CHAPTER 8

RADICAL PHYSICALISM AND THE ‘REAL WORLD’

[Reply to Moritz Schlick’s ‘On the Foundation of Knowledge’ (1979b) and Thilo Vogel’s ‘Bemerkungen zur Aussagentheorie des radikalen Physikalismus’ (1934). Reference will also be made to Fred Bon’s ‘Der Gegenstand der Psychologie’ (1934).


In addition cf. Philipp Frank’s Das Kausalgesetz und seine Grenzen (1932) as well as Rudolf Carnap’s most recent publications [i.e., up to 1934], a short summary of which appears in Die Aufgabe der Wissenschaftslogik (1934a).]

INTRODUCTION: SCHLICK’S OBJECTIONS

Logical analysis of the scientific language helps us to overcome difficulties; above all it reveals many problems of philosophy as metaphysical pseudo-problems. A representative of the Vienna Circle once expressed the opinion that each of us was better at noticing metaphysical residues in his neighbour than in himself. If he is right, we are expanding the common sphere of logical empiricism if we help one another overcome such residues.

Moritz Schlick has attacked fundamental formulations of radical physicalism with some sharpness in his essay ‘On the Foundation of Knowledge’. At other times he has liked to stress, along the lines of certain fundamental ideas of the Vienna Circle, that there are only two classes of philosophical problems: the questions of the one class are basically answered by science, the questions of the other are pure pseudo-questions — meaningless word connections — and thus there are no special philosophical questions at all, especially not those in which scientific knowledge itself is raised as a problem. In his latest essay, however, he has written precisely about this problem.

A systematic criticism of Schlick’s comments should first make the attempt
to define the scientific language used by him. However, here for the purpose of orientation, I want to limit myself to showing which of Schlick’s tenets we have to reject necessarily and for what reasons, in order, then, to make progress by positive investigations on common ground.

In his objections against radical physicalism, Schlick has used examples from my comments on protocol statements and their position in science, and from my rejection of a confrontation between ‘knowledge’ and the ‘real world’. However, he does not give the reader a clear picture of my formulations; he does not stress their physicalist and empiricist character but characterises them as the ‘well-known’ theory of ‘coherence’ (p. 374); moreover he classes my view with the ‘general’ coherence theory and makes ‘short shrift’ of both together, while mine could at least be classed with the variety which represented the ‘economy standpoint’ (p. 377) to whose rejection Schlick grants extenuating circumstances.

Years ago Schlick himself (1910) showed how the view that truth consists of the “conformity of thinking with itself” has its place within idealistic metaphysics. Whether such an opinion is put forward by certain followers of Kant or by the English representatives of idealistic metaphysics, it is always interlocked with reflexions on the soul, on the absolute, or on similar ‘metaphysical objects’; at best, the metaphysics is treated separately.

Precisely for the purpose of evading such idealistic metaphysics, physicalism tries to replace pseudo-content statements (Carnap’s ‘content language’) by statements about language conventions (Carnap’s ‘formal language’) and, as to the rest, to make additions to the content statements of science. It tries to express geology as well as sociology, mechanics as well as biology, and likewise ‘statements on statements’ in the physicalist unified language.

In harmony with consistent empiricism, one tries again and again to refer back to ‘experience’; however, this easily leads to a doctrine of ‘personal experiences’ which then declines into idealistic metaphysics. In order to escape from this I suggested avoiding the term ‘personal experience’ and using the term ‘experience statement’ instead. I showed that one can formulate the experience statements (‘observation statements’ called ‘protocol statements’ if carefully worded) — in physicalist language and avoid a special ‘phenomenological language’ — for example like this: ‘Charles’ protocol in the time interval around 9 hours 14 minutes at a certain place: Charles’ formulation (‘thinking’, ‘statement thinking’ — better than ‘speech thinking’ because this term reminds one too much of the specific doctrines of the American behaviourists) in the time interval around 9 hours 13 minutes was: there was a table in the room during the time interval around 9 hours 12 minutes 59