CHAPTER 3
LOGICAL POSITIVISM t SCHLICK AND AYER

From what we have already seen in the preceding chapter, philosophical propositions are neither empirical nor a priori. If this is the case, then the only remaining alternative would seem to be that they are non-sensical. The notion comes directly to us from the logical positivists.

In the 1930's logical positivists, amongst them, Schlick, Carnap and other members of the so-called Vienna circle enunciated the thesis that the meaning of a statement is the method of its verification. It *can* be given only by giving the rules of its verification in experience* 2 As a matter of fact, the requirement of verifiability was first stated by Wittgenstein according to Carnap. He says, in "Testability and Meaning":

... among empiricists there seems to be full agreement that at least some more or less close relation exists between the meaning of a sentence and the way in which we come to a verification or at least a confirmation of it. The requirement of verification was first stated by Wittgenstein, and its meaning and consequences were exhibited in the earlier publications of
our Vienna circle...

Now this principle, which is known as the principle of verifiability, functioned as a criterion of literal meaningfulness. It was used to determine whether an utterance has literal sense or not. Schlick's formulation is inadequate because it does not distinguish between kinds of verification. The modifying phrase, "in sense experience", was eliminated by Schlick because "no other kind of verification has been defined", the implication being that there is no other kind of verification. Now the suppression of the phrase "in sense experience" as unnecessary might be contested by a "scientifically minded angel", which hypothesis, however inane, is theoretically possible. Schlick leaves himself open to the objection that his verification criterion is an empty tautology. If verification in sense-experience is the only theoretically possible kind of non-a priori verification, then the term "in sense-experience" has no use to distinguish between kinds of non-a priori verification. And the statement "all non-a priori verification is sense verification" turns into the uninformative tautology "all non-a priori verification is non-a priori verification."
LOGICAL POSITIVMS SCHLICK AND AYER

A better known formulation of the criterion which is A.J. Ayer's is not subject to this objection since it includes a reference to sense-experience. It is as follows:

... a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express, that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the propositions as being true or reject it as being false.

In summary,

a simple way to formulate the principle would be to say that a sentence had literal meaning if and only if the proposition it expressed was either analytic or empirically verifiable.

The logical positivists considered metaphysical statements which refer to a supposed reality lying beyond the bounds of sense-experience to be nonsensical (neither a priori nor verifiable in sense-experience, therefore nonsensical).
Though the criterion of literal meaningfulness, as first stated by Wittgenstein, was used by positivists to attempt to eliminate metaphysical statements from sensible discourse, Wittgenstein never clearly distinguished between philosophical statements in general and the special class of metaphysical statements. In the \textit{Tractatus} he said:

most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but non-sensical.

In his liter writings he appears to use "metaphysics" and "philosophy" interchangeably. If this identification is correct, then the principle of verifiability would eliminate not only metaphysical statements, but all philosophical statements/ not only statements referring to what transcends sense-experience, but statements which refer to everyday phenomena, e.g., "Motion is impossible", "Time is unreal", "Space cannot exist", and such like.

Before embarking on a discussion whether all philosophical sentences are nonsensical, we should reformulate the principle of verifiability so as to avoid inadequacies of Ayer's first formulation, viz., a
sentence has literal meaning if and only if the proposition it expresses ... This is open to the objection that if the sentence already expresses a proposition it must have literal significance: a proposition has the meaning of an indicative sentence. The sentence thus cannot be cast out by the application of this version of the verifiability criterion. We cannot say that a sentence expressing a proposition is meaningless because it expresses an unverifiable proposition. For, if it expresses an unverifiable proposition, it expresses a proposition and therefore has literal meaning. The difficulty can be got round by a simple formulation: A sentence has literal meaning if and only if it expresses a proposition verifiable in sense-experience.

But this reformulation does not escape the obvious objection that it is seemingly tailored with an eye to what positivists wish to eliminate. By semantic fiat, i.e., arbitrarily, it eliminates metaphysical utterances. We might characterize it as a semantic petitio principi. For the principle of verifiability was patently intended to rule out metaphysics by its formulation. A metaphysician could defend himself by arguing against the criterion in the following way, *non-a priori* sentences which refer
to a transcendental reality are those which are open to super-sensible verification." Thus Kant has said in his Preface,

... when all progress in the field of the supersensible has thus been denied to speculative reason, it is still open to us to enquire whether data may not be found sufficient to enable us, in accordance with the wish of metaphysics to pass beyond the limits of all possible [sense] experience.

Again in the Phaedrus the platonic immortals come to the outside of heaven, and the revolution of the spheres carried them round, and they behold the things beyond. But of the heaven which is above the heavens, what earthly poet did or ever will sing worthily? It is such as Z will describe, ... There abides the very being with which the true knowledge is concerned/ the colourless, formless* intangible essence* visible only to the mind* the pilot of the soul. The divine intelligence being nurtured upon mind and pure knowledge* and the intelligence of every soul which is capable of receiving food proper to it* rejoices at beholding reality* and once more gazing upon truth* is replenished and made glad...
"Reality" here is plainly *supersensible*.

An important defect of the verification criterion which has not so far been noted is that it violates a principle about the way in which antithetical terms are linked to each other. *Wittgenstein* made use of this principle although he did not explicitly formulate it. He did however, in several instances, cite examples of its violation. He writes:

... in stating our puzzles about the general vagueness of *sense-experience*, and about the *flux* of all phenomena, we are using the words "*flux*" and "*vagueness*" wrongly, in a typically metaphysical way, namely, without an antithesis; whereas in their correct and everyday use vagueness is opposed to *clearness*, flux to stability, inaccuracy to *accuracy*... 

This shows the way to a general formulation of the principle of antithetical *terms*: if one of a pair of antithetical terms is deprived of its function in the *language*, the other* even though *artificially* retained in the language* has no descriptive function.

The following are examples of violations of this principle.

1. *Hobbes* view that all desires are *selfish*. Here
the term "selfish" would not have a use to distinguish between desires. Therefore "selfish desire" would contract into "desire". By being deprived of its antithesis, "unselfish", the word "selfish" loses its function to characterize desires. As a result, Hobbes' view reduces to the contentless tautology, "All desires are desires".

2. Berkeley's view that "it is impossible for there to be an unperceived thing". About the existence of "sensible objects in themselves, or without the mind", he says "to me it is evident those words mark out either a direct contradiction, or else nothing at all." They no more describe a sensible object than the phrase "round square" describes a geometrical figure. "Unperceived thing" has no descriptive function in the language. But by eliminating "unperceived" from use, "perceived", even though retained in the language, loses its ordinary use. As in the example from Hobbes, depriving a term of its antithesis reduces the view to a tautology. "Everything is a perceived thing" becomes "Everything is a thing".

3. Mill's view that all propositions are empirical, 2+2=4, alike with all cows are herbivorous. According to Mill, the difference between them lies merely in their degree of certainty. But again, if all propositions
are empirical, then "empirical" does not serve to distinguish between propositions and loses its use.

It may turn out, however surprising, that the verifiability criterion also violates the principle of antithetical terms. The criterion is formulated in such a way to eliminate the theoretical possibility of verification in non-sensory experience (i.e., experience which transcends the bounds of sense). This comes down to saying that the phrase "domain beyond the bounds of sense" has no use to refer to a domain. The term "domain of sensible objects" therefore has no antithesis and itself can have no actual use in the language. The suppression of "domain of supersensible experience" carries with it the suppression of "verifiable in supersensible experience". The antithesis of the latter, "verifiable in sense-experience", would remain in the language only artificially where it delusively appears to have its use. Only by re-instating "verifiable in super-sensible experience" does the term "verifiable in sense-experience" regain its use. Wittgenstein said "What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use." This is the way of restoring their lost function. Wittgenstein compared the semantic separation of antithetical terms
with removing the tiller from the rudder, thereby making the rudder useless. If all literally significant non-a priori statements are verifiable in sense-experience, such that the phrase "verifiable in non-sensory experience" is ruled out from having a use, then "verifiable in sense-experience would not distinguish between verifiable propositions. The criterion then would say nothing more than "All verifiable propositions are verifiable propositions". We are perhaps Justifiea in thinking that the verification criterion has been semantically tailored with an eye to what it eliminates. Violating the principle of antithetical terms prevents it from doing the task the positivist wishes to assign to it.

With this failure to eliminate from philosophy what Hume characterised as its "most contentious" part, we are left with the same disputes which have survived unresolved for centuries. Ayer has taken the position that these disputes are unwarranted. He writes:

"... the questions with which philosophy is concerned are purely logical questions; and although people do in fact dispute about logical questions, such disputes are always unwarranted. For they involve either the denial of a proposition"
which is necessarily true, or the assertion of a proposition which is necessarily false. In all such cases we may be sure that one party to the dispute has been guilty of a miscalculation which a sufficiently close scrutiny of the reasoning will enable us to detect. So that if the dispute is not immediately resolved, if is because the logical error of which one party is guilty is too subtle to be easily detected, and not because the question at issue is irresoluble on the available evidence.

Even if we allow that the verification principle eliminates certain philosophical propositions* it fails to explain the interminability of debates that cluster around every philosophical theory. E.g., that motion is impossible. The latter makes a claim that is not eliminated by the verification criterion. Dispute about it continues although it is practically as old as philosophy itself. Therefore it would seem that the positivists have added a dispute to the collection of philosophical disputes — the dispute over the verification principle itself.