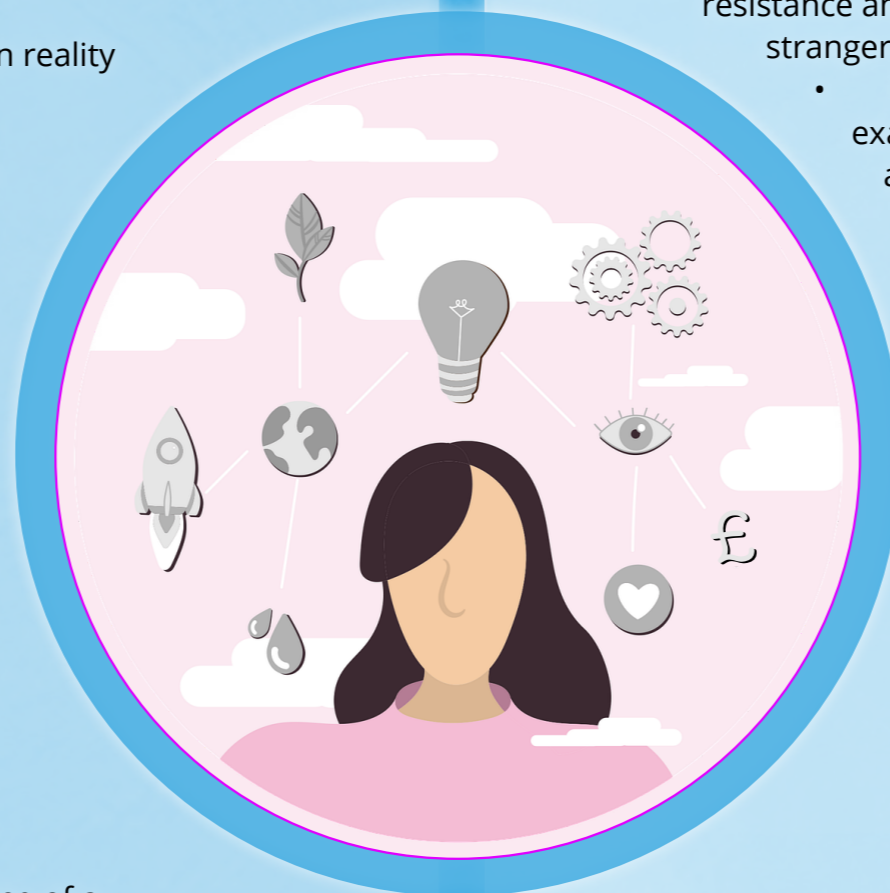


Key concepts

- **Logical positivism** was based on the work of the Vienna Circle in the 1920s who aimed to establish a common criterion for language:
 - **analytic** statements (meaningful) – rational, mathematical or tautological propositions that are self-evident e.g. $2+2=4$, all bachelors are single males
 - **synthetic** statements (meaningful) – propositions that require verification (checking for truth through empirical evidence) e.g. the cat sits on the mat
 - **meaningless** statements – any proposition that is not analytic or synthetic.
- The **verification principle** says that the meaning of a statement is in the logical or **empirical** method we use to show that the statement is true.
- A.J. Ayer made refinements on the basis that the verification principle made historical and some scientific statements meaningless:
 - verification in practice – we can check the truth of the statement in reality
 - verification in principle – we know what we would do, but it is impractical
 - weak verification – some evidence can be said to count towards a proposition
 - strong verification – the evidence to support a proposition is conclusive.
- Propositions like ‘God is good’ or ‘murder is wrong’ cannot be verified.
- **Falsification** requires knowing how to prove a proposition false.
- Flew claimed religious statements are meaningless because believers allow nothing to count against their claims.
- He used Wisdom’s parable: two explorers find a garden, one thinks a gardener tends it, the other does not. They place traps and keep watch but never find a gardener. One says the gardener must be invisible and intangible.
- Flew argues there is no difference between an invisible, intangible gardener and no gardener at all.



Criticisms of Verification:

- The verification principle is meaningless. The proposition ‘the meaning of a statement is its method of verification’ cannot be verified.
- Historical statements such as ‘Henry the VIII had six wives’, is neither analytic nor synthetic. This means that they are also meaningless.
- Universal scientific statements like ‘all metals expand when heated’, are meaningless because you cannot test every case in practice.
- John Hick claimed that Ayer’s verification in principle makes religious statements meaningful.
- **Eschatological verification** allows statements like ‘there is life after death’ to be verified in the future, when we die.
- He tells a parable in which two travellers on an unknown road consider what is at the end. One thinks it is a pointless journey, whilst the other believes it leads to a celestial city. Neither will know the truth until they reach the end.

Criticisms of Falsification:

- Hare – everyone views evidence from a different perspective through their own ‘**blik**’. A blik is a world view, like different coloured lenses, that everyone has. When we see ‘evidence’ we interpret according to our lenses or blik.
- Hare’s example shows a paranoid student who believes his teachers are trying to kill him. His friends present evidence to the contrary but he persists, arguing it is a trick. They have different bliks and view evidence differently.
- Mitchell – shows not all meaningful statements are falsifiable. Religious believers are already committed to a faith position, so they continue to trust God despite counter evidence that is offered.
- His analogy in a time of war, has a partisan meet a stranger who claims to be from the resistance and asks for help. The partisan is convinced, and remains so, even if the stranger behaves as an enemy. He claims it is part of the plan.
 - Swinburne claims some meaningful statements cannot be falsified. For example, we know what it means to say that toys come out of the cupboard and move around when we are not looking, but we cannot falsify this claim.

Key quotes

‘A proposition is said to be verifiable... in the weak sense, if it is possible for experience to render it probable.’ (Ayer)

‘How does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?’ (Flew)

Key words

| | | | |
|------------------------|-----------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| logical positivism | analytic | synthetic | meaningless |
| verification principle | empirical | falsification | eschatological verification |
| blik | | | |

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some suggest that religious language is not just about making factual, ‘truth’ claims, but has numerous functions that verification and falsification neglect.

Other argue that religious believers do try to make cognitive claims about God and so must be subject to the same scrutiny as any other language.

Key questions

Does religious language mean anything?

Does logical positivism offer a persuasive criterion for meaningful language?

Do religious believers really allow nothing to count against their claims?