

LOGICAL POSITIVISM

HUME'S FORK

The empiricist David Hume divides knowledge into two classes: 'relations of ideas' (i.e. tautologies) and 'matters of fact' (i.e. empirical statements). His *Enquiries* concludes (§132) with the following paragraph:

"When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact or existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

VERIFICATION PRINCIPLE

Hume's Fork was updated by modern logical positivists (the Vienna Circle - influenced by Wittgenstein - and their young English visitor A.J.Ayer), who proposed the *Verification Principle (VP)*. This claims that **sentences are only meaningful if they are tautologies** (which are true because of the definitions of the terms involved, e.g. *a square has four sides, six is bigger than four*), **or if they are in some way empirically verifiable** (i.e. connected with actual experience, e.g. *Harold lost at Hastings, electrons are both particles and waves*). Any other statements (including religion and morality, according to Ayer) will be meaningless.

SIX IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

Area	Term	Meaning	Example	Problems
Epistemology	a priori	knowable before experience, through thought alone	<i>five is bigger than four</i>	Can anything be known without experience? (e.g. maths). Could you know something about the world a priori? Could someone (e.g. God) know everything a priori?
	a posteriori	empirical; known through experience	<i>there's a stone in my shoe</i>	
Metaphysics	necessary	has to be true (in all possible worlds)	<i>triangles have three sides</i>	Is it possible that <u>all</u> truths are necessary, even empirical ones? Or is it possible that there is no such thing as a necessary truth?
	contingent	capable of being either true or false	<i>cars have four wheels</i>	
Language	analytic	tautologies; statements concerned only with meanings of words	<i>air is a gas</i>	It may be arbitrary which terms are definitions, and which are claims about the world. We might reorganise a language so that the analytic truth became synthetic, and vice versa.
	synthetic	statements concerned with information about the world	<i>air contains oxygen</i>	

The Logical Positivists believed that these terms fall strictly into two groups: a) **a priori-necessary-analytic**, and b) **a posteriori-contingent-synthetic**. This means that if something is necessarily true, this is because it is true by definition, and can be known by thinking about it. If a statement is about the real world, then it could be false, and you need experience to know it. Thus *a priori synthetic truths* (approved of by rationalists like Descartes and Kant) are impossible.

APPLICATION TO RELIGION

If religious statements like 'God is love' are only true by definition, then outsiders can ignore them because religion is just an arbitrary game like chess; if they are empirically verifiable, then sceptical philosophers can demand to see some relevant evidence. Anthony Flew's well known Gardener Parable is a demand for evidence. If none can be offered, then spiritual claims seem to be meaningless (not 'false'). A defence of religion might be verification in the afterlife, or religion having its own rules.

APPLICATION TO MORALITY

Hume's *is/ought* distinction claimed that all values arise from conscious minds, not from facts. He said morality was based on sympathy, which was a feeling to encourage, because it made society more pleasant to live in; this led later to utilitarianism. Ayer took a different route, and said that as morality came from our feelings there is no reason to prefer a feeling like sympathy. Morality is whatever we happen to feel about events, a theory known as **emotivism** (the 'boo-hurray' theory to critics); moral statements are unsupported by facts, arbitrary if they are mere definitions, and probably meaningless.

TURNING THE TABLES

A favourite criticism of Logical Positivism is to "turn the tables". Is the VP a tautology or an empirical statement? A.J.Ayer preferred to call it a definition, but realised that this opened the theory to charges of being arbitrary.

PRECISE STATEMENT OF THE VP

At first the VP was very strict. *Statements are meaningful if they can be conclusively established from experience*. This ruled out sensible theories, generalisations, and statements about the recent past, so had to be too strong. Try *...if observations are relevant to their truth*, or *...if observations can be deduced from the statement*. Ryle suggested that the observations can be made by anyone, not just the speaker. But who decides the relevance? And everything is relevant to everything else in *some way*! In the end logicians showed that *any* statement could pass these weaker tests, and so be meaningful. Another criticism emerged: you must know a statement's meaning *before* you can attempt to verify it! And maybe words are basic, rather than statements. And try verifying "unicorns don't exist"! Or "it will rain tomorrow". Can you verify an order or a promise? Or "I wonder if fairies exist"? Ayer admitted defeat.

THEORIES OF MEANING

If the VP was either too strong or too weak, and some statements really did seem meaningless ("ultimately nothingness negates itself" was Ayer's example!), then the theory was on the right lines, even if it could not be stated precisely. The great question in 1950-70 was to find a good theory of meaning in language. The main candidates were to do with **communication** (getting an intention from one brain to another) - or to do with **truth** (the meaning is how the world is if the statement is true). It was generally agreed that empirical verification had *something* to do with the meaning of a statement.

ANTI-REALISM

Those who persisted with the VP (e.g. Michael Dummett) developed **anti-realism**, the idea that 'reality' was a meaningless concept, and we could only meaningfully talk about the experience and evidence in front of us.