

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language
Class 17: Verificationism

1. A movement that became prominent in the 1930s and 1940s, most notably due to the Vienna Circle (containing, amongst others, Moritz Schlick, Rudolph Carnap, Otto Neurath, A. J. Ayer, Hans Reichenbach, Carl Hempel, Kurt Gödel) (see SEP article). Also pushed by A. J. Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic*, and later revitalized by Michael Dummett in the 1980s.
2. The *verification principle*: If a sentence has no verification condition then it is meaningless.
3. What is a verification condition of a sentence? A course of experience that would show the sentence to be true. By 'course of experience' is meant something like 'bunch of perceptual experiences' – things looking, feeling, sounding, smelling, and/or tasting a certain way.
4. The following are thus meaningless:
 - a. The Absolute is perfect. (Hegel)
 - b. The Nothing noths. (Heidegger)
 - c. Negation negates itself.
 - d. Everything has just doubled in size.
 - e. The entire universe came into existence five minutes ago.
 - f. We are brains in a vat.
5. The claims of the following disciplines are meaningless:
 - a. Religion ('God is omniscient')
 - b. Ethics ('It is wrong to lie')
6. Moreover, the meaning of a sentence is its verification condition – the course of experience that would show it to be true.
7. Note: the meaning of a sentence is not its truth condition – the condition in which it is true. It is its verification condition – the condition in which it can be known to be true. This can thus be thought of as an *epistemic* account of meaning.

Is this to make a common philosophical mistake?
8. Note: it is assumed that sentences have truth conditions.
9. A sentence also has falsification conditions, but the claim is that its meaning has to do with its verification conditions. Later Karl Popper would make a fuss about falsification conditions.

Example of a sentence that is not verifiable but is falsifiable, or vice-versa?

10. Verificationists typically make an exception for so-called *analytic* sentences – sentences that are true in virtue of the meanings of their constituents. Examples:
 - a. No bachelor is married.
 - b. If Ithaca is gorges then Ithaca is gorges.
 - c. Five pencils are more than two pencils. (?)

These have no verification condition, but are nevertheless meaningful – their meaning is not their verification condition.

Note the commitment to a distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences, a distinction that Quine famously argued against.

11. There is a related claim: that every meaningful (synthetic) sentence is synonymous with (abbreviates) a sentence that describes a course of experience. These are different claims.
12. Another related claim: empiricism – the idea that experience is our only source of knowledge. Verificationism does not follow from empiricism.
13. Another related claim: sentences with no verification conditions need not be meaningless, but there is no point debating their truth. This is a different claim.
14. What was the motivation? A growing empiricism and scientism in philosophy – only claims that are grounded in experience are meaningful.

Hume (1777): “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 and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.”

15. What about ‘Descartes had exactly 154 books on his bookshelf’? Is this verifiable? The question: must the sentence be verifiable in practice or can it be just in principle?