

A. J. Ayer



1 Philosophical Significance

A. J. Ayer was one of the most influential philosophers of the early 20th century. He is best known for his promotion of “logical positivism.” Positivism was characterized by a number of different criteria, but most notable was its adherence to “verificationism,” which was the idea that only statements that were empirically verifiable had any meaning or “cognitive significance.” In other words, a statement was thought to be meaningful solely to the extent that it says something (true or false) about the world that we can verify in principle. On this ground, the positivists attempted to rule out large swaths of philosophical discourse – particularly metaphysics – as nonsense, because they involved claims that had no verification conditions. Ayer is also known for his “emotivist” theory of ethical claims. According to that theory, claims like “X is good” or “Y is bad” are not literally true or false, but are merely expressions of emotional attitudes.

Ayer is not rightly classified as an ordinary language philosopher, though his philosophy does share some similarities with that school of thought.

2 Writing Style

Like Russell, Ayer was concerned with making philosophy clear, and to that end he tried to make his writing straightforward. That said, the book of his that we are reading (*The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*) is not intended as an introductory philosophy book like Russell’s was. Ayer’s discussion thus contains significantly more nuance, and requires more careful reading.

3 Reading Questions

These reading questions are intended to help you focus when doing the reading. You are not required to write up answers; this is purely for your benefit. This

class tests you on how well you understand the authors that we cover, and these questions are intended to help promote that understanding.

- 1) Why does Ayer say the term “sense data” was introduced?
- 2) According to Ayer, why have philosophers said that we *only* perceive sense data, as opposed to sometimes perceiving sense data and sometimes perceiving physical objects? (Ayer mentions three different arguments for this conclusion, all in Section 1.)
- 3) What are the two ways to interpret the “argument from illusion,” according to Ayer?
- 4) Why does Ayer claim that the argument from illusion involves merely a linguistic disagreement?
- 5) What are the “good grounds” that Ayer sees for adopting the sense-datum language?