VERIFICATIONISM AND ANALYTICITY LECTURE 2

1. In the introduction to the Second Edition of LTL, Ayer maintains a distinction between **strongly** and **weakly** verifiable statements: the strongly verifiable ones are those that you can conclusively verify; the weakly verifiable are those which evidence can make more or less probable. You might think, for reasons that we discussed in Lecture 1, that there are *no* strongly verifiable statements; but Ayer maintains that there are some. These he calls 'basic' propositions; and he regards them as incorrigible in the sense that the only mistake you could make when describing them is verbal.

2. As for weakly verifiable statements: Ayer recognized that it was vague just to say that some experience is 'relevant' to the determination of their truth value. He made two attempts to give a more precise criterion. The first of these, as stated in the first edition, was as follows:

> (2.1) A statement S is weakly verifiable iff some observation statement O can be deduced from S together with some other statements S1, S2…, without being deducible from S1, S2… alone.

Here an 'observation statement' is one that records an actual or possible observation: say 'This is green'. The trouble with this criterion, as Isaiah Berlin pointed out, is that it lets too much in. Let S = 'The absolute is lazy'; let S1 = 'If the absolute is lazy then this is green'; and let O = 'This is green'. Then S meets the criterion in (2.1) but it is plainly the kind of thing that Ayer wanted to rule out.

3. The second edition proposes something more complicated. Ayer says: first: 'I propose to say that a statement is **directly verifiable** if it is either itself an observation-statement, or is such that in conjunction with one or more observation-statements it entails at least one observation-statement which is not deducible from these other premises alone.'

4. He continues: 'I propose to say that a statement is **indirectly verifiable** if it satisfies the following conditions: first, that in conjunction with certain other premises it entails one or more directly verifiable statements which are not deducible from these other premises alone; and secondly, that these other premises do not include any statement that is not either analytic, or directly verifiable, or capable of being independently established as indirectly verifiable. And I can now reformulate the principle of verification as requiring of a literally meaningful statement, which is not analytic, that it should be either directly or indirectly verifiable, on the foregoing sense.'

5. Unfortunately there is a counterexample to this version of the principle too, due to Church. Let S be an arbitrary statement (e.g. 'The absolute is lazy') and let O and O' be arbitrary observation statements. Now consider the statement:

> (5.1) $Q = (O \wedge S) \vee (\sim O' \wedge \sim S)$

Clearly Q is *directly* verifiable on Ayer's definition because in conjunction with O' it entails O, and O does not follow from O' directly. But then S is *indirectly* verifiable, because together with Q it entails O, and O does not follow from Q alone.

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6. Perhaps the most striking thing about Ayer's book is that although it does a fine job of drawing out the consequences of verificationism, it doesn't give any arguments for it. What are the arguments for it? The only explicit argument for something like A's version is due to Schlick ('Meaning & Verification', *Philosophical Review* 1936.) That argument is based on the idea (which must surely have something going for it) that the acquisition of language is ultimately an empirical process.

7. One idea in Ayer's book, and current since Kant's time, was the distinction between **analytic** and **synthetic** truths. Roughly speaking and as we already saw, analytic statements – like 'Bachelors are unmarried' – are true in virtue of their meanings, whereas synthetic statements are true in virtue of some extra-linguistic reality.

8. It's worth distinguishing this distinction from two others that are closely related. First, we can distinguish statements whose truth is knowable **a priori** from those whose truth is knowable only **a posteriori**. The former category encompasses claims that you can know without recourse to experience (though experience may *also* give you knowledge of their truth); the latter can only be known by means of sense experience. Elementary arithmetic is knowable a priori if anything is – whether it is analytic is another question – but geometry is more complicated. One plausible position is that there is a 'pure' geometry that is a priori and an 'applied' geometry that is a psosteriori.

9. Second, we can distinguish what is **necessarily** the case from what is **contingently** the case. Necessary truths describe how things are and how they must have been; contingent truths describe features of reality that might have been otherwise. Arithmetic and logic are both arguably necessary if anything is; a statement like 'Elizabeth I began her reign in 1558' and 'I am here now' both express contingent truths: Elizabeth might never have become queen; and I might have been somewhere else right now. On the other hand, Kripke (in *Naming and Necessity*) takes the view that there are necessary truths that are not a priori (or presumably analytic): if cats are not robots, then they could not have been robots; but it is an empirical discovery that they are not.

10. So there are three distinctions: the following table gives examples of how they might arguably come apart:

	Analytic	A priori	Necessary
Bachelors are unmarried	Y	Y	Y
5 + 7 = 12	N (Kant)	Y	Y
I am here now	Y	Y	N
Cats are not robots	N	N	Y

11. Having made the distinction though, we can at least set it aside for the purposes of understanding Quine ('Two dogmas of empiricism', *Philosophical Review* 1951): as we'll see, *his* critique of analyticity takes for granted (like Ayer) that all three categories coincide – though not much would be lost if we questioned this.