

Logical Positivism and Carnap's Confirmability on the Meaningfulness of Religious Language

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The characteristic claim of the group of thinkers who referred to themselves as “The Vienna Circle” and who formed the philosophical movement now known as “Logical Positivism” was their acceptance of the so-called verifiability principle. Put briefly, the verifiability principle is an empiricist criterion of meaning which says that only those statements that are verifiable by (*i.e.*, logically deducible from) observational statements are cognitively meaningful.¹ Statements that do not satisfy the verifiability principle were taken to be cognitively meaningless, statements that failed to describe any state of affairs.²

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¹ The verifiability principle is neutral regarding the status of observational statements (the so-called ‘protocol statements’). Some logical positivists took protocol statements to be the starting-points and paradigm cases of the rest of meaningful statements (see, for example: M. SCHLICK (1934). “The Foundation of Knowledge”, 213 and 221 [reprinted in: A. J. AYER (ed.) (1959). *Logical Positivism*. New York: The Free Press, 209-227]). However, not all logical positivists who accepted the verifiability principle also accepted this alleged foundational nature of protocol statements. Neurath, for example, defended a coherentist view of truth according to which no statements are more basic or fundamental than others: all statements are of equal value and hence no set of statements can provide the foundations of our knowledge (see: O. NEURATH (1932). “Protocol Statements”, 94-95 [reprinted in: O. NEURATH (1983). *Philosophical Papers, 1913-1946*. Netherlands: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 91-99]).

² Classic formulations of the verifiability principle can be found in, for example: A. J. AYER (1934). “Demonstration of the Impossibility of Metaphysics”, *Mind* 43/171, 337; R. CARNAP (1928). “Pseudoproblems in Philosophy”, 325-327 [reprinted in: R. CARNAP (1967). *The Logical Structure of the World and Pseudoproblems in Philosophy*. California: Open Court, 305-340]; A. E. BLUMBERG and H. FEIGL (1931). “Logical Positivism: A

It is important to distinguish between the classical, Viennese formulation of the verifiability principle and its liberalized versions, which include Carnap's confirmability. Whereas the first takes verifiability to be a matter of logical deduction from observational statements, the latter makes inductive inference from observational statements the requirement for cognitive meaning.

If we are to accept the verifiability principle in its classical Viennese formulation, which states that verifiability is a matter of logical deduction from observational statements, then religious statements have no chance of being verified unless they are reduced to the description of religious attitude: unless we are going to argue that God can be reduced to non-theological, observational properties, religious statements cannot be logically deduced from observational statements.

We can distinguish two main approaches to religious language among the members of the Vienna Circle: either they took religious language to be non-cognitive and purely emotive,³ or they took it to be cognitively meaningful by trying to reduce it to observational language, to the description of religious attitude.⁴

No logical positivist gave a clear account of how to understand this alleged emotive meaning of religious belief. Some years later, Braithwaite in his "An Empiricist View of the Nature of Religious Belief"⁵ offered a more developed emotivistic account of religious belief, according to which it is some sort of commitment to a concrete way of life. On the other hand, this reduction of religious language to the description of religious attitude is well summarized by Neurath's claim that

There are Protestants, but there is no Protestantism. Physicalistically speaking, one can only note that men who have a certain mode of

New Movement in European Philosophy", *The Journal of Philosophy* 28/11, 281-296; R. CARNAP (1931). "Psychology in Physical Language", 166 [reprinted in: A. J. AYER. *Logical Positivism*, 165-198]; M. SCHLICK (1932/1933). "Positivism and Realism", 86-88 [reprinted in: A. J. AYER, *Logical Positivism.*, 82-107].

³ See, for example: R (1928). *The Logical Structure of the World*, 293 [reprinted in: R. CARNAP. *The Logical Structure of the World and Pseudoproblems in Philosophy*, 1-304].

⁴ See, for example: O. NEURATH (1931). "Empirical Sociology: The Scientific Content of History and Political Economy", 358 [reprinted in: O NEURATH (1973). *Empiricism and Sociology*. Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 319-421].

⁵ R. B. BRAITHWAITE (1955). "An Empiricist View of the Nature of Religious Belief" (1955) [reprinted in: B. MITCHELL (ed.) (1971). *The Philosophy of Religion*. London: Oxford University Press, 72-91].

life and use certain words in cults (and otherwise) begin at a certain point in time to exhibit a different behavior and perhaps to use different words.⁶

The problem is that neither of these two conceptions succeeds in capturing what orthodox theism takes religious belief to be. In the ordinary understanding of religion, the evaluative aspect of believing is, so to say, interwoven with the factual claims of religious discourse. One cannot, for example, consider himself a Christian without also claiming Jesus' Resurrection, which is a factual claim. Perhaps orthodox theism has an inadequate conception of religious language, but if this is so, these approaches must be understood as *proposals* for correcting our ordinary understanding of religion.

It is true that if we accept the verifiability principle in its Viennese formulation, then we are forced to adopt one of these two conceptions to account for religious language. Strictly speaking, however, the success of neither of these two positions is linked to the success of the verifiability principle: we can, for example, defend an emotivistic account of religious belief on other grounds, without accepting the verifiability principle.

The verifiability principle, however, suffers from some severe limitations, which make it clearly inadequate as a criterion for cognitive meaning. These problems are already well known. To begin with, the verifiability principle has the odd consequence that universal statements, statements of the form 'All A's are P' are not cognitively significant since they cannot be logically deduced from any finite set of observational statements. It also runs into problems when accounting for dispositional properties, properties such as 'soluble' or 'fragile': since an object might have these properties even if it never manifests them, it is not clear how these properties can be reduced to observational language. For similar reasons, the verifiability principle ran into difficulties when accounting for theoretical entities referred to in scientific discourse. Furthermore, since relations of modality cannot be logically deduced from observational statements, the verifiability principle failed to distinguish between ordinary universal statements (*i.e.*, statements of the form 'All A's are contingently P') and statements expressing natural laws (*i.e.*, statements of the form 'All A's are [empirical-

⁶ O. NEURATH. "Empirical sociology: The Scientific Content of History and Political Economy", 358.

ly] necessarily P'). A last problem of the verifiability principle concerns its status: since the verifiability principle is neither an analytical claim nor a verifiable statement, it seems that we must accept that the verifiability principle is a metaphysical, cognitively meaningless claim.

By the mid 30's some logical positivists became aware of the severity of these problems and realized of the need of revising the verifiability principle: Carnap, for example, claimed that the principle must be abandoned since "[...] it led to a too narrow restriction of scientific language, excluding not only metaphysical sentences but also certain scientific sentences having factual meaning".⁷ To resolve these problems, logical positivists gave up the requirement of conclusive verifiability, *i.e.*, logical deducibility from observational statements, and defended a sort of liberalisation of the verifiability principle. The most serious attempt of which was Carnap's confirmability criterion, first defended in his "Testability and Meaning".⁸

In contrast to the Viennese formulation of the verifiability principle, the confirmability criterion is understood as an inductive inference from observational statements.⁹ A statement is not completely verified but is confirmed *to some degree* upon the single instances, and the possibility of being confirmed to some degree is what assures that the statement is cognitively meaningful.¹⁰

More concretely, a statement is confirmed when it allows us to make successful and observable predictions.¹¹ This not only seems to preserve the

⁷ R. CARNAP (1936). Testability and Meaning. *Philosophy of Science* 3/4, 421. See also: A. J. AYER (1959). "Editor's Introduction", in A. J. AYER. *Logical Positivism*, 13-14; A. C. EWING (1937). "Meaninglessness", *Mind* 46/183, 348; H. REICHENBACH (1938). *Experience and Prediction: An Analysis of the Foundations and the Structure of Knowledge*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 188; F. WILL (1940). "Verifiability and the External World", *Philosophy of Science* 7/2, 185.

⁸ R. CARNAP. "Testability and Meaning"; R. CARNAP (1937). "Testability and Meaning – Continued", *Philosophy of Science* 4/1, 1-40. Although in this paper I will focus on Carnap's confirmability criterion, it is important to point out that other different attempts to revise the verifiability principle were made. John Hick, for example, aimed to liberalize the verifiability principle by claiming that verifiability was, at least partially, a psychological notion (see: J. HICK (1960). "Theology and Verification", 54-55 [reprinted in: B. MITCHELL. *The Philosophy of Religion*, 53-71]).

⁹ Carnap's efforts for trying to show that inductive inference is a procedure as logical as logical deduction respond to this claim (see: R. CARNAP (1945). "On Inductive Logic", *Philosophy of Science* 12/2, 72-97; R. CARNAP (1946). "Remarks on Induction and Truth", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 6/4, 590-602 (especially 590-596)).

¹⁰ R. CARNAP. "Testability and Meaning", especially 420-428.

¹¹ R. CARNAP (1939). "Foundations of Logic and Mathematics". *International Ency-*

link between meaning and experience, but at the same time it seems to respect the meaningfulness of theoretical entities and dispositional terms: even if we cannot reduce them to observational language, we understand their meaning provided they are linked to sensory-experience through their observable effects.

So, in the end, Carnap's confirmability criterion turns out to be a sort of *abductive argument*: the best explanation for predictive success is the reference of the theoretical entities employed in the derivation of the prediction. We can now clearly see the extent to which the criterion had been liberalised: remember that in the Viennese formulation of the verifiability principle the only procedure allowed was logical deductibility from observational statements.

Once abductive reasoning is allowed and the requirement of reducing all cognitively meaningful statements to the observational is abandoned, the door opens to arguing for the meaningfulness of religious language. Most (if not all) arguments from natural theology are formulated in this way: they claim to show the existence of God through our observational statements. The so-called 'argument from miracles', for example, is construed along these lines: once there is an event which is outside the scope of scientific explicability (*i.e.*, a violation of a natural law), the best explanation for it is that that event has a supernatural cause.

These arguments, of course, might fail and the theistic hypothesis might not, after all, be confirmed. The argument from miracles, for example, might be contested by arguing that the possibility of a violation of a natural law is internally inconsistent or by arguing that the theistic explanation lacks enough explanatory power to be the best explanation of an event. But whether these kinds of arguments succeed in showing the existence of God is not something that can be decided beforehand; they must be assessed argument by argument.

Notice also that the theist would gladly accept that our knowledge of God comes from His observable effects -so, the theist also accepts this link between meaning and experience upon which Carnap's confirmability is built. The key question is, of course, whether the theist is justified in claim-

lopedia of Unified Science 1/3, 67-69; R. CARNAP (1956). "The Methodological Character of Theoretical Concepts", 49-52, in H. FEIGL and M. SCRIVEN (eds.) (1956). *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science. Volume I: The Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 38-76.

ing that God has observable effects. But whether there are such effects or not is not implied by the acceptance of Carnap's confirmability as a criterion for cognitive meaning.

It might be contested that theoretical entities are confirmable in so far as it is assumed that they are natural entities: we are justified in claiming that theoretical entities bear some relation to the observable because theoretical entities are of the same nature as observational entities -which is the idea behind Reichenbach's so-called 'extension rules'.¹² So, it might be argued that religious statements cannot be confirmed, since they involve non-natural entities. This argument by itself, however, is simply begging the question in favour of naturalism, since it assumes that there are only natural causes. But this is simply to deny the core claim of theism (*i.e.*, that there are observable effects supernaturally caused): by assuming that there are only natural causes, one is acting as if he has already beforehand solved the matter of the existence of God. Of course, if we happen to have independent evidence for naturalism, the theistic hypothesis cannot satisfy Carnap's confirmability principle, but the point I am making here is that the confirmability criterion neither requires, nor presupposes, the truth of naturalism.

Conclusion

The verifiability principle in its classical Viennese formulation, which states that verifiability is a relation of logical deductibility from observational statements, implies that religious language is not verifiable -and, hence, cognitively meaningless. If we are to account for religious language, then, we must adopt an emotivistic approach or reduce it to the description of religious attitude.

Yet the verifiability principle in its classical, Viennese formulation fails. So, to account for religious language, we are not forced to adopt an emotivist conception of it or to reduce it to the description of religious attitude: if either of these two conceptions must be defended, it must be defended on other grounds.

Carnap's confirmability, which is a liberalised form of the verifiability principle, does not, by itself, imply the claim that religious language is cog-

¹² H. REICHENBACH (1951). "The Verifiability Theory of Meaning", 100 [reprinted in: H. FEIGL and M. BRODBECK (eds.) (1953). *Readings in the Philosophy of Science*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 93-102].

nitively meaningless. A theist can adopt Carnap's confirmability and still argue that religious language is cognitively meaningful. The point is that whether religious language is confirmable or not (and, hence, whether it is cognitively meaningful or not) depends on the debate about naturalism (*i.e.*, the thesis that there are only natural causes) and supernaturalism (*i.e.*, the thesis that there are observable effects supernaturally caused), not on the acceptance of confirmability as a criterion for cognitive meaning since, from a theist perspective, the existence of God can be confirmed through our observational statements. If we had independent evidence for naturalism, then religious language would turn out to be meaningless; the confirmability principle by itself, however, neither requires nor presupposes the truth of naturalism.

Finally, a last remark is needed. I am aware that nowadays no one accepts the Viennese formulation of the verifiability principle, and that almost nobody takes Carnap's confirmability criterion (at least in the original terms that Carnap defended it) to be an adequate criterion for cognitive meaning. However, I also think that the historical relevance that Logical Positivism had during the first half of the 20th century for the posterior development of analytic philosophy of religion is something beyond dispute. The origin of some questions that are currently discussed in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion can be traced back to the debate about the meaningfulness of religious language that has been addressed here (take, for example, the question about the predictive and explanatory power of theistic explanations). So, even under the assumption that religious language does not need to be verifiable or confirmable in order to be meaningful, I think that to offer a clear exposition of that debate is still relevant in so far as it can help us to reach a better comprehension of those contemporary discussions.

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