

Husserlian Verificationism



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Abstract

Verificationism is the name for a family of claims connecting meaning and epistemic access, mostly known from logical empiricism. The widespread rejection of verificationism was a necessary step for the revival of metaphysics in analytic philosophy, and has for this reason received much attention. Much less discussed are verificationist claims in the early phenomenological tradition.

I aim to show in what sense and to what end Husserl commits to a form of verificationism. I then present the Church-Fitch argument as a general challenge to such a commitment.

- 1 Introduction: Unlikely Fellows
- 2 Verificationism in the Phenomenological Tradition
- 3 Verificationism in the Logical Empiricist Tradition
- 4 The Church-Fitch Argument against Epistemic Notions of Truth

Outline

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Context and Background Assumptions

- Manifest and Scientific Images can get in conflict. Phenomenology promises to ground the scientific in the manifest.
- Overarching Goal: an explicit proposal for a phenomenological interpretation of scientific knowledge which starts from the manifest image
- Assumption: adopting a phenomenological approach is metaphysically substantial (Zahavi 2017), not neutral (Crowell 2001)

Which notion of truth

- There is a fundamental disagreement on how what notion of truth such a project should rely on
- Hardy (2013) develops a Husserlian account of scientific knowledge that employs a realist (knowledge-independent) notion of truth
- Zahavi (2017) assigns Husserl an epistemic notion of truth
- Others, like Sebold 2014; Reynolds 2018 argue that phenomenological philosophy of science should not presuppose an epistemic notion of truth, regardless of textual interpretation
- Epistemic notions of truth have waned in popularity — here is where responses to the logical empiricists become relevant for developing a phenomenological account

Unlikely Fellows

[L]ogical positivism is the antithesis of Husserl's thought. (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2012, lxxxix)

- Schlick and Husserl had a not very respectful disagreement over the role of intuition for knowledge (Husserl 1984, 535f. Schlick [1918] 2009, esp. sects. 1.5, 1.12), and Schlick criticized phenomenological claims about discovering synthetic a priori judgements Schlick (1938) 1969
- Things get even worse with Heidegger and Carnap's analysis that "Nothingness itself nothings" is grammatically ill-formed. (Carnap 1931, 229f.)
- Further differences are legion, making it little surprising that logical empiricist and phenomenologists are usually read as opponents

A minimal verificationist principle

- There is a great range of different claims that have been defended as *verificationism*. They usually connect meaning or truth to possible evidence

V-Bold The meaning of a sentence is the method of its verification.

V-Crit A sentence that is not connected to a possibility of confirmation (fulfilment) is meaningless.

V-Truth Any truth is knowable.

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Truth in the Prolegomena to a Pure Logic

- Closely following Brentano, Husserl assumes an epistemic account of truth:
Evidently, there is a general equivalence between the sentences “A is true” and “it is possible, that someone judges with evidence, that A”. (Husserl [1900–1913] 1975, §50)

Verificationism in the Introduction to Logic and Theory of Knowledge

“An empirical assertion is justified, if [a relationship governed by a law of essence] warrants the ideal possibility of verification for this assertion.”(Husserl [1906] 1984, 354, tr. GB)

“Eine empirische Behauptung ist berechtigt, wenn [...] [ein wesensgesetzliches Verhältnis] die ideale Möglichkeit der Verifizierung dieser Behauptung gewährleistet.”(354)

Verificationism and the Critical Potential of Phenomenology

- What role would verificationism play for Husserl's phenomenology? Is it a detachable commitment?
- The epistemic conception of truth seems to fit better with the preferred *order* of investigation: start with the epistemology and let the metaphysics follow, instead of starting with the metaphysics to explain how we can know. (cf. Husserl [1906] 1984, 354)
- In *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science*, Husserl claims that the complete description would not leave any meaningful (“sinnvolle”) questions open (Husserl [1910] 1987, 34f.)

An argument scheme from meaningfulness?

This suggests an **argument scheme** along the following lines:

P1 All meaningful questions are answered by the totality of possible evidence.

P2 The totality of possible evidence does not decide the truth of proposition q .

CONC Whether or not q is not a meaningful question.

Such an argument scheme seems to be applied for example in the rejection of things-in-themselves

An object that is but is not and in principle could not be an object of a consciousness, is pure non-sense. (Husserl 1966, §4)

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Motivations for Verificationism

- For empirical science: Addressing underdetermination; resource allocation
- For philosophy: Elimination of pseudo-hypotheses; more rigorous methods
- For society: Erosion of authorities based on pseudo-theories

Analysis or Language Proposal?

- Carnap's verificationism is a proposal for an “empiricist language”
- Schlick and Waismann understand verificationism as meaning analysis
- Logical empiricists have a much narrower scope of what counts as “verification”

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The Church-Fitch argument

- Why not keep the epistemic account of truth?
- An important challenge is the Church-Fitch argument, also known as the Knowability Paradox: it shows an incompatibility between the claim that every truth *could* be known, and the idea that there is at least one unknown truth.
- The Church-Fitch argument derives from “All truths are knowable” the much stronger claim “All truths are known”
- expressed formally: $p \rightarrow \diamond K(p) \vdash p \rightarrow K(p)$

I now attempt to bridge vast methodological differences and give a somewhat intuitive version of this argument. I hope this does not look like sophistry — it is an attempt to clarify how the epistemic notion of truth should be understood.

Not all propositions that could be known are known

I don't know how many books are in the office right now. But I can emptyly intend "there are 208 books in the office" and then go through the books, counting, see if this intention is fulfilled. And likewise, for any other number of books.

More Technically:

On Husserl's early notion of evidence, evidence is the awareness of the identity of states of affairs given and intended. For some intended state of affairs p , it is possible to recognize that it matches with what is given: it is possible to judge with evidence, that p .

I have better things to do than count the books in the office. Maybe there is a little drawer for which only I have the key, and where I have secretly stashed away a few Husserliana volumes. Nobody else knows how many books there are in the office, since I have the only key, and the lock is unbroken. It might seem that in this, or a suitably modified scenario, I can *know* that nobody knows the number of books in the office right now.

I do know how the question could be settled, and that it has an answer, but I also know that nobody in fact has settled the question, because I didn't bother.

A contradiction?

It seems now that it is possible to know that “Nobody knows how many books are in the office right now.” While I of course cannot know *which* is the case, it has to be one of the following:

- Either the number of books is odd, and nobody knows that it is odd.
- Or the number of books is even, and nobody knows that it is even.

No matter which of these is true, it is incompatible with the principle that every truth is knowable. No one could ever know that “the number of books is odd, and nobody knows that it is odd” – knowing the proposition would make it false.

Why Care?

- The easiest examples for “nobody knows that p” are exceedingly trivial propositions.
- This might make it tempting to dismiss the whole problem as trivial
- But these trivialities challenge the presumption that truth can be understood in terms of possible knowledge

Kinds of Responses

But I think it is worth considering how to respond to it, at least in general outline, only to make one's background understanding of truth and knowledge more explicit. The options I can think of are

- 1 Accept unknowable truths (and drop the epistemic notion of truth)
- 2 Accept strong verificationism (and drop that there are contingently unknown truths)
- 3 Dismiss Formalization
- 4 Change the notion of knowledge
- 5 Change logic (e.g. to allow for undecided propositions)

Accepting Unknowable Truths

Even if their engagement is not with the Church-Fitch argument, this response would probably be embraced by e.g. Hardy 2013; Reynolds 2018; Sebold 2014. I think the main reasons to hesitate here can fall in three categories:

- 1 **Skeptical Worries.** Once we assume unknowable truths, how could we make sense of a project of ultimate foundation? What would warrant our epistemic optimism?
- 2 **The wrong order** between epistemology and metaphysics. We want the metaphysics to be a consequence of what we can know about the world, not explain from metaphysical hypotheticals how we can have knowledge of the world.
- 3 **Objectivism:** Such a notion of truth would be in tension with other typical phenomenological commitments: the world not being a “ready-made” metaphysical entity, that can be described “from nowhere”.

Accepting Strong Verificationism

An option that as far as I know nobody discusses in the literature is to embrace the conclusion that all truths are known at some point.

Maybe with a sufficiently idealist metaphysics, there is a story to be told for this response. But it seems very hard to deny that some judgements could be brought to evidence, even if they are never made, let alone evidently judged.

Dismiss Formal arguments

One response might be to simply dismiss arguments that are discussed in the context of epistemic logic.

But the Church-Fitch argument does not really presuppose a specific logical framework, so it would require quite a general rejection of formal arguments.

There are lines of thought in Husserl that point toward a limiting the scope of formal arguments, such as the distinction between material and formal essences. But is it plausible to apply this argument here? It would need to make a very general claim about the inadmissibility of formalization.

Changing the Scope of the Verificationist Claim

A very suggestive response is to simply say that the verificationist principle is not true for strictly *all* truths.

Many responses do seem to work along these lines, but I think it is not available, if the verificationist principle is supposed to express an epistemic account of truth. If there are truths for which the connection with possible knowledge does not hold, then truth amounts to *more* than the possibility of knowledge.

Changing the Notion of Knowledge

There are of course many ways in which the notion of knowledge could be changed. One that I suppose is tempting would be to argue that there is no knowledge of the absence of knowledge: that is, there cannot be cases where I know that nobody knows.

But outside of the paradox, it would seem strange to make such a claim: there must have been flowers blooming on uninhabited islands. I can know that these were uninhabited, why would I not know that nobody actually knows or will ever know, how these long withered flowers smelled?

What would be more interesting is whether on the right account of negative judgement (“Nobody knows the number of books in the office right now.”) the argument is invalidated.

Changing Logic

The Church-Fitch argument is often discussed in the context of proposals for intuitionist logic, and its most famous proponent, Michael Dummett.

People have (attempted to) formulate related problems in an intuitionist context. In any case, adopting a non-classical logic would be a substantive, and interesting, consequence of sticking with the epistemic account of truth.

Thank you for your attention

How would you respond? Are you bothered at all?

Any suggestions are highly appreciated, also anytime via
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Overview: the Church-Fitch Argument

- 1 For any true proposition p , it is possible to judge with apodictic evidence (= JWAE) that p .
 $\forall p : p \rightarrow \diamond K(p)$ (Epistemic Truth)
- 2 To JWAE that “Nobody JWAE that p ” entails that “nobody JWAE that p ” is true
 $\forall p : \Box (K (\neg K (p)) \rightarrow \neg K (p))$ (Substituting $\neg K (p)$ for p in Facticity)
- 3 JWAE that p & q allows to JWAE that p and to JWAE that q .
 $\forall p : \Box (K (p \wedge \neg K (p)) \rightarrow (K (p) \wedge K (\neg K (p))))$ (Subst. $\neg K (p)$ for q in Distributivity)
- 4 It is impossible to JWAE that (p and no one JWAE that p).
 $\forall p : \Box \neg K(p \wedge \neg K(p))$ (From 2.–3.)
- 5 $\forall p : \neg \diamond K(p \wedge \neg K(p))$ (from definition of \Box)
- 6 $\forall p : (p \wedge \neg K(p)) \rightarrow \diamond K(p \wedge \neg K(p))$ (Subst. $p \wedge \neg K(p)$ for p in 1.)
- 7 Since every truth can be JWAE, it cannot be true that there is a truth that is never JWAE.
 $\forall p : \neg (p \wedge \neg K(p))$ (modus tollens 4., 6.)
- 8 Therefore, all truths are JWAE (at some point, by someone).
 $\forall p : p \rightarrow K(p)$ (transformation of 7.,)