

The falsification principle offers no real challenge to religious belief. (45)

There are several principles and arguments which try to challenge religious belief by raising questions about it. One of these principles is the falsification principle which questions the meaningfulness of religious statements by checking if they can be falsified, or not as the cases may be. The thing that must be examined however is whether the challenges made by such a principle are really strong enough to challenge people's beliefs.

The Falsification Principle is a similar principle to the verification principle as both states that statements are only meaningful if it can be proven true or false, verified or falsified. The falsification principle however is more focused on the idea of falsifying statements, as the name would suggest, and says that religious statements are meaningless because people (believers) will let nothing count against them no matter what the evidence. For example believers may have the belief that 'God is loving' and no matter how strong or how much evidence I could provide to show the opposite the believers would still have reasons why, in spite of everything, God continues to be loving. This was the point Anthony Flew was trying to make when he applied the falsification principle to religious statements and concluded that they were meaningless as he deemed it they died a 'death by a thousand qualifications'. There will never be anything believers will accept that could challenge what they believe because they will always come up with other ways of qualifying it.

The parable of the garden put forward by John Wisdom was also used by Flew in order to prove his view religious statements are meaningless because a believer will allow nothing to interfere with their beliefs. In the parable two people return to their long neglected garden and once there one says that there has been a gardener tending to it while the other says there has been no one attending to it. They both observe the garden and see proof for each of their beliefs but after neither of their beliefs have changed. This is because beliefs are so strong and will never change and nothing that is so unchangeable can be meaningful so statements of about religious beliefs are meaningless

The falsification principle would at this point therefore seem to make a significant challenge to religious belief. This is because it renders religious statements meaningless, and if the statements on which religious beliefs are made are meaningless then surely this would make the religious beliefs meaningless too. This you would therefore suspect to make a real challenge to people's religious beliefs.

The falsification principle is however challenged by many philosophers including Richard Swinburne, Basil Mitchell and R.M. Hare which affects its ability to really challenge religious belief. Hare argued that religious statements are meaningful as the falsification principle cannot be used on them as they are non-cognitive. Hare argued this because he said that the falsification principle can only be used on cognitive statements which make factual claims and religious statements don't do this. Religious statements are also meaningful in Hare's argument as they influence the way people behave and live their lives and must therefore have meaning to that person and so no matter what the evidence they will continue to believe it. Hare named such a way of looking at the world a 'blik'.

Swinburne was against the falsification principle as he argued that there are statements that cannot be falsified yet they must still have meaning because we can understand them. He used the example of toys in a toy cupboard in order to show his point of view as we have no way of proving or disproving (falsifying) if toys in the toy cupboard move around or come out when we are not watching them yet we still understand the concept so it does have meaning.

Mitchell also wanted to show that religious statements are meaningful even if they are not straightforwardly verifiable or falsifiable but took a different approach to Swinburne to challenge the falsification principle. He argued that Flew was wrong when he said that people don't allow anything to go against their beliefs as he has missed the whole point of religion which is a prior commitment to God. This commitment is made on faith, and this faith is the reason nothing can go against their belief and they have no choice but to look for qualifications for the why God is 'loving' or 'good' even though there are things like natural disasters in the world.

The challenge to religious beliefs by the Falsification Principle is now starting to look less like a real challenge. It looks even less so when you consider there are people such as Paul Tillich who argued that religious language/statements are symbolic shows that religious statements have meaning. Tillich said that religious language communicates religious experience through symbols which 'open up' new levels of reality. He argued this was because symbols go beyond the external world to an 'internal reality', a higher reality which allows us to understand the concepts of God in our level of reality and understanding. The symbols of religious language therefore have a meaning, which can change through time in order to direct us to what they did in the past, and if religious language has meaning then religious statements must therefore be meaningful concretizing religious belief.

Just like the falsification principle by Flew, religious language as symbols by Tillich has challenges made to it. Tillich is challenged by Paul Edwards who says that religious language is not symbolic because we have no way of checking to see if the concepts are true or remotely accurate. Edwards argued that it was inappropriate to describe religious language as symbolic as there is no factual basis behind the symbol and it can therefore lead to misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Edwards therefore strengthens Flew's argument that religious statements are meaningless and adds to his challenge to religious belief.

Overall it would therefore seem that the falsification principle does make some key points about the meaningfulness of religious language which could rock many people's religious beliefs but the criticism put forward by people such as Hare, Mitchell, and Swinburne as well as Tillich's view of religious language as symbolic make it much less of a real challenge. However when you take into account the criticism of Tillich as well it makes his view a lesser threat to taking away the challenge put forward by the falsification principle if not totally dismissing it, which would suggest it rests on the strengths of the criticism of the falsification principle to decide if it is a real challenge to religious beliefs or not.