

# Falsification Principle

Religious Language



# Falsification Principle

- Falsification means to prove something is false.
- The falsification principle accepts a statement is verifiable if it is known what empirical evidence could count against it or prove it wrong (false).
- For example: *Aliens live in Saturn* – is a meaningful statement because we know how to verify it.





# Antony Flew

- Wrote in the 1950's.
- Applied the falsification principle to religious language, and concluded that religious statements are meaningless.
- This is because there is nothing that can count against religious statements – they can be neither proved true (verified) or false (falsified).
- Flew argued Christians say 'God is Good' no matter what evidence is offered against this.



# Antony Flew

- Flew stated that these constant qualifications render religious statements meaningless because they die the  
*“death by a thousand qualifications”*.
- He used **John Wisdom’s** ‘Parable of the Gardener’ to prove his point that religious statements are meaningless, because a religious believer will allow nothing to count against his/ her beliefs.



# The Parable of the Gardener

- Two people return to their long-neglected garden, to find a few old plants surprisingly vigorous.
- One says to the other:  
*“It must be that a gardener has been coming and doing Something about these plants.”*

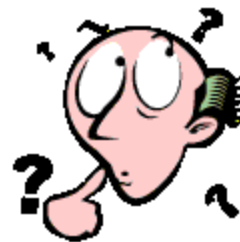




# Parable of the Gardener

- Asking their neighbours, they find that no-one has tended to their garden.
- The first man says to the other

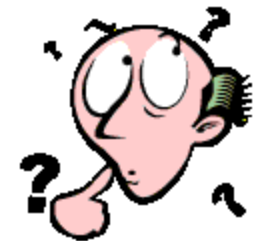
“He must have worked whilst we slept.”





# The Parable of the Gardener

- The other man said  
*“No, someone would have heard him, and besides, anybody who cared about plants would have kept down the weeds.”*
- The first man replied  
*“But look how they are arranged. There is a purpose and feeling of beauty here. I believe someone invisible to mortal eyes comes and if we look carefully we shall see more evidence of this.”*





# The Parable of the Gardener

- Both men examined the garden and continued to make suggestions.
- Eventually, the first man said *“I still believe a gardener comes”*
- The other man replied *“Well, I don’t”*





# The Parable of the Gardener

- What do you think Wisdom was trying to show with this Parable?

The story illustrates that both men had pre-conceived ideas about the garden. Evidence, research and challenging opposing opinions had no impact on their own beliefs.

How is this relevant to the 'Falsification Principle'???

# Antony Flew and The Gardener

- Flew said that a believers continual refusal to accept things which count against the existence of God made any such discussions meaningless.
- He described this as a  
*“death of a thousand qualifications.”*

What did he mean by this? Write an answer.



## Discuss

- What is the difference between the Logical Positivist Verification Principle and the Falsification Principle?

# Verification V's Falsification

- The Falsification Principle depends on falsifying the evidence not verifying it to decide if it is meaningful.
- The challenge to Falsification is not based on language but on the basic insight to assert something is to deny something else.
- Flew suggests that to prove God exists the believer needs to be in a position to know and not just believe.



# Strengths and Weaknesses

- Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the Falsification Principle.
- You need to come up with 3 strengths and 3 weaknesses.

# Challenges to the Falsification Principle

Other philosophers wanted to prove that religious language can have meaning even if it is not verified or falsified. The reasons for rejecting the falsification principle include the following:

- There are statements that cannot be falsified, and yet we understand the meaning behind the statement. **Richard Swinburne** – toys.

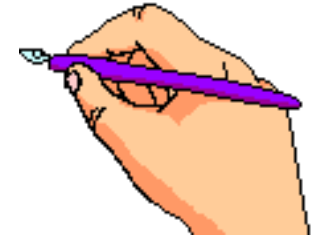
# Challenges to the Falsification Principle

- **Basil Mitchell** believed that religious statements could be meaningful. Mitchell argued Flew was wrong in supposing that believers never allow anything to count against their beliefs. He claimed that believers have to look for qualifiers to explain, for example, that there is evil in the world.

# Challenges to the Falsification Principle



- **R. M. Hare** agreed that the falsification principle could be used to decide the meaningfulness of a cognitive statement, but concluded that religious statements are non-cognitive. Religious language can not make factual statements but they are still meaningful. Example: University student and killer Don's.
- R. M. Hare called this way of looking at the world '**Bliks**'. Religious beliefs are bliks because they impact on the way people look at the world and live their lives.



# Task

- Take 15 minutes to write up a summary of 'The Falsification Principle'.