

Ayer and Quine on Meaning

Analytic philosophy is a form of philosophy that focuses primarily on clarifying the imprecise structure of spoken language, and providing explicit, unambiguous forms of argumentation. This branch of philosophy emerged as an official philosophical practice from the rejection of idealism in the early 20th century. Various remarkable philosophers of the time who adopted the ideology of empiricism, otherwise known as logical positivism, came together to form the Vienna Circle, a group devoted to unifying philosophy and science, mainly through the use of formal logic. Verificationism became the central thesis of the logical positivist movement as this group sought out to establish the “truth” of expressions via logical reasoning and empirical verification. In essence, they created, and frequently revised the verification principle, which after being restructured by one of the group’s core members, A.J Ayer, can be regarded as a philosophical doctrine that determines the meaningfulness of expressions, holding that a statement is meaningful only if it is either empirically verifiable or tautological. Ayer thus made a significant contribution to the logical positivist school of thought with his publication of *Language, Truth and Logic (LTL)* in 1936, in which he adopts this “modified principle of verification” as a criterion of meaning, to test whether a sentence expresses a genuine empirical hypothesis by requiring that some possible sense-experience be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood. This criterion of meaning influenced the belief of verificationism as a theory of meaning, which regards the meaning of a sentence as being the method of its verification (empirical confirmation), the limiting case being analytic statements, which are confirmed independently of sense-experience. In the following years however, the logical positivist project suffered a rapid decline after the publication of Willard Van Orman Quine’s article *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* in 1951, which rendered it untenable. Quine’s main purposes for writing this piece were to attack the belief of a distinction between analytic and synthetic statements (the first dogma), and to reject reductionism (the second dogma). Radical reductionism, or semantic reductionism, is a form of reasoning true of empiricists, holding that every meaningful statement can be translated into a statement about immediate experience. Like verificationism, reductionism regards synthetic statements as having a unique set of possible sensory events that influence the likelihood of the statement’s being true. Particularly, Quine’s argument against reductionism, otherwise known as semantic atomism, influenced his shift in thought towards semantic holism, that is, the belief that a word/sentence gets its meaning from its relation to other words/sentences. This disagreement between Ayer and Quine, regarding the notion of reductionism, prompted an even more profound discrepancy about meaning, specifically the process by which a word/statement gets its meaning. Both philosophers, despite having illustrated credible and remarkable arguments, have very different interpretations of meaning and have opposing views on its derivation. In this essay, I shall outline and contrast the

means by which Ayer and Quine come to their conclusions about how a word/sentence gets its meaning, as well as provide possible arguments Ayer could make against Quine's views on verificationism and semantic holism.

A.J Ayer, one of the most renowned British philosophers of the 20th century, made his remark in his book *Language, Truth, and Logic*, with his particular views on the verification principle, which he regards as being "the only valid basis for philosophy". As mentioned previously, he adopts a "modified principle of verification", that aims to test whether a sentence expresses a genuine empirical hypothesis by requiring that some possible sense-experience be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood. Specifically, this criterion of verifiability, holds that a sentence is factually significant iff, the proposition it claims to express can be verified through observations. That is, observations must lead one to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false. However, if a non-tautological proposition's truth or falsehood is determined by an assumption regarding the nature of future experience, it is considered to be a pseudo-proposition, and the sentence expressing it, although emotionally significant, is not literally significant. Similarly, Ayer claims that questions that cannot be answered with observations, are not genuine questions despite having strong grammatical foundations. Furthermore, to eliminate vagueness about the principle of verification, he makes the distinction between "weak verification" and "strong verification". He claims that weak verification, a more relaxed form of the criterion, instead of demanding observations to be the only determinant of a statement's truth or falsehood, deems that they merely be relevant to this determination. A statement then is considered nonsensical if it fails to comply with this standard of relevance. Strong verification on the other hand, requires that there be strong (empirical) evidence to contribute to the meaning of verifiable sentences. For this reason, weak verification determines whether statements are sensible or nonsensical, while strong verification provides the meaning of sentences. Ultimately, Ayer's belief continued to revolve around this connection between empirical evidence and meaning, deeming that the meaning of a sentence be a product of the presence of this satisfactory evidence. Tautologies, all of which he considered to be analytic propositions, formed the only class of statements granted as having meaning, independently of any fact. This criterion of verifiability, aimed at testing the meaningfulness of statements, transpired into a general belief about the notion of meaning, and the way in which a statement acquires it. Not to be confused with the criterion of verifiability, merely providing the necessary conditions for a statement to be considered meaningful, the verification principle as a theory of meaning claims that the meaning of a sentence is the method of its verification.

This verificationist theory of meaning has suffered numerous oppositions, the most infamous being that of Willard Van Orman Quine's appearing in his work *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, where he attacks the ideology of semantic atomism, which prompts a shift towards semantic holism, proposing a different view of how a word/sentence acquires its meaning. His piece begins with the attack of the first dogma, the logical positivist belief of a distinction between analytic and synthetic statements, which he concludes to be nonexistent after his failed

attempts at providing a notion for analyticity. Initially, Quine suggests that to successfully establish a cleavage between analytic and synthetic statements, one must first be able to define analyticity. He elaborates on the Kantian views of analyticity which after revision, regards a statement as being analytic when it is true in virtue of meaning alone and is independent of fact. Quine states that to pursue this notion of analyticity, it must first be clarified what is meant by “meaning”, which must not be confused with naming. He makes this clarification by introducing the terms intension and extension. He states that the extension of a singular term is the object it names and of a general term or predicate, the set of objects of which they are true. To show this, he uses the example of the general terms “creature with a heart” and “creature with a kidney”, which are true of the same object, that is, they share an extension, but are unlike in meaning, which Quine regards as the intension. In making this clear distinction between reference and meaning, he suggests that this “theory of meaning” which is of interest when giving an account for analyticity, can be explained by the synonymy of linguistic forms. For this reason, intensions need not be defined so long as an account for synonymy can be given. He clarifies further that there are two classes of analyticity. The first class being “logical truths”, or statements that are true in virtue of the meaning of their terms, and are independent of fact. For example, statements like “no unmarried man is married”, is true simply in virtue of the logical particles occurring in it, and need no further explanation. The second class of analyticity however, turns statements into logical truths by replacing synonyms for synonyms, and is one that demands further explanation as it demands a notion of synonymy, not previously understood. For this reason, Quine devotes a large part of his piece to trying to give an account for synonymy, which if done successfully, would be sufficient for solidifying the notion of analyticity. To be clear, the notion of synonymy which he aims to define is not the kind of synonymy used regularly, that is, “synonymy in the sense of complete identity in psychological associations or poetic quality”, rather a kind of synonymy he calls “cognitive synonymy”, which can be regarded as the synonymy of terms so similar in meaning that they cannot be differentiated. One of the ways Quine attempts to give an account for cognitive synonymy not presupposing analyticity, is by appealing to the verification theory of meaning. Verificationists, like Ayer, assume that “each statement, taken in isolation from its fellows, can admit of confirmation or information at all”. Therefore, sentences are cognitively synonymous iff the experiences that lead to the determination of their truth values are exactly the same. In this view, “statement synonymy is said to be likeness of method of empirical confirmation or infirmation”, that is, likeness of meaning, given that the verification theory of meaning states that the meaning of a statement is the method of empirically confirming or informing it. The “nature of the relationship between a statement and the experiences which contribute to or detract from its confirmation”, is as Quine puts it, “the most naive view”, radical reductionism, that is, the idea that “every meaningful statement is held to be translatable into a statement about immediate experience”. This ideology of radical reductionism is largely advocated by Ayer, as he claims that talk about physical objects can be “reduced” to talk about experience. If this were the case, analyticity could be

understood in terms of logical truths and likeness in verification. Quine however, sees something very wrong with this ideology of deriving meaning, the reason being explained through his attack of the second dogma of empiricism. Namely, this skepticism about the notion of analyticity being derived from the verification principle, is directly related to his skepticism about reductionism. As put by Quine, “the two dogmas are, indeed, at root identical”. The first dogma clearly supports the other in the sense that “as long as it is taken to be significant in general to speak of the confirmation and infirmation of a statement, it seems significant to speak also of a limiting kind of statement which is vacuously confirmed”, that is, the kind of statement taken by verificationists to be analytic or “true in virtue of the meaning of their terms alone”. In other words, if synthetic statements can be reduced into statements about sense experience, then it is only rational to assume that analytic statements possess the same ability, given that every meaningful statement is translatable into a statement about immediate experience. That taken to be the case, he claims that “factual and linguistic components in truth of any individual statement can’t be sharply distinguished”, arguing that no statement is purely “linguistic”, rather they all require some factual component. His rejection of reductionism can be regarded simply as his belief that “our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body”, that is, the belief that every word/sentence has meaning only in relation to other words/sentences.

Taking into account the many arguments against Quine’s belief that the meaning of a term or sentence, is derived solely by its relation to others, Ayer could argue that this notion of semantic (meaning) holism is not a sufficient, or even relevant condition for deriving meaning, stating that the meanings of terms and statements come not from their relationships to others in the language, but rather from them being empirically verifiable, that is, being derived from sense-experience. Although he may agree with the possibility that the meanings of words or statements are in fact related to others, in the way that “fire” is related to “hot”, the claim that this relationship is the way that a word/sentence gets its meaning, would be, from his perspective, inaccurate, as he may insist that one must first have experienced or empirically verified both, that is, come to know their meanings via sense-experience, to be able to understand their relationship. For example, one must first have experienced heat and fire before being able to say that the two are related. Ayer could argue further, that taking this notion of interdependent meanings to be true, would not allow for the exact translation of words/sentences into other languages. If it were purely the relation to other parts of a language that determine the meaning of a word/sentence, then under the same principle, it would be impossible for the meaning of a word/sentence to remain the same when translated into a language that does not contain in it, a word/sentence for every object/entity it is related to. However, if it is experience (empirical verification) that leads to the determination of a word/sentence’s meaning, then the experiences being the same for both the word/sentence and its linguistic translation, would allow for the exact meaning of the word/sentence to be preserved.

By arguing the flaws of semantic holism, Ayer could potentially make a strong case for semantic atomism and provide further validation for his ideas about the verification theory of meaning. Likewise, there exists a possibility that Quine could further argue the notion of semantic atomism, showing ways it fails to satisfy as a theory of meaning, or method of deriving meaning. Ultimately, both philosophers have made remarkable contributions to analytic philosophy and have provided insight into the way linguistic meaning is perceived, as well as the ways in which this “meaning” is attributed to words/sentences.

References:

1. Ayer, A.J. *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 1936.
2. Van Orman Quine, Willard. *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, 1951.