Cognitive AO2 Handout

Part 1

Basil Mitchell successfully challenges the falsification Principle for religious language. Evaluate this view.

Antony Flew claimed that the key for deciding whether language was meaningful was the application of the falsification principle. If it was known how a statement could be shown to be false then the statement was meaningful. If nothing could show it to be false, then the statement was meaningless. To illustrate his argument, Flew told the parable of the Gardener, in which the claim that there was a gardener was compatible with anything happening or not happening. In other words, the claim that there existed a gardener had no content and so was meaningless. Flew applied this to religious assertions generally arguing that all religious assertions were meaningless if it could not be stated what would falsify it. For example, religious believers are unable to say what would have to happen for them to conclude that 'God does not love us'.

Basil Mitchell took up this view about 'God loves us', claiming that theologians do not deny that the fact of pain counts against the assertion that 'God loves us'. However a believer is committed by their faith to trust God, so pain and evil does not count decisively against the assertion. His parable of the Stranger illustrates that though the Stranger's behaviour does count against what he believes about him, it is this very situation which constitutes the trial of his faith. Yes things do count against believing the Stranger but he has met the Stranger and so has reason to be committed to him. Clearly the parable relates to the assertion that 'God loves us'. The fact that it cannot be conclusively falsified does not make it meaningless. Mitchell sees it as an article of faith, and is meaningful.

However, how successful is this response? It does not challenge the idea of the falsification principle, but rather claims that it is difficult to state exactly what would have to happen to no longer believe. But surely the Stranger in the parable is very different from God. The stranger is human whilst God is omnipotent and omniscient. God created us so although we may think of explanations of why the Stranger did what he did; it is more difficult to explain God's actions where evil is concerned. Flew saw such attempts at explanations as "death by a thousand qualifications". Yet Theologians and philosophers have offered various possible explanations to the problem of evil that make it reasonable for a believer to remain believing in God's love. So it does seem that religious assertions are meaningful.

Part 2

'Religion has unsuccessfully responded to the challenges of the Verification Principle.'
Evaluate this view.

Many people felt that A.J.Ayer had dealt a death blow to religion with his attack on religious assertions. He argued that assertions were meaningless if there was no way that they could be verified, either in principle or in terms of probable. The difficulty for religion was that the notion of God was nonsensical given the verification principle. God was a person whose essential attributes were non-empirical but for an assertion to be meaningful it had to be open to verification through the senses. Indeed Ayer and others saw religious language as a misuse of language. People assumed that because a word existed there must be some corresponding reality, for example, the word 'God'.

Talk of God was therefore meaningless nonsense. As expected, this did not go without challenge. A number of responses accepted the Verification Principle but focussed on the argument that infact, verification was possible. It was accepted that historical statements were meaningful. Therefore, the statement that 'Jesus was raised from the dead' must also be regarded as meaningful. An argument by John Hick involved eschatological verification. Verification was possible if there was life after death and heaven. However, even if verification is possible in some instances, further problems arise. For instance, if Jesus did come back from the dead, it would still not be clear that there was a God. Even the experiences in the afterlife might be ambiguous as in this life. If some religious language was cognitive, is it possible to discern that which is cognitive and that which is non-cognitive? Keith Ward also thought verification was possible. He suggested that 'If I were God I would be able to check the truth of my own existence' so his existence is verifiable in principle.

Other attempts at challenging the claim that religious assertions were meaningless involved the argument that the Verification Principle is flawed as it cannot itself be verified. There are no sense experiences that can count in its favour because it is a non-empirically verifiable proposition. The debate continues without either side having a clear win. However, believers seem to understand religious language and Wittgenstein's approach of language –games may be the answer.

An alternative answer to the challenges posed by the Verification Principle is to agree and claim that non-cognitive language is still meaningful. Symbolic language is meaningful as are myths. However, this would degrade religious language to just being an expression of our psychology and 'God' is just a term for 'being itself'. For many this would be to deny what they understand by religious assertions.