

The verification principle offers no real challenge to religious belief essay sam...



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I would like to start this essay by explaining the background to Verification Principle. Verification is a philosophical movement which claims that language is only meaningful if it can be verified by a sense- observation or it is a tautology. The verification movement was influenced by science, which emphasized the importance of confirming any statement by observation eg through experiment. Moritz, Schlick and other supporters of the verification pointed out that the meaningfulness of statements is shown by the method by which you verify the statement. If you cannot demonstrate with sense- observations how a statement is true, then the statement is factually meaningless. Personally, I agree with the verification principle in some aspects, for example things can be verified by using sense observations and that it challenges the religious belief of God. There are also some stronger and weaker challenges which I will explain later on.

Verificationists argue that any statement that cannot be proved true or false is meaningless. Language that talks about God is meaningless for a verificationist as there is no way to demonstrate the truth or falsity of God.

However one problem with early verificationism's strict scientific approach is that it would mean that many statements people make are meaningless, even when most people think they make perfect sense. Swinburne gives the example " all ravens are black", He points out that while people generally accept ravens are black, there is always the possibility of a raven that is not black, therefore according to verificationism the statement is meaningless. Furthermore for early verificationists is that no statement can be made about history. If I say that the battle of Hastings occurred in 1066, there is

not way in which to verify this fact by observation. Therefore it is factually meaningless according to verificationism.

AJ Ayer supported the verification theory. He suggested that “ the criterion we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability”. According to Ayer if a statement is not verifiable it is either meaningless or a tautology. By meaningless Ayer meant that a statement was not factually significant. Ayer was not denying that people make other type of statements that are important to them, such as saying that God answers my prayers; it is just that unverifiable statements do not have factually significance. He would argue that the verification offers a large challenge to religious belief.

Ayer suggested a procedure for deciding whether a statement is verifiable. Ayer called the statement being tested a ‘ putative proposition’. Ayer distinguished ‘ practical verifiability’ from ‘ verifiability in principle’. Practical verifiability are statements which could be tested in reality. Verifiability in principle are statements that we cannot verify as we lack the technology.

Ayer distinguished strong and weak verification. Strong verification applied to anything that can be verified conclusively by observation and experience. Weak verification refers to statements that can be shown to be probable by observation and experience. Ayer argued that the sense in which verificationism should be used is the weak sense because the strong sense of verification had no possible application. He gave the example, all humans beings are mortal in a strong sense without killing every human being , this is clearly impossible to do but a few people would doubt that all human

beings are mortal, as all human observations to date suggest the truth of the statement human beings are mortal.

However, strong verification has been widely criticised for excluding many areas of knowledge. Eg- it is not possible to talk meaningfully about history using the strong verification principles as no sense observations can confirm historical events. Swinburne has argued that strong verification excludes universal statements of any sort. You cannot say water boils at 100 degrees at standard temperature and pressure, because there is always the possibility of repeating the test one more time and obtaining a different result.

If the principle of verification is applied to religious claims, the claims can appear meaningless because they cannot be supported by observations from sense experience that go with what is probable. Eg the teleological argument has been criticised for its inability to verify the arguments convincingly from sense experience. However it may be argued that there are signs of design in the world but becomes a debate about what level of proof satisfies the weak verification criteria.

On the other hand John Hick argued that God talk is eschatologically verifiable. He suggested that religion is not meaningless because its truth is verifiable in principle, thus meeting the conditions of verificationism. Hick said that the truth of god's existence is verifiable in principle if true, but not falsifiable if false, at the end of things. Hick himself speaks of the asymmetry of his notion. He shows this in his story of celestial city. Hick imagined 2 travellers on the journey through to the celestial city. The journey is

unavoidable. One traveller believes that there is a celestial city at the end of the journey and views difficulties along the way as learning activities and good events as welcome and bad events have to be endured. Whichever one is right at the end, their views could be verified. As Swinburne says that there are many criticisms of verificationism, particularly strong verificationism, which is “ generally agreed to be false”.

Moreover the evidence problem scrutinised weak verification as it concerns what evidence can count in the verification assessment. Ayer rejected accounts of religious experience, other researchers have suggested that there is clear evidence that such experience that such experiences happen and that a God causing the experience cannot be ruled out.

Richard Swinburne pointed out that there are many areas of debate where the problem would be getting people to agree what was admissible evidence to decided the matter. Swinburne refers to debates where the problem would be getting people to agree what was admissible evidence to decide the matter. Swinburne refers to debates about the end of the world, the devil or Poseidon

However if Ayer is correct, religious statements are nonsense if they are referring to God defined in a traditional sense as infinite, impersonal and transcendent because statements about God do not tell people anything about the world that is verifiable

Ayer also rejected any argument from religious experience. He accepted that people might claim to have experiences of God, but he argues that a person, such as Paul who claim they have seen God is recounting a set of <https://assignbuster.com/the-verification-principle-offers-no-real-challenge-to-religious-belief-essay-sample/>

experiences raised interesting psychological questions, but because religious experiences are not verifiable Ayer rejected them as meaningful statements.

However it is possible for something to be meaningful but unverifiable. It is quite possible for a statement to be meaningful without being verifiable.

Swinburne gives the example of toys in a cupboard. The toys only come out at night when no one observes them. The situation is meaningful even though it is fictitious and unverifiable. Schrodinger suggested that you can imagine a cat in a box with a radioactive particle that would kill the cat. Is the cat dead or alive- you cannot know. If you open the box to find out, you may trigger the release of the radioactive particle, thus killing the cat.

Hence, whether the cat is alive or dead at any point is unverifiable.

Later on in Ayer's second edition responded to many of the criticisms by a number of philosophers. He changed his definition of the principle of verification to, " a statement is held to be literally meaningful if only if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable'. Ayer changed the definition of verification because he concluded that his distinction between strong and weak verification was not a real distinction as the strong form of verification could not apply to any statement, and Ayer had come to the conclusion that some statements can be conclusively verified. He observed that single experiences are what happens and when you have the experience it is a reality.

He also rejected his earlier definition of weak verification as ' far too liberal, since it allows meaning to any statement whatsoever'. To solve the problem with strong and weak verification Ayer suggested directly and indirectly

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verifiable. Ayer suggested that something 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 premises alone. Eg, is a post box red?, can be verified by observing post boxes.

By indirectly verifiable Ayer meant a statement that is not directly verifiable or analytic and ‘ in conjunction with certain other directly verifiable evidence could support it. For example, scientists demonstrated their existence of black holes in space, however black holes cannot be observed; instead scientists demonstrated their existence by looking at other evidence which suggested the existence of the black hole

Although there is still a major problem that Verificationism is unverifiable. Many philosophers have pointed out that claiming ‘ statements are only meaningful if verifiable by sense-observation’ is itself unverifiable. You cannot demonstrate this principle by sense- observation.

The Falsification principle is a different approach to the question of language. Falsification addresses the question – when a statement scientific as opposed to any other type of statement? One of the most well known statements of falsification is Karl Popper- one can sum up all this by saying that the criterion of the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, or refutability, or testability.

Popper gave the example of a comparison of Einstein’s theory of gravity with astrology. Popper argued that Einstein’s theory of gravity was scientific because it was potentially falsifiable. In other words its truth or falseness
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could be tested against empirical observations of the universe. Astrology on the other hand was labelled as unscientific.

Thus if applied to religious belief falsification raises a question about the nature of the claims that religious people make. For example, if a religious person says ' God loves me' the question is whether the statement is scientific or not. If the religious claims are scientific then it must be possible that the religious claims could conflict with sense observations and thus be undermined.

Falsification theory was famously discussed by Anthony flew, hare and Basil Mitchell in an article entitle " theology and falsification: A symposium".

Within the article, they presented different analyse of falsification

Flew suggested that believers will allow nothing to falsify their belief claims. Flew presented an analogy of the jungle. Two explorers in the jungle find a clearing in which weeds and flowers grow. One of them suggests that there is a gardener who looks after clearing; the other suggests that there is not. The two explorers set a watch; they even use dogs to hunt for the gardener and put up an electric fence to detect anyone entering. No one is ever detected. One of the explorers says " there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves".

Flew's argument is that religious believers act in the same way as the believing explorer. Flew gives the example of saying God loves people, even if disaster happens. His argument is that people still go on believing in the <https://assignbuster.com/the-verification-principle-offers-no-real-challenge-to-religious-belief-essay-sample/>

loving God. No experience seems to falsify a religious believer's faith. Flew therefore argues that God-talk is meaningless as it is unfalsifiable, in like manner to the eternally elusive gardener in his analogy.

Flew suggested that God died a 'death by a thousand qualifications'. By this phrase, Flew meant that when a religious believer is challenged about the existence of God, or God's nature, their response is to modify their statements about God so much when challenged, that statements no longer resemble the original claim about God.

Anthony Flew's example of the explorer in the garden was inspired by a similar story by John Wisdom. However Wisdom uses his story to make a different point to Flew. Wisdom's story about a garden suggested that two people were looking at an overgrown garden. One of the observers how uncared it is, but there are signs of order like flowers and suggests a gardener. However no test can show whether there was a gardener. It suggests that religious language makes statements that are reasonable. Just as they cannot verify whether a gardener has been at work, the existence or nature of God might be beyond our normal methods of verification.

Therefore the nature of God is a matter that is outside the scope of traditional methods of scientific enquiry.

In conclusion the principles of verification and falsification both present strong challenges to religious belief. However, they are not the only ways in which to assess religious language, and for many believers the language they use to talk about God is symbolic, mythological or just different from other language. Therefore, believers might claim that the principles of

falsification and verification are not relevant challenges to religious language as the nature of religious language is different from that supposed in the verification and falsification debates.