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Verificationism: the problem of demarcation of the sensible and the senseless

Angelo Loreti
Postgraduate,
Department of philosophy of language and mass communication,
Lomonosov Moscow State University,
119991, 1 Lenin Hills, Moscow, Russian Federation;
e-mail: loreti_a@yahoo.it

Abstract

The author analyzes the principle of verification in the middle period of Ludwig Wittgenstein´s philosophical career. The author pays particular attention to the influence of Albert Einstein on Wittgenstein's verificationism, which was defended by Wittgenstein in his work "Philosophical investigations". According to the doctrine of verificationism, the meaning of a sentence is its method of verification. Wittgenstein held this position at the beginning of the 1930s. The author draws attention to P.U. Bridgman's comments on theory of relativity and analyzes the concept of absolute space in Newtonian physics. The author also applies verificationism to the dispute between the supporters of Ptolemaic and Copernican systems who had one question: whether the earth moves or is stationary. He shows that both parties of the dispute used unreasonable terms and therefore they did not understand the issue they were investigating. The author comes to the conclusion that based on Wittgenstein's verificationism one can question whether people really understand what they say while talking about something. Moreover, finally it should be noted that Wittgenstein does not reject scientific theories, but at the same time he calls us to clearly define the criteria of using both scientific and everyday concepts to avoid nonsense.

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Keywords

Wittgenstein, Einstein, verificationism dispute, the Ptolemaic system, the Copernican system.

Introduction

Ludwig Wittgenstein in his work "Philosophical investigations" ("Philsophische Bemerkungen") wrote, that according to Einstein some quantity is shown by the way it is measured [Wittgenstein, 2012, 200]. This statement is a base for the doctrine of verificationism, according to which the meaning of a sentence is its method of verification. Wittgenstein held this position at the beginning of the 30s. To have better understanding how much Einstein influenced Wittgenstein's concept (read the following for more information about Einstein's influence: [Penco, 2008]), we should refer to Bridgman's commentary on the relativity. According to Bridgman, Einstein proved that the meaning of the term should be sought in those operations that occur while using this term. If this term can be applied to specific physical situations like terms "length" or "synchronism" do, the value should be found in operations defining the length of the specific physical objects or operations which determine whether two specific physical events are simultaneous or not. Einstein's revolutionary contribution is his conscious use of this principle as a criterion in new situations, and the way it was applied. Einstein has analyzed physical operations that are used to measure length and time in more details than it was done before. Prior to his analysis no one considered the possibility that to measure moving objects we cannot use the same operations as for objects at rest as the term "length" is of absolute nature. Einstein called us to pay more attention to the fact that while studying new phenomena we must be aware of all the details of all the operations that take place, and even their silent prerequisites. We also should be prepared that some of these

factors may be important to settle the new situation [Bridgman, 1958, 281-283]. Thus, according to Bridgman, Einstein's novelty is the fact that after the theory of relativity physicists would hardly be interested in using the concept, which cannot be empirically verified. In Newtonian physics, the notion of absolute space was the important function [Newton, 1934, 6]. Do points of absolute space, which at the time T1 coincide with the corners of our physical room, also coincide with the same angle at the time of T2? In Newtonian physics, the question is of great importance even if a person has no way to answer it by direct verification. Points of absolute space are different from each other, they have their own personality, but a man has no special organ of perception to catch them, as opposed to the time instants, which are directly observed by a man. In other words, the absolute space eludes human understanding and perception.

Thus, it is worth paying attention to one point of paramount importance, which is, oddly enough, is always underestimated by researchers. The dispute between the proponents of the Ptolemaic system and the Copernican system, consequences of which in everyday life we know from school textbooks, was completely based on the concepts, but the parties of the dispute were not given the criteria of it. In this case, the criteria are the concepts of absolute motion and absolute rest.

The dispute of supporters of the Ptolemaic system and the Copernican system

Both sides had one question: whether the earth moves or is stationary. On the one hand, it was obvious that the paradigm of absolute rest is the Earth. However, it also seemed reasonable to ask whether the Earth is in a state of rest or motion. Nevertheless, as this question is not settled by direct verification, participants of the dispute started to imagine.

The space where the Earth is hypothetically moving has no starting points. Accordingly, a man is not able to see how it moves (if it moves) from one point to another. However, finally he can feel that the Earth is either at rest and its position in space does not change, it is always at one and the same point or the Earth moves and constantly takes different positions in space. A man cannot see the state of mo-

tion or rest of the Earth, but he can imagine these states. Here we should turn to Berkeley's doctrine, which is extremely important. Berkeley warned that the imagination should not go beyond the possibility of real existence, i.e. of our perception [Berkeley, 1993, 28]. Canadian researcher Cheryl Misak considers Berkeley to be one of verificationism predecessors. Misak pays special attention to the principle of intelligibility, according to which only understandable things should matter. If a philosophical problem concerns something what is impossible to realize, then we are talking about an imaginary problem [Misak, 1995, 16].

The most strange fact is how you can imagine something that no one has ever seen. The answer is very simple. In the old days and nowadays when the dispute about the Earth arises and when participants believe they have understood the essence of the question (whether the earth is stationary or it moves), they imagine the Earth as a small ball in our human environment, for example, in a room, and it is expected that the ball must either stand still or move. One gets the feeling as if in the real world the real Earth is in some room, which is some starting point, and in this room the earth rotates around itself with its background at rest. However, we should remember that in everyday life people are talking about stationary or moving things. Sometimes people wonder whether or not they move themselves. For example, when they are standing at the train station, waiting for its departure, and sometimes cannot tell if the train is already moving, or that the nearby train goes. As a rule, the question whether the train is still or moves is clear for all passengers.

However, in discussions about the state of the earth such elementary daily occurrence is projected on the infinite cosmos: it results in incredibly bold action, but at the same time, surprisingly naive. What do we mean when we say that the train is not moving? Is it not moving regarding what? Regarding streets, roads, hills, in a word, regarding the Earth. Every day we aim at moving from one point of the Earth's surface to another, and the Earth itself is the starting point of rest and motion of bodies. This system is, by definition, is at rest, but this is not the logical definition. A usual person concludes the concept of rest and motion from his own movements on the Earth's surface. In this sense, the Earth's surface is at rest, because it is a measure of rest and motion. Everything that does not move regarding the Earth's surface is at rest. Everything that is moving is in motion regarding the Earth.

However, when we talk about the Earth and the question arises whether it is moving or at rest, a man imagines some kind of gigantic surface of the land on which our Earth is one of many other bodies, which must be either in motion or at rest. Nevertheless, here we introduce one space in its own space and the human space has become a space of human space. It is a strange operation.

It is appropriate to consider that a bright person of that time could object to both sides of the dispute in Wittgenstein's style: "Regarding what point you are investigating the question whether the earth is at rest or moves? Regarding walls of what giant room? You know how to ask questions about the movement and rest only on Earth, using the Earth itself as a starting point, so what's the point in the question whether the Earth itself moves or not?" Of course, this objection is not frivolous or trivial. The fact is that when participants of the dispute used entirely new for them concepts of movement and rest, which had no proven criteria at that time, it was impossible to determine whether the earth was in motion or at rest regarding the space. Thus, we can conclude that the proponents of Copernicus and Ptolemy did not know what they were discussing, because they initially did not have a clear idea about the content of their dispute. They did not have the opportunity to resolve the issue because they did not have any proven criteria for the dispute. Wittgenstein wrote that about one thing, namely the standard meter in Paris, it could not be said that its length is one meter, nor the fact that its length is not equal to one meter [Wittgenstein, 1994, 103].

According to Wittgenstein, to say that the length of the meter is one meter also would be inappropriate. Because it would be like "it is as long as it is". Is there any sense in denying such a proposal? What does it mean to be the same length as you are? The question of whether the Earth moves or not, like the question of whether the sample of the quadrangle contains the quadrangle or not. It is important to note is this would not help Ptolemy's supporters turn right. A statement that a sample of the quadrangle contains the quadrangle is ridiculous. It is like to bet the won horse after the race. Wittgenstein would probably have come to the conclusion that both sides are thoughtless, because they do not know what they are discussing. To oppose to such criticism, you could answer: "We know well what we are discussing, but we have developed a much more abstract concept than the general concept of motion and rest. There is no doubt that we took it out of the general concept. However, we

went ahead, and using our imagination we are now able to imagine not just a large room, which is expected to look like our room, not some huge land like our Earth, which moves like other planets or is at rest; not some closed space where we could verify what parts of the mechanism change their spatial relationships: a large outer part or a ball in the center. Instead of all this, we imagine a completely empty room without walls. Despite the fact that it has no walls, no floor or ceiling, which could be starting points, this imaginary room without walls is also a location containing celestial bodies. Thus, in the framework of the above room it is also fair to ask if our Earth is moving or not. Then we will have to separate the space occupied by the room from the room itself, or to separate the space occupied by the Earth's surface from the Earth's surface. We would have to make this space very clean, or even infinite, and thus we would keep wondering whether the earth is moving or at rest. So abstract! So brave! However, according to verificationism supporter Wittgenstein (partly also according to Wittgenstein in the late period of his career), common sense in this operation would have led us to nonsense. Thus, the whole dispute from the position of Wittgenstein philosophy would be nonsense (read the following for more information about nonsense (Unsinn): [Wittgenstein, 2001]).

Conclusion

Wittgenstein in the late period of his career was convinced that, by getting rid of his own criteria, a man might believe that he has created some new deeper concept, but in fact, he has given up his own idea. A man thinks that he understands what he is saying, but he is wrong. We do not appeal here to the principle of sufficient reasons, but to a much deeper question "how a certain reality becomes a concept". How some mental event, which has no practical application, can serve as a concept, that is, to refer if it is necessary to something outside itself? It may be a concept if it is applicable. Everyday concepts of motion and rest are applicable in relation to the Earth. People have a right to speak about the states of motion and rest of bodies. The Earth was adopted as a starting point therefore people legitimately say that, for example, a train is moving or standing. However, what is the technique of applying the concepts of absolute space? How can we say that the Earth is at rest or moves, if this motion is expected de facto

only in our imagination?[1] If such dispute arose, the participants would have to admit that they did not have any criteria. Eventually, Wittgenstein wants to question the fact that when people are talking about something they really understand what they say. Moreover, he wants the rival to come to the following conclusion: "In fact, I never understood what I was saying!" In conclusion, it should be noted that Wittgenstein does not reject scientific theories, but at the same time, he calls us to clearly define the criteria of using both scientific and everyday concepts to avoid nonsense.

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1 It is scarcely necessary to remark that […] Newton has again acted contrary to his expressed intention only to investigate actual facts. No one is competent to predicate things about absolute space and absolute motion; they are pure things of thought, pure mental constructs that cannot be produced in experience [Mach, 1919, 229].

Верификационизм: проблема демаркации осмысленного и бессмысленного

Лорети Анджело
Аспирант,
кафедра философии языка и коммуникации,
Московский государственный университет имени М.В. Ломоносова,
119991, Российская Федерация, Москва, Ленинские горы, 1;
e-mail: loreti_a@yahoo.it

Аннотация

В статье автор анализирует принцип верикации в среднем периоде философского творчества Людвига Вигенштейна. Автор обращает особое внимание на влияние Альберта Эйнштейна на данную концепцию, изложенную Витгенштейном в работе «Философские заметки» («Philosophische Bemerkungen»). Автор обращается к комментариям П.У. Бриджмена о теории относительности. Автор также анализирует понятие абсолютного пространства в ньютоновской физике. Автор применяет верификационизм к спору между сторонниками системы Птоломея и системы Коперника, и показывает, что участники спора использовали необоснованные понятия и потому не понимали то, что обсуждали. Автор приходит к выводу, что, исходя из верификационизма Витгенштейна, можно подвергать сомнению тот факт, что, когда люди говорят о чем-то, действительно понимают то, о чем говорят.

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Ключевые слова

Витгенштейн, Эйнштейн, верификационизм, спор, система Птолемея, система Коперника.

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