

Radical Empiricism Made Foolish

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

The outlook of the influential, early 20th century school known as the "Vienna Circle" was that of logical positivism. Its most enthusiastic expositor was the Oxford philosopher, Alfred J. Ayer (b. 1910), particularly his popular work *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936, rev. 1946).

Ayer maintained that any genuinely meaningful and factual statement must pass the "verifiability criterion." Ayer never successfully formulated the principle, but it was something to the effect that any meaningful statement is *in theory* verifiable *by observation*, either directly or indirectly. With this weapon the philosopher could now purify intellectual discussion of the "nonsense" of metaphysics and ethics.

Although the radical empiricism and antireligious character of logical positivism gave apparent respectability to popular prejudices of many unbelievers, the Christian apologist can be glad for its open advocacy. This has made possible the very public and painful discrediting of that viewpoint (even at the hands of other unbelieving philosophers) as self-refuting, prejudicial, and a veiled faith-commitment to its own particular kind of metaphysics.

Ayer later wrote that the verifiability principle was intended *as a definition*. This would be, of course, a tremendous embarrassment to logical positivism on its own terms because definitions are mere tautologies (with the help of semantic facts) and thus entirely trivial or non-informative. Thus Ayer immediately added that the verification principle was not an "arbitrary" definition because it stipulates the conditions which govern the practice of scientific discussion.

Does he mean that it is *prescriptive*, then? If so, it again suffers the disdain of logical positivism which, according to its own strictures, deems ethical statements (of obligation) emotive or factually meaningless.

Does Ayer then mean that the verification principle simply "defines" (describes) the actual past practice of scientists? If so, so what? One could as readily and as arbitrarily define the verifying procedures of religious mystics.

Resorting to a pragmatic defense at this point, Ayer might contend that the verification principle "defines" the past practice of the naturalistic scientists because that practice has proven so successful in achieving their aims. This would be a philosophical *faux pas*, however, because then Ayer would have to defend a value-judgment (viz., the aims of the naturalistic scientists are the right aims to choose) and a metaphysical judgment (viz., that science has been more successful than other procedures in the past, *and* the future will resemble the past). *But value judgments and*

metaphysical judgments are the very things logical positivism seeks to banish from meaningful discourse!

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? (1 Cor. 1:20)