

Gentrain Unit 14 The Vienna Circle and Logical Positivism, 24 April, 2014, Dr. Cindy Ausec

Logical Positivism (also called logical empiricism, scientific philosophy, and neo-positivism) A philosophy asserting the primacy of observation in assessing the truth of statements of fact and holding that metaphysical and subjective arguments not based on observable data are meaningless (Webster Dictionary)

Vienna Circle (1914-1936)

- Group of scientifically trained philosophers and philosophically interested scientists and mathematicians who met under the nominal leadership of **Moritz Schlick**
- Met weekly to discuss problems in the philosophy of science
 - Seeking a systematic reduction of human knowledge to logical and scientific foundations - it dismissed as nonsense the metaphysical and normative pretensions of the philosophical traditions
 - Members had differing opinions on important issues

Influenced by Russell's work in mathematical logic and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

- Rejected Wittgenstein's metaphysical doctrine of Logical Atomism – that the world consists of facts, not of objects
- Rejected Wittgenstein's "Picture Theory of Meaning"
- Accepted the idea that true statements of logic and mathematics are tautologies
 - **Tautologies** are complex/compound propositions which are true no matter what truth values their atomic propositions take
 - Examples:
 - "This candidate will win or will not win."
 - "If it rains, it will rain."
 - Tautologies are devoid of empirical content they only concerned ways of representing the world
- The truths of science are verifiable empirical claims (acquired by experience)

Verification Principle – ruled that the meaning of a statement is its method of verification - to verify something is to show that it is true

- If a statement purports to be a factual statement about the world but there is no way to prove that statement is either true or false - the statement has no meaning
- Verification must be possible in principle, though not necessarily possible in fact
- Cannot verify metaphysical statements - we cannot devise a method to prove that "God is dead" or that "God is not dead" – the statement is factually meaningless

Problems with the Verification Principle

- Scientific generalizations are incapable of conclusive verification
- Ethical statements are treated as emotional expression of the speakers view or as an attempt to establish a standard
- Analytic statements are considered exempt from consideration of the verification principle because, like definitions, they are not about facts but about the meaning of symbols
- Natural laws such as the law of gravity are not totally verifiable- it is impossible to verify a statement which concerns the behavior of all bodies in all possible futures

No experience could conclusively falsify the general propositions so the **Verification Principle** was reformulated in a weaker form

- A proposition was significant if there were some observations which would be *relevant* to its truth or falsity
- Recognized that many significant propositions which are verifiable in principle but not in practice
- Natural laws are statements of fact because that could be partially verified

Problems concerning the nature of verification

- All verification is based someone's individual sense experience
- If meaning depends on verifiability, and verification is by mental states which I alone experience, how can I understand anyone else's meaning
- Schlick's answer was to make a distinction between form and content
 - Content– what I enjoy or live through when I look at something green – is private and incommunicable
 - Form – the structural relationship between my private experience and other peoples' private experience is public and communicable

Logical Positivists were able to show how many statements which purport to be about the world are really statements of syntax, directives for the use of words

- The rose is red – a meaningful statement about the world
- The rose is a thing – is a syntactical statement
- Many problems in the history of philosophy have arisen because statements of syntax have the same form as statements of fact