

Antony Flew and the Falsification Principle

It is much easier to show a claim must be false or probably is false than to show that it is true beyond a reasonable doubt or probably true. Thus refuting a religion or a specific religious claim is a relatively simple task. That is why we should be aware that religion's improbable or far-fetched "explanations" for its errors should be presumed to be sophistry and proof that the faith is in fact manipulative, manmade and nothing special in itself.

A claim that cannot be tested is no good for it can be denied or ignored as easily as it can be endorsed! What cannot be tested to see if it is true or probably true is no good. Such a test implies you are testing to see if it is false or probably false. To test to see if something is true is also to test to see if it is false.

Theory in regard to the Falsification Principle does not mean a mere guess or assumption. Theory refers to an explanation or explanations that are testable and which seem to have the support of relevant evidence.

The Falsification Principle teaches that if you do not know how to verify a theory or statement then the theory or statement is meaningless. In other words, if you don't care about the facts and the evidence if they are against your belief then your belief is meaningless. In other words, a theory that cannot be proven wrong because it is full of evasions to avoid refutation is not a valid theory - it is rubbish.

To put that another way: falsification regards a statement as having no relevance to the truth when it cannot be verified or refuted mathematically or scientifically. It has to be able to be shown correct or falsified by maths or scientific testing or experimentation. Empirical testing such as looking in a box to see if what is claimed to be in it is in it counts as science.

The Principle describes how something might look like it gives information or meaning but in fact does not and cannot intend to. Words and phrases then can be deceiving.

The principle was popularised by Karl Popper and Anthony Flew.

Verification principle

The Falsification Principle is not the same as the Verification Principle of the Logical Positivists. The Falsification Principle says a statement or theory only has value if you know how it might be shown untrue. The Verification Principle says that a statement or theory is useless and meaningless if you don't know how to show if it is true or false.

Falsification was developed as an improved way of examining the meaningfulness or otherwise of religious statements that sought to resolve the weaknesses of verificationism. It teaches that a theory should be accepted until proven false and a theory that cannot be proven false is meaningless. A theory must have falsification criteria.

If you develop the theory that there are post offices in England you can go out and check if this is true or false. If we cannot agree that we should go out and find out then we have no falsification criteria for the theory and we render it meaningless even if it is meaningful to others who accept criteria. It only seems meaningful. But seeming meaningful is not the same as being meaningful.

To decide if a statement is meaningful or meaningless you must know what you need to falsify it should it be untrue.

True and false the same sides of the one coin

To assert that something is true is to deny the truth of something else. To assert there is a God is to deny that there is no God. To assert there is no God is to deny that there is a God.

Take "There is a God therefore it is false to say there is no God."

The Falsification Principle says that, "There is a God", has meaning and makes sense as long as you admit there could be proof that God does not exist. That is because if you dismiss the falsifiable though the words may seem to make sense your intention is not to mean anything by them.

The Falsification Principle says that, "It is false to say there is no God", has meaning and makes sense as long as you admit there could be proof that God does exist.

Trying to prove there is no God is not the same thing as trying to prove there is. Which one comes first if there is a choice?

Which one matters to us as people and to our lives? It depends. Atheists and believers both feel that life is worth living. Anyway, a principle or teaching being good does not make it true. Whatever one comes first then does not matter - what matters is which one is most about the truth and open to the truth.

The truth and which one serves the truth best is the principle. If one comes first in principle then that is the one the Falsification Principle should be applied to.

To assert there is a God means you have to admit there is a way that God can be refuted.

The explorers and the garden

There is the story of two explorers who find a clearing in a wild jungle. It is like a nice garden. One thinks from some signs of order in the garden that there must be a gardener. The other says there is no gardener and the order can be explained without one. They set a foolproof watch but no gardener is ever discovered despite the garden staying in the same shape as it was when they first found it. It looks like somebody is taking care of it. The one who says there is a gardener then starts to claim that there is an invisible and intangible gardener who works in such a way that he cannot be seen doing it. So no matter what evidence there is against the gardener, it will be brushed aside. Flew says that believers in God talk the same way as the explorer who believes in the gardener. No matter what, believers believe that God is there. For example, they refuse to say that any evil or suffering is bad enough to refute a good God's existence. They assume there is an invisible and undetectable God just like the gardener and they engage in a pile of evasions of the truth to believe in him.

They tell you that you should be open to believing in the magical gardener or in God for you cannot disprove them. But possibilities do not count and why these and not something equally or more or less magical? Their point that there is no disproof does not mean a thing when the evidence for an invisible gardener and a magic God is not there when it should be. People say you cannot prove a negative but there are many negatives you can prove. You can prove that your hands are not made of cement. You can prove that your body is not a ghost that has fooled itself and other people into thinking it is real. They will press on to say that if somebody says there is an alien called Jerry on some distant planet you will never be able to prove there isn't for the universe is such a big entity.

The religious focus

If proof or evidence is never allowed to count against your belief then your belief is meaningless. If you say there is a ghost and you use excuses to explain the evidence against the existence of the ghost, then you are making your statement unfalsifiable. Thus "There is a ghost" is meaningless. The Falsification Principle seems to be directed mostly at religious or superstitious claims.

If you believe that walking under a ladder is bad luck, you will seize upon bad things that would happen to you anyway as evidence that it is bad luck. The believer in God who imagines God helps her be a better person will regard self-improvement that is going to come anyway as evidence. The evidence is contrived and so the superstition and the God belief are not fit to be described as theories.

Anthony Flew stated that talk about God is meaningless for the believers admit to no way of disproving his existence. They set up the doctrine in such a way that there is an excuse for rejecting anything that refutes it.

Some say that not all believers assume there is a God and try to stop people seeing their their assumption is unlikely or wrong. But if there is no evidence for God then they do just that. And nobody can deny that many believers do engineer their ideas in such a way that nothing can ever falsify them. Whoever does it, does it simply because they do not care about the truth.

The controversy then is in saying that all believers in God make sure there is no way to disprove God thus their beliefs about God are meaningless.

Wisdom

John Wisdom, a contender to Flew, would suggest that both explorers, the one who concluded from the order in the garden that there was a gardener and the other that there was none for there was no order that could be explained by a gardener, were both making sensible and reasonable statements. Wisdom said that God might not be verifiable by sense-experience or by science but some other way perhaps a way yet to be discovered. So he said the existence and nature of God, what God is like, is outside the ability and scope of sense-experience and science and the verification and falsification they provide.

But if you take God as that which should get absolute 100% devotion it follows that only something that is self-checking such as sense-experience or science could verify God. Anything else risks creating a God out of your imagination - even if there is a God it does not follow that the God you adore is him.

And if the garden can be explained without a gardener the one who assumes there is one is being unreasonable - period. And he proves it by saying the gardener is some kind of magical being. He digs a deeper hole.

And if both explorers are sensible, it does not follow that they are equally sensible. It is impossible for differing views to be equally sensible. One could be 100% sensible. The other could be 99% sensible.

Even if there are flaws in Flew's thinking and his falsification theory, it is still a better model than Wisdom's. If Falsification is the necessary evil then go for it.