

“The verification principle offers no real challenge to religious belief.” Discuss.

The verification principle is a theory used to determine whether a sentence is meaningful, assessing whether it is in fact just nonsense. It is the role of logical positivists to analyse the structure of sentences to analyse the logical structure of sentences. This is a theory developed by the Vienna circle which was then later adopted by British philosopher A. J. Ayer. The Vienna circle were a group of predominantly Jewish philosophers gathered around the University of Vienna in 1922. In the 20th century, several philosophers were raising the question of whether the whole concept of a transcendent God was meaningful at all.

A positivist believes that someone who believes that the evidence that we get from our senses is the highest and the only real form of knowledge that we get, aside from logic. Positivists struggle with the concept of God because it is by its very nature, a reality beyond one that we know and experience and so we therefore have no way to verify its existence. Positivists believe that a statement was only cognitive if it was analytic, that is that the sentence makes sense in its own form by virtue of the definition of the words alone. For example, ‘the circle is round’. We know that this statement is true by the simple definition of the word circle. A sentence can also be meaningful if it can be backed up by an evidence of the senses. An example of a statement verified by the senses is that ‘there is a table in front of you right now’. You can deem this sentence to be meaningful as your eyes make you able to see the physical object of a table and so the statement is meaningful. The fact that you cannot verify conclusively the existence of God through your senses challenges the idea of religious belief as the sense of God cannot be ‘experienced’.

A.J. Ayer built on the verification principle by verifying things in a ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ sense. Ayer taught that if a statement is not verifiable then it is in fact a meaningless statement. Although not directly trying to deny statements that people feel important to them such as ‘God answers my prayers’, he stated that unverified statements simply have no factual significance. Ayer distinguished a ‘practical verifiability’ from a ‘verifiability in principle’, both of which being statements that you could test but the former being statements that you can actually test in reality such as checking the colour of a football, with the latter being statements that you could potentially test if we had things like the future technology such as checking for life on other planets.

When applied to religious claims, the principle of verification generates seemingly meaningless statements as you cannot verify them through our own sense experience. However, I would personally argue that you could deem the existence of God as being potentially verifiable in principle as we may in 200+ years develop technology that allows us to test the presence of God or we could experience a change to the way that God behaves that reveals himself to each one of us. This exploration of the application of the verification principle to religion would therefore not present a real challenge to religious belief. Ayer did argue that we can make no meaningful statements about metaphysical ideas because we can have no knowledge of things beyond experience that we have gained through our senses. It almost becomes an argument about what level of proof satisfies the verification criteria.

John Hick has argued that talk of God is not meaningless as you can verify it in principle, therefore not challenging religious belief. Hick tells us a parable of two men who are walking on a road together. I find this parable to be extremely interesting and one that actually presents my own personal opinion. One man believes he is going to a Celestial City and thinks about what he’s doing and anything bad happening to him on the way just being part of the strive to reach the city

whilst the other man thinks the road leads nowhere and just puts up with anything bad that happens on the way. When they turn the final corner, one will be right and one will be wrong but of course we cannot verify this yet as it hasn't happened. This is comparable to life after death and a belief in God, some people, ie. Christians believe that they are living their life, (the road), to eventually reach Heaven (the city) and take anything that comes at them during their life as just part of the journey to Heaven. However, the non-believer view is shown through the expectation of nothing and just putting up with anything bad. You can also add a verification of life after death as Hick argues in contrast to Ayer that you can indeed make sense of post-mortem existence but you just need to wait and rely on at least one person surviving death in order to verify this claim.