

## Metaphysics and the Challenge of Logical Positivism: An Interrogation

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**ABSTRACT** Metaphysics ranks as one of the core branches of philosophy, after epistemology, ethics and logic. The word 'core' is deliberately used here to underscore the point that metaphysics is such a fundamental area of philosophy as distinct from the applied areas such as philosophy of science, philosophy of law, philosophy of education etc. The intention is not to belittle these areas of philosophy, but rather to show the centrality of metaphysics in the programme of philosophy since no such curriculum can hardly be complete if it omits metaphysics. A quick flashback in history reminds us that metaphysics, otherwise called 'After Physics' following a posthumous title given to Aristotle's works by Andronicus of Rhodes, had a beginning dating back to the ancient times when the Ionian philosopher\_ scientists reflected on the ultimate stuff or substance of the universe or what is there? The term metaphysics has come to mean the science of being as such and in recent times, it has concerned itself with the investigation into the nature of reality and raises questions as to what is the ground of being? What is the essence of being? What is the meaning of life and the purpose of man? Metaphysicians carried on their business unchallenged right from the ancient, through the mediaeval and the early modern period, although, there were disagreements and disputations which is a common feature in philosophy. However, there was a certain conspiracy, as it were, a gang-up in the modern period emanating from the activities of the logical positivists to destroy and erase metaphysics from the compass of philosophy. It is the challenge posed by logical positivist to metaphysics that will pre-occupy us in this article and the grounds as well as the justification for such revolt and whether the revolt was successful or botched.

### INTRODUCTION

Although, the exact date when logical positivism began may not be easily ascertained, but according to records, it started in the early 1920's following a confluence of philosopher-scientists, physicists, mathematicians and psychologists proclaiming themselves logical positivists or Vienna circle movement whose intention was to rub minds and discuss issues of common interests. The initial or founding members were few but as the movement grew in fame and popularity, it attracted a wider membership particularly from England, Holland, Belgium, America, Australia and Germany. The foundation members included Moritz Schlick (1882-1945), (who incidentally occupied the Professorial Chair vacated by Ernst Mach). Rudolf Carnap (1891- 1970), Otto Neurath (1882-1945), Herbert Feigl (1902-1973), Friedrich Waismann (1896-1960), Kurt Geodel (1906-1978), and A. J. Ayer (1910-1989). Even though Ayer was a late comer to the circle, he eventually became its anchorman and most popular spokesman.

Wittgenstein cannot be said to be a member of the Circle in the true sense of the word since he did not officially subscribe to it, although, he

lived nearby in Vienna and maintained constant dialogue with Schlick and Waismann.

It is important to remark that the Circle has formulated and made public its philosophical orientation, but the publication of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in 1921 and Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* in 1936 boosted the image and reinforced the ideas already articulated in the Circle's journal *Erkenntnis*, which served as a formidable outlet for the dissemination of its views, added a substantial impetus to its growth (Popkin 1999).

Having made these remarks, the question now is, what were the views of the logical positivists and what were they for and against? The position of the logical positivists can be derived from their expressed aim which is to show that all genuine knowledge are those related to logic, mathematics, and the natural sciences. In other words, they argue that the only genuine knowledge is knowledge about the physical world and the only means of attaining such knowledge is science (Omogrebe 1998). Based on this, one expects that there is no place for such conceptualizations which border on metaphysical knowledge of reality or supra-natural or theoretical entities which transcend what is permissible in common-sense experience.

Following from this, one notices that the logical positivists attempt to achieve two interrelated things, firstly, the subordination of philosophy to science and secondly the exclusion of metaphysics represented by any attempt to go beyond what is given in experience or what Hume would prefer to call matters of fact (Ayer 1981). The logical positivists hoped to realize this goal through their famous “Verifiability Principle” which is taken to mean that the meaning of a proposition consists in its method of verification.

The strategy, according to them, is that if one, for example, wants to verify the proposition, “The cat is on the mat”, it is expected that the person sees the cat actually lying on the mat and that the person knows the meaning of the proposition “the cat is on the mat” as well as its rendering.

### EARLIER POSITIVISM

No one is left in doubt that with the verification criterion, the logical positivists are fascinated by the empirical and scientific tempers of the day.

Logical positivism is a radical form of scientism that holds that only the special sciences can make cognitively meaningful statements about the world. It rejects traditional philosophy especially metaphysics... logical positivism asserts instead that philosophy, should be restricted to the clarification and explanation of scientific theorizing (Popkin 1999).

The attempt by the logical positivists to interpret and render philosophy on the empiricist and scientific moorings was earlier elaborated by John Locke and David Hume who argued that an observation consists in having a particular sense experience, a particular datum with which one is directly acquainted devoid of mistakes or errors. Also Hume classified propositions into two, namely formal and factual propositions. The former relates to logic and mathematics whose truth is tautologous since its truth is known by a mere analysis of the meaning of the propositions. For example, the truth of the proposition, “All bachelors are unmarried” is immediately known if we know the meaning of the word bachelor. These propositions are said to be analytic, necessary, or *a priori*. The latter, requires empirical corroboration or verification to ascertain its truth or falsity like “All crows are black”, “All men are mortal” since it is not part of the definition of “crow” and “man” that they are black and mortal respectively, but only that, past experience and

observation has shown that crows are black and that men do die at a certain age. Propositions such as these are said to be synthetic, empirical, contingent or *a posteriori*.

The logical positivists accepted this classification and those of Auguste Comte’s law of three stages’ in which all knowledge and societies dialectically pass through theological and metaphysical to positive or scientific stage. Comte rejected the theological and metaphysical stages because thought or conceptualizations here are suffused with myths, fictions and gods. But in the positive or scientific stage explanation of phenomena is done through its connections to some general laws, like the gravitational law. It is necessary to remark that the logical positivists received a significant influence from the efforts of Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein and others who championed the analytic movement which regards philosophy as essentially concerned with logical analysis, logical synthesis and comprehensive construction of facts as they exist in the world. (Ozumba 1994). It should be recalled that before the emergence of the analytic movement, philosophy seemed to be dominated by the metaphysical idealism of Hegel which was popularized by both F. H. Bradley and McTaggart who said that the “absolute” is a community of substances which is seen as part of the whole. The analytic philosophy thus arose as a revolt against this metaphysical idealism and to reconstruct philosophy along the paradigmatic framework of science, mathematics and logic. This bold step dovetailed in logical atomism which was defended by Russell and Wittgenstein (Russell 1959).

As we stated above that even though Wittgenstein did not officially subscribe to logical positivism, he nevertheless maintained personal interactions with some of the Circle’s members. Again, his book *Tractatus* added an impetus as well as reinforcing the Circle’s views. For in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein said that propositions are comprised of atomic facts “which are logically independent of each other”. According to him, these atomic or basic facts are mirrored by elementary propositions (Ayer 1981). In order to determine whether a proposition is cognitively significant, such proposition, must be capable of being expressed either as true or false.

Put differently, a proposition is said to be cognitively meaningful in so far as it matches or corresponds to the states of affairs in the world,

such as the proposition, “The cat is on the mat” whose cognitive sense can be comprehended within what is empirically observable like “cat” and “mat” in the world. Hence, in the *Tractatus*, he stated that “what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence”, although, he seemed to equivocate at the end of the book when he said that “all those who understood him would understand that everything he had said was nonsense”. A corollary to this is Ayer’s powerful book, *Language, Truth and Logic* which, like *Tractatus*, expresses the view that genuine philosophical problems can be solved by logical analysis and that a proposition is susceptible to either “practical verification” or “verification in principle”

### REJECTION OF METAPHYSICS

Based on these exposures, the logical positivists attempted to determine the status of metaphysical, ethical and poetical statements to see whether or not they would pass the test of empirical verifications which expectedly they failed to satisfy. According to them, since such sentences of philosophy, literature, theology, arts, metaphysics, ethics and others bearing emotive meaning do not satisfy the empirical verification criteria, they are to be regarded as a species of nonsense or cognitively meaningless. The point being made here is summarized by Schlick thus,

... A theory is a set of hypotheses which may be either true or false by experience... in establishing the identity of meaning and manner of verification we are not making any wonderful discovery, but are pointing to a mere truism (cf. Osward Hanfling 1978).

Following their endorsement of Wittgenstein’s view that there is a one-to-one correspondence between language and the world, they argued that such metaphysical talks about absolute, substance; transcendental, theoretical entities, destiny and immortality of the soul could not be correlated with any substantive entities in the world. For them, therefore, metaphysics is cognitively senseless because human mind has had to go beyond the realm of possible experience in order to know it” (Anyanwu 1981). The apparent hostility and suspicion of metaphysics by the logical positivists is merely a restatement of Hume who had earlier said,

*If we take in our hands any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics for instance, let us ask,*

*does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No, commit it then to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion (cf. Popkin and Stroll 1969).*

From what is stated so far, it is clear that the logical positivists recognized only propositions which can be verified, confirmed or refuted by experience and observation.

### CRITICAL APPRAISAL

The positivists wanted to get rid of metaphysics with their “Verifiability Principle”, but it seems that there are some conceptual and linguistic confusion surrounding the principle itself. It is not entirely clear how to verify the principle or what kind of observations would show that it is either true or false?

Besides this, there is the charge of solipsism which tends to threaten the principle. It is necessary to note that Schlick stated that “if a statement is meaningful to me, it must be verifiable by me”. This expression did not go down well with the members, particularly Neurath and Carnap who, apparently avoiding the subjectivism implicit in Schlick’s view claimed that it was not enough to determine the truth of what someone perceives based on someone’s experiences, but that his physiological components should be taken into consideration. It does not seem however that this move meets the charge of solipsism leveled against the principle since the danger of episodes of subterfuges by the perceiver cannot be totally eliminated.

In any case, metaphysics has not been eliminated as envisioned by the logical positivists since their ‘Verifiability Principle’ is enamored by torrents of conceptual problems. Hence, metaphysics is still receiving adequate attention by philosophers and non-philosophers alike and as Jim Unah says while re-echoing Heidegger that the problem of metaphysics is the problem of a fundamental ontology (Unah 1996) So we can conclude by saying that the revolt against metaphysics by the logical positivists is a failure and botched. The final requiem of the Vienna circle movement was song when Schlick was brutally murdered by a frustrated student and the emigration of other surviving members to America, England, and Holland following the Nazi Germany

insurgence opposed to the radicalism and anti-clericalism of the members of the Circle.

Apart from the unfortunate fate suffered by the members of Vienna Circle either individually or collectively leading to the eventual collapse of the movement, the logical positivists are accused of making unsubstantiated and dubious epistemological claim that science never uses non-empirical arguments, and that what we regard as metaphysics never draws on empirical premises (Craig 1998).

Again, metaphysics is still relevant and meaningful since the issues it focuses on are currently discussed in the areas of philosophy, science, anthropology, culture, religion etc. As Ayo Fadahunsi claims, both science and metaphysics, as a human activity, attempt to explore and explain the universe as a whole, although, metaphysics goes much deeper than science in raising more general questions bordering on human life and God's existence and man's purpose and relationship with his creator (Fadahunsi 1999).

### AFRICAN METAPHYSICS

Besides justifying the relevance of metaphysics based on the perennial questions it deals with, it is our contention that such questions namely: freewill and determinism, appearance and reality; universals and particulars, and other themes like destiny, personhood, God, causality, ancestor worship, sorcery and witchcraft pose some tension and paradoxes for philosophers and scholars interested in African studies. There is no one universal way of defining African metaphysics that is uncontentious but what we can do here is to provide a minimal guide for the idea of African metaphysics. African metaphysics is defined as the conceptions of the African people, as a cultural group, on being, reality, God, the universe, as they grapple with the natural and supernatural entities in their environment. This definition is based on the belief that any group of human beings will certainly need to have some world outlook, that is, some general conceptions about the world in which they live and about themselves both as individuals and as members of society (Wiredu 1991).

We made the above statement at the risk of being accused of relativism, but it is important to state that the issues dealt with in metaphysics are universal ones, but how each culture treats

and understands these issues are contingent on the values and cultures of the people in question. Hence, Placide Tempels, a Belgian missionary, in his *Bantu Philosophy*, claims that whereas the Western people hold a static conception of being and maintain a certain detachment with the object, the African people hold a dynamic conception of being (Tempels 1969) since reality is seen as a closed system so that everything hangs together and is affected by any change in the system (Teffo and Roux 1998).

### Metaphysical Concepts in Igbo and Yoruba with their English Translation

<i>Igbo</i>	<i>Yoruba</i>	<i>English</i>
<i>Chineke, Chukwu</i>	<i>Olodumare</i>	God
<i>Mmadu</i>	<i>Eniyan</i>	Person
<i>Aru, ahu</i>	<i>Ara</i>	Body
<i>Uche</i>	<i>Emi</i>	Mind
<i>Nkpuruobi</i>	<i>Okan</i>	Heart
<i>Uburu</i>	<i>Opolo</i>	Brain
<i>Chi</i>	<i>Ori/Eleda</i>	Destiny
<i>Ilo uwa</i>	<i>Atayewa</i>	Reincarnation
<i>Ogbanje</i>	<i>Abiku</i>	Born to Die or Repeater child
<i>Amosu</i>	<i>Aje</i>	Witch
<i>Ndichie</i>	<i>Alale</i>	Ancestor
<i>Dibia</i>	<i>Onisegun</i>	Medicine man, native doctor
<i>Obara</i>	<i>Eje</i>	Blood
<i>Mmuo</i>	<i>Anjonu/Emi</i>	Spirit

### CONCLUSION

The knowledge and understanding of these concepts would not have been possible if metaphysics had been obliterated from the compass of philosophical discourse by the conspiracy of the logical positivists. Metaphysics is still a live issue and according to Innocent Onyewuenyi, quoting Henry Alpern, it (Metaphysics) is necessary for art, morality, religion, economics and sociology, for the abstract sciences as well as every branch of human endeavour considered from the practical angle<sup>17</sup>. Even science or scientific knowledge cannot be said to be totally experiential. For there contain, within its system, certain unobservable entities like proton, electron, electro-magnetic waves etc. So the rejection of metaphysics or the attempt to purge it of all spiritistic and supra-sensible entities that are not accessible to empirical verification or scrutiny is preposterous since both attempts to explain reality by *a priori* principles.

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