

Language Truth and Logic *Pierre Cruse*

Language, Truth and Logic (LTL) is nothing if not ambitious. In a little under 150 pages, Ayer aims to resolve the major questions of philosophy. He doesn't propose to resolve the questions by actually *answering* them, but by showing them to be spurious. They are spurious, he thinks, because they concern questions of 'metaphysics'. And Ayer thinks he can show that metaphysical questions, and the answers which philosophers propose to them, are uniformly meaningless.

I think few would disagree that there is something slightly naïve about Ayer's project – or that he doesn't entirely succeed in carrying it out. However, the question I want to look at here is whether the basic idea behind the project is a sound one. Ayer's guiding principle – that a statement that is not verifiable is meaningless – is often criticised on the grounds that it is either baseless, or worse, inconsistent. However, I will argue that the situation for Ayer is not as bad here as is sometimes made out. That's not to say that I will agree with Ayer: I do not agree with many of the conclusions Ayer reaches, and I do not think he provides satisfactory arguments for them for reasons I will explain. However, I also think there is more to be said in his defence than one might think, even though it ultimately isn't quite enough to save his project. In the following, I will try to explain why this is.

I: The argument behind Language, Truth and Logic – The Verifiability Criterion

Ayer's aim, as I said above, was to argue against 'metaphysics'. Metaphysics, as he understands it, is the activity of trying to discover matters of fact which cannot be known on the basis of experience. Ayer thinks he can show this activity to be illegitimate, by showing that the propositions metaphysics deals in are meaningless.

In order to demonstrate this, Ayer proposes a criterion by which we can sort meaningful from meaningless statements. The criterion he calls the 'verifiability criterion of meaning' or 'principle of verification' (POV). The principle of verification says that a statement is factually significant for a 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, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false'. In other words – as he explains himself later – a statement is meaningful if and only if there are possible experiences that would count as *evidence* for or against it.

The POV as stated applies to 'factual' propositions, that is, those which aim to make true or false statements about the way the world is. In addition, however, Ayer allows statements to be meaningful when they are *analytic* or *tautologous*, that is, true simply in virtue of the words involved. Examples of such statements are 'ewes are female', or 'a numismatist collects coins'. Statements like this are meaningful, but don't strictly say anything about the world – rather, Ayer says, they express relations between the meanings of the words involved. However, Ayer thinks that if a statement is neither analytic, nor empirically verifiable, then it is meaningless.

Ayer gives as an example of the sort of claim this criterion will class as meaningless, the sceptical claim that the world we perceive is 'unreal'. This sounds at first like a meaningful (if unlikely) supposition. However, no observations could possibly count for or against its truth: observations could only confirm how we experience the world rather than the nature of the reality behind our experience. Nor is the supposition that the world is radically different to how we experience it analytically false – its falsity does not follow simply from the meanings of the words involved. Therefore, by Ayer's criterion the claim that the world behind our perceptions is unreal is meaningless; it has no chance of even counting as true or false.

Having introduced the principle of verification, Ayer goes on in the rest of the book to apply it to various areas of discourse, philosophical and otherwise. The areas he looks at are primarily areas where we might think metaphysical propositions are involved, but which seem to be perfectly meaningful. Thus, his aim in discussing them is to show how we can understand them without the intrusion of meaningless metaphysics. There isn't room here to go through everything Ayer says, but I'll mention a selection of his ideas to give the general picture.

II: The Elimination of Metaphysics

The first question Ayer raises is the nature of philosophical inquiry. As he is, essentially, writing a work of philosophy, he needs to show that doing philosophy does not essentially require us to inquire into metaphysical questions – factual questions which cannot be decided by appeal to experiential evidence.

To counter this suggestion, Ayer argues that philosophy is in the business of *analysis*. Analysis, for Ayer, is simply inquiry into the meanings, or as he prefers to put it, the 'definitions' of words. A familiar example of this kind of inquiry (though not Ayer's) might be the case of analysing the notion of 'knowledge'. Traditional analyses of knowledge consist in putting forward some definition of the term 'knowledge' in terms which do not presuppose it, such as 'knowledge is justified true belief'. This definition will either be analytically true, or (as in this case) we will notice that there are cases that fall under the analysis which we would not class as knowledge, or vice versa, in which the definition will be analytically false. The important point about this kind of inquiry is that there is nothing 'metaphysical' involved in it. We are merely looking for some way of characterising the situations in which we would apply the term 'knowledge', and the knowledge we get from our inquiry is essentially just of analytic truths. If we succeed in doing this, we learn something not about the world, but about the meanings of our words.

Ayer's applies this idea in a more controversial way in his analysis of statements about ordinary material objects (see LTL, pp 64-69). The problem here is that on a common understanding material objects are thought to be 'substances' which exist in the external world entirely independently of our experience of them. But talk about metaphysical substances that exist independently of our perception of them is unverifiable, since Ayer thinks there are no experiences which would count as evidence for the truth of sentences about these substances. However, given the frequency with which we talk about material objects it would be highly implausible for Ayer to dismiss all such talk as meaningless. His solution is to propose that statements about material objects are not really about mind-independent substances at

all. Rather, they are what he calls 'logical constructions' out of the immediate contents of our experience, also known as 'sense-contents'.

Ayer's idea is that we can translate any sentence that contains the word 'table' into an equivalent statement that refers only to sense-contents. Roughly, his claim is that a material object can be defined as a group of connecting sense-contents that bear a certain kind of relation of similarity to each other. Thus, what characterises the table in front of me is the fact that the sense-data in a certain (table-shaped) region of my sensory field are all similar (brown, hard, etc.) and are different from the directly adjacent parts of my sensory field (which are empty). Statements about tables, then, can be translated into other statements that refer only to relations of similarity between sense-data by referring to relations between brown, hard elements of my sense-field and their relations to other parts of my experience.

Philosophy, then, does not violate the principle of verifiability, on the grounds that philosophical knowledge is ultimately not 'factual', but just about the meanings of words. Another area in which the same applies is mathematics and logic (see LTL, pp. 75-87). The apparent problem here is that mathematical propositions like ' $6+7=13$ ' appear to give factual knowledge, but are not known on the basis of sense-experience – you can know that $6+7=13$ without ever counting any actual objects. Again, however, Ayer argues that mathematical propositions are true just in virtue of the meanings of the constituent symbols ('6', '7', '+', '=' and '13'), so they are not really 'factual'. The same goes for logical principles.

A further area in which Ayer applies the principle of verifiability is in ethics (LTL, pp. 102-114). As Ayer notes ethical propositions pose a problem for his criterion. Consider an ethical statement such as 'killing innocent people is wrong'. This statement certainly seems to be meaningful. However, it isn't obviously analytic, since it isn't clear you could come to know it is true simply by virtue of reflecting on the meanings of the words involved in stating it. Nor is it obviously synthetic, since it is not clear what observations would count for or against it. But if it is neither analytic nor synthetic, then the principle of verifiability would class it as meaningless. This is clearly unacceptable.

One obvious tactic that Ayer *could* pursue in accounting for moral and other value judgements would be to adopt what we might call a descriptivist theory of ethical terms. According to a descriptivist theory, ethical judgements are equivalent to statements of non-ethical fact. One such theory, for example, is utilitarianism. According to utilitarianism to say that some action is right is to say it is conducive to the general happiness. However, Ayer thinks this kind of analysis is unsatisfactory. For Ayer, we can recall, a philosophical theory such as utilitarianism must – if it is true – be analytically true, true as a matter of definition. However, he argues that since it is not contradictory to assert that something is morally right without being conducive to general happiness, utilitarianism cannot be analytically true. The same goes, Ayer thinks, for other 'descriptivist' theories that equate being right or good with the satisfaction of some factual condition.

Ayer's alternative is to deny that moral judgements express propositions at all. Or rather, they do not convey any propositions other than the factual propositions that are already involved in stating them. If I say 'killing innocent people is wrong', then I am

expressing no proposition, but merely my disapproval of killing innocent people. To use Ayer's way of putting it, stating that killing innocent people is wrong is like writing 'killing innocent people' with a special kind of exclamation mark designed to show that I am expressing disapproval. If, on the other hand, I say 'it was wrong for Pol Pot to have killed so many innocent people', my assertion has some factual content – it asserts that Pol Pot killed so many innocent people – but in addition my statement only serves to express my disapproval of Pol Pot's killing those people. Ayer's theory is therefore sometimes known as the 'boo-hooray' theory of moral judgements – saying that killing innocent people is wrong is very much like saying something along the lines of 'killing innocent people – Boo!' – since 'boo' expresses disapproval of something without making a factual statement.

III: Do Ayer's conclusions follow?

Ayer applies his criterion in a number of further areas, but there isn't time to outline them here. However, I hope this gives a flavour of Ayer's general project. The basic theme, as we have seen, is that Ayer wants to go through various areas of discourse (talk about material objects, mathematics, ethics, and also truth, probability, other minds, and other topics) to show how they can be interpreted in line with the basic guiding principle – the principle of verification.

There are therefore (at least) two key questions we might ask about the success of Ayer's arguments. The first question is whether his conclusions follow from the principle of verification – whether, if the principle is true, we are committed to the views that he says we are committed to. The second question is whether the principle of verification is in fact true.

Although it is a very interesting question, and crucial for a full evaluation of Ayer's views, I want to pass over the first question relatively briefly. However, I will make a couple of comments. The first is that if the principle of verification is true then it is clear that his overall strategy is a coherent one. For a start, the truth of the principle would give him a good reason for saying that many 'metaphysical' conclusions are unverifiable. It also seems a good idea, if he is to defend the principle, to show that it does not class the majority of our talk as meaningless – suggesting that it might have to be analysed in unfamiliar terms.

However, even if we grant this it is not clear that *all* his conclusions will follow. Consider for example his claim that statements about ordinary material objects can be defined in terms of sense-contents. The principle of verification says that a factual statement is meaningful only if it is verifiable, in the sense that there can be experiences that count as evidence for or against it. But on an ordinary understanding there can be evidence that counts for the existence of a real, physical table – seeing the table in front of you, for example! To prove that tables are really constructions from sense-contents Ayer needs to show not only that sense-contents don't conclusively verify the existence of a table, but that they provide no evidence for it whatsoever. Presumably Ayer does think this, otherwise he would not have felt the need to argue for this view. But he doesn't really put forward an argument for it. For this reason, I think that some of his conclusions are doubtful even if we grant the strong principle of verification.

Nevertheless, there are other areas – such as ethics – where he clearly *does* need to do some work. For example, if we think there is a plain and irreducible fact that, say, killing is wrong, then it is very difficult to see how it could be verifiable in Ayer's sense. So if he thinks this statement is meaningful at all, he needs to explain how that can be. So I think that much of what he says is at least well-motivated given his starting point.

IV: Problems with the Principle of Verification

I want now to focus on whether the principle of verification is actually true. I will begin by looking at some problems with this principle. The first question we might ask is why Ayer thinks the principle of verification is actually true. When he introduces the principle in the first chapter of LTL, he has the following to say about it:

As to the validity of the principle... a demonstration will be given in the course of this book. For it will be shown that all propositions which have factual content are empirical hypotheses; and that the function of an empirical hypothesis is to provide a rule for the anticipation of experience. And this means ... that a statement which is not relevant to any experience is not an empirical hypothesis, and accordingly has no factual content. But this is precisely what the principle of verifiability asserts. (LTL, 41)

Now this appears to be an argument for the principle of verification. The crucial premise is that the function of an empirical hypothesis is to predict experiences. The idea is presumably that an unverifiable statement will predict no experiences, and will therefore fail to be an 'empirical hypothesis', and will therefore have no factual content – in other words it will be meaningless. Ayer says that he will demonstrate later in the book that the function of an empirical hypothesis is to predict experiences. But in fact, when the issue comes up, he only says:

What is the purpose of formulating hypotheses? Why do we construct these systems in the first place? The answer is that they are designed to enable us to anticipate the course of our sensations (LTL, 97)

This is not the argument we were hoping for. It is merely a statement of the view he needs to prove. Moreover, it is hardly the sort of thing we can just accept on trust. Everyone will agree that it is *a* function of formulating hypotheses to predict experiences. But it is a big step to conclude from this that the *only* reason we formulate hypotheses is to predict experiences, which is what Ayer needs for his argument to go through. On the contrary, someone who disagrees with the principle of verification (a metaphysician, for example) will argue that one important reason for forming hypotheses about the world is simply to try to acquire knowledge of the truth, whether or not doing so helps us predict experiences. Ayer needs some reason why someone who holds this view is wrong. But he doesn't, as far as I can see, provide one.

I think it is fair to say, therefore, that Ayer provides little *direct* justification for his crucial principle of verification. However, this isn't a crippling objection as it stands. For Ayer *could* reply that the proof of the principle is to be found in its application

(see Foster 1985, 31, for further discussion of this possibility). He could say that we will see it is true simply because the results we get by applying it can independently be seen to be true. Now this would be a legitimate response, were the results it gave intuitively true. But there is little doubt that they are not; it is far from obviously true that statements about material objects are really about sense-contents, or that ethical statements are not genuine propositions. No-one is going to accept these claims without a strong independent argument to suppose that things must be that way. Now he would have a strong argument to this effect if he could independently demonstrate the verification principle. But as we have seen, he doesn't do this.

A further, related objection to the verification principle is that not only does it lack justification, but it is actually incoherent. The principle says, as we saw, that *all meaningful statements are either empirically verifiable, or analytic*. Now this principle applies to all statements. But it takes the form of a statement itself. Thus, it should apply to itself. That is, it should itself be either empirically verifiable or analytic. The difficulty is that the statement does not appear to fall into either of these categories.

On the one hand, it does not appear to be empirically verifiable. In order to be empirically verifiable, there would have to be experiences we could have that gave evidence that all meaningful statements are empirically verifiable or analytic. But it is not clear what experiences would do this. One problem here is that you don't *experience* whether a statement is meaningful or not, so it's difficult to see how experiences could help you decide which statements are meaningful. On the other hand, the principle does not seem to be analytic either. The difficulty is that analytic truths are supposed to be true in virtue of the meanings of the words involved. And this suggests that if you know the meanings of the words involved then you should be able to tell straight off whether the statement is true. For example, if you know what a ewe is (i.e. a female sheep) then you can tell straight off that ewes are female. But this doesn't seem true of the principle of verification. We all, presumably, understand the words involved in stating it ('meaningful', 'experiences', and so on). But few would claim that they could see straight off that it is true.

There are two major problems, then, with Ayer's principle of verification. The first is that he doesn't provide us with any reason to think it is true. The second is that the statement is incoherent, as it declares itself meaningless. It is, in other words, a prime bit of metaphysics. If these charges are correct, then Ayer's project is clearly deeply flawed.

V: Defending Ayer – The Consistency of the Verification Principle

Let us look at whether these criticisms will stick. I will take them in reverse order.

The second criticism was that the principle of verification classes itself as meaningless, so cannot consistently be held. In fact Ayer addresses this problem briefly in the introduction to the second edition of LTL. He says,

While I wish the principle of verification itself to be regarded, not as an empirical hypothesis, but as a definition, it is not supposed to be entirely arbitrary. It is indeed open to anyone to adopt a different criterion of meaning

and so to produce an alternative definition which may very well correspond to one of the ways in which the word 'meaning' is commonly used... Nevertheless I think that, unless it satisfied the principle of verification, [a statement] would not be capable of being understood in the sense in which either scientific hypotheses or commonsense statements are habitually understood. (LTL, 16)

There seem to be two strands to what Ayer is saying here. One strand is that the principle of verification is a 'definition', and that it is open to others to adopt a different definition. On this view, it seems that the principle is supposed to be a *recommendation* about how to talk about meaning, rather than a statement about what meaning is. On the other hand, Ayer suggests that the criterion is not entirely arbitrary, and corresponds to the way in which certain statements are 'habitually understood'. On this view, it seems that Ayer is saying that the principle of verification should be seen as an *analytic* truth, that is, a statement true just in virtue of the meanings of the words involved (such as 'meaning'). Let us ask whether either of these responses could work for Ayer.

The first view is that the principle of verification is primarily a *recommendation* about the way we *should* talk about meaning. This view certainly has some advantages. For example, suppose someone objects to Ayer that the conclusions Ayer draws from it about material objects, ethics, and the rest, are not intuitively true. On this view he can merely respond that he is not describing how we *do* understand statements about material objects and ethics, but how we *should* talk about them, so it's irrelevant if his conclusions are not intuitively true – he is not describing them but proposing how they should be reformed.

But this leaves him with two problems. One is simply that it is very difficult to justify the claim that we should only regard statements that meet the principle of verification as meaningful. Presumably a metaphysician, for example, will disagree, and will think that Ayer's proposal is a very bad way to talk about meaning. It is difficult to see how Ayer could respond to this. Another difficulty is that Ayer's theory about ethical statements says that a statement like 'you should do X' just means something like 'X – Hooray!'. If this is so, then the statement 'you *should* only regard statements as meaningful when they meet the principle of verification' just means 'the principle of verification – Hooray!'. But if this is true, we would have to interpret the whole book as being devoid of arguments, and merely expressing Ayer's approval of the verification principle and his disapproval of metaphysics. This, I take it, is not how he means it.

The other suggestion is that Ayer should say that the principle of verification is an analytic truth. I agree with Foster (Foster 1985, 5-6) that this is what Ayer should say. The main advantage of this is that it fits in with his conception of philosophy. Ayer argued, remember, that philosophy is all about *analysis*, where analysis involves finding connections between the meanings of different words that we use. Thus, if the principle of verification is a bit of philosophy – which it presumably is – the natural thing to say is that *it* can be reached by a bit of analysis of the words involved: 'meaning', 'verification', and so on.

The problem that we raised above with this idea was that unlike 'ewes are female', the principle of verification is not obviously true even if you understand the words. But as Foster points out (1985, 5) this is not really a major problem. If Ayer is right, then there are many unobvious analytic truths. For example, philosophical claims that material objects are really about sense-contents, or that ethical statements do not express propositions, are on Ayer's view analytic but not obvious. So are unobvious mathematical propositions like 'every even number is the sum of two primes' (assuming this is true). In all these cases, we would need to think hard before we realised that the propositions in question are true, even if their truth was, ultimately, just a matter of the meanings of the words. So there is no reason to think the principle of verification should be any different.

I think it is *consistent*, then, for Ayer to regard the principle of verification as analytically true. But this doesn't mean that he has any *justification* for holding it. This brings us to our second point. *Is there any reason to think that it is actually true?*

VI: Is there any Justification for the Verification Principle?

I think it is fair, in view of what we said in section III, to say that Ayer himself never really gives us a good reason to accept the principle of verification. However, I think there is a plausible line of argument that leads to *something like* the principle. Whether it gives us exactly Ayer's version of the principle is a more subtle issue, however, as we will see.

Let's begin by asking what reason there is for thinking that verification has anything to do with meaning at all. On the face of it the two notions are not intimately connected. A sentence means something if it succeeds in representing some state of affairs as obtaining. But it is verifiable if we have some way of recognising that the state of affairs it represents obtains. These appear at first sight to be two entirely different things.

However, there are considerations that suggest that meaning and verification are more closely linked. Here is one sort of argument that leads to this conclusion. I will put the argument in terms of 'linguistic units' for reasons I will explain shortly – by 'linguistic unit' I mean either a word or a sentence. We will see that the argument runs a bit differently depending on what exactly we take a linguistic unit to be.

The argument I have in mind has three premises. The first is that for a linguistic unit to be meaningful it must be possible for someone to understand it. This, I think, is very plausible, since it is ultimately through people using and understanding linguistic devices like words and sentences that they acquire a meaning.

The second premise is that someone can only be said to understand a linguistic unit if they are able to distinguish between cases in which it applies and cases in which it does not. This, again, I think is quite plausible. For example, consider a sentence like 'it's raining'. It is plausible to think that someone would only count as understanding it if they could (at least sometimes) distinguish between cases when it was raining and cases when it was not. Or in the case of a word, someone could only count as understanding the term 'dog' if they could distinguish between cases where a dog was present and cases where no dog was present.

The third premise is that in order to be able to distinguish between cases where a linguistic unit applies and cases where it does not, it must be possible to have experiential evidence for when it applies and when it does not. This, again, is pretty plausible. There is no way of distinguishing between when it's raining and when it isn't unless there would be some experiential evidence (e.g. feeling raindrops) by which we can detect the difference. Equally, there is no way of distinguishing between when a dog is present from when one isn't unless there can be some experiences (e.g. the sound of barking) by which we can tell the difference.

In summary, then, this argument suggests a link between a linguistic unit's having meaning, and our being able to verify that it applies. It does this because we can only be said to understand a linguistic unit if we can distinguish when it applies from when it doesn't, and to do this, there must be some evidence by which we can do this. If the argument is sound then *something* like the verification principle follows, as we can conclude that a linguistic unit can only be meaningful if it is possible to have experiential evidence for when it applies and when it does not. The reason I put things in terms of 'linguistic units', however, is that the argument yields very different conclusions depending on what we take linguistic units to be.

VII: Two Versions of the Principle of Verification

If we think that linguistic units are *sentences*, then the argument demonstrates that a *sentence* is only meaningful if there can be evidence for when it is true and when it is not. This is exactly Ayer's verification principle. But if we think that linguistic units are *words* then things are rather different. To see this suppose that I am competent at recognising dogs, and therefore at recognising whether the word 'dog' applies to anything in my vicinity. If this is true the word-version of the verification principle says that I can understand the word 'dog'. But then I can go on to formulate such sentences as, 'there are dogs so distant from us that no-one has, or ever will, have any evidence for them'. Now if we assume that the other words in this sentence are meaningful, and that a grammatical sentence comprised from meaningful words is itself meaningful, then it follows that the sentence is itself meaningful. But it is unverifiable – there could be no evidence for the existence of dogs for whose existence there is no evidence! It follows that if we think the verification principle applies to words rather than sentences, Ayer's version of the principle does not follow, since there can be unverifiable but meaningful sentences.

Let us call the view that a sentence has to be verifiable to be meaningful the *sentence-principle*, and the view that a word has to have some verifiable conditions of application the *word-principle*. In order to work out whether there is any argument in what we have said for Ayer's view, we need to look at whether the word-principle or the sentence-principle is more likely to be true. There is not room here to consider the issue in detail. However, my own view is that the word-principle is much more likely to be true. I'll suggest a couple of reasons why I think this is.

One reason is simply that I think we have a very strong intuition that we *can* form unverifiable, but meaningful, sentences. One example is, 'there are dogs that no-one will ever discover', which certainly *seems* meaningful, despite being unverifiable. Another example might be the case of scientific theories that postulate entities for

which no evidence is known. For example physicists currently talk about fundamental physical forces being explained in terms of ‘superstrings’. But (as I understand it) no evidence has yet been proposed by which a superstring could be detected. It seems conceivable, then, there just *is* no such evidence. However, we would be reluctant to say that all talk about superstrings is, as a result, meaningless. It seems, then, that if you believe the sentence-principle, then you need some explanation of why sentences like this *seem* meaningful, but aren’t – and it’s not too clear how such an explanation would go.

On the other hand I don’t think there are such strong intuitions that there are meaningful words that would violate the word-principle. Or rather, not after we adjust it slightly. We need to adjust it to take into account the possibility of defining words that do not satisfy the word-principle. For example suppose I defined the term ‘udog’ to apply to all the dogs for whose existence we will never have evidence. Talk of udogs would then be meaningful – since I gave a perfectly clear definition of what I meant by it – but we could never detect the presence of udogs. Thus, the principle would need to allow not only words that satisfy the principle themselves, but words that are definable in words that satisfy the principle. The same goes for ‘superstring’ – which physicists could presumably define in terms of other more recognisable concepts if called upon to do so. But given this adjustment to the word-principle there seems to be a good case for saying that any words that fail it are genuinely meaningless.

Another reason we might prefer the word version of the principle is that it gives a better explanation of the meaning of analytic sentences. Remember that the principle of verification says sentences are meaningful if they are verifiable *or* analytic. So we might ask how the different versions of the principle of verification we have been looking at might classify analytic sentences.

On the one hand, the word-principle appears to apply directly to analytic sentences. If we ignore sentences that are themselves definitions, it is plausibly true of *all* sentences – analytic or synthetic – that they are meaningful only if their constituent words have detectable conditions of application or are definable in terms that do.¹ On the other hand, the sentence-principle cannot be applied directly to analytic sentences, since there are no experiences that count as evidence for or against the truth of analytic sentences. This suggests that the sentence-principle is going to have to be combined with some other principle that explains the meaning of analytic sentences.

The problem I see for the sentence-principle might therefore be put this way. The natural account of what makes analytic sentences meaningful is that the words that form them are meaningful and grammatically arranged. But the sentence ‘there are dogs that no-one will ever discover’ is also apparently comprised from meaningful words grammatically arranged. So the believer in the sentence-principle needs some explanation of why this idea works for analytic sentences, but not all non-analytic sentences. I am not sure that no such explanation is available. But it isn’t as clear as in the case of the word-principle what that explanation would be. I think, therefore, that there at least are some reasons to think that if any version of the verification principle is true at all, then it is going to be the word principle.

VIII: The Verification Principle and the Elimination of Metaphysics

I have argued that although there are considerations that point to something like the verification principle, they are more likely to lead to the principle that words have to have verifiable conditions of application than that sentences have to be verifiable. I now want briefly to comment on how much of Ayer's project would survive if this version of the principle turned out to be true.

The fundamental aim of Ayer's book, we will remember, was to eliminate 'metaphysics' – for Ayer, the attempt to gain knowledge of matters of fact through pure thought – by showing that it is meaningless. But I do not think that *this* project could succeed if only the word-principle is true. According to the weak version, it is only necessary for a word to be meaningful that there be some cases in which it is possible to gain evidence of the fact that it applies. Thus it allows unverifiable but meaningful factual sentences – so by Ayer's definition, it will allow at least some 'metaphysics' to be meaningful.

Not only this, it is likely to leave just the sorts of metaphysical statements that Ayer dislikes most to count as meaningful. For example, consider the claim that the world is completely independent of and different from our experience of it. This is unverifiable, but the words we need to express it – 'independent of', 'different from', and so on – are clearly of a sort that would occur in other more familiar contexts, where we could recognise their conditions of application: two cogwheels can be recognisably moving independently of one another, say, or any two things could be recognisably different from one another. So we can formulate this metaphysical claim using words that the word-principle counts as meaningful. The same, I think, would go for many other traditional metaphysical statements.

This doesn't mean that the word-principle is completely devoid of anti-metaphysical implications, however. This is because there remain words which we sometimes class as meaningful, but where it is difficult to think of *any* situations in which their conditions of application could be recognised in this way, or any definition of the word in such terms. One kind of case would be when a notion was simply too ill-defined and abstract to have any detectable conditions of application or precise definition. If Ayer is right, something like 'The Absolute' might be like this (though not being familiar with the work of C. D. Broad, from which he takes this example, I would not wish to endorse this claim!)

Ethical claims might also be classed as meaningless if we adopt the word-principle, though the issue is less clear. On the one hand, anyone who understands moral terms must be able to distinguish cases when they apply from cases when they do not – you don't understand 'is morally wrong' unless you have some ability to distinguish morally wrong actions from others. But on the other hand, when someone distinguishes cases where a moral term applies from when it does not, they will do this on the basis of non-moral facts – e.g. they will judge that an act is wrong since, for example, it causes pain to an innocent person. So it is not clear whether a moral term like 'is good' will satisfy the word-criterion, since it isn't clear whether we can really have experiential evidence that this term applies in the right kind of way.

Thus, I think one could base *some* sort of anti-metaphysical project on the word-principle, by sifting out concepts that neither have detectable conditions of application, nor are definable in terms that do. But in view of the fact that the word-principle allows us to formulate apparently metaphysical statements, that project would be little like Ayer's.

IX: Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to give a sympathetic reading of *Language, Truth and Logic*, and show that Ayer can be defended against some of the criticisms that are sometimes levelled at his view. Moreover, I have suggested that there are reasons for thinking that something *like* the overall project of the book is well-motivated. However, I have also tried to show that the anti-metaphysical aspect of Ayer's project relies on a premise – the principle of verification, as applied to sentences – which he does not adequately justify, and which is problematic for independent reasons. Ultimately, I think the problem is that he never really overcomes the strong intuition that at least some unverifiable sentences *are* meaningful. Nevertheless, I think that the book retains considerable interest as an exploration of what we would have to accept if the principle of verification were true.

Pierre Cruse
King's College London

References

A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd ed., (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1970). Referred to in the text as 'LTL'. Foster, John, *Ayer* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985)

¹ This criterion would not work for sentences that *are* definitions because definitions contain words – the words they are supposed to define – which are not independently meaningful. For example, suppose we try to define 'a flotch' to mean 'a brown horse', by stipulating that the sentence 'a flotch is a brown horse' is true. But is this sentence meaningful? According to our criterion it is meaningful if and only if the words are meaningful, and the words are meaningful if and only if they have detectable conditions of application or they are definable in terms that do. So is 'flotch' so definable? Presumably only if 'a flotch is a brown horse' is a meaningful sentence... but it should be clear that we have now gone round in a circle. This means we need a different criterion for when definitions are meaningful. There isn't really room here to go into how we might formulate such a criterion, but I don't think it will ultimately be a problem for this theory.