

Logical Positivism on Necessity and A prioricity

Seminar 10

PHIL2120 Topics in Analytic Philosophy

30 November 2012

Admin

Required reading for this seminar:

30 November: Logical Positivism on Necessity and Apriority (Ch 12, Ch 13 sections 1-3)

Optional Reading: Godfrey Smith, *Theory and Reality* Ch 2

7 December: The Rise and Fall of the Empiricist Criterion of Meaning (Ch 13 sections 4-6)

14 December: No seminar

Essay 2 is due 8 Jan 5pm, submit by email to danm@hku.hk

Logical positivism

Logical positivism was a philosophical movement that began in Europe after WW1, flourished in a radical form in the 1920s-1940s, before becoming less radical, and then dying out in the 1960s.

Prominent figures: Moritz Schlick, Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, Hans Reichenbach, Carl Hempel, Herbert Fiegl, and A.J. Ayer.

Influenced by Hume, Russell, Wittgenstein and Einstein.

Empiricism

Logical positivism was a radical version of empiricism

Empiricism is the conjunction of epistemic empiricism and content empiricism.

Epistemic empiricism: All knowledge about the world is based on experience

Content empiricism: All thought about the world is derived from experience

Empiricism 2

Example: Suppose Jane hasn't ever had any experiences (e.g. she has never had any visual or other sensory experiences).

Then:

- i) Jane can't know that there are red objects;
and
- ii) Jane can't think that there are red objects

What logical positivism was against

Logical positivists were opposed to philosophers they regarded as obscure, such as Hegel (1770–1831) and Heidegger (1889–1976).

Hegel's view: Human history as a whole is a process in which a "world spirit" gradually reaches consciousness for itself

Quote from Hegel: "Reason is substance, as well as infinite power, its own infinite material underlying all the natural and spiritual life; as also the incident form, that which sets the material in motion"

Reichenbach's lament

A student reading this would normally first think it was their fault that they couldn't understand it they would then work away until it finally seemed obvious that reason more substance, and also infinite power.

But in fact: Hegel's sentence is nonsense!!

Analyticity

Sentences like (*) are true in virtue of both what they mean and how the world is.

(*) La Universidad de Princeton esta en Nuevo Jersey

Sentences like (1), on the other hand, are true wholly in virtue of what they mean.

(1) If a man is a bachelor then he is unmarried

Definitions

S is **analytically true** iff S is **true** in virtue of what S means

S is **analytically false** iff S is **false** in virtue of what S means

S is **synthetic** iff S is neither analytically true or analytically false

Claim: Analytically true sentences aren't about the world since their truth does not depend on how the world is.

The verificationist theory of meaning

- i) Knowing the meaning of a synthetic sentence is knowing how to verify it as true or false (by means of observation)
- ii) A synthetic sentence is meaningful iff (in principle) it is verifiable as true or false (by means of observation)

Rationale for the verificationist theory: For a sentence to be meaningful its truth value must make some potential to our sensory experiences: it must make a difference to our somehow (motivated by content empiricism)

Claimed consequence of the verificationist theory of meaning

Many traditional problems and theses in philosophy turn out to be meaningless since they are neither verifiable by experience or analytically true or false.

Ex1: Is there a world beyond our sensory experience?

Ex2: Does God exist?

Ex 3: Ethical and aesthetic questions and theses

This is good: Philosophers have been stuck working on these problems the centuries. Now they can do more productive work such as providing analyses and clarifications

Question 1: How is a priori knowledge possible

Logical positivists endorse epistemic empiricism since they hold that:

- i) Every sentence that is about the world is synthetic
- ii) Synthetic sentences can be only know on the basis of experience

The hold, however, that analytically true sentences can be known to be true a priori. How is such knowledge possible?

Answer: The conventionalist theory of a priori knowledge

For any sentence S:

(CT1) S is a priori knowable iff S is analytically true

Suppose S is analytically true. To know that S is true we just need to know what S means, and then, since S is guaranteed to be true by its meaning, we are in a position to know that S is true, no matter what state the world is in.

We are therefore able to know a priori that S is true, since we do not have to look at the world in order to determine whether S is true.

Question 2: How is knowledge of necessary truth possible?

Suppose S is necessarily true. How do we know that S is not only true but necessarily true?

Surely we don't examine all the possible world states and check if S is true at each one! So how do we know S is necessary??

Answer: The conventionalist theory of necessity

For any sentence S:

(CT1) S is necessary iff S is analytically true

Suppose S is analytically true. To know that S is true we just need to know what S means, and then, since S is guaranteed to be true by its meaning, we are in a position to know that S is true, no matter what state the world is in.

We are therefore in a position to know that S is necessarily true.

Objection to the logical positivist's explanation of a priori knowledge

(1) If a man is a bachelor then he is unmarried

The positivist's explanation:

We a priori know (1) because

- i) We a priori know what (1) means (since we can decide to let (1) mean anything we like), and
- ii) we a priori know that the truth of (1) follows from the meaning of (1)

What is it for Q to follow from P_1, \dots, P_n ?

Option A: Q follows from P_1, \dots, P_n iff it is knowable a priori that Q is true if P_1, \dots, P_n are true

Prob: Then how do we explain how it is possible to have a priori knowledge of this fact? (The account is therefore incomplete.)

Option A: Q follows from P_1, \dots, P_n iff, necessarily, Q is true if P_1, \dots, P_n are true

Prob: Then how do we explain how is possible to have a priori knowledge of this fact? (The account is again incomplete)

Objection to the logical positivist's explanation of knowledge of necessities

A similar argument to that for a priori knowledge shows that the logical positivist's explanation of knowledge of necessities also fails.

Towards an evaluation of the verificationist theory of meaning

The verificationist theory of meaning
(reformulated): For any synthetic sentence S , S is meaningful iff there are a finite set of possible observation sentences which stand in R to S

Question 1: What is an observation sentence?

Question 2: What is R ?

Observation sentences

An observation sentence is a sentence that expresses the content of a possible observation or perceptual or sensory experience.

Example: 'a is red', 'b is next to c'

Two views about observation sentences

Ayer's view: Observation sentences describe observations of sense data

Other view: Observation sentences describe observations of external material objects

Logical positivists differed between themselves about which view was right

Next week

We will investigate whether there is any choice of R for which the verification theory is plausible

The discussion will be independent of which view to take about observation sentences