualised this by means of its emphasis on language, clarity of expressions and avoidance of ambiguities in our everyday expression. In this sense, one can deduce that logical positivism is more of a contribution to the field of Logic rather than an attack on metaphysics.

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