Schlick on Meaning and Verification

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The Viennese Circle

- Moritz Schlick was a leading member of a group of philosophers known as the "Viennese Circle" or the "Vienna Circle."

- The group was active from 1922, when Schlick went to the University of Vienna, until the mid-1930s, when most of its members fled the Nazis.

- The group published two series of books.

- Among its leading members were:

    - Rudolf Carnap,
    - Otto Neurath,
    - Friedrich Waismann,
    - Herbert Feigl,

- Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* was much-discussed, and Wittgenstein himself had meetings with a sub-group of the Circle.

Logical Empiricism

- The members of the Vienna Circle tried to conduct philosophy on the model of natural science.

- They called their approach "logical empiricism," though it is more popularly known as "logical positivism."

- The key doctrine of the logical empiricists was that the meaning of a sentence is to be found entirely in the conditions under which it could be verified by some possible experience.

- Metaphysical sentences were taken by the logical empiricists to be unverifiable and therefore meaningless.

- Logical empiricism was adopted by philosophers outside the Circle itself, most notably, Hans Reichenbach in Berlin.

- It was popularized in English by A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936).

Logical Empiricism and Analysis

- "There is no such thing as speculative philosophy, a system of sentences with a special subject matter on a par with those of the sciences. To pursue philosophy can be only to clarify the concepts and sentences of science by logical analysis" (Carnap in the first volume of *Erkenntnis*, a logical empiricist journal).

- The clarification of the sentences and concepts leads to their "reduction" to primitive sentences and concepts relating directly to experience (hence "empiricism").

- The most famous attempt at such a "reduction" is found in Carnap's *The Logical Construction of the World* (1928).

- Symbolic logic was heavily employed in the clarifications made by the logical empiricists (hence "logical").

The Meaning of a Proposition

- It is paradoxical to ask for the meaning of a proposition.

- A proposition, by its very nature, expresses its own meaning.

- Thus, it is appropriate to answer a question about the meaning of a proposition by repeating the sentence expressing it, though perhaps in slightly different words.

- If this does not suffice, the proposition is evidently misunderstood.

- A proposition is not understood when all one possesses is a string of words making up a sentence.

The Meaning of a Sentence

- It is intelligible to ask for the meaning of the sentence.
  - What proposition does the sentence stand for?

- One answers the question by locating it within the framework of a language, in one of two ways:
  - By translation, the provision of another sentence in the same language,
  - By indicating the logical rules which tell us the circumstances in which the sentence is to be used.

- The second way gives us a deeper understanding of meaning and helps us solve philosophical difficulties.

- We can regard it (though Schlick does not do so explicitly) as an analysis of the sentence.

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Meaning and Context

- We run into philosophical difficulties when we use in philosophical contexts words whose significance is restricted to ordinary contexts.

- "For every word has a definite signification only withn a definite context into which it has been fitted" (340).

- To give the word meaning in a new context, such as a philosophical one, we need new rules for its use.

- But the rules can be quite arbitrary.

  - "Take me to a country where the sky is three times as blue as in England."
  - The sentence is meaningless unless "three times as blue" is (arbitrarily) given significance in terms of "certain definite circumustances" in which the sky can be described that way.

Meaning and Logical Rules

- In general, the meaning of sentences is given by giving the circumstances in which the sentence is to be used.

- These are conditions in which the sentence would be true, and those in which it would be false.

- The corresponding logical rules which regulate the use of sentences may be called rules of grammar (in the widest sense).

- This account is due to conversations with Wittgenstein.

- "The meaning of a sentence is the method of its verification" (341).

Definitions

- The logical rules consist of definitions of two kinds:

  - Ordinary definitions, which are explanations of words using other words,
  - Ostensive definitions, which are "explanations by means of a procedure which puts the words to actual use" (341).

- Ostensive definitions are of two kinds:

  - Simple definitions, as in pointing to blue objects when teaching the meaning of "blue."
  - Complex defnitions, in which the meaning of a word (e.g., "because," "chance," "again") is defined by the way it is used in complex situations.

- Ultimately, ordinary definitions themselves must be understood through ostensive definitions.

- "And this means, in an obvious sense, reference to 'experience' or 'possibility of verification'" (342).

Meaning, Common Sense, and Science

- This account of meaning is not a hypothesis about how it arises.

- It is merely a description about how meaning is actually ascribed to sentences, not only in everyday life, but also in science.

- The account is derived from common sense and scientific procedure.

  - For example, Einstein gave an experimental procedure for measuring distant simultaeneous events, which gives the meaning of "two events at distant places happened simultaneously."

  - Without this verificational procedure, we do not know the meaning of the phrase.

- The account is denied only because it has been rarely formulated.

The Meaning of Simultaneity

- Assume that the speed of light is constant.

- Assume as well that two events take place in such a way that information about their having occurred is transmitted to an observer by means of light.

- Assume finally that the observer is equidistant between the place of the two events at the time they occur.

- The events occurred at the same time just in case the information arrives at the observer at the same time.

- This account leaves open that to a stationary observer, the events are simultaneous, while to a moving observer, they are not (or vice-versa).

- The important thing about the account is that it provides a rule under which assertions of simultaneity by an observer are either true or false.

Lewis's Criticism of "The Logical Positivism of the Viennese Circle"

- The American pragmatist philosopher C. I. Lewis criticized "the empirical-meaning requirement."

- His chief criticism concerned its consequences for the conduct of philosophy:

  - It would make significant philosophical discussion impossible, or
  - It would make it severly limited.

- Schlick claims responsibility for some features of what he prefers to call "Consistent Empiricism."

- He claims further that it imposes no significant restrictions on philosophizing.

Schlick's Response to Lewis

- Lewis distinguishes between "verbal and logical" understanding of a sentence and the understanding of its verification conditions.

- Schlick responds that we cannot understand a sentence "verbally and logically" unless we understand the conditions under which it would be true or false, so the latter is not a separate condition on intelligibility.

- Lewis claims that it follows from "the empirical-meaning requirement" that "nothing can be meant except what is actually present in the experience in which that meaning is entertained."

- Schlick counters that the requirement allows for possible as well as actual verification.

    - One may verify a future event by waiting for it to happen.

Empirical and Logical Possibility

- There are two senses of "possibility" in which a sentence can be possibily verified.

    - Empirical: what does not contradict the laws of nature,
    - Logical: describable according to the rules stipulated for our language.

- Judgments about empirical possibility are uncertain, so if possible verification is empirical, in some cases we would not know whether a sentence is meaningful.

- Verifiability is a matter of logical possibility.

- Since the stipulation of rules for language generates logical possibility, it is the basis for verifiability as well.

- Meaning is given to sentences by stipulating how it will be used, and thus it is our own fault if we utter a meaningless sentence.

No Unfathomable Mysteries

- What has been claimed about assertive sentences applies as well to interrogative sentences.

- A question is meaningful just in case it is logically possible to give an answer to it.

- Any other interrogative sentence has no meaning.

- It may not be empirically possible to give an answer.

- But there are no limits in principle to our knowledge, since the empirical boundaries can be pushed back.

- "There is no unfathomable mystery in the world" (352).

Meaning and Experience

- Since verifiablity is determined by merely logical possibility, it seems that experience plays no role in determining the meaning of a sentence.

- But this claim is based on a conflation of two senses of "experience."

  - Any "immediate" data (as in Hume and Kant),
  - Having done many things and learned from them how to proceed.

- The second kind of experience is irrelevant to the meaning of sentences.

- But the first kind is relevant.

  - Meaning is derived from the stipulation of rules of use,
  - All rules ultimately are based on ostensive definitions, which "presuppose data and situations, to which names can be attached" (353).

An Example: The Other Side of the Moon

- It may be held that according to the "logical positivist," questions such as "What is the other side of the moon like?" are meaningless.

- But there is no doubt that it is meaningful and that its meaningfulness can be explained on the present account.

- We can describe a situation in which a person is located in a position where he could see the other side of the moon.

- Even if it were empirically impossible to be in that position, we can use meaningful sentences of physics and geometry to describe how someone could experience the other side of the moon.

- This does not require our being able to imagine such a situation, as this is a psychological consideration, not one of logical grammar.

An Example: Immortality

- The question of human immorality seems to be a metaphysical question.

- But if it is meaningful, it must somehow be verifiable.

- It can be verifiable if it is treated as an empirical hypothesis: you wait until you die.

- Or it could be publically verified in the sense of being the best explanation of some observed phenomena (though this would not establish it as an absolutely true hypothesis).

- The claim that the souls of the deceased occupy an unperceivable supercelestial space is meaningful only if there is some logically possible way of detecting such a space.

Positivism and Solipsism

- Lewis claims that fundamental to logical positivism, in addition to the "empirical-meaning requirement," is a stress on the first-person point of view, as in Carnap.

- Carnap called his approach in *The Logical Construction of the World* "methodological solipsism."

- He attempted to "construct" physical objects from "for-me" objects (*eigen-psychische Gegenstande*).

- Schlick claims that "true positivism" is in fact anti-solipsistic.

- Carnap could have started his construction from something else, so his "solipsism" is just a method of carrying it out.

Positivism and Idealism

- Idealists such as Berkeley and Schopenhauer recognize that the "self" has a unique position in experience.

- On this basis they adopt an egocentric view that "things" or "the world" are nothing more than "ideas" or "representations."

- But they err in taking the unique position of the "self" to be a logical fact, rather than an empirical fact.

- That "I can only feel my own pain" is true by the rules of language.

- In that case, it is meaningless, "in the sense that it does not assert anything, but merely indicates a rule concerning the use of words" (365).

- "True positivism" allows for the logical possibility that the "data" of "experience" have no owner.

The External World

- One way to describe "realism" about "the external world" is in the form of an hypothesis formulated by Lewis:

    - "If all minds should disappear from the universe, the stars would still go on in their course."

- This hypothesis cannot be verified empirically, but it could be verified in principle.

- Experience shows that the course of the stars does not depend on living things.

- And even if no minds were to exist, there could still be "primitive experience" in the neutral sense of "mere existence of ordered data."

- The mistake of the idealist is to formulate the hypothesis in a way that makes it impossible to be true, which implies that it is meaningless.

Summary

- "The last considerations may serve as an example of one of the main theses of true positivism: that the naïve representation of the world, as the man in the street sees it, is perfectly correct; and that the solution of the great philosophical issues consists in returning to this original world-view, after having shown that the troublesome problems arose only from an inadequate description of the world by means of a faulty language" (369).