

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language  
Class 19: Problems for Verificationism

*Verificationism:*

1. The *verification principle*: If a sentence has no verification condition then it is meaningless.
2. Verification condition: a course of experience (bunch of perceptual experiences) which would show the sentence to be true.
3. Exception: analytic sentences ('No bachelor is married', 'It Ithaca is gorges then Ithaca is gorges', etc.)
4. Further claim: the meaning of a sentence is its verification conditions (perhaps also its falsification conditions – an ordered pair).
5. 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.
6. Another related claim: empiricism – the idea that experience is our only source of knowledge. Verificationism does not follow from empiricism.
7. 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.
8. Issue: are we talking about verification in principle or in practice? Test case: 'Descartes had exactly 154 books on his bookshelf'.

*Problems for verificationism:*

9. Lack of clear test cases. The following are not clear:
  - a. The Absolute is perfect.
  - b. The Nothing noths.
  - 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.
10. Is there a distinction between being analytic and being synthetic?

Quine: in the light of recalcitrant experience *any* sentence may be given up, so there are no analytic sentences.

11. How does the theory extend to questions and commands?

Reply: this is everyone's problem.

12. It seems that we first have to understand a sentence in order to then check whether or not it has verification conditions. Suppose it has none – then understanding the sentence could not have amounted to grasping its verification conditions (it has none). But then its meaning cannot be its verification conditions.

Reply: it is an illusion that we understand them.

13. What does the verification principle say about itself? Is it self-defeating?
14. Erwin (1970): A certain machine judges the truth value of sentences with 100% accuracy. Then every sentence is verifiable. And their meanings all include experiences associated with it being fed into this machine.
15. Just what count as the verification conditions of a sentence seems to depend on the background knowledge of the experiencer (or group of experiencers), so should be relativised to an experiencer (or group of experiencers). But that makes the meaning of the sentence a relative matter.

Reply: that's the right result.