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Alan W. Richardson, "Logical Empiricism as Scientific Philosophy"

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Alan W. Richardson. *Logical Empiricism as Scientific Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press 2023. 80 pp. $64.99 USD (Hardcover 9781009471510); $22.00 USD (Paperback 9781009471473).

Ever since analytic philosophy became a focal point for historians, logical empiricism in general, and the Vienna Circle in particular have had a prominent place in scholarly works. This influential movement originated in Vienna (and Berlin) during the 1920s. It reached its first peak and international prominence during the 1930s in Europe, and then became a professionalized philosophical movement in the Anglophone world during the 1950s and early 1960s. It was then replaced by so-called post positivist philosophies of science. Going back to the 1970s, so much has been written about logical empiricism that it is hard to keep track. Nonetheless, there were typically two different types of accounts. One focused on rational reconstructions of the different arguments and theories of the logical empiricists. Most notably of Rudolf Carnap, Moritz Schlick, Hand Reichenbach, and occasionally of Carl Gustav Hempel. These studies aimed to show how main positions were developed in the history of analytic philosophy, usually against the background of other main characters like Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, or Ludwig Wittgenstein.

The other strand of historiography produced more nuanced pictures of the origins, development, and fate of logical empiricism. This approach focused on the movement's direct historical predecessors, and on its cultural, social and historical context, while trying to understand members from within. That is, this type of historiography puts more emphasis on how logical empiricists conceived their own movement, goals, and values. Nonetheless, these works were often conceived and phrased against the background of the first type of historiographies; namely how the refined logical empiricists could be placed within the history of *analytic philosophy* or within a history of empiricism.

In his recent book, Alan W. Richardson aims to overcome these historiographies by pointing out what is congenial in their approaches and produce a novel account of *logical empiricism as scientific philosophy*. *Elements* is a book of corrections: Richardson shows that most accounts of logical empiricism that tried to place the movement within analytic philosophy or within the history of empiricism as such are wrong because none of these are among the actors' categories. That is, while empiricism was obviously important—just check the Circle's famous 1929 manifesto—either it was just one among other movements like phenomenology, positivism, neo-Kantianism, or it was even superseded during the 1910s and 1920s. After all, most logical

empiricists were trying to develop certain neo-Kantian views and positions, and occasionally they intended to produce improvements on certain elements of Husserl's phenomenology. Their goal was not to follow the steps of Locke, Hume and Berkeley, but to understand the new sciences within the latest philosophical settings (most often neo-Kantianism). Because of these problems, Richardson urges us to look for an alternative reading and place for logical empiricism in the history of philosophy, and he thinks that this is the history of *scientific philosophy.* This philosophy had a certain prominence in Germany and in Austria during the second half of the 19th, and the first decades of the 20th century.

Proving his case with numerous references provided by members of the Vienna Circle, particularly Carnap, Schlick, and by Reichenbach in Berlin, Richardson makes a good case for his notion that logical empiricism was a special form of scientific philosophy. It was motivated by various concerns about philosophy to make it more scientific (that is, scientific philosophy was an actor's category). Their aim, yet again, was not to build up the best of possible empiricisms, but empiricism was put into service of a new scientific philosophy. There were individual differences, of course, especially regarding how one should make philosophy scientific, whether it should be about scientific concepts or arguments, or what its subject or goals are, but all people in the Circle (and in logical empiricism in general) agreed that philosophy shall be and can be made more scientific, meeting many of the standards on the sciences.

Some people (like Schlick, or his students) envisioned philosophy as a *scientific practice*, others (like Carnap and his followers) transformed philosophy into the *logic of science*, an analytical tool. While Neurath obviously wanted to overcome philosophy in any form, even his activities could be seen as making philosophy into an inquiry, modeled on scientific standards and values. (At one point, Richardson argues that many of the values and standards of logical empiricists' scientific philosophy met the ethos described by Robert Merton, namely communitarianism, universalism, disinterestedness, organized skepticism.) Although unity is a central concept of logical empiricism—especially in the 1940s and 1950s when the movement was often referenced as Unified Science Movement or Unity of Science Movement—disunity was also central to the collective enterprise. Individual differences, emotional scholarly debates, divergences about argumentative details, and various possible views of what acceptable evidence amounts to were all part of what was known as the Vienna Circle and later as logical empiricism. Since Richardson is not going after any unification of Carnap, Reichenbach, Schlick or Neurath, he does

not want to find a unified, final, and unique doctrinal commitment that could define logical empiricism and could show how it emerged within analytic philosophy, gained prominence, and was defeated after all. Rather, Richardson stressed the importance of unity as an attitude, an ethos, as a shared practical commitment. Putting things this way provides Richardson sufficient flexibility to bring most of the logical empiricists (with different backgrounds and opinionated differences) to a common platform under the aegis of scientific philosophy.

Logical empiricism was not alone, however, in its aspiration to shape a new scientific philosophy; what made it special, after all, is that members of the movement had certain 'informal sensibilities regarding the epistemic and social virtues of science and scientific philosophy' (37). Scientific philosophy had a social function. This type of social sensitivity is shown most clearly in the Vienna Circle's critique of metaphysics. Richardson argues that for the logical empiricists, metaphysics was not just a bundle of nonsense but a bundle of socio-politically and morally dangerous nonsense. Being educated and socialized in the early 20th century Germany and Austria, members of the movement saw clearly how different political and religious parties utilized the tenets of metaphysicians to oppress people and to introduce various detrimental measures in nationalistic fights. The modernist and socialist sensibilities of logical empiricism were clear and active during their public talks and lectures, pamphlets, and in their socially engaged scholarly work and educational performances (in adult education centers and within the walls of the university).

The short *Elements* does not have enough space, of course, to go into all the details and quite obviously Richardson have reserved materials for the future. Reichenbach's quite obviously fitting *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy* enters the picture only on the last pages, and its reception is not treated beyond a short comment from a review. We get a few hints about the American transformation of the movement, but there is still much to work on, especially regarding Philipp Frank, Herbert Feigl, or Carl Gustav Hempel. While the first always conceived philosophy of science as a bridge between science and philosophy (less of a scientific philosophy), the latter two showed less socially engaged thinking and practice than Carnap or Reichenbach. Nonetheless, Richardson's new approach of 'logical empiricism as scientific philosophy' now provides the framework to assess fruitfully all the leading figures of the movement, and their well-known, though possibly misinterpreted, debates and theses.

The book could be used by those established in the study of logical empiricism as an exercise in

alternative ways of historiography of philosophy (of science) and to develop new understandings of old topics; however, it can be used also by uninitiated graduates and postgraduates to learn about one of the most important movements of 20th century philosophy and its contemporary scholarly evaluation.

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