2. THE ORIGIN AND SPIRIT OF LOGICAL POSITIVISM

[1969a]

Logical positivism began to form a fairly definite outlook in philosophy about forty years ago. As is well known, it was primarily the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Rudolf Carnap that initiated the early phase of this — then new and radical — departure from the traditional ways of philosophizing. To be sure, some aspects of logical positivism are derived historically from Hume and Comte; but, in contrast, especially to Mill’s positivism, a new conception of logic (having its origins in Leibniz, Frege, and Russell) was united with the empiricism of Hume, Mach, and the early Einstein.

The Vienna Circle consisted mainly of scientifically trained philosophers and philosophically interested mathematicians and scientists. Most of the members were tough-minded thinkers, Weltzugewandt (as Hans Hahn put it), ‘this-worldly’ rather than ‘other-worldly.’ They were radically opposed to metaphysical speculation, especially of the a priori and transcendent types. Since the development of the Vienna Circle is by now a familiar chapter in the history of recent philosophy, I propose, after dealing with some of the antimetaphysical doctrines of logical positivism, to concentrate on some of the aspects that are not as well known. I shall refer particularly to the work of Moritz Schlick, the founder and leader of the Vienna Circle. Schlick’s early work anticipated a good deal of what in more precise formulations was later developed by Carnap, Reichenbach, and others. In his Allgemeine Erkenntnislehre (1918) there were also anticipations of some of the central tenets of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.* I think it was Schlick’s extremely unassuming character, his great modesty and kindliness, and his deep personal devotion to Wittgenstein that made him forget or suppress the great extent to which his views, independently developed and quite differently stated, already contained very important arguments and conclusions regarding the nature of logical and analytic validity; the semantic explication of the concept of truth; the difference between pure experience (Erleben), acquaintance (Kennen), and genuine knowledge (Erkennen), etc. Indeed, so deeply impressed was Schlick with Wittgenstein’s genius that he attributed to him profound philosophical insights which he had formulated much more lucidly long before he succumbed to Wittgenstein’s almost hypnotic spell.

In the first flush of enthusiasm of the late 1920’s, the Vienna Circle
proclaimed its outlook as a philosophy to end all philosophies, as a decisive turn toward a new form of enlightenment. The pamphlet *Wissenschaftliche Weltanschauung: Der Wiener Kreis*, published in 1929, was our declaration of independence from traditional school philosophy. This slender brochure, composed collaboratively by Carnap, Hahn, and Neurath (aided by Waismann and myself), was presented to Schlick upon his return from his visiting appointment at Stanford University. As I remember only too well, Schlick, while appreciative of this token of friendship and admiration, was deeply disturbed by the idea of having originated another 'school of thought.' He was a philosophical individualist; although he promoted group colloquy and believed in the fruitfulness of mutual criticism and searching discussion, he was profoundly convinced that everyone should think for himself. The idea of a united front of philosophical attack was abhorrent to Schlick — notwithstanding the fact that he himself promulgated the Viennese point of view in many of his lectures, in Europe and also in the United States.

Logical positivism became noted, as well as notorious, through its critique and complete rejection of metaphysics. In the spirit of Hume and Comte, but equipped with more fully developed logical tools, the Vienna Circle declared any question (and any answers) of a transempirical sort to be factually meaningless. The original formulations of the criterion of meaningfulness were somewhat brash and careless. The motivation, however, was fairly obvious. Just as Hume considered significant only statements about the relations of ideas (i.e., logic and mathematics) or matters of fact (the empirical sciences), so the logical positivists were adamant in excluding as *nonsensical* any question that, in the light of logical analysis, revealed itself to be absolutely unanswerable. Always granting, and even emphasizing, that pure logic and pure mathematics have standards of meaningfulness and validity of their own, the meaning criterion was designed to separate factual questions and propositions from metaphysical pseudoproblems and pseudosolutions of such problems.

It was only some years later that the Viennese positivists realized their kinship of outlook with that of the American pragmatists, especially C. S. Peirce, and with the operationalist approach of P. W. Bridgman. The pragmatists declared a proposition meaningless if there was no difference that *made* a difference between asserting it and denying it. The difference that Peirce referred to was a difference with respect to observable consequence. Bridgman considered a concept to be genuinely meaningful only if it could be defined by specifiable, observational, mensurational, or experimental procedures. Under the influence of Wittgenstein’s and Carnap’s early work, Schlick maintained that the factual meaning of empirical statements consists in ‘the method