Religious Studies
Summer Independent Learning
Philosophy of Religion
4 a and b
Religious language
Read the booklet and then complete all the tasks.
Bring in on the first day back after the holidays
Assume you have RS on that day
The initial assessment will be an AO1 question on this booklet. It will be the second lesson back (see task 19 for examples)
### Philosophy of Religion

#### Theme 4: Religious language

|   | Inherent problems of religious language:  
<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Limitations of language for traditional conceptions of God such as infinite and timeless; challenge to sacred texts and religious pronouncements as unintelligible; challenge that religious language is not a common shared base and experience; the differences between cognitive and non-cognitive language.</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| **A.** | Religious language as cognitive, but meaningless: Logical Positivism – Verification (A. J. Ayer) – religious ethical language as meaningless; there can be no way in which we could verify the truth or falsehood of the propositions (e.g. God is good, murder is wrong); Falsification - nothing can counter the belief (Antony Flew).  
**Criticisms of verification:** the verification principle cannot itself be verified; neither can historical events; universal scientific statements; the concept of eschatological verification goes against this.  
**Criticisms of falsification:** Richard Hare – bliks (the way that a person views the world gives meaning to them even if others do not share the same view); Basil Mitchell – partisan and the stranger (certain things can be meaningful even when they cannot be falsified); Swinburne – toys in the cupboard (concept meaningful even though falsifying the statement is not possible). |
| **B.** | Religious language as non-cognitive and analogical:  
Proportion and attribution (St Thomas Aquinas) and qualifier and disclosure (Ian Ramsey).  
Challenges including how far analogies can give meaningful insights into religious language. A consideration of how these two views (Aquinas/Ramsey) can be used to help understand religious teachings. |

### Issues for analysis and evaluation will be drawn from any aspect of the content above, such as:

- The solutions presented by religious philosophers for the inherent problems of using religious language.
- The exclusive context of religious belief for an understanding of religious language.
- The persuasiveness of arguments asserting either the meaningfulness or meaningless of religious language.
- How far Logical Positivism should be accepted as providing a valid criterion for meaning in the use of language.
- To what extent do the challenges to Logical Positivism provide convincing arguments to non-religious believers.
- Whether non-cognitive interpretations are valid responses to the challenges to the meaning of religious language.
Inherent problems of religious language:

The key role of ‘Religious Language’ is God-talk, which is, being able to talk about God in a meaningful and coherent manner. The problem of religious language arises when we consider ‘what can be said about God?’

The religious language debate is not concerned with whether or not God exists, or what God is like or why there is evil in the world. It is solely concerned with working out whether or not religious language means anything.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Language has meaning</th>
<th>Religious Language does not have meaning</th>
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<tr>
<td>On the one side of the debate, you have the centuries old tradition of religious believers who believe that you can speak and write about God, because God is a reality.</td>
<td>On the other side, are the Logical Positivists and those that they influenced who claim that statements about God have no meaning because they don’t relate to anything that is real.</td>
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Task 1 Key terms - write full definitions as you progress through the topic

a. Cognitive

b. Non-cognitive

c. Analytic (include your own example)

d. Synthetic (include your own example)

e. Anthropomorphism

Task 2 Complete the spider diagram below

Why and when is religious language used and studied?

e.g. during worship . . .
Hick has identified two main issues related to the use of religious language:

a. This relates to the unique way that religious terms are used when they are applied to God.

b. This relates to the basic function of religious language, e.g., do religious statements that have the form of factual assertions (God loves humanity) refer to a special kind of fact—different to scientific fact—or do they fulfill a separate function altogether?

**Task 3**

Examples of terms used in a special way to describe God identified by John Hick—explain what you think religious people do not mean by these statements.

1. ‘Great is the Lord’—It does not mean God is physically large.

2. ‘the Lord spoke to Joshua’—

3. God is good -

When words are used in a secular (non-religious) and theological (religious) context the secular meaning comes first and is adapted to describe God.

Give five examples of words that are used to describe God:

_____________________________________________________________________________________

Using the example of love explain why its meaning is more complex in the theological context.

___________________________________________________________________________________

**The differences between cognitive and non-cognitive language.**

Some philosophers and believers assert that religious language is cognitive and therefore something about God can be known. If religious language is classed as cognitive then it communicates knowledge, information, and facts about God.

The problem with this is that religious statements are not about objective facts that can be proved true or false. The argument put forward is that if we are unable to validate religious statements based on objective facts that are open to cognition then religious language is considered to be meaningless.

Others claim that religious language is non-cognitive. This is a view of religious language which argues that its function is not to inform and does not contain facts that could be proved true or false. Non-cognitive language includes ethical and moral propositions (statements) linked to some theories of ethical language, or an expression of an emotion such as a scream.
**Specification:** Limitations of language for traditional conceptions of God such as infinite and timeless; challenge to sacred texts and religious pronouncements as unintelligible; challenge that religious language is not a common shared base and experience; the differences between cognitive and non-cognitive language.

**Task 4** Read the list of problems below and add examples and explanations to each problem from the list on page 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems facing religious language</th>
<th>Examples and explanations</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The words used are contradictory to our logic.</td>
<td>d. An example could be the concept of the Virgin Birth or an omnipotent God and truly free humans</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Some of the words are abstract, metaphysical or puzzling. They are difficult to understand.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Human language is inadequate to describe God.</td>
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<td>4. God cannot be described.</td>
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<td>5. There is a risk that we anthropomorphise God.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Words might have different meanings in religious and non-religious contexts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Religious stories can be interpreted literally and non-literally, this could lead to problems if people believe different interpretations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Some words used in religions have different meanings with different religious systems and when used in other contexts.</td>
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</table>
Examples and explanations

c. ‘God is timeless’ is difficult for humans to understand as . . .

d. Phrases such as ‘God’s hand guided me’

e. The term karma is used with slightly different meanings in both Buddhism and Hinduism

f. An example could be the concept of the Virgin Birth or an omnipotent God and truly free humans

g. God’s love and human love

h. Using everyday language to talk about God can lead to misunderstanding

i. The Biblical stories of Creation and The Fall in the book of Genesis

j. Any attempt to describe God will fail or be so partial that we are saying nothing meaningful.

Task 5 Memory aid on the problems of religious language - to complete in class

Cognitive

Anthropomorphic

Timeless

Limitations of language

Ineffable

Contrary to logic

Karma – not a common shared base

Stretch and challenge - to come back to during revision

Write out 5 religious statements that would be classed as meaningless under the verification principle.

Explain why they would be considered meaningless.
The Verification Principle

**Verification** (A. J. Ayer) – religious ethical language as meaningless; there can be no way in which we could verify the truth or falsehood of the propositions (e.g. God is good, murder is wrong);

Key Vocab

- **Verified** – shown to be true, through the use of evidence
- **Falsified** – shown to be false, through the use of evidence
- **Cognitive** – conveys information
- **Meaningful** – in this context it is not a psychological term, as when we speak of ‘a very meaningful experience’ or to say ‘something means a lot to me’; it is a logical term. To say that something has meaning is it say it is, in principle verifiable.

The **Vienna Circle** was a group of philosophers who gathered together at Vienna University in 1922. The members of the Vienna Circle had two main beliefs about philosophy:

1. Experience is the only source of knowledge.
2. Logical analysis performed with the help of symbolic logic is the preferred method for solving philosophical problems.

The ideas of the Vienna Circle were adopted by other philosophers throughout Europe, and the philosophy that developed became known as **logical positivism**. One development from logical positivism was the **verification principle**. This is the idea that the meaning of a statement lies in the method of its verification, so that any statement that cannot be verified, even if only in theory, is meaningless. The logical positivists only accepted two forms of verifiable language:

**Analytic statements or propositions** (*a priori*) – propositions that are necessarily true, independent of fact or experience. Knowledge is gained though logical analysis (reasoning). These are propositions that are true by definition, for example, ‘all quadrupeds have four legs’. We know this proposition is true because a quadruped means a four-legged animal. It would be a contradiction to deny an analytical truth, for example, to refer to a ‘two-legged quadruped’. A two-legged animal would be a biped.

**Synthetic statements or propositions** (*a posteriori*) – propositions in which the predicate (the subject of the sentence) is not part of the meaning or definition of the thing. These propositions are proved true or false (verified) by some form of sense experience or experiment. For example, the statement ‘a cat is a quadruped’ could be verified by discovering whether or not cats have four legs. I can use by eye sight, look at a cat and see that it has four legs.

‘A quadruped has four legs’ is a meaningful **analytic** statement.

‘This cat is totally cute’ isn’t a meaningful statement (according to Logical Positivists).

‘This cat is a quadruped’ is a meaningful **synthetic** statement.
Task 6

Identify which of the following propositions are analytic statements and which are synthetic statements.

i) Every widower has lost a spouse.

ii) Most widows do not remarry.

iii) The Moon is made of green cheese.

iv) \( 9 + 2 = 10 \)

v) It is raining outside

All the above propositions would be accepted as meaningful statements by the logical positivists as it is known how to verify them. The principle is stating that we know the meaning of a statement if we know the conditions under which the statement is true or false. The statement, ‘the moon is made of green cheese’, is false, but for the logical positivists it is still meaningful as we know the conditions under which the statement is proved true or false: that is, astronauts visit the moon and bring back rock samples to verify whether or not the moon is made of green cheese. ‘\( 9 + 2 = 10 \)’ is the wrong answer, but it is still meaningful for the logical positivists as we know the conditions under which the statement is true or false: that is, in mathematics \( 9 + 2 = 11 \).

Even if we are not able to verify a statement as true or false at the moment, but know the conditions under which the statement could be verified true or false in the future, then for some logical positivists the statement is still meaningful. For example, ‘there is life in other galaxies’ cannot be verified as our spaceships are not capable of reaching other galaxies, but we know that if we had such ships then we could prove the statement true or false.

If the conditions are not known under which a statement may be proved true or false, then the statement is meaningless. This is because, according to the method of verification principle, it is not logical to make such a statement.

A sentence is factually significant to any given person if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express – that is, if he knows that observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept it as being true or reject it as being false. Meaning was also accorded to sentences expressing propositions like those of logic or pure mathematics, which were true or false only in virtue of their form, but with this exception, everything of a would-be indicative character which failed to satisfy the verification principle was dismissed as literally nonsensical.


Task 7

Why does the verification principle regard any statements about the existence of God, the attributes of God and life after death as meaningless? Read the information above very carefully.
Ayer realised that there is a problem if synthetic propositions are only accepted as meaningful based on our own observations. There are statements whose meaning no one would wish to deny.

Consider, for example, the case of the general propositions of law – such ... as ‘arsenic is poisonous’; ‘all men are mortal’; ‘a body tends to expand when it is heated’. It is of the very nature of these propositions that their truth cannot be established with certainty by any finite series of observations.

In other words, the number of observations of such propositions is limited as we can only observe it a finite (limited) number of times. For example, if I drink the arsenic and die, I will no longer be observing the arsenic’s effects. Ayer accepted that such statements are not limited to finite observation. Arsenic remains poisonous even though I am dead and no longer observing it. Therefore, such statements have been verified by others with certainty.

Task 8 – start the summary below (or on paper) using pages 8 - 10
Strong and Weak Verification

This led Ayer to develop a distinction between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ verification. **Strong verification** occurs when the truth of the statement can be established with certainty. **Weak verification** occurs when there is a possibility of error in what is currently accepted as true. This applies to many scientific and historical statements. For example, a physicist might develop a theory to explain something, but this theory is later proved to be wrong. An historical event that has been accepted as accurate may be brought into question when new evidence is uncovered.

**Task 9.** Add a simple definition of strong and weak verification to the summary diagram on page 10

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**Task 10 – add an example of weak verification to the summary diagram**

Here are two examples of weak verification: propositions that were accepted as true but now, in the light of new evidence, are doubted.

1. The steady-state theory was accepted for many years as an accurate description of the universe. Now it is rejected by most physicists in favour of the Big Bang theory.

2. It was accepted that the first European to discover America was Columbus in 1492. New evidence has been found that supports the view that America was discovered much earlier.

These are examples of weak verification because the conditions are known under which these statements may be verified true or false, but it has to be allowed that evidence may change whether the statements are true or false.
Task 11 The Verification Principle – a summary

Fill in the missing terms – experience, weak, picture, verification, Vienna, God, meaningful, historical, probable

Who Wittgenstein (1889-1951)

What He influenced the Logical Positivists as he initially set out a narrow view of what could count as being a meaningful proposition. He said the function of language was to __________ the world. Therefore every statement needed to correspond to some information about the world itself (verifiable through sense __________). The statement the cat sat on the mat is meaningful if you can observe the mat sitting on the mat.

Who Vienna Circle (R.N. Carnap, Moritz Schlick)

What They held the belief that theological interpretations (using God as an explanation) of events and experiences belonged to the past, to an unenlightened age when ____ was used as an explanation for anything that science had not yet completely mastered. They wanted to find a way of showing statements to be __________ and either true or false. They attempted to apply the theories of maths and science to language statements.

The meaning of statements comes from the method of __________. A statement is only meaningful if it can be proved to be true or false through such evidence. Experience is key to determining whether a statement is meaningful or not.

Friedrich Waismann (one of the __________ Circle) ‘Anyone uttering a sentence must know under what conditions he calls it true, and under what conditions he calls it false. If he is unable to state these conditions, he does not know what he has said. A statement which cannot be conclusively verified cannot be verified at all. It is simply devoid of any meaning.’


What Strong and _____ Verification

Strong – There is no doubt the statement is true – verified using sense experience. It excludes things that people considered to be true, such as __________ statements and general laws of science. Therefore, philosophers started to reject the strict form.

Weak (developed by Ayer) He rejected the necessity of conclusive verifiability and instead argued that for meaningfulness it was enough to know what sense experience would make the statements __________. However, even this is not possible with religious statements since ‘the notion of a person whose essential attributes are non-empirical is not an intelligible notion at all’. Through the misuse of language people assume that because a word existed there was some corresponding reality.
Implications of the Verification Principle for religious language

- Statements about God are neither analytically true nor open to verification by observation, and are therefore meaningless. Claims such as ‘The Lord is my shepherd’, ‘God created the world’ and ‘God has a plan for all of us’ cannot be shown to be either true or false using the senses.

- Claims to have experienced God are subjective, not universal and therefore are not reliable grounds for testing them; hence they cannot be the basis for empirical propositions about God.

- The question ‘Does a transcendent God exist?’ is rejected because although it seems to be cognitive (asking a question about an objective reality), our sense experience of the world does not include any transcendent beings.

Wider implications of the Verification Principle

- All statements that express unverifiable opinions and emotions are invalid
- Universal statements ‘All ravens are black’ cannot be conclusively verified because one day someone might see a white raven.
- such as ‘The Battle of Hastings happened in 1066’ can’t be verified as we can have no sense experience of it happening
- The status of the verification principle itself can be called into question. What observation could be made to verify or falsify it?

Task 12 – Read pages 12 and 13 again

Explain how Wittgenstein influenced the Logical Positivists.

What were the aims of the Logical Positivists?

Why does the Verification Principle seem to cause a problem for religious believers?

How can the wider implications be turned into criticisms of the Verification Principle?
The Falsification Principle - nothing can counter the belief (Antony Flew).

Who: Anthony Flew

When: 1955 article ‘Theology and Falsification’

What: A rule that the meaningfulness of a statement lies in the method of falsification. This would mean that any statement that could not, even if only in theory, be falsified, was empty of meaning.

Why: An attack on the meaningfulness of religious language. It is a response to the Verification Principle.

Summary

Karl Popper, a philosopher of science, argued that when conducting experiments, we should not look to verify theories, but to falsify them. Only in that way does science progress – we recognise, through continual criticism, weaknesses in our existing theories, discard them, and try to produce better ones. Popper claimed that statements gained meaning if you knew how they could be falsified and gave the example of astronomy and astrology to demonstrate this.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Astronomy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Astronomy is . . .</td>
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<tr>
<td>Astronomy is meaningful because . . .</td>
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Flew, influenced by Popper, revisited the debate started by the Logical Positivists however, he insisted that religious statements should be falsifiable rather than verifiable. He reached the conclusion that religious statements were meaningless as there is nothing which can count against them. Religious statements can neither be proved true or false because religious believers do not accept any evidence to count against (falsify) their beliefs. For Flew, there is no difference between non falsifiability and meaningfulness.
Flew referred to John Wisdom’s parable of the gardener; in this parable two explorers come across a clearing in the jungle, in the clearing there are both flowers and weeds. One explorer is convinced that there must be a gardener who comes to the clearing to look after it, but the other disagrees.

The two explorers decide to settle the debate by lying in wait for the gardener, but he never appears. The believer claims that there is an invisible gardener. So the two explorers set up traps, and no gardener is found. The believer still qualifies his assertion that there is a gardener, by saying he is ‘invisible, silent, intangible’ until the sceptical explorer asks ‘But what remains of your original assertions? Just how does an invisible, intangible and eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?’

Flew draws a parallel between the believer and a religious person who makes claims such as ‘God loves us as a father loves his children’ and ‘God has a plan’.

Flew said that these beliefs about God are challenged by evil and suffering, but religious believers don’t accept they are wrong and God doesn’t love us or have a plan. Believers then qualify their claim by saying ‘God’s love is not like human love’, ‘we can’t understand God’s plan, and it is a mystery’. Believers meet every challenge to faith with qualifications and modifications until eventually there is nothing left of the original assertion.

**Flew said believers claims about God die a ‘death of a thousand qualifications’**.

He claimed if a statement is to have any meaning it has to;

- assert something, for example ‘x is y’
- deny the opposite of that assertion ‘x is not true’

For example - ‘I am standing on a mountain’

Rules out ‘I am sitting’ ‘I am lying down’.

If you were asked ‘Under what circumstances would your claim to be standing on a mountain be false? You could say ‘if I were weeding in my garden’.

Flew argues when theists talk about God they refuse to rule out any state of affairs, if you asked them ‘Under what circumstances would your statement that God loves us be false? They would not think of any, as they claim their belief can’t even be falsified in principle their belief is meaningless.
Task 14

Complete in detail

1. Complete your own summary of the FP including ‘Who, when, what and why’

2. What point is being made by Flew in the parable of the gardener?

3. Think of three examples that could be used to argue against God’s goodness. Link to the Problem of Evil and Suffering topic.

4. List reasons that a believer might give to argue why a good God would allow this to happen? Link to the theodicies and the Free Will Defence.
Criticisms of the verification principle: the verification principle cannot itself be verified; neither can historical events; universal scientific statements; the concept of eschatological verification goes against this.

Are, therefore, religious statements to be considered meaningless?

The verification principle should give no reason to believe this; it is one of the most discredited theories of the twentieth century.

1. It is suggested that the verification principle is not in itself verifiable (there is no sense experience that could count in its favour); it is meaningless, therefore cannot be verified using the verification principle.

2. Many philosophers actually disagree with the verification principle because they argue that in trying to verify statements, concepts or beliefs, it relies on the abilities of the individual trying to verify the experience. An example: think of the case of a blind man who is asked to verify that the sky is blue, or a young deaf girl who is asked to verify that the sound of pop music is enjoyable; does the statement not appear to be meaningless in both cases? Why is this?

3. Yet what about people who have normal visual abilities and people who have no hearing difficulties; what does the statement mean to this group of people? Hence whilst it could be claimed that statements about God cannot be verified by a person who does not have a faith, to people who share a common faith, religious statements are meaningful to them.

4. This has brought about the conception of an idea to prove that religious language does have meaning even if it cannot be verified or falsified. Some philosophers argue that it is wrong to classify religious statements in the same way as other statements. They propose that religious statements are non-cognitive; they do not contain facts that could/should be proved true or false.

5. When a verification is weak; then it can actually support some religious statements, e.g. the statement God is the creator of world, can actually be supported by the evidence that there is some design to the world; in other words the statement is not meaningless unless the possibility of the evidence (in this case-from design) is meaningless.

6. There is also historical evidence which supports many statements, i.e. St. Peter was the first Pope of Christ’s Church; Jesus was crucified by Pontius Pilot and rose from the dead on the third day (despite ones beliefs, because of the fact there are many people in the world who do believe, this allows for verification for all of those believers).

This idea is supported by R.M. Hare who claims, “…although religious language cannot make factual claims, it still has meaning-not because it imparts knowledge, but because it influences the way in which people look at the world..”
Richard Swinburne in ‘God-talk is Not Evidently Nonsense’ challenges verificationism giving the example ‘All ravens are (at all times) black’. Swinburne points out that whilst people generally accept ravens are black, there is no way to ever confirm this statement, as however many ravens you look at there is always the possibility of there being one more raven that is not black. Therefore, according to verificationism, the statement is meaningless. Also, universal scientific statements cannot be verified but they do have meaning. For example, all humans are mortal – we can’t test this – but we accept that it is true.

Keith Ward (Holding Fast to God 1982) stated that the Verification Principle excluded nothing, since all experiences are allowable because of the criterion of ‘verifiable in principle’. He argues that the existence of God can be verified in principle since ‘If I were God I would be able to check the truth of my own existence’.

Eschatological verification (in more detail)

Hick challenged the verification principle on the grounds that there are some propositions that cannot be verified by everyone, or that to be verified it is sometimes necessary to take action.

Sometimes it is necessary to put oneself in a certain position or to perform some particular operation as a prerequisite of verification. For example, one can only verify ‘there is a table in the next room’ by going into the next room; however, it is to be noted that one is not compelled to do this.

Hick, Philosophy of Religion, 1990

To verify whether or not there is life after death then it is first necessary to die. If there is life after death then the truth of ‘continued conscious existence after bodily death’ is proved, but, as Hick points out, if there is no life after death then the fact that such a belief is false can never be falsified as the fact that it is ‘false can never be a fact of which anyone has experiential knowledge’. This fact does not undermine the meaningfulness of the hypothesis of life after death for, as Hick states, ‘if its prediction is true, it will be known to be true’.

Hick calls this idea ‘eschatological verification’ and uses the parable of two travellers on the road to the Celestial City to support his argument.

Two people are travelling together along a road. One of them believes that it leads to the Celestial City, the other that it leads nowhere; but since this is the only road there is, both must travel it. Neither has been this way before; therefore, neither is able to say what they will find around each corner. During their journey they meet with moments of refreshment and delight, and with moments of hardship and danger. All the time one of them thinks of the journey as a pilgrimage to the Celestial City. She interprets the pleasant parts as encouragements and the obstacles as trials of her purpose and lessons in endurance, prepared by the sovereign of that city and designed to make of her a worthy citizen of the place when at last she arrives. The other, however, believes none of this, and sees their journey as an unavoidable and aimless ramble. Since he has no choice in the matter, he enjoys the good and endures the bad. For him there is no Celestial City to be reached, no all-encompassing purpose ordaining their journey; there is only the road itself and the luck of the road in good weather and in bad.

Hick, Philosophy of Religion, 1990
The believer expects to experience the Celestial City at the end of the journey whereas the atheist does not. When they turn the last corner, it will be clear which one of them is right. What they believed to be the destination at the end of the road affected the way that they felt about the road and the way that they behaved on the journey. Similarly, believers and atheists have very different expectations about what will happen after death, and therefore live their lives differently. If the believer is right, according to Hick, there will be ‘continued conscious experience’ and knowledge of the existence of God.

In conclusion, the Logical Positivists did make a distinction between a statement that was meaningful and a statement that was true (or false). The criterion of meaning was concerned to distinguish statements that were meaningful. The issue of whether the statements were true of false was a different area of discussion.

A further challenge to the Verification Principle
Talking about God through negatives - The Via Negativa

The via negative uses only negative terms to speak of God, as a way of avoiding belittling God by attributing human qualities to him (anthropomorphise)

It is the idea that it is possible to talk about God by saying what he is not. It is often used by mystics such as St John of the Cross. St Augustine and others claimed that positive attributes of God should be countered by the recognition that human language is inadequate when describing God. In particular scholars have frequently appealed to the importance of negation and analogy. The appeal to negation is easy to understand and is best thought of as an attempt to prevent people from misrepresenting God. It emphasizes the unknowability of God and argues that though one can talk significantly about God one can only do so by saying what God is not.

Some examples of statements that via negativa Christians might make about God are:

- God is not light or darkness
- God is neither human nor divine
- God is not visible and not describable
- God is ineffable
The verification principle cannot itself be verified; neither can historical events; universal scientific statements; the concept of eschatological verification goes against this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criticisms</th>
<th>Explanation of the criticism and any counter arguments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The verification principle is not verifiable</td>
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<td>Historical evidence</td>
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<td>Universal scientific statements</td>
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<td>The concept of eschatological verification</td>
<td>How did Hick’s idea of eschatological verification challenge the verification principle?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious language as Non-cognitive</td>
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<td>The via negativa</td>
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The most convincing criticism of the Verification Principle is..................

This is because..................................

The least convincing criticism of the Verification Principle is...........................

This is because..................................
Criticisms of falsification: Richard Hare – bliks (the way that a person views the world gives meaning to them even if others do not share the same view); Basil Mitchell – partisan and the stranger (certain things can be meaningful even when they cannot be falsified); Swinburne – toys in the cupboard (concept meaningful even though falsifying the statement is not possible).

R. Swinburne – The toys in the cupboard (the concept is meaningful even though falsifying the statement is not possible)

Swinburne has claimed that we don’t have to specify what would count against an assertion for it to have meaning.

For example; we can’t specify what would count against scientific theories of the beginning of the universe as we don’t know enough about the scientific theories involved. It doesn’t make the theories meaningless as we accept, hypothetically at least that something could count against the theories.

For Swinburne’s objectives to work we have to allow that something could count against the existence of God, even if we can’t specify what it means.

Swinburne shows us how we can understand some statements even though we cannot falsify them; the example of the toys in the toy cupboard:

*We cannot prove that the toys do not come out of the cupboard when we are asleep at night; yet, although we cannot falsify the statement that the toys do not move around, we still understand the meaning of the statement. Perhaps we understand the statement through our visual and mental perception?*

R. M. Hare and bliks (the way a person views the world gives meaning to them even if others do not share the same view)

The philosopher R. M. Hare writes: “I must begin by confessing that, on the ground marked out by Flew, he seems to me to be completely victorious.” Hare thinks Flew’s conclusions follow if you accept Flew’s assumptions, particularly Flew’s assumptions about what counts as verification and falsification. Hare agreed that religious statements are non-cognitive.

But, Hare says, Flew does not realize that different people have very different standards for verification and falsification. What counts as falsifying evidence for one person might not count for another. In Hare’s terms, not everyone has the same blik. A blik is a frame of reference in terms of which data is interpreted – a mental filter in terms of which the notion of evidence is defined. Hare says: “... without a blik there can be no explanation; for it is by our bliks that we decide what is and what is not an explanation.”

Hare illustrates this with the parable of the paranoid man. “A certain lunatic is convinced that all dons want to murder him. [A “don” is a tutor at a British university.] His friends introduce him to all the mildest and most respectable dons that they can find, and after each of them has retired, they say, “You see, he doesn’t really want to murder you; he spoke to you in a most cordial manner; surely you are convinced now?” But the lunatic replies, ‘Yes, but that was only is diabolical cunning; he’s really plotting against me the whole time, like the rest of them; I know it, I tell you.’ However many kindly dons are produced, the reaction is still the same.”
The paranoid man’s entire frame of reference is paranoid. Any evidence that might count to falsify the claim that dons are all killers (e.g. a large number of mild, kindly dons) simply does not count as evidence in a paranoid’s frame of reference. Many kindly dons would eventually convince a non-paranoid man that not all dons are killers. But for the paranoid man, the kindly dons only serve to reinforce the paranoid belief.

What does this have to do with religious belief? Hare says religious people have a religious *blick*. Once you accept the religious *blick*, you have a brand-new way of looking at the world. Your frame of reference is radically altered, and with it, your evidentiary standards. Suddenly all sorts of things that previously did not count as evidence for God begin to count. Your evidentiary filter becomes much more porous. The existence of God becomes so obvious that nothing can falsify it.

In other words, Hare is implicitly agreeing with Flew that meaningful assertions must be falsifiable; he tries to avoid Flew’s trap by arguing that what appear to be religious assertions aren’t really assertions at all (rather, they are expressions or affirmations of frames of reference for interpreting data). As frames of reference, they aren’t falsifiable, and can’t be falsifiable (because verification and falsification occur only within frames of reference). But this seems odd. Consider what this would mean. For a religious person, “God exists” expresses a fact about the universe. When a religious person says “God exists,” he means that the universe is actually different from how it would be if no God existed, i.e., the claim is falsifiable. So when Hare depicts religious “assertions” as non-falsifiable, he is actually far removed from Christian orthodoxy. As Flew says, “If Hare’s religion really is a *blick*, involving no cosmological assertions about the nature and activities of a supposed personal creator, then surely he is not a Christian at all?”

Furthermore, although Hare is probably right when he says explanations explain only within a *blick*, Hare gives no way to rank-order *blicks*. Religion is a *blick*, science is a *blick*, paranoia is a *blick*. But surely we don’t want to leave it there. Some *blicks* are surely better than others. Surely Hare does not want to say paranoia is every bit as legitimate a *blick* as science or religion. Paranoia is a sick *blick*.

**Basil Mitchell – partisan and the stranger** (certain things can be meaningful even when they cannot be falsified)

Often a person would accept a statement as meaningful simply on trust. Although evidence might be against the beliefs, they continue to trust in God because the evidence in not sufficient to prove them false.

Rather than religious believers refusing to allow anything to count against their belief, **Mitchell was arguing that the believer’s prior faith maintains their trust in God even when the evidence appears to undermine that trust.**

Basil Mitchell agrees with Flew that religious assertions are genuine assertions. However, Mitchell takes issue with Flew’s implicit assumption that religion is a matter of being intellectually convinced of the truth of certain propositions. Mitchell points out that the truth is not always cut-and-dried; we may be more or less convinced that a claim is reasonable to believe; and we might reasonably believe claims whose truth is objectively unknown.
Mitchell emphasizes that religion is a matter of relationship, rather than intellectual conviction. He illustrates this in his parable of the Freedom Fighter:

“In time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets one night a stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend that night together in conversation. The Stranger tells the partisan that he himself is on the side of the resistance – indeed that he is in command of it, and urges the partisan to have faith in him no matter what happens. The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of the Stranger’s sincerity and constancy and undertakes to trust him.

“They never meet in conditions of intimacy again. But sometimes the Stranger is seen helping members of the resistance, and the partisan is grateful and says to his friends, ‘He is on our side.’

“Sometimes he is seen in the uniform of the police handling over patriots to the occupying power. On these occasions his friends murmur against him: but the partisan still says, ‘He is on our side.’ He still believes that, in spite of appearances, the Stranger did not deceive him. Sometimes he asks the Stranger for help and receives it. He is then thankful. Sometimes he asks and does not receive it. Then he says, ‘The Stranger knows best.’ Sometimes his friends, in exasperation, say, ‘Well, what would he have to do for you to admit that you were wrong and that he is not on our side?’ But the partisan refuses to answer. He will not consent to put the Stranger to the test. And sometimes his friends complain, ‘Well, if that’s what you mean by his being on our side, the sooner he goes over to the other side the better.’”

What does this parable mean?

According to Mitchell, statements like “The Stranger is on our side” or “God loves us” are genuine assertions, in that they can be falsified. But, given the partisan’s experience of the stranger, “The Stranger is on our side” is not obviously false. The partisan has reasons to believe it; the partisan has met the stranger and been impressed by him. When the partisan asks the stranger for help and doesn’t receive any help, the partisan is not logically compelled to say “The Stranger is not on our side.” The partisan can say instead “The Stranger is on our side but he has reasons for withholding help.” In other words, the partisan can give the Stranger the benefit of the doubt – just as you would give the benefit of the doubt to a friend. The real question is: “How long can he uphold [this position] without its becoming just silly?” How many times must you give a friend the benefit of the doubt? Mitchell’s answer: “I don’t think one can say in advance.”

Mitchell is insightful here. He says the partisan can’t just “blow it off” when the Stranger appears to betray him. If the partisan has faith in the Stranger, the faith is only really tested if the partisan feels the full force of the apparent betrayal. The problem of evil is just as real for a believer as for an unbeliever. There is no solution but faith. But it’s not unreasonable or illogical to maintain faith in a person with whom you have a relationship.

For many Christians, the essence of their faith is a personal relationship with God. So Mitchell’s analogy speaks to them. But there are numerous philosophical problems with Mitchell’s parable. For one thing, Mitchell seems to miss the point of Flew’s argument. Flew’s point is that religious assertions are nonsense. It’s not that we don’t know whether religious claims are true or false; in order to be true or false in the first place, religious assertions must mean something, and according to Flew, they don’t mean anything. When religious people say “Just believe,” Flew replies, “Believe what? There’s nothing to believe; the claims don’t say anything in the first place!” Statements like “The Stranger is on our side”
or “God loves us” are potentially compatible with all states of affairs, especially since you can’t say when to stop giving God the benefit of the doubt. Furthermore, there is the pesky problem of religious encounter. The parable of the Stranger works if you’ve had an impressive encounter (religious experience), but not everyone has religious experiences.

Finally, Mitchell’s parable is especially weak as a “solution” to the problem of evil. The analogies do not hold. The Stranger of Mitchell’s parable is a man; he is neither omnipotent nor omniscient. “But suppose the Stranger is God. We cannot say he would like to help but cannot: God is omnipotent. We cannot say he would like to help if only he knew: God is omniscient. We cannot say that he is not responsible for the wickedness of others: God creates those others.” Thus, Flew (who gets the last word in the exchange) thinks his case has been proved: religious assertions can’t be falsified. Therefore they fail the verificationist test of meaningfulness, and fall into the category of nonsense.

**Task 17 Answer the questions using the information above – read it all again**

1. Explain Swinburne’s toy cupboard analogy.

2. How does it challenge the falsification principle?

3. Why did Hare believe religious language had meaning?

4. Outline and explain Hare’s university parable.

5. Fully explain Hare’s idea of a ‘blik’.
6 Why does he believe religious beliefs are ‘bliks’?

7 Explain why Flew rejected Hare’s ideas.

8 What was Mitchell’s aim and desired result?

9 Why did Mitchell dismiss Flew’s theory?

10 Write a summary of Mitchell’s parable of the freedom fighter.

11 What is Mitchell attempting to demonstrate with this parable?

12 How did Flew respond to Mitchell.
AO2 Strengths of the Verification and Falsification Principle (Logical Positivism)

1. The Logical Positivists challenge people to give a good account of their religious language by applying some sort of test for its truth or falsity. Truth and meaning are only given to those statements which either logically fit together (analytic statements) or those statements which are factually based (empirically verifiable). This does allow us to separate sense from nonsense.

2. Religious language can be puzzling, abstract and seemingly contradictory, and these principles can be ways of making religion observe similar rules to other areas of life. After all, if I said that there is something living in my garden shed which could not be seen, touched or heard, then I doubt that you would believe me. Phrases such as God being omnipresent will strike us as odd and we may find this impossible to understand. After all, if I said that I was everywhere, I doubt you would believe me. In everyday life we are quick to pick up on people when they make a contradictory set of remarks and so this shold be applied to religion, too. So, the Logical Positivists emerge as having made some strong points against religious language.

3. In everyday life we do look to verification and falsification as ways of showing meaning. For example, if I said, ‘my cat is a great dancer’, you would surely ask me to show you some evidence to verify this statement. Imagine that I said this in 2017. By 2030, after observation, no evidence of dancing skills had been found. Then my cat becomes immobile due to old age, yet I still insist that I am right. My original statement would not be considered meaningful as it is has neither been verified, nor have I allowed it to be falsified.

4. The Logical Positivist base their ideas on a posteriori evidence. This is a strength, as many of the classical arguments for God’s existence are based upon this type of argument, such as the design argument. The Logical Positivists are simply asking religion to be consistent in its use of criteria to demonstrate meaning.

5. Some would say that some religious events defy logic, such as the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection. The Logical Positivists have a strong case when they ask for events to pass certain tests before they are considered to be meaningful. They would argue that the two events just mentioned would fail their test and are therefore meaningless. In an age of testing and logic, their views stand firm.

6. Some would agree with Flew when he said believers will never give up their religious claims. There may be those people who we know that seem to hold beliefs (religious or not) when those beliefs defy logic, have little evidence in favour of them and a lot of evidence against them. Flew may therefore be right in observation thus providing the Logical Positivists with another strong argument.

Overall, the strength of the Logical Positivists is that they leave us with a warning about being careful when we talk about God. They make religious language conform to rules that other walks of life have to conform to. This has resulted in religion providing ways of talking about God in meaningful ways.

Extract from D. Ellerton Harris

Task 18 – Create your own summary notes on strengths of the Verification and Falsification Principles
Sample questions for the initial assessment
AO1
19. Write and revise brief essay plans for the following questions.
1. Explain the inherent problems of religious language.

3. Explain the verification principle with reference to Ayer.

4. Explain the falsification principle with reference to Flew.

5. Explain how the verification and falsification principles challenge religious language.

4. Examine the criticisms of the verification and falsification principles.