

THEOLOGY AS THE CASUALTY OF LOGICAL POSITIVISM

Logical positivism said that if you cannot verify an assertion or know how to then you don't really have a meaning for it. It is just words. It is meaningless though it may read like good sense. This led to the verification principle which called all statements that were not checked empirically not true not false but meaningless nonsense.

The principle then assumes that only evidence and proof give reality to a statement. The words making sense does not mean the meaning makes sense.

Christian philosopher Richard Swinburne says that a statement can be meaningful without being verifiable. He gives an example. He says it is meaningful to say that the toys come out at night to play even though you cannot prove or disprove this and though it is clearly nonsensical.

That is not a refutation of the principle. You may feel the statement is meaningful but the principle says that a statement is not factually significant though it can be emotionally significant. It can feel like it has meaning but it might have none. Also, you can prove the toys don't come out for they are not alive. The statement has meaning because of the principle.

Saying the toys come out to play may be meaningless but it is emotionally meaningful and to say language is meaningless is not to say that is is useless. The language is useful - as a story or thought - but that has nothing to do with whether is is meaningful or not.

Logical positivists are familiar with statements that people assume are meaningful but which are not. Giving examples of such statements does not help refute the positivists. If one says statements a to z are meaningless and one picks out statement h and says, "Look that is meaningful" that is failing to make a point. It is failing to deal with the objection. Statement h is one of the statements which meaningfulness is being questioned so making an example of it does not help at all.

Also, Swinburne is speaking of a miracle in the toys coming alive and being able to play. We know the Verification Principle is right in spirit even if we can't get the details of what it does right we certainly know that an extreme belief such as the belief that the flow of nature can be interrupted by a miracle is definitely one thing it can refute the meaningfulness of.

If miracles are logically or otherwise impossible then you can prove that the toys stay in the cupboard. Believing in miracles or believing in a God who uses nature such as winds to make the toys come out to play decreases our confidence in evidence. A person who denies such things happen can have more confidence in the unknown than can a person who does. For example, he can be more sure the knife won't come out of the drawer by itself and kill his child. Even if we are wrong it is better to have confidence in natural law.

If you need to know how to prove or disprove a proposition to make it meaningful, what if the evidence for its truth/falsity is only slightly better than the evidence for its falsity/truth? It shows that the statement is in fact not necessarily either meaningful or meaningless but is a shade of grey. Statements can be partly meaningless but mostly meaningful. They can be partly meaningful but mostly meaningless. Perhaps they are not meaningful or meaningless at all.

If miracles happened all the time our language would be meaningless. An apple would be really a pear and water would be turning into wine and all-sorts all the time. Communication would be wrong and nonsense all the time. Any miracle is an outbreak of chaos and an evidence against the trustworthiness of natural law. To use examples like Swinburne's is to reduce the meaningfulness of language. The more miracles that are accepted as possible or as facts the more the meaningfulness of your statements is compromised.

What if Swinburne had used the example: "This statement is meaningful though it cannot be verified or falsified. That stranger at the nearest beach who is getting into the car now and who I never met and will never meet, drank some sea water"? You are still claiming a miracle that is meaningless took place, namely that you know this without being able to verify it. You are still denying the validity of evidence and therefore talking gibberish though you seem to be using coherent words to do it.