

AUGUSTE COMTE'S POSITIVISM AND THE INDESTRUCTIBILITY OF METAPHYSICS

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Abstract

The thrust of this paper is to critically assess the coherence of Auguste Comte's positivism and its attempt to eliminate metaphysics. It introduces metaphysical residualism, the thesis that any epistemological framework that rejects metaphysics necessarily retains implicit metaphysical commitments. Through philosophical argumentation, conceptual and textual analysis of Comte's law of the three stages and its development in logical positivism, the paper reveals that positivism does not abolish metaphysics but transforms it into an unacknowledged form. Central to this critique is the residual metaphysics principle, which argues that the denial of metaphysics is self-undermining, as it presupposes unverifiable claims about reality, knowledge, and meaning. This is further exposed through the incoherence of the verification principle. The paper distinguishes between explicit and implicit metaphysics, arguing that positivism conceals rather than eliminates metaphysical assumptions. It concludes that metaphysics is a necessary condition for epistemology and must be critically engaged rather than denied.

Keywords: Metaphysics, Positivism, Verification Principle, Empiricism, Metaphysical Residualism

Introduction

The aim to eliminate metaphysics has been one of the most defining and equally controversial moves in the history of modern philosophy. Comte's positivist philosophy seeks to ground all genuine knowledge in empirical observation, while repudiating metaphysical inquiry as a relic of a rudimentary stage of human thought. Comte puts it that:

From the study of the development of human intelligence, in all directions, and progress through all times, the discovery arises of a great fundamental law, to which it is necessarily subject, and which has a solid foundation of proof, both in the facts of our organisation and in our historical experience. The law is this:—that each of our leading conceptions, each branch of our knowledge,—passes successively through three different theoretical conditions: the Theological, or fictitious; the Metaphysical, or abstract; and the

Scientific, or positive. In other words, the human mind, by its nature, employs in its progress three methods of philosophising, the character of which is essentially different, and even radically opposed: viz., the theological method, the metaphysical, and the positive. Hence arise three philosophies, or general systems of conceptions on the aggregate of phenomena, each of which excludes the others. The first is the necessary point of departure of the human understanding, and the third is its fixed and definitive state. The second is merely a state of transition.¹

Comte's law of the three stages, from the above excerpt, holds that human thought evolves from theological explanations, through metaphysical speculation, to the scientific stage, where knowledge is solely grounded in observable phenomena and their empirical components. This redefines the scope of knowledge and also attempts to subordinate, if not eliminate, metaphysics as a standard domain of inquiry.

This anti-metaphysical aim finds both support and resistance within the broader philosophical tradition. On one hand, David Hume argues that whatever counts as knowledge must be rooted in sensory experience, while dismissing metaphysical speculation as empty.² Similarly, later logical positivists, such as Alfred Ayer, sharpen this stance by arguing that any statement lacking empirical verification is meaningless, thereby explicitly reinforcing Comte's rejection of metaphysics.³ On the other hand, Immanuel Kant argues that experience depends on a priori conditions that cannot come from observation alone, thereby restoring a necessary role for metaphysics.⁴ This challenges empiricism by indicating that observation alone cannot fully account for how knowledge is possible. These opposing positions show a persistent tension that, as much as empiricism seeks to eliminate metaphysics, it appears unable to do so without presupposing it.

This paper contributes to this longstanding debate by arguing that the positivist stance has not only been unsuccessful but also structurally self-undermining. While Comte's law of three stages is often rendered inconsequential as overly simplistic, such a stance underestimates its philosophical sophistication. Comte does not reject metaphysics arbitrarily;

¹ Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*. Vol 3, London: George Bell & Sons, 1896: 1-2.

² David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007: 22.

³ Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*. England: Penguin Books, 1936: 35-36.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: A51.

instead, he offers a comprehensive epistemological framework grounded in observation and the hierarchical organisation of the sciences.⁵ This makes his position philosophically significant and worth considering. The challenge, however, is that the principles that sustain positivism, including its commitment to observable knowledge, its account of intellectual progress, and its restriction of meaningful discourse, depend on assumptions that cannot themselves be empirically verified.

To salvage this tension, the paper introduces the concept of metaphysical residualism, which is the thesis that any epistemological stance that attempts to eliminate metaphysics necessarily retains irreducible metaphysical commitments that function as its condition of intelligibility and can neither be sidelined nor wished away. Building on this, the paper brings to the fore the residual metaphysics principle, which states that the denial of metaphysics is inherently self-undermining because it presupposes claims about knowledge, reality, and meaning that go beyond empirical verification. This conceptual analysis enables a shift from a historical critique of Comte to a systematic critique of a broader philosophical problem.

The paper considers Comte's positivism, starting with its historical context and tracing its influence on logical positivism, particularly on the Vienna Circle. It further examines the verification principle as an articulation of the anti-metaphysical project and explains its performative incoherence. Drawing the threads, it advances metaphysical residualism for understanding why such projects inevitably fail, because if metaphysics is indeed ineliminable, then continued attempts to eliminate it from scientific and philosophical discourse rest on a fundamental misunderstanding. As such, rather than denying metaphysical assumptions, intellectual inquirers should get more self-conscious in identifying and critically evaluating them. To achieve the above objective, the paper uses philosophical argumentation and conceptual and textual analysis. It concludes, without reservations, that metaphysics is not an optional addition to knowledge but a necessary precondition for it.

Comte's Positivism and The Anti-Metaphysical Project

Comte's positivism is one of the earliest systematic attempts to ground all knowledge in empirical observation while eliminating metaphysical speculation. This leads us to ask whether knowledge can be solely grounded in pure observation without presupposing the very metaphysical structures that positivism seeks to eliminate? Comte's law of the three stages posits that human thought progresses from "theological explanations" to metaphysical abstractions and finally to the positive stage, where knowledge is confined to observable relations among phenomena.⁶ This thought and developmental

⁵ Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy*, 5-6.

⁶ Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, 1.

pattern are not only descriptive but also normative, implying that metaphysics belongs to an intellectually inferior stage.

John Stuart Mill is taken to have given support to the empiricist orientation by arguing that scientific knowledge is made possible through observation and induction, drawing general laws from particular facts.⁷ In the same vein, Ernst Mach rejects metaphysical entities and embraces sensory data.⁸ However, from the earliest, Aristotle contends that true knowledge is only achieved when we understand the primary cause of a thing, transcending mere observation to grasp the “why” behind an object’s existence.⁹ He repudiates the idea that nature is a product of chance. This leads him to propose instead the fourfold framework of causality, including the material, which is the physical substance, the formal, the efficient, and the final, which is the purpose.¹⁰ By identifying these four causes, Aristotle argues that a complete account of reality that explains not only the mechanics of how a thing changes, but also the inherent purpose that drives its development toward a specific end is possible.

Kant argues that experience does not passively happen to us through the senses, since the mind actively organises what we perceive using built-in *a priori* structures.¹¹ Friedrich Hegel posits that “Being, the indeterminate immediate, is in fact *nothing*, and neither more nor less than nothing.”¹² This insinuates that even the most abstract concepts are necessary starting points for thinking, and they unfold into more concrete determinations, and that abstract categories are necessary for understanding reality. This tension, if anything, reveals that Comte’s dismissal of metaphysics, like that of other philosophers after him, overlooks its foundational role in structuring experience itself.

Comte’s rejection of metaphysics is closely tied to his epistemological claim that knowledge should be limited to observable phenomena and their regularities, maintaining that science should concern itself only with laws of succession and coexistence, thereby avoiding speculation about underlying causes.¹³ This stance aligns with David Hume’s scepticism about causation, which explains causal relations as nothing more than patterns of constant

⁷ John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive: Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*, 3rd ed., vol. 1. London: John Parker, 1851: 335.

⁸ Ernst Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations and the Relation of the Physical to the Psychical*. Chicago and London: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1914: 1.

⁹ Aristotle, *Physics Books I and II*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970: 184a10–15; 194b16–195a3.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Physics Books I and II*, 194b16–195a3.

¹¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A51.

¹² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Science of Logic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010: 59.

¹³ Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, 26.

conjunction and the mind's habitual expectation that one type of event will follow another, rather than a necessary connection between causes and effects.¹⁴ The positivist paradox features as Comte's attempt to eliminate metaphysics, which is, in itself, a metaphysical stance. By asserting that knowledge is confined to observable phenomena, positivism hinges on an unprovable ontological commitment; the belief that reality is structured by laws of succession rather than underlying essences. As Kant and Hegel suggest, the positive facts Comte avers are not raw data to be collected; they are perceived through *a priori* structures and abstract categories. Without the Nothing of abstract Being that Hegel equally describes, the scientist would have no conceptual framework to distinguish one phenomenon from another. Consequently, Comte's rejection of metaphysics does not explain metaphysics away; it merely ignores the foundation upon which the scientific method functions. And going back to Aristotle, the final cause represents a deviation from the modern positivist focus on observable patterns, which will be discussed in the subsequent sections, as it suggests that nature possesses a purpose. While Comte and Hume would argue that the quest for a purpose in nature is a metaphysical distraction, Aristotle's analysis reveals that without a final cause, our understanding of observable change remains incomplete. Aristotle's stance suggests that empirical data are only meaningful when they are anchored in a comprehensive causal explanation that accounts for both the physical origin and the ultimate goal of a thing's existence.

A number of contemporary philosophers have revisited the positivist ambition to eliminate metaphysics, not by rejecting empiricism outright, but by revealing its conceptual dependence on what it seeks to exclude. Jonathan Lowe argues in *The Possibility of Metaphysics* that metaphysics supplies the framework within which empirical inquiry becomes meaningful; without distinctions such as object, property, and relation, scientific discourse would lack coherence.¹⁵ This challenges Comte's assumption that observation can stand independently of metaphysical commitments. However, Lowe's account is not unproblematic. His defence of a robust ontological framework arguably reintroduces metaphysical commitments that cannot themselves be empirically verifiable, thereby sprouting the very positivist critique he resists. The tension here is whether metaphysics can be both indispensable and epistemically justified. A complementary critique arises from the philosophy of science, particularly in the work of Nancy Cartwright. In *How the Laws of Physics Lie*, Cartwright argues that scientific laws do not straightforwardly describe universal regularities; rather, they operate within highly idealised and often fictionalised models, and thus hold only under specific, carefully controlled conditions rather than in the complexity of the real world.¹⁶ This significantly destabilises Comte's reliance on laws of succession and coexistence as

¹⁴ Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 39-40.

¹⁵ Jonathan Lowe, *The Possibility of Metaphysics: Substance, Identity, and Time*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998: 8-9.

¹⁶ Nancy Cartwright, *How the Laws of Physics Lie*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983: 4.

objective features of reality. The simple logic is that laws are model-dependent, so what counts as an observable regularity is already shaped by theoretical assumptions. However, Cartwright's position raises a pressing difficulty such that if scientific laws are not universally descriptive, does this fragment science into a patchwork of localised models, and, if so, does this fragmentation undermine the kind of explanatory depth that Aristotle's causal framework was intended to secure?

Analysing further, in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," Wilfrid Sellars argues that all observation is conceptually mediated and embedded within inferential practices.¹⁷ The long and short of Sellar's stance is that there is no such thing as raw, uninterpreted observation, because observing is already a thinking activity, not just a sensory one, and knowledge comes from being part of a web of justified inferences, not from isolated sensory givens. Comte holds that knowledge should be grounded in observable phenomena and their regularities, treating observation as the sure foundation of science and avoiding speculation about underlying causes or essences. This assumes, at least implicitly, that observation can deliver objective, theory-neutral data upon which scientific laws are built.

Sellars's point complicates this.

If all observation is conceptually mediated and inferentially structured, then there is no such thing as a purely neutral observational base. The tension here is significant to the extent that if Sellars is right, then Comte's positivist program cannot simply rely on observation as a self-sufficient starting point, because observation itself already presupposes the very kinds of conceptual structures that Comte would have intended to keep strictly subordinate to empirical data. Sellar's stance reinforces the point that Comte's positive facts are not epistemically primitive but structured by prior conceptual frameworks. An epistemological challenge stems from Sellar's position in that if all observation is theory-laden, how do we explain objectivity? Comte's stance, for all its limitations, attempts to anchor knowledge in shared observable patterns. But Sellars shows that this is insufficient, and the solution is to ground objectivity in shared norms of reasoning that make knowledge claims accountable across a community.

Comte presents prediction as a key function of science, which he avers with his claim that "from science comes prevision: from prevision comes action," but he also insists that the deeper aim of science is to understand the laws governing phenomena, rather than only to enable practical prediction.¹⁸ Following a more salvageable path, Van Fraassen argues that the aim of science is not truth about all things, especially not about unobservable entities,

¹⁷ Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind." *Science, Perception and Reality*. London: Routledge, 1963: 16–17.

¹⁸ Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, 21.

such as electrons, quarks, or fields; instead, the aim is empirical adequacy.¹⁹ This insinuates that a scientific theory is successful if everything it puts forward about observable phenomena is correct, then it “saves the phenomena” as it accurately describes what we can observe. Like Comte, he resists metaphysical speculation, and unlike Comte, he allows theoretical language about unobservables, but treats it as useful, not necessarily true. This preserves Comte’s anti-metaphysical stance while avoiding ontological commitments about laws or underlying structures. However, it implicitly concedes that the observable/unobservable distinction is itself theory-dependent, thereby reintroducing a philosophical, if not fully metaphysical, residue.

Neo-Aristotelian metaphysics strengthens this critique by arguing that science alone cannot fully explain reality. Kit Fine, for instance, develops the idea of grounding, the relation that explains what depends on what. He argues that saying one fact grounds another is to say it holds *in* virtue of something more basic, not just that it regularly follows from it.²⁰ This kind of explanation transcends empirical generalisation and shows that a complete account of reality requires understanding the underlying structures of dependence. In this way, Fine revives an Aristotelian stance that explanation must go beyond observable patterns to what makes them the case.

Comte draws on Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena but pushes it further by rejecting any knowledge of things-in-themselves. Whereas Kant treats noumena as limiting concepts that mark the bounds of experience, Comte dismisses them altogether as meaningless and irrelevant to scientific inquiry.²¹ Carnap can be understood as both an ally and a corrective to Comte. Similarly to Comte, he seeks to eliminate metaphysics, but rather than dismissing it as intellectually inferior, he argues that many metaphysical disputes are pseudo-problems arising from the misuse of language.²² This refines Comte’s stance. However, Carnap’s framework implicitly concedes what Comte denies, that there is a structure that is framework-relative within which scientific statements make sense. Thus, Carnap softens positivism but equally reveals that it cannot be entirely anti-metaphysical, and it must rely on linguistic/conceptual frameworks. Nonetheless, W.V.O. Quine’s critique is more disruptive. By rejecting the analytic–synthetic distinction, he collapses the idea that there is a seam that runs between observation and theory. For Comte, observation provides a neutral foundation, but conversely, for Quine, no statement is immune to revision, not even those tied to observation, as all

¹⁹ Van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980: 12–13.

²⁰ Kit Fine, “Guide to Ground,” in *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012: 37–38.

²¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A254.

²² Rudolf Carnap, “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 4(11), 1950: 20–21.

knowledge is sealed up in a holistic “web of belief.”²³ Since metaphysical statements are not empirically verifiable, they will not fit into Quine’s holistic system. However, unlike Hegel, Quine avoids metaphysical system-building, leaving us with a tension that a fully empirical philosophy cannot justify its own empirical starting point.

Drawing the threads together, these critiques show that Comte’s attempt to eliminate metaphysics is unsuccessful in removing it but rather refines it into implicit assumptions about language, structure, and theory that continue to shape scientific knowledge. If this is the case, how did later philosophers, particularly the Vienna Circle, attempt to reconstruct positivism in a more rigorous, explicitly anti-metaphysical form without collapsing into the same paradox?

From Comte to Logical Positivism

A major distinction exists between Comte’s positivism and the logical positivists’ thesis, despite their point of agreement. Comte considers positivism as a historical and epistemological stance, and his rejection of metaphysical speculation is dismissed as belonging to an earlier, intellectually inferior stage of thought.²⁴ Conversely, the logical positivists, otherwise known as the Vienna Circle, transform this stance into a semantic and logical thesis, arguing that metaphysical statements are not only false and outdated but are pseudo-statements, and at worst, meaningless, since they can neither be verified through empirical observation nor logical analysis.²⁵ This marks a significant progression in that what is rejected by Comte on developmental grounds is rejected by logical positivism on the grounds of the criteria of meaning. The Vienna Circle consists of philosophers such as Rudolf Carnap, Moritz Schlick, Hans Hahn, Otto Neurath, and Freidric Waismann, amongst others, who strengthened Comte’s stance after up to eight decades.²⁶ Like Comte, they posit that meaningful statements must be grounded in empirical observation.

However, Karl Popper rejects verification in favour of falsification, arguing that universal scientific statements can be falsified, thereby establishing falsifiability as the demarcation criterion of science.²⁷ These stances suggest that logical positivism inherits and intensifies the limitations of Comte’s

²³ W. V. O. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980: 23-24.

²⁴ Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, 1-2.

²⁵ Rudolf Carnap, “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language,” in *Logical Positivism*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959: 60–61.

²⁶ Vienna Circle,” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed March 5, 2026, <https://iep.utm.edu/viennacr/>

²⁷ Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1963: 33–34.

framework. Then, a shift exists that makes it clearer in Alfred Ayer, who explains the verification principle as follows:

One way of attacking a metaphysician who claimed to know a reality which transcended the phenomenal world would be to inquire from what premises his propositions were deduced. Must he not begin, as other men do, with the evidence of his senses? And if so, what valid process of reasoning can lead him to the conception of a transcendent reality? Surely from empirical premises nothing whatsoever concerning the properties, or even the existence, of anything super-empirical can legitimately be inferred. But this objection would be met by a denial on the part of the metaphysician that his assertions were ultimately based on the evidence of his senses. He would say that he was endowed with a faculty of intellectual intuition which enabled him to know facts that could not be known through sense-experience. And even if it could be shown that he was relying on empirical premises, and that his venture into a non-empirical world was therefore logically unjustified, it would not follow that the assertions which he made concerning this non-empirical world could not be true.²⁸

Ayer frames the verification principle as one in which a statement counts as meaningful if it is either analytically true, that is, by definition, or capable of being verified through experience. Against the backdrop, this more rigorous formulation encounters internal difficulties. It could be seen as a challenge that runs deeper than a simple disagreement about method, as it targets the logical status of the verification principle itself. When Ayer and other logical positivists came about a criterion of meaning, a rule that separates meaningful statements from metaphysical nonsensical ones, Popper points out two junctures of contraction, including (i) that the verification principle, which thrives on a criterion of meaning, is itself, not analytically true, that is, it is not true by definition, and that (ii) it is also not empirically verifiable as one can neither test it through observation nor experiment.²⁹ So by its own standard, the principle itself would be meaningless. This is what makes it self-undermining, as it fails the same test it imposes on all other statements to fizzle them out. In essence, Popper's response is not meant to reject verification, but to rethink what distinguishes science from non-science.

²⁸ Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 13-14.

²⁹ Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. London: Routledge, 2002: 18–19.

Instead of asking whether a theory can be verified, he rephrases it and asks whether it can, in principle, be proven false. This leads to his criterion of falsifiability, a paradigm shift in thought, where scientific theories that rely on predictions could turn out to be wrong, and a single counter-instance is enough to refute a universal claim.

In what follows, Popper's stance sharpens the critique of positivism in at least two ways. First, it reveals that the verification principle is not only incomplete but also logically inconsistent as a universal rule. Second, it reframes science as a critical, fallibilist enterprise and terrain of inquiry rather than a system built on firm observational foundations. The implication following from this is that it further exacerbates the point of discourse, in that if scientific theories are never verified but only tentatively accepted until falsified, then, with rational cogency, it is not unreasonable to argue that science no longer delivers certainty, but only provisional/tentative knowledge. This pushes the debate beyond Comte and the positivists. The issue is no longer how to eliminate metaphysics, but whether any strict criterion, verification, or falsification can fully capture the complexity of scientific practice.

What then is the status of the verification principle? Is it a factual claim, a logical truth, or a rule about how language should be used? Carnap seems to defend positivism from Popper's objection as he considers the verification principle not as empirical statements but as linguistic proposals, as seen in his principle of tolerance, which are rules for constructing meaningful discourse instead of reality claims, and that logical systems are freely constructed frameworks governed by explicit syntactical rules.³⁰ *Prima facie*, this seems to sidestep Popper's stance. If the principle is not a factual claim, then it does not need to be empirically verified. However, this reinterpretation actually reveals a continuity with Comte. Note that Comte did not just describe how knowledge develops; he prescribed that scientific thought ought to restrict itself to observable relations and phenomena. In other words, his positivism is already normative, not entirely descriptive. Consequently, it turns out that rather than abandoning Comte, the logical positivists translate his critique of metaphysics into a criterion of meaning. Nonetheless, it is to this problem of self-application of the verification principle and performative inconsistency that the next section now turns.

The Verification Principle and Performative Incoherence

From the foregoing, the competing positions show that the verification principle rests on contested philosophical assumptions rather than neutral empirical criteria. An identified difficulty that seems to undermine the principle is how what it avers cannot be applied to it. Since the principle itself is neither empirically verifiable nor analytically true by definition, as Ayer

³⁰ Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1937: 52.

posits, it does not satisfy the condition it imposes on the meaningfulness or otherwise of other statements, which cannot be wished/explained away. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that this renders the principle self-refuting, which is an incoherence in itself.³¹

More importantly, as Bernhard Weiss puts it forward, Michael Dummett, who dealt chiefly with the philosophy of language, points out the inability of the verification principle to justify its own status as a meaningful proposition, thereby operating at the level of meaning.³² This moves the issue from logical inconsistency to that of normativity, which is a harder challenge to evade. However, this approach also has a limitation, since it presupposes that all meaningful principles must be justifiable internally on their own. But a positivist may reject this demand and argue differently that the criterion of meaning is justified outwardly/externally on pragmatic grounds. If such is the case, then Dummett's stance may be seen as imposing a stronger condition than positivists will be willing to accept. Taken together, the major challenge with the verification principle could be restructured as not only that it fails its own test, but that it cannot account for the authority of the test it imposes on other statements and principles. As such, the challenge with logical positivism is not a later distortion, but a development of tensions already embedded in Comte's original formulation of positivism. If the verification principle is either self-refuting, as MacIntyre argues, or incapable of justifying its own meaningfulness, as Dummett puts forward, then its assertion reveals that the verification principle performs an act, declaring the conditions of meaningful discourse, that it cannot itself justify within its own framework. This raises the question of whether the principle is flawed and performatively incoherent.

Jürgen Habermas argues that participants who communicate cannot avoid presupposing shared standards of validity, since any attempt to deny them must itself rely on the norms it seeks to reject. In this sense, certain positions undermine themselves because the act of asserting them presupposes what their content denies.³³ This is a case of performative incoherence. However, logical positivists may attempt to reinterpret the principle as a methodological stance rather than a truth claim. However, this move, if at all considered, still does not resolve the underlying challenge. Even as a proposal, it presupposes a normative claim about what counts as meaningful discourse. Thus, attempts to fizzle out metaphysics by Comte and the logical positivists alike result not in its disappearance but in its reappearance at a deeper, unacknowledged level, and equally retain a metaphysical residue that cannot be wished away.

³¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981: 72–73.

³² Bernhard Weiss, *Michael Dummett*. New York: Routledge, 2002: 3-4.

³³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984: 88–89.

Metaphysical Residualism

The concept of metaphysical residualism explains that the positivist ambition of Comte and, by extension, the logical positivists to exclude metaphysics from the domain of meaningful discourse is not only a historical failure, but also a structural and performative incoherence. It asserts that any epistemological stance seeking the complete abolition of metaphysics inevitably and invariably smuggles it back in as a condition of its intelligibility. Comte, by every indication considered, and by extension, the logical positivists, did not eliminate metaphysics; they repress and refine it into unacknowledged methodological axioms. This structural incoherence is present at the foundation of the positivist project, vividly exposed in Comte's own formulations. Comte dogmatically asserts the inevitable triumph of his system, stating that:

The problem, once recognised, cannot remain long unsolved; for all considerations whatever point to the Positive Philosophy as the one destined to prevail. It alone has been advancing during a course of centuries, throughout which the others have been declining. The fact is incontestable. Some may deplore it, but none can destroy it, nor therefore neglect it but under penalty of being betrayed by illusory speculations. This general revolution of the human mind is nearly accomplished. We have only to complete the Positive Philosophy by bringing social phenomena within its comprehension, and afterwards consolidating the whole into one body of homogeneous doctrine. The marked preference which almost all minds, from the highest to the commonest, accord to positive knowledge over vague and mystical conceptions is a pledge of what the reception of this philosophy will be when it has acquired the only quality that it now wants, a character of due generality. When it has become complete, its supremacy will take place spontaneously and will re-establish order throughout society.³⁴

Under the scrutiny of metaphysical residualism, this excerpt reveals a profound hypocrisy in that Comte's positivism rejects metaphysical notions and foundational underlying causes in favour of observational and empirical phenomena. However, his stance of a predetermined historical destiny and an evolution of human cognition relies on an unacknowledged metaphysical edifice. By presuming an absolute and unavoidable endpoint for human

³⁴ Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, 16-17.

thought, Comte replaces theological/mystical and metaphysical conceptions with an equally dogmatic ontology of progress. This is because to argue that the trajectory of the human mind is not an empirical observation, but a metaphysical stance being masked as a historical fact. In fact, a major critique of the positivists' stance was jettisoned by Gustav Bergmann, a logical positivist, who contends that the verification principle cannot dispense with metaphysics, because the logical form of empirical statements already presupposes a world structured by entities such as facts and relations that are not themselves empirically verifiable but are nonetheless indispensable to scientific discourse altogether.³⁵ *Albeit*, Bergmann's point is to reveal that the positivist refusal of metaphysics does not indicate a triumph of scientific rigour, but a failure of epistemological self-awareness on their part.

To further see the enduring nature of this incoherence, one must also confront the harsh subsequent formulations of the anti-metaphysical project. Consider Ayer's formulation of the verification principle, which bifurcates the boundary of intelligibility, as he argues that a sentence has meaning if and only if what the proposition it expresses is either analytic or empirically verifiable.³⁶ Metaphysical residualism exposes the self-undermining logic that the verification principle itself is neither empirically verifiable nor an analytic tautology, and attempts to oust metaphysical claims cannot be done without implying it in the background. Determining what counts as reality, which are only observables, and what counts as meaningful, which are verifiabiles, Ayer's system relies on an implicit ontology. It enforces a metaphysical stance about the limits of existence while it disguises it as a purely linguistic criterion. The bifurcation between the observable and unobservable could be seen as an ontological bias, not an empirical discovery. To demand that our way of knowing be stopped at the boundary of the human sensory apparatus is a metaphysical commitment regarding the anthropocentric structure of reality. If anything, the critical claim of metaphysical residualism is that empiricists are metaphysicians in denial. By replacing metaphysical theories with scientific criteria, positivist philosophies carve out an invisible ontology of metaphysics. These assumptions give epistemological rules without ever subjecting themselves to the empirical scrutiny they demand of other domains of inquiry, particularly metaphysics. Therefore, metaphysical residualism turns out to be a tool for exposing how anti-metaphysical philosophies, from Comte's dogmas to contemporary empiricism, collapse under the scrutiny of their own seemingly indispensable, ontological commitments.

The Residual Metaphysics Principle and the Necessity of Metaphysics

From the foregoing, the argumentative strength drawn from metaphysical residualism leads to the residual metaphysics principle, which holds that the epistemic stance required to oust metaphysics is inherently, and unavoidably, a

³⁵ Gustav Bergmann, *The Metaphysics of Logical Positivism*. New York: Longmans Green and Co, 1954: 47-48.

³⁶ Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 14.

metaphysical act. To have a defined boundary between what can be known requires a vantage point that goes beyond that boundary. Consequently, any analysis, system, or its corollaries that deny metaphysics must structurally presuppose it to justify its own criterion of exclusion. This principle sets out to knock off the core mechanics of Comte's positive philosophy, since he explicitly ousts metaphysics. Comte's apex evolutionary epoch, as we have it in contemporary times, is meant to make us abandon the search for absolute essences, even though Comte avers that the human mind must sternly focus on the study of phenomena and how they play out. However, applying the residual metaphysics principle here reveals the ontological nullity of this restriction. To argue that reality must be understood only through observable phenomena and successions, and to emphasise that underlying causes are either inaccessible or non-existent, is not a neutral, theory-free observation.

Comte does not transcend metaphysics *per se*. At best, he replaces metaphysics of substance with that of relations. The epistemic demand that science should limit itself to the "how" and ignore the "why" presumes a world where observable regularities are self-sufficient, epistemically. But this self-sufficiency cannot be observed; it can only be assumed. Thus, the criteria set by positivism, courtesy of Comte and by extension, the logical positivists, which are to distinguish genuine knowledge from metaphysical speculation, considered as illusory speculation, are themselves ungrounded in empirical fact. The Residual Metaphysics Principle thus proves that metaphysics is not an optional domain of inquiry to epistemology, but a necessary foundation of any epistemological system, including positivism.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the historical and logical attempts to eliminate metaphysics, with a particular foci on Comte's positive philosophy, following his laws of three stages from metaphysical speculations to scientific observation, and the verification/falsification principle of the logical positivists, and how their attempt failed. The paper introduced metaphysical residualism, which made it clear that positivism does not eliminate metaphysics but merely represses it, refining its ontological inquiries into unacknowledged methodological stances. From Comte's law of the three stages to Ayer's self-refuting verification principle, the anti-metaphysical project is defined as performatively incoherent. This is because positivism enforces strict boundaries on meaningful discourse and what counts as reality, while their principle and analysis violate their own empirical criteria. Metaphysics is indestructible because the act of defining the limits of empirical knowledge requires an additional empirical and ontological stance, which is itself metaphysical. Positivism's failure is not a matter of inadequate scientific rigour, but of logical impossibility. Therefore, instead of seeking a solely empirical inquiry, philosophical and scientific stances must actively acknowledge and critically interrogate the metaphysical notions and structures that make knowledge acquisition possible. The paper concluded that denying

metaphysics is not tantamount to achieving scientific purity, but to accepting the relevance and universality of metaphysics as a domain of knowing.

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