

Verification and Falsification

VERIFICATION

The Verification Principle states that **sentences are only meaningful if we can explain in what circumstances they could be verified by sense experience:**

“The criterion, which we use to test the genuineness of apparent propositions of fact, is the criterion of verifiability. We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express – that is, if he knows what observations would lead him under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false.”

Language, Truth and Logic
A.J. Ayer

FALSIFICATION

Anthony Flew suggested an alternative but related test of meaningfulness – Falsification. Based upon the thought of Karl Popper, a philosopher of science, he asserted that **a statement is meaningful if you knew what observation would show the statement to be false.** He cited the parable by **John Wisdom** of the two visitors to the forest clearing. One believes there is a secret gardener, the other does not. Both are able to explain their findings without denying their central conviction that the gardener does/does not exist. Therefore he asks the question:

“Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?”

“Theology and Falsification”
Anthony Flew

He expands this idea to ask the same sorts of questions about the meaningfulness of claiming that God exists when no experiences could possibly be imagined that would count against it:

“Now it often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding ‘There isn’t a God after all’ or ‘God does not really love us then.’ Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no sign of concern. Some qualification is made – God’s love is ‘not a merely human love’ or it is ‘an inscrutable love,’ perhaps and we realise that such sufferings are quite compatible with the truth of the assertion that ‘God loves us as a father (but, of course...).’ We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask, what is this assurance of God’s (appropriately qualified) love worth; what is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against? Just what would have to happen... to entitle us to say ‘God does not love us’ or even ‘God does not exist?’”

New Essays in Philosophical Theology
Anthony Flew

Again the same question can be asked: what is the experiential difference between a God that loves, a God that does not love and no God at all? **Flew** claims that religious claims suffer **“death by a thousand qualifications,”** because they can never state any conditions of falsifiability.

- The **strong form** of the verification principle excludes perfectly meaningful statements, such as, “All people spend part of their lives asleep”; “All cats are mortal”; “Hitler invaded France.”
- Many religious statements are verifiable in the **weak sense** if we allow what **John Hick** (in a book called *Faith and Knowledge*) called **‘eschatological verification’**. That is to say, they could be verified ‘in the end’ – when we die and confront whatever, if anything, comes after. He uses the example of the two travellers on the road to the celestial city. One of them believes that the road ends at the city, one that there is no celestial city. When they reach the end they both will find out which was right and which was wrong!
- The verification principle excludes nothing, since **all experiences are allowable** because of the criterion ‘verifiable in principle’:
“If I were God, I would be able to check the truth of my own existence.”

Holding Fast to God
Keith Ward

- The Verification Principle does not satisfy its own criteria of meaningfulness. That is to say, is the verification Principle obviously meaningful, or meaningful by sense experience? If it is not **the VP is itself, by its own definition, meaningless.**
- **Richard Swinburne** points out that **many statements are meaningful even though they are not falsifiable.** He gives us two examples:
“Some of the toys which to all appearances stay in the toy cupboard while people are asleep and no one is watching, actually get up and dance in the middle of the night and then go back to the cupboard leaving no traces of their activity.”
“A man can understand the statement ‘once upon a time, before there were men or any other rational creatures, the earth was covered by sea’, without his having any idea of what geological evidence would count for or against this proposition.”
The Coherence of Theism
Richard Swinburne
- **A statement can in principle be verifiable even if it cannot in principle be falsifiable.** For example, the proposition that there are three consecutive sevens in the number π . This could never be falsified but could, if it were true, be verified. The same claim can be made regarding propositions about God (if we think again about Hick’s parable of the travellers on the road to the Celestial City.)
- **Basil Mitchell** stated **that religious statements were in principle falsifiable** too but it just happened to be the case that religious believers have such a faith in God that almost any evidence that is supposed to falsify their belief can be explained in other ways. He compares this to someone who belongs to a revolutionary terrorist movement. The person has complete trust in the rebel leader. Sometimes the rebel leader seems to do things that are against the interests of the group but the person still trusts the rebel leader because he is told that “it is all part of a secret plan.” If his belief in the rebel leader were strong enough this would be enough.