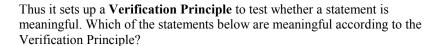# Verification Revision

A verification theory posits (puts forward) the 'rules' by which any statement can be judged intelligible or meaningful.

Logical Positivism arose out of the work of a group of philosophers dubbed the Vienna Circle. The English philosopher, **A. J. Ayer** (1910-89), expressed Logical Positivism in its most influential form in his book *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936).

Alfred Jules Ayer

> **In a nutshell, Logical Positivism claims that only two kinds of proposition are meaningful:**
>
> - analytic propositions (*a priori* – e.g. logic and tautologies)
>   *e.g. monotremes are egg-laying mammals*
>
> - synthetic propositions (*a posteriori* - empirically testable statements)
>   *e.g. a duck-billed platypus is a monotreme*

Thus it sets up a **Verification Principle** to test whether a statement is meaningful. Which of the statements below are meaningful according to the Verification Principle?

a)   *Jane has red hair.*
b)   *Jane has dyed her hair.*
c)   *Jane is a spinster.*
d)   *A spinster is an unmarried woman.*
e)   *God exists.*
f)   *God loves every person.*
g)   *Human life is sacred.*
h)   *Murder is wrong.*
i)   *One plus one equals two.*
j)   *Honesty is good.*

How strong an attack is Logical Positivism on Religious Language?

- If LP is valid, then much of what is asserted about God, metaphysics, ethics and aesthetics is meaningless, since it fails LP's verification principle.
    o But then, LP fails its own verification principle. How fatal to LP is this?

- One could also 'bypass' LP's verification principle by asserting that knowledge of God is founded on direct apprehension (mysticism), through symbols (cf. Tillich), and so on.
    o Is this the philosophical equivalent of 'taking your ball home and refusing to play'? Should language about God be subject to the rules under which ordinary statements are deemed intelligible? Or would we expect language about the Ultimate to play by different rules (cf. *Via Negativa & Analogica*)?

- One could also argue, as **John Hick** did, that assertions about God will receive *eschatological verification*.

One can trace the ancestry of Ayer's thought in the writings of **David Hume**.

Hume divided objects of proper enquiry into two classes: *relation of ideas* and *matters of fact* – broadly corresponding to analytic and synthetic propositions. He would criticise books on 'divinity or school metaphysics' thus:

'Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity and number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.'
(An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding)

Ayer extended his theory to allow for the fact that not all statements considered meaningful are *verifiable in practice*. Some statements (e.g. scientific hypotheses) may only be *verifiable in principle*.

Ayer also distinguished between *strong* and *weak* verification – the former to statements that can be established definitely true or false, the latter to statements (for example, about happenings in history) that can be rendered probable or otherwise through present experience.

Falsification

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) moved away from his support of LP in his later years. As did **Karl Popper** (1902-94), an émigré from pre-war Austria who subsequently settled in England. Popper wanted to establish what was genuinely scientific against metaphysics or 'pseudo-science'.

In *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963), Popper highlighted theories from his early years that had intrigued him:

- Einstein's theory of relativity,
- Marx's theory of history,
- Freud's psychoanalysis,
- Adler's individual psychology.

Only Einstein's theory, in Popper's view, had the mark of genuine science. Why? Since among Einstein's ideas was that of the effect of gravitation of light. At the time, this was all tentative; no evidence backed up his view. In fact, Einstein had put forward measurement criteria that would *disprove* his ideas. His theory was **falsifiable**. Subsequently, the British physicist Eddington established Einstein's ideas fitted observations (made during eclipse observations in 1919).

By contrast, the theories of Marx, Freud and Adler were not theories that could be tested *against* empirical data (and hence falsifiable), rather they were theories *by* which empirical data were interpreted – always in such a way as to presume and confirm the theory. In Popper's view, they were more akin to astrology than science.

It is easy, Popper thought, to obtain confirmations for a theory: a genuine test is always an attempt to falsify it by observations.

Theology and Falsification

Anthony Flew, a former Professor of Philosophy at Reading University, adapted this criterion of falsifiability to matters religious. He used **John Wisdom's** Parable of the Gardener as a starting point for a critique of religious belief and language. His basic point is that the believer in the invisible gardener will allow nothing to count against this belief, instead interpreting observations in terms of this belief. Similarly, the theist allows nothing to count against their belief in God, rather straining for theodicies in the face of evidence that others would say pointed to God's non-existence.

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 obvious sign of concern … What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or the existence of, God?

(Theology and Falsification, 1955)

How strong is this argument against religious language?

- **Basil Mitchell** responded to Flew's attack by offering a *Parable of the Partisan and the Stranger*. Mitchell's point seems to be this: trials of faith do occur, especially those occasioned by the problem of evil. But a believer's prior commitment and trust means that nothing counts *decisively* against belief.
    - Flew responds by saying that the Stranger's ambiguous behaviour (in spite of his good will) is easy to explain: the Stranger is a man and may not be able to offer more direct assurance of his allegiance during a dangerous struggle. An omnipotent, omniscient God should have no such problems.

In this parable, the Stranger confides with the Partisan, saying he is on their side in the resistance struggle. He asks for the Partisan's trust, in spite of appearances and actions that follow. Sometimes, the Stranger seems to be 'on the other side' - trust comes under pressure.

- **R. M. Hare** (died 2002) responded to Flew with the *blik* argument. The difference between believers and non-believers boils down to a basic *blik* difference. To Hare, it seems that to accept the full force of a Flew's argument, one would have to share his *blik*.
    - Flew attacked the *blik* argument. Christianity, he says, makes assertions about the way things are. It is absurd to think of it merely as a 'believer's *blik*'. It is true that Hare's argument spent too little time on telling us how one *blik* is better/truer than the other. But Hare, following Hume, makes a powerful case for *blik* as a necessary - but non-rational - starting point for one's engagement with the world.

Hare gave the example of a lunatic student who believed the dons wanted to murder him. In spite of every effort to show the lunatic that this was not the case, every peaceful action was interpreted as really underhandedly murderous, so far as the student was concerned. Hare asserts that the lunatic's insane *blik* is not countered by 'no *blik*' – rather by a 'sane *blik*'. *Blik*s, then, are the basic conceptual apparatus by which we make sense of the world (cf. myth) – by our *blik*s we decide what is and what is not an explanation.