

Cognitive AO1 Handout

Part 1

The Verification Principle

In the 1920s and 1930s a group of philosophers were concerned that some questions remained unanswered century after century, while other academic areas progressed. They wondered whether these unresolved questions were never resolved because they were not real meaningful questions. The group of philosophers were based in Vienna and became known as the Vienna Circle. Its members mostly had backgrounds in science. The group decided it needed a test for meaningfulness so that statements could be identified as either meaningful or meaningless. They were influenced not just by science (the area that provided answers and resulted in agreed knowledge) but also by empiricism (knowledge is based on experience) and by the work of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein who argued for a picture theory of language (words ultimately derive from our sensory experience). They agreed that the meaning of a proposition lay in knowing what is pictured.

Logical Positivism was a movement that developed from the Vienna Circle. They sought after finding the ultimate test for meaningful statements – the Verification Principle. They concluded that for a statement to be meaningful it had to be able to be verified by the sense experiences, in practice and conclusively.

It was soon realised that this principle would eliminate historical statements and general laws of science since it was not possible to observe and so verify past events or statements that apply universally. But these statements were seen as meaningful, so a weaker form of the principle was devised – verifiable in principle rather than practice and verifiable in terms of probable rather than conclusive.

However, this still meant that all talk of God was deemed nonsensical since the notion of a person whose essential attributes are non-empirical is not an intelligible notion at all. They argued that it was a misuse of language that assumed that because a word existed (God) there must be some corresponding reality.

Part 2

The Falsification Principle

Sir Karl Popper challenged the accepted methodology of science and argued that it was concerned with falsification rather than verification. He realised that the key to science wasn't its ability to verify but rather its ability to know what would show something as being false. Theories are considered true until some evidence counts against them. The more times you fail to show a theory is false (because you know what would have to happen to show it was false), the more reason you have to think the theory is correct. Popper regarded the falsification principle as a test that a statement was scientific. However, the British

philosopher Antony Flew applied this to the debate about language. He argued that when religious statements were claiming to be asserting something about the world – then they were meaningless, since the religious believer allowed no set of circumstances to count against the statement.

For instance, the statement that God answers prayer is seen to be consistent with whatever happens, since the religious believer claims that God's reply could be yes, no or wait. (I.e. whatever happens, God is seen to answer).

Antony Flew illustrated his argument using a parable about an invisible gardener. He told of two explorers who discover a clearing that resembles a humanly made garden yet in other ways resembles a natural phenomenon. One explorer is convinced that there is a gardener; the other disagrees. They set up testing the hypothesis that there is a gardener, using fences, bloodhounds and so on. No evidence of a gardener is found. However, at every stage the believer qualifies the hypothesis, the gardener is invisible, he cannot be detected by any of the senses. Finally the non-believer asks "Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even no gardener at all?" Flew's claim is that this is what happens to religious claims. They are unfalsifiable and therefore are meaningless. Religion does not allow itself to be proven false.