

A Brief Critique of Religious Empiricism, Logical Positivism, Materialistic Monism and the Anti-Supernaturalism of “N. T. Wright” – Undertaken with the Aid of the *Theologia Germanica* and Sir A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic*. Or:

Countering the Attempt to Entrap the Human Mind in a Matrix of Words

By Edmund Schilvold

Rogaland, Norway

October 2020

This paper owes its origin to a three-day “home exam” I sat for in November 2018, as part of the master’s program in theology I have now completed. The assignment I chose was phrased as follows: “Present Luther’s understanding of theology and discuss whether [or not] it is a meaningful approach to the discussion of theology as an academic discipline.” Below is my response – slightly modified and expanded.

Before I begin my response, I will briefly consider the wording of the chosen assignment, as I view it as important to let the reader know how I choose to interpret it, as well as why I intend to reply in the manner I do.

One of the central phrases is “Luther’s understanding of theology”. Initially, I found this to be a somewhat peculiar choice of words. Why does it not simply say “Lutheran theology”, for example? Why include the term “understanding”? Upon closer examination, I arrived at the supposition that the author desires an emphasis on Martin Luther’s own, *personal* view of Christian theology, as opposed to the now centuries-old Lutheran theological tradition. This supposition would appear to be strengthened by the absence of names other than that of Luther, since Lutheran theology can hardly be said to be the work of only Luther himself,

even if we confine our view to Luther's own lifetime. Hence, in my presentation of this subject, I will attempt to accentuate the theological perspective of Martin Luther himself.

Moreover, the constraint in terms of length means that it is simply impossible to give a full presentation of Lutheran theology in all its aspects here, so even if the phrase had been different, I would have had to limit myself to certain features only.

Another central phrase is "meaningful approach". The term "meaningful" is interesting, and its definition is crucial to the sentence as a whole. In popular parlance, this term is usually associated with intent or purpose, as in "a meaningful expression" or "a meaningful life". However, considering the linking of this term to "the discussion of theology as an academic discipline", as well as the fact that this is an exam in a subject called Theory of Science, I have arrived at the conclusion that the author must be after an examination of how Luther's theological position fares upon the encounter with Modern science, and whether or not Luther's theological statements can actually be considered "meaningful" in a scientific sense of that term.

"Science" is of course an exceedingly broad term, but the development which more than anything else suggests itself to my attention here is, as the reader may have already anticipated, *Logical Positivism*. The reason is the very peculiar and highly influential use English-speaking representatives of this movement made of terms such as "senseless" and "nonsensical" (Ayer, 1971, pp. 9, 14, 20, 24, 27, 73, 110), which, in their discourse, are roughly synonymous with "meaningless" – even though it was a very specific kind of "lack of meaning" which was campaigned for.

The Logical Positivists were, as we know, more concerned with thinking about science than with actually engaging in practical science, and therefore belong more to the category of philosophy of science than science itself, but they nevertheless endeavoured to draw a very definite distinction between the "significant" and the "nonsensical" (Ayer, 1971, pp. 9, 14, 17, 24), and, by implication, between the "scientific" and the "un-scientific" (Ayer, 1971, p. 32, pp. 122–123), and the fact that this divide of theirs consigned all disciplines involving

“metaphysics”, including theology, to their class of “nonsense” (Ayer, 1971, p. 120), appears to me to make Logical Positivism well nigh unavoidable in an examination of the “meaningfulness” of theology as an academic discipline. For academic disciplines must be “scientific”, must they not?

Hence, I intend to make the encounter between Luther’s position and Logical Positivism a significant part of my response.

Before I end this introduction, I will also say that I aim to treat of Luther’s theology in a rather critical manner. Even though I have the sympathy for Lutheranism which is a common result of having been brought up in a largely Lutheran country, I do believe that the time is ripe for a reconsideration of both the views of Luther and those of the rest of the Protestant reformers – for a variety of reasons – but, as will probably become clear, not in the way this tended to be attempted in the 20th century. Furthermore, I suspect that a critical comparison of Luther’s theology with other ways of thinking will enable us to perceive more easily what actually sets that theology apart.

My own confessional position is very nearly identical to that expressed by C. S. Lewis in his work *Mere Christianity* (2009).

*

Where to begin, with such vast fields of study at hand? An interesting place to start might be the quite startling and “unorthodox” question which began to take shape in my mind in the wake of my reading of Oswald Bayer’s work, *Theology the Lutheran Way* (2007), which is on the curriculum for the subject this is an exam in. This question could be formulated as follows: **“Does Luther’s theology constitute a religious ‘proto-empiricism’?”**

The reason why this issue began to haunt me is that a number of the epistemological claims made by Bayer (2007) – and also by Luther himself as quoted by Bayer – look strikingly similar to some of the basic tenets of traditional empiricist epistemology. This in spite of the fact that Empiricism as a modern philosophical movement is ordinarily presented as having begun more than a century after Luther’s death, with philosophers like John Locke (1632–1704), George Berkeley (1685–1753) and David Hume (1711–1776) (Duignan, Fumerton and Quinton, 2015).

I do of course realize that this may appear to some to be a rather bold claim to make, but I believe that I am well able to justify it.

*

If we now begin to examine the above mentioned work by Oswald Bayer, we find that as early as in “Part One: Luther’s Understanding of Theology”, we encounter a multitude of statements which, when taken together, present a very unambiguous estimation of how knowledge of God is to be acquired.

On page 18, for instance, Bayer (2007) says that “The sinful human and the God who justifies are connected through an exchange of words.” Then, on page 19, the same view is slightly elaborated: “The communicative relationship between God and humans that is salvific and not destructive is grounded in the word and takes the form of an exchange of words (*in sermonibus tuis*).”

As is immediately apparent, there is a huge emphasis on “words” here. To me, this came as a surprise, even though I had of course long been familiar with the principle of “sola Scriptura” (Hillerbrand, 1999). But there is more. A little later, on page 21, Bayer (2007) quotes an even more forceful statement, by Luther himself:

“God does not deal [act] with us, nor has he ever dealt [acted] with us otherwise than through the word of promise We in turn cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in his word of promise.”

This already makes it quite clear that “the word of promise”, which, as Bayer has just stated, is here the same as the *verbal language* of Scripture, is elevated to the *only* source of knowledge of the Divine, and the *sole* means of communication between God and Man.

However, in case there should still be any doubt as to the nature of the “word” and the “words” here spoken of (what of the Word in the sense of Christ himself, for example?), page 51 provides two additional statements by Luther regarding this issue. In the first, even the Holy Spirit is made dependent on “the outward word”, meaning actual *words*: “For God will not give you his Spirit without the outward word (...)” In the second, the word is called “external”: “Therefore, we should and must insist that God does not want to deal with us human beings, except by means of his external word and sacrament.” (Bayer, 2007, p. 51)

I could cite several other examples of this view in Bayer’s work, but I think the point has been sufficiently made. The *verbal language* of the Bible, written and spoken, is regarded as the *only* channel of communication between God and human beings – to the complete exclusion, it seems, of the Rationalist belief in the possibility of reaching or receiving some understanding of God by way of some faculty of the Human Mind.

This means that the kind of knowledge arguably deemed to be the most important of all knowledge by the Christian Medieval in Europe – knowledge of God and Salvation – is now made entirely dependent on *bodily sense perception*, since no one can gain familiarity with the words of Scripture except by way of sight or hearing, or perhaps touch.

The parallels with later philosophical Empiricism go even further, however. On page 22, Bayer (2007) makes the claim that

“(…) when Luther says that the Christian life is ‘passive’ he means that God is the active subject and that the Christian is the object of God’s action. The Christian life in the sense that it *suffers*, it *undergoes* God’s work and so passively receives it.”

This unidirectional conception of the relationship between God and Man appears to me to foreshadow the Empiricist conception of the relationship between the external world and the bodily senses. For in philosophical Empiricism, the five senses are evidently conceived of as being capable of *passively* receiving information from the outside (whether or not they provide us with accurate knowledge of any truly external objects as they are “in themselves” is a different question). This may be deduced from how Empiricism tends to view “input” from the bodily senses as the *only* source of reliable (or probable) knowledge – which such “input” could hardly be viewed as being if those senses were instead seen as *actively engaging* with such input in various ways.

Incidentally, we now know that the Mind and the brain play a far more *active* role in the reception and formation of sense impressions – and, we could even say, in our experience of “reality” – than was usually thought to be the case in the past. But there is no room for a discussion of that here.

My suspicion that Luther’s theology anticipates the Empiricism of later centuries would appear to be further strengthened by a third kind of statements made by Bayer (2007). On page 28, he writes that “This is consistent with the view of the early Luther who said that theology is ‘experiential wisdom’ (*sapientia experimentalis*), a view he continued to hold. Wisdom does not exclude science but includes it.” The noteworthy term here is of course “experiential”, since that is also a key term in Empiricism.

Moreover, on page 29, Bayer (2007) goes on to say that

“Luther is different. He is aware of the sheer temporality of our knowledge of God, indeed of God himself. Therefore he does not regard theology as a science, a study of principles, but as a study of history and experience.”

Here, we again find that crucial Empiricist term, “experience”, and here, as in Empiricism, what is meant by “experience” is not at all the inner, purely mental, Rationalist *vision*, but the experience of something external, mediated by, or at least made possible by, the bodily senses alone.

Bayer also makes the astonishing claim – astonishing since it comes from a *Christian theologian* – that “God himself” is characterized by “sheer temporality” (Bayer, 2007, p. 29). If Bayer actually means what I interpret him to mean, namely that God is *not* an ultimately transcendent God, having his metaphorical throne beyond his creation, beyond the dimensions of space and time, but a God somehow existing *within* this physical world, then I cannot but disagree with both Bayer’s theology and his view of Luther. For such a theology necessarily entails a god who cannot be the Highest God, the God of Ultimate Reality, as such a god evidently cannot be the primary originator of this physical Universe, but must necessarily be a lesser being, bound to perish when this Universe, which such a god would be dependent on, ceases to exist (the ancient concept of the Demiurge comes to mind).

Such a conception of the Highest God would *only*, I think, be viable if the Universe itself (or at least matter) was actually eternal, with no beginning and no end, as some of the ancients allegedly believed it to be, but that is *not* the Modern scientific view (c.f. National Geographic, 2015), and I would argue that it is not the overall Biblical view either (c.f. Isaiah 65:17–18; Matt 24:35; John 18:36; 2 Peter 3:10–13; Rev 21, for example) – even though some passages would appear to contraindicate this.

Perhaps I am misinterpreting Bayer, though. An alternative possibility might be that he is primarily concerned with the Incarnation of the Word, which Christians certainly believe did occur in Time, in history, in the world.

*

Before moving on, I will conclude the comparison between Luther and Empiricism with two more quotes from Bayer (2007), which, in my view, come close to rendering my inkling a certainty. On page 31, we read that “For Luther, on the other hand, ‘to know’ (*cognoscere*) means ‘to feel through experience’ (*sentire experientia*).” With the possible exception of the term “feel”, we have here the essence of Empiricism.

Additionally, on page 46, Bayer says that “Speculation lacks the firm ground of experience.” The Empiricist would in all likelihood agree, but the Rationalist would certainly disagree – at least if we take the term “speculation” to mean the kind of elevated *contemplation* practiced by Plato and Saint Augustine of Hippo, for example. In fact, to the Rationalist philosopher, sensory experience of the material world is not a “firm ground” to stand on *at all*.

The question arises: Does Bayer’s work actually give the reader a balanced view of Luther’s thought, or does Bayer, consciously or unconsciously, draw a picture of Luther which says more of Bayer and Bayer’s own time than of the reformer? The student of Luther knows that Luther had a *hot* temper, and often wrote in a highly hyperbolic manner. His seminal essay “On the Eucharist” (Norwegian: “Om Kristi Nattverd”) is a case in point (Luther, 1979). Hence, any portrayal of Luther could easily become distorted. On the other hand, the fact that Oswald Bayer is “professor emeritus of systematic theology” (2007, back cover) causes the work to carry some weight.

If we assume that Bayer’s portrayal of Luther’s theology as largely fair and correct, then it seems clear to the undersigned that this theology represents such a dramatic change, and such a drastic break with the past, that we would be justified in describing the Lutheran part of the Reformation (and possibly the Reformation as a whole) in the sort of language Thomas Kuhn deployed in his controversial book on the history of science (2013). Luther would then be understood not as a reformer, but as a *revolutionary* (which, in my vocabulary, is not a term

of praise) – the creator of a wholly new “paradigm”, so different in outlook from the previous “paradigm” that it was “incommensurable” with it.

The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches would, accordingly (if we simplify greatly for the sake of seeing patterns), be seen as representing one paradigm, largely Rationalist in terms of anthropology and epistemology, characterized by the successful blending of “Jerusalem” with “Athens”, and continuing the contemplative philosophical tradition begun by the ancient Platonists, while the new Lutheran (Protestant) churches would be viewed as embodying a new and very different paradigm, largely Empiricist and Nominalist in nature, and as not only carrying within themselves the seeds of many of the ways of thinking which characterize the Modern world, but actually *being themselves* the eruption of Modernity onto the world stage.

*

Are there any factors which would seem to indicate that the above gives us too one-dimensional a picture of Luther’s theological epistemology? Such factors do indeed appear to exist. One of the most obvious is the alleged influence exerted on Luther by the works of St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 A.D.). If Luther was indeed as heavily influenced by St. Augustine as is often supposed, then that would not go very well together with a thesis comparing Luther to Empiricist philosophers, as St. Augustine’s *Confessions* (2013), taken as a whole, make it abundantly clear that the famous bishop was greatly influenced by Platonic philosophy, and therefore by an eminently Rationalist anthropology and epistemology. Nor is this an unreasonable supposition, since Luther himself mentions St. Augustine as an influence (Dr. Pfeiffer, 1857, p. xvii), and since Luther was, after all, an Augustinian friar.

However, since this is so widely known already, and space is very limited, I choose not to go into this in any more detail here, and to instead take a look at another literary influence on Luther which is less renowned, and which also looks like a possible argument against Bayer’s depiction of Luther as advocating an exclusive reliance on external information and sense impressions.

That influence is the *Theologia Germanica*, a little mystical treatise by an unknown medieval author, possibly “a knight of the Teutonic order” (Dr. Pfeiffer, 1857, p. xi), which Luther himself gave the highest recommendation imaginable. For in his signed preface to the 1518 edition of this work (Dr. Pfeiffer, 1857, p. xvii), Luther boldly stated the following:

“This I say because I will have every one warned who readeth this little book, that he should not take offence, to his own hurt, at its bad German, or its crabbed and uncouth words. For this noble book, though it be poor and rude in words, is so much the richer and more precious in knowledge and divine wisdom. And I will say, though it be boasting of myself and ‘I speak as a fool,’ that **next to the Bible and St. Augustine, no book hath ever come into my hands, whence I have learnt, or would wish to learn more of what God, and Christ, and man and all things are (...)**. God grant that this book may be spread abroad, then we shall find that the German theologians are without doubt the best theologians.” (Dr. Pfeiffer, 1857, pp. xix–xx, emphasis added)

The reason why this does not seem to fit the Empiricist thesis very well is of course that all religious mysticism, regardless of label, age and location tends to favour a turning *away from* sense-experience and worldly concerns, and a turning *towards* the life of the Mind and purely mental concerns. Needless to say, this presupposes some version of the Rationalist position.

Let us briefly remind ourselves of how Plato defines True Philosophy. One such definition appears in the conversation between Socrates and Glaucon in 521 c in *The Republic*:

“Socrates: ‘Do you want us now to consider in what way such merit will come into being and how one will lead them up to the light, just as some men are said to have gone from Hades up to the gods?’

Glaucon: ‘*How* could I *not* want to?’ he said.

Socrates: ‘Then, as it seems, this wouldn’t be the twirling of a shell but **the turning of a soul around from a day that is like night to the true day; it is that ascent to *what is which we shall truly affirm to be philosophy.***’

Glaucon: ‘Most certainly.’”

(Plato and Bloom, 1991, Book VII, 521 c, p. 200, emphasis and italicization added)

With this in mind, we should now be able to see if the *Theologia Germanica* can be said to be a typical Mystical work or not, and if there is anything in it which, considering Luther’s endorsement of it, would seem to necessitate a revision of a radical empiricist, “sola Scriptura” portrayal of Luther’s theology.

(A careful reading of *The Republic* makes it quite clear that it is *primarily* about the inner “City”, and how to rise to a *mental* encounter with Divine Light – see Book VII, 517 b–517 d, p. 196, Book VII, 518 c–518 d, p. 197, Book IX, 592 a–592 b, pp. 274–275, for example.)

The introductory words by Charles Kingsley (1819 –1875) would seem to indicate that the answer will have to be in the affirmative:

“(…) So again with Eternity. It will be found in this book to mean not merely some future endless duration, but that ever-present moral world, governed by ever-living and absolutely necessary laws, in which we and all spirits are now; and in which we should be equally, whether time and space, extension and duration, and the whole material universe to which they belong, became nothing this moment, or lasted endlessly.

I think it necessary to give these cautions, because by the light of Locke’s philosophy, little or nothing will be discerned in this book, and what little is discerned will probably be utterly misunderstood. If any man wishes to see clearly what is herein written, let him try to forget all popular modern dogmas and systems, all popular philosophies (falsely so called), and be true to the letter of his Bible, and to the instincts which **the Indwelling Word of God** was wont to awaken in his heart (...)” (Dr. Pfeiffer, 1875, p. xvi, emphasis added)

Already on page one of the work itself, we find a declaration concerning the Divine which, as far as I am able to judge, looks to be very much in accord with both the Platonist, the overall Patristic (if such a generalization is permissible) and the Pseudo-Dionysian (Corrigan, 2015) conception of the Supreme Being:

“‘That which is perfect’ is a Being, who hath comprehended and included all things in Himself and His own Substance, and without whom, and beside whom, there is no true Substance, and in whom all things have their Substance. For He is the Substance of all things, and is in Himself unchangeable and immoveable, and changeth and moveth all things else. But ‘that which is in part,’ or the Imperfect, is that which hath its source in, or springeth from the Perfect; just as a brightness or a visible appearance floweth out from the sun or a candle, and appeareth to be somewhat, this or that. And it is called a creature; and of all these ‘things which are in part,’ none is the Perfect. So also the Perfect is none of the things which are in part.” (Dr. Pfeiffer, 1857, pp. 1–2)

Another highly significant statement occurs in chapter VI, on pages 16 and 17. Here we find the ancient concept of Divine Emanations (in Saint Augustine (2018), Christ is essentially a “pure emanation” of Divine light, see *On The Trinity*, Book IV, Chapter 20), as well as the classic Mystical contrast between this material world, the World of Flux, and Ultimate Reality, the Realm of (Higher) Being:

“(…) But if our inward man were to make a leap and spring into the Perfect, we should find and taste how that the Perfect is without measure, number or end, better and nobler than all which is imperfect and in part, and the Eternal above the temporal or perishable, and the fountain and source above all that floweth or can ever flow from it. Thus that which is imperfect and in part would become tasteless and be as nothing to us. (…)” (Dr. Pfeiffer, 1857, pp. 16–17)

Of even greater relevance to this present analysis is, however, the statement in chapter VII, pages 20 and 21, which speaks of two different “eyes” of the soul, two different human capabilities, since this makes it quite clear what the author would have said regarding the controversy between Empiricism and Rationalism, and confirms that he, in classic Mystical fashion, subscribes to the view that the Human Mind is capable of rising to at least a glimpse of the Divine Light emanating from God:

“(…) Now the created soul of man hath also two eyes. The one is the power of seeing into eternity, the other of seeing into time and the creatures, of perceiving how they differ from each other as afore-said, of giving life and needful things to the body, and ordering and governing it for the best. But these two eyes of the soul of man cannot both perform their work at once; but if the soul shall see with the right eye into eternity, then the left eye must close itself and refrain from working, and be as though it were dead.

For if the left eye be fulfilling its office toward outward things; that is, holding converse with time and the creatures; then must the right eye be hindered in its working; that is, in its contemplation. Therefore whosoever will have the one must let the other go; for ‘no man can serve two masters.’” (Dr. Pfeiffer, 1857, pp. 20–21)

But it gets even more interesting. In chapter VIII, the author goes on to *quote* “St. Dionysius” (Dr. Pfeiffer, 1857, p. 22). This is none other than “Pseudo-Dionysius”, also known as “Dionysius the Areopagite” (Corrigan and Harrington, 2015).

“(…) For if the soul shall rise to such a state, she must be quite pure, wholly stripped and bare of all images, and be entirely separate from all creatures, and above all from herself. Now many think this is not to be done and is impossible in this present time. But St. Dionysius maintains that it is possible, as we find from his words in his Epistle to Timothy, where he saith: ‘For the beholding of the hidden things of God, shalt thou forsake sense and the things of the flesh, and all that the senses can apprehend, and all that reason of her own powers can bring forth, and all things created and uncreated that reason is able to comprehend and know, and shalt take thy stand upon an utter abandonment of thyself, and as knowing none of the aforesaid things, and enter into union with Him who is, and who is above all existence and all knowledge.’ (…)” (Dr. Pfeiffer, 1857, p. 22)

Much more could be mentioned concerning the content of *Theologia Germanica*, but I think enough has been said to demonstrate that the problem anticipated a while ago is indeed a real one.

In other words, how can we reconcile Luther’s explicit placing of this eminently Mystical little book on a par with Saint Augustine of Hippo and the Bible, with the general drift of Bayer’s work, and the seemingly decisive statements by Luther Bayer refers to in order to support that drift?

Since I am not a professional Luther scholar, I am hardly in a position to answer that question conclusively, as doing so would likely require years of careful inquiry into Luther’s life and writings. However, judging from what I *do* know, my suspicion is that Bayer is not entirely wrong in making Luther’s theology resemble the Empiricist worldview – Lutheranism did,

after all, embrace the three “solas” (or five), and lead to an end to Monasticism in Lutheran countries – but I *do* also suspect that Bayer is greatly influenced by a certain late Modern, 20th century outlook on life, with its tendency towards Empiricism and Materialism, ontological Monism, and the like, as well as a curious theological trend which I, for lack of better term, call “*this world*-theology”, and that Bayer therefore, to some extent, “recreates” Luther in the image of the 20th century Zeitgeist.

It goes without saying that I cannot here attempt to substantiate this view of the theological trends of the 20th century to any significant degree, as that would turn into a long digression, which the constraint on length leaves no room for. But I will mention the example of Nicholas Thomas Wright (also known by the marvellously conceited pseudonym of “N. T. Wright”), as I think his influential theology exhibits anti-metaphysical and “temporal” tendencies similar to those already identified in Bayer’s work.

In his paper “Responding to N.T. Wright’s Rejection of the Soul”, Brandon L. Rickabaugh of Baylor University expresses certain aspects of my concern quite succinctly:

“Christian scholars are divided over the ontology of human persons, a debate many of the Church Fathers would likely not have expected. **On one side stand those of the historical Christian view, a type of dualism according to which human persons are not identical to a physical body, but consist of a body and a soul.** In opposition stand a more recent cohort of Christian materialists who maintain that human persons are in some way fundamentally material. **While Wright clearly rejects the soul, it is unclear how he avoids materialism. (...)**” (Rickabaugh, 2018, pp. 201–202, emphasis added)

The 2008 interview with “N. T. Wright” in Time Magazine (Biema, 2008) reveals a similar “theological” bent.

It is fascinating to note, by the way, how very close the new “purified” religion propounded by N. T. Wright and his acolytes comes to being indistinguishable from the revolutionary, materialistic, pseudo-religious worldview of Marxism, and to sharing the seductive, but dangerous Marxist notion of a future “Paradise” or “Heaven” here on Earth, created not by God, but by Man.

But to return to the main line of argument: I would say that those who do not want to abandon the conviction that Man – at least when in a certain ideal state – is indeed endowed with a kind of dual vision, and that the Rationalist religious epiphany, spoken of by Mystics all over the world for more than two millennia, does indeed result from a communion with God, can take comfort in Luther’s *early*, but *unequivocal* recommendation of *Theologia Germanica*.

With this, I temporarily leave Luther and make the chronological leap that appears to be necessitated by the task at hand – since I suppose that the “discussion” referenced is the debate of recent times – and move to Logical Positivism, which is certainly one of the patterns of thought causing the legitimacy of theology as an academic discipline to be disputed. For even though I believe the origins of such disputes must be sought in much earlier ages – in the rise of Nominalism and in the Revolution in France, for example – and Logical Positivism as a movement in one sense petered out decades ago, the radical Empiricism it represented and engendered manifestly lives on, and now that I have become familiar with Logical Positivism, it seems to me that much of the Scientism, the pervasive disdain for religion and morality, the obvious breakdown of aesthetics (as in contemporary art and architecture), the exaltation of a “narrow” kind of reason which is actually utterly *unreasonable*, et cetera, is, to some degree, related to this early 20th century movement which began with certain radicals in Vienna, Austria.

In my scrutiny and critique of Logical Positivism, I have chosen to focus on the philosopher Sir A. J. Ayer (1910–1989), and his seminal 1936 publication *Language, Truth and Logic*, since this book is widely regarded as having introduced the thinking of the so-called Vienna Circle into the English-speaking parts of the world (Rogers, 1998; BBC TV, 1976).

Now, *according to Ayer*, the Logical Positivists tended to regard themselves as continuing the British or Western European Empiricist school of thought, for in the preface to the aforementioned book, he makes the following assertion:

“The views which are put forward in this treatise derive from the doctrines of Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein, which are themselves the logical outcome of the empiricism of Berkeley and David Hume.” (Ayer, 1971, p. 9)

However, as one reads *Language, Truth and Logic*, it becomes increasingly evident that Logical Positivism – at least in the form espoused by Ayer – is not merely a continuation of Empiricism, but a *radicalization* of it. Let us see what some its tenets are. On page 9, he also writes that

“To test whether a sentence expresses a genuine empirical hypothesis, I adopt what may be called a modified verification principle. **For I require of an empirical hypothesis, not indeed that it should be conclusively verifiable, but that some possible sense-experience should be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood. If a putative proposition fails to satisfy this principle, and is not a tautology, then I hold that it is metaphysical, and that, being metaphysical, it is neither true nor false but literally senseless.** It will be found that much of what ordinarily passes for philosophy is metaphysical according to this criterion, and, in particular, that it can not be significantly asserted that there is a non-empirical world of values, or that men have immortal souls, or that there is a transcendent God.” (Ayer, 1971, p. 9, emphasis added)

As this and numerous other statements in the book make clear, the Logical Positivists would have us believe that there can only ever be *two classes* of “significant” or “meaningful” propositions, and thus only *two* sources of human knowledge. One is the analytic proposition, which *always* consists of tautologies, that is propositions which are inherently “self-verifying”, and which therefore tell us nothing which is not already contained in the words

composing the sentences (Ayer, 1971, p. 73). The other is the synthetic type, which *always* consists of propositions which have been or may be verified by way of empirical sense-experience (Ayer, 1971, p. 73).

For on page 73, Ayer writes, after a brief examination of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, that

“(...) we say that a proposition is analytic when its validity depends solely on the definitions of the symbols it contains, and synthetic when its validity is determined by the facts of experience. Thus, the proposition ‘There are ants which have established a system of slavery’ is a synthetic proposition. For we cannot tell whether it is true or false merely by considering the definitions of the symbols which constitute it. We have to resort to actual observation of the behaviour of ants. (...)” (Ayer, 1971, p. 73)

To qualify as significant, a synthetic proposition must, at the very least, be empirically verifiable *in principle* (Ayer, 1971, p. 17).

The outcome of this construction of a revolutionary linguistic criterion, by which all human utterances are to be judged, would have been tremendously upsetting to anyone with even the faintest sympathy for the societal status quo. For *all* propositions which do not conform to one of the above mentioned two classes may now, according to Ayer, be rejected as “metaphysical” and “nonsensical” (Ayer, 1971, p. 24).

As Ayer readily admits, he is out to “overthrow” “transcendent metaphysics” (p. 14), and as early as on page 32, he claims to have *demolished* (p. 32) millennia of metaphysics altogether by way of his linguistic argument.

For in Ayer's estimation, all those famous sages of the past who thought they were engaged in something of importance, were in fact deluded:

“For we shall maintain that no statement which refers to a ‘reality’ transcending the limits of all sense-experience can possibly have any literal significance; from which it must follow that the labours of those who have striven to describe such a reality have all been devoted to the production of nonsense.” (Ayer, 1971, p. 14)

However, I do not think Ayer's proposed criterion for determining the validity of a proposition is as unassailable as he describes it as being – far from it. It seems to me that his whole argument rests on a very peculiar view of the role of verbal language. This can easily be seen in such statements as these:

“For the fruitlessness of attempting to transcend the limits of possible sense-experience will be deduced, not from a psychological hypothesis concerning the actual constitution of the human mind, but from the rule which determines **the literal significance of language.” (Ayer, 1971, p. 15, emphasis added)**

“In general, the postulation of real non-existent entities results from the superstition, just now referred to, that, to every word or phrase that can be the grammatical subject of a sentence, there must somewhere be a real entity corresponding. For as there is no place in the empirical world for many of these ‘entities’, a special non-empirical world is invoked to house them. (Ayer, 1971, p. 27, emphasis added)

To me, this looks rather like a *fantastically ill-conceived* picture of the proper place of verbal language in the life of Man. Ayer's argument would hold if verbal language had had the significance ascribed to it by him. However, as his argument stands, it is fundamentally

flawed, since it is based on a deeply misguided emphasis on lettered words – as I intend to show.

“Thought”, the rich and often mysterious life of the human mind, is *not* reducible to verbal language, and verbal language is only the necessary, but unfortunate *reduction* of true thought to words for purposes of preservation and communication. Any prose author or poet who has struggled to express his or her ecstatic moments of inspiration and mental visions in words knows this all too well. (As someone who has been a writer and a visual artist for around two decades, I have at least *some* first-hand familiarity with this issue.)

In actual fact, language has much the same type of relationship to thought, its *non-lingual* origin, as a photograph has to the original play of light which made the emulsion or the digital sensor record a displayable picture. No one in a sane state of mind would claim that a photograph is identical to or the equivalent of that which it depicts.

Moreover, as the experienced photographer is highly aware of, not even the best camera, operated by the most skilled artist, can ever capture the full range of light and color present in the motif itself – not to mention properties such as physical texture, actual three-dimensionality, fragrance, motion, sound, and so on. A photograph is always a mere *derivation*. So it is with verbal language – particularly when it constitutes an attempt to describe the non-verbal.

It may be that some individuals (possibly such as are often called “left-brained” in popular culture) actually tend to think mainly in *words*, so that the life of their minds is akin to an almost incessant conversation, but if they think that is *all* that goes on in their minds, or that words are *all* that their minds are capable of harbouring, then I think it is safe to say that they do not know themselves very well, and they should certainly not make the mistake of concluding that all or even most human beings think in that way. I, for one, do *not*, and *never* have.

In truth, much of the millennia-long history of art and architecture, literature and music bears testimony to the struggle of human creators to manifest or express in a communicable form the ineffable beauty and grandeur of essentially non-verbal, non-lingual ideas.

When Ayer contends that metaphysical language arises from a “superstition” concerning words (Ayer, 1971, p. 27), I would counter that he has the relationship between words and metaphysics completely backwards. Metaphysics do not originate from the use of language – metaphysical language originates from the direct or indirect encounter with actual, metaphysical phenomena.

While this conviction is my own, I have recently discovered that Plato makes similar observations regarding language in the final part of the dialogue *Cratylus* (2020). Consider 438a–438e:

“Socrates: ‘Now let us drop this and return to the point at which we digressed. A little while ago, you may remember, you said he who gave names must have known the things to which he gave them. Do you still hold that opinion, or not?’

Cratylus: ‘I do.’

Socrates: ‘And you say that he who gave the first names also knew the things which he named?’

Cratylus: ‘Yes, he knew them.’ [Greek: εἰδότης.]

Socrates: ‘But from what names had he learned or discovered the things, if the first names had not yet been given, and if we declare that it is impossible to learn or discover things except by learning or ourselves discovering the names?’

Cratylus: ‘I think there is something in what you say, Socrates.’

(...)

Socrates: ‘Then if that is true, Cratylus, it seems that things may be learned without names.’

Cratylus: ‘So it appears.’”

Then, in 439a –439b, words are said to be mere images of the Truth Itself (the reader of Plato’s *Republic* will be thoroughly familiar with this way of thinking):

“Socrates: ‘(...) Did we not more than once agree that **names** which are rightly given are like the things named **and are images of them?**’

Cratylus: ‘Yes.’

Socrates: ‘Then if it be really true that things can be learned either through names or through themselves which would be the better and surer way of learning? To learn from the image whether it is itself a good imitation and also to learn the truth which it imitates, or to learn from the truth both the truth itself and whether the image is properly made?’

Cratylus: ‘I think it is certainly better to learn from the truth.’”

Moreover, to demand that transcendent metaphysical phenomena *must* be capable of being described in empirically verifiable sentences, or else be dismissed as “nonsense”, is to set up a criterion to which most such phenomena cannot possibly conform, as they are inherently non-sensual and non-empirical. When we then consider that such phenomena have demonstrably been seen as vital to human existence and human understanding by societies all over the globe for thousands of years, then we cannot but denounce such a criterion as highly *unreasonable*, and even *conceited*.

It is also necessary to add that Ayer's conception of "empirically verifiable" is terribly narrow. He claims, for example, that there is no evidence whatsoever of an immaterial soul, or of a life after death (Ayer, 1971, pp. 122–123). *However*, this is *only* true if one defines empirical verification in an almost absurdly strict manner, namely as only mechanistic measurements performed in a laboratory. For the fact is that many of the recurring phenomena often referred to as "paranormal" have now been subjected to numerous rigorous investigations for well over a century, and that this has yielded huge bodies of materials, consisting of both primary witness accounts and experiments, which, when taken together, makes such "metaphysical" propositions as the existence of an individual, body-independent entity of consciousness, capable of surviving physical death, nearly indubitable to all but the most hardened and dogmatic skeptics.

It is interesting, to say the least, that Ayer makes his highly categorical claims in the 1930s, while residing in *Great Britain*, which was then the very country where the famous *Society of Psychical Research* had been pioneering serious, systematic research into the paranormal for more than half a century.

*

So how does all this relate to Martin Luther's understanding of theology?

In the first place, I think the suspected similarity between the "sola Scriptura" theological approach – particularly as interpreted by Bayer – and philosophical Empiricism has now been rendered well-nigh indisputable. Incidentally, it does not seem unlikely that there is some *causal* relationship between the Israelite and Christian emphasis on Scripture and the eventual rise of Empiricism, which, as far as I am able to judge, is a mainly European or "Western" philosophical phenomenon. The various schools of Hindu (Vedic) and Buddhist philosophy, for example, clearly tend towards Rationalism (if Rationalism is defined as the view that the Human Mind is capable of gaining knowledge and of apprehending the Divine, by itself, *without* the aid of sense impressions).

In the second place, it looks like Luther's theology would, in certain ways, be much more acceptable to Logical Positivism and its heirs than other variants of theology – Christian and non-Christian – as Luther's theology may, in a sense, be “verified” by sense-experience, since it relies on the quite definite, almost “measurable” phenomenon of a printed, scriptural canon. If one sets up as an axiom the reliability of certain canonical books, or at least of certain parts of these, then theological propositions may indeed be validated or disproved by empirical examinations of such books.

There are also broader similarities between Luther and modern empiricists. For when Luther says “sola Scriptura!”, Ayer might, if he could, respond with “sola Lingua!”

Some contemporary thinkers might even go so far as to claim that language is all we have, and that it does not matter if it refers to anything “real”, as we can never go beyond language, and as it is language which constitutes whatever “reality” we are in. The theologian could then argue that since God is present in Scripture, in a linguistic sense, he is “real” in the only possible sense of that term, and that any “meta-lingual” existence is actually irrelevant. But this would be one line of thought for which the term “nonsense” would indeed be a perfect description.

In any case, the presence of such influences may be why Bayer writes as he does, whether he is aware of it or not.

In the third place, however, it is clear that we need to qualify this picture of Religious Empiricism by turning around and admitting that Luther is *not* reducible to Empiricism. **In the eyes of Ayer and those like him, most of the *Theologia Germanica*, and most of St. Augustine, is nonsense, yet Luther placed both of these, as already mentioned, on a par with the Bible itself.**

In the end, I do not think the linguistic and epistemological claims of Logical Positivism and similar movements are a *philosophically legitimate* problem for the future of theology in academia, as they are far too presumptuous and one-dimensional to deserve serious consideration. **Theology should not attempt to adapt itself to these flawed outlooks, but rather do all in its power to expose them as narrow-minded and misguided.**

Finally, I would seriously question the whole tendency to set up a *dichotomy* between Sense-Experience and the Life of the Mind, evident in the debate between Rationalism and Empiricism outlined above. Similar tendencies are apparent in N. T. Wright's proposed dichotomy of "Platonism" versus "Christianity", for example. It seems that the Human Mind has a lamentable tendency to construct exaggerated contrasts, and to alternate between extremes. This lack of balance, this jumping to conclusions, this desire to identify with one end of the scale, so to speak, and to then eliminate views other than one's own, could perhaps be said to be part of the fallenness of the Human Condition. The human being, in its life here on Earth, clearly needs both the "outer" and the "inner", both sense-impressions and contemplation, in order to lead a healthy, harmonious life and realize its full potential.

In my experience, the most rewarding life comes not from an "either or", as in either Asceticism or Epicureanism, for example, but from a *middle way*, in which one gradually learns to see the Eternal *in* and "*through*" the Temporal, and the Temporal in light of the Eternal. To this deepened gaze of the Individual Soul at the world, the material world has become *transparent*, so to speak, to the Divine Realms beyond it, and the Divine has become visible, in a sense, in the world of matter.

This does not at all mean succumbing to some flavour of Monism or Pantheism, but to understand so-called Dualism as it ought to be understood, and as I think both Plato and a number of the Christian thinkers of the first millennium after Christ did understand it.

(Plato's philosophical schema consists of at least six different planes, which are all connected, so Dualism is actually a misnomer, but that, as they say, is another story, for a another time.)

Bibliography

Augustine of Hippo. (1955). *Confessions* [e-book] (Albert C. Outler, Trans.). Dallas, TX, the United States: Southern Methodist University. Retrieved from <https://www.ling.upenn.edu/courses/hum100/augustinconf.pdf>

Augustine of Hippo. (2020). *On the Holy Trinity* [e-book] (Arthur West Haddan, Trans., Philip Schaff, Ed., W. G. T. Shedd, Ed.). In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series I, Volume III. Grand Rapids, MI, the United States: Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Retrieved from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnfl03.html>

(Digitized version of: Augustine of Hippo. (1887). *On the Holy Trinity* (Arthur West Haddan, Trans., Philip Schaff, Ed., W. G. T. Shedd, Ed.). In *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Volume III. Grand Rapids, MI, the United States: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company)

Ayer, A. J. (1971). *Language, Truth and Logic*. London, Great Britain: Pelican Books. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/AlfredAyer>

BBC Radio 4. (2009, July 2). *In Our Time: Logical Positivism* (Melvyn Bragg interviews Prof. Barry Smith, Prof. Nancy Cartwright and Prof. Thomas Uebel) [audio recording]. London, Great Britain: British Broadcasting Corporation. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00lbsj3>

BBC TV. (1976). *Logical Positivism and its Legacy* (Bryan Magee interviews A.J. Ayer) [video recording]. London, Great Britain: British Broadcasting Corporation. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/nG0EWNezF14>

Bayer, Oswald. (2007). *Theology the Lutheran Way*. Grand Rapids, MI, the United States: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

Biema, David Van. (2008, Feb. 20). Christians Wrong About Heaven, Says Bishop. *Time Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1710844,00.html>

Bonaventure. (1978). *The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis* (Ewert Cousins, Trans.) Mahwah, NJ, the United States: Paulist Press. Retrieved from <https://books.google.no/books?id=YvHldn0e1-MC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Corrigan, Kevin and L. Michael Harrington. (2015). "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2015 Edition (Edward N. Zalta, Ed.). Stanford, CA, the United States: The Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/pseudo-dionysius-areopagite>

Dr. Pfeiffer (Ed.). (1857). *Theologia Germanica: Which setteth forth many fair Lineaments of divine Truth, and saith very lofty and lovely things touching a perfect life* (Susanna Winkworth, Trans.). Andover, MA, the United States: W.F. Draper. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/theologiagerman00winkgoog/page/n10>

Duignan, Brian, Richard Fumerton and Anthony M. Quinton. (2015, Feb 19). Empiricism: Philosophy. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/empiricism>

Durant, Will. (2014). *The Reformation* [audiobook]. The United States: Blackstone Audio, Inc.

Hillerbrand, Hans J. (1999, July 26). Lutheranism. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lutheranism>

- King, Peter. (2005). William of Ockham: Summa Logicae. In John Shand (Ed.), *Central Works of Philosophy* (Vol. 1, pp. 242–269). Chesham, Buckinghamshire, Great Britain: Acumen Publishing Ltd.
- Lewis, C.S. (2009). *Mere Christianity*. London, Great Britain: HarperCollins.
- Louth, Andrew. (2007). *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*. New York, NY, the United States: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <https://books.google.no/books?id=aQpZU3tT6Y4C&lpg=PP1&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>
- Luther, Martin. (1979). Om Kristi nattverd. In Inge Lønning and Tarald Rasmussen (Eds.), *Martin Luther: Verker i utvalg* (vol. 5, pp. 58–86). Oslo, Norway: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag.
- McGrath, Alister E. (2013). *Reformation Thought* [audiobook]. The United States: Audible, Inc.
- National Geographic. (2015, Oct. 16). How will the Universe End? Video Highlights from Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey. *National Geographic*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com.au/science/how-could-the-universe-end.aspx>
- Plato and Allan Bloom. (1968/1991). *The Republic of Plato. Translated with Notes and an Interpretive Essay by Allan Bloom* (2nd ed.). New York, NY, the United States: Basic Books
- Plato. (2020). *Cratylus*. Perseus Digital Library (Gregory R. Crane, Ed.). Medford, MA, the United States: Tufts University. Retrieved from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg005.perseus-eng1:383a>
- Quinn, John Francis. (1998, July 20). Saint Bonaventure: Italian Theologian. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Bonaventure>

Rickabaugh, Brandon L. (2018). Responding to N. T. Wright's Rejection of the Soul. *The Heythrop Journal*, vol. 59, issue 2, pp. 201–220. Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/heyj.12341>

Rogers, Ben. (1998, July 20). Sir A. J. Ayer: British Philosopher. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/A-J-Ayer>