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Philosophie **3** der Neuzeit
From Descartes to Kant


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Buchbesprechungen

Book Reviews

Friedrich Stadler: *Studien zum Wiener Kreis.*
Ursprung, Entwicklung und Wirkung
des Logischen Empirismus

Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1997

Friedrich Stadler is one of the driving forces behind the current upsurge in interest in the lives and work of the various people that collectively are known as the Vienna Circle (VC hereafter). As a founding member and current director of the *Institute Vienna Circle* he has been a prolific writer on the history of the VC. This book brings together a number of his earlier published essays with new material. As such the book is one of the first attempts to assess and synthesize the newly gained insights on the VC. The great strength of the book is that it tries to come to terms with the VC as an active group and does not simply focus upon individual members. I wish to strongly praise the book for this reason. At the same time, however, it can not be denied that the book is slightly inconsistent in the way it presents its arguments and deals with the enormous amount of new material at hand. In tracing the roots of the VC, i.e. in trying to locate the intellectual sources of its focus on language, logic, empiricism, anti-idealism and scientism, we are told a standard kind of story of the history of idea variety in which the obviously well known names (Bolzano, Brentano, etc.) figure strongly. But when Mach is introduced into the narrative the historiographical line of argumentation is all of a sudden altered: Mach's autobiography becomes an important source of information. This surprising break is not only unsettling but it is also unclear why it is needed. Besides: why should Mach's own remarks be taken at face value? It is well known that autobiographical reminiscences tend to be self-serving, separate the writer from his social environment, and make it look as if it is the genius on his own who is responsible for his success. At various places Stadler is acutely aware of this problem and considerably qualifies what is quoted from biographical sources. But not so when dealing with Mach.

Nevertheless, I am inclined to view this unbalancedness in a positive light. To a certain extent it reflects the uneven nature of both the quality and quantity of the sources available on the various members and subgroups of the VC, but not only this. The VC was much less a coherent unity than is normally acknowledged by either its advocates or its adversaries. This lack of unity puts a great strain on the kind of story that can be told. The way Stadler has solved this problem can, I believe, only be admired: by carefully presenting a nuanced picture of the various sides of what is after all a very complexly shaped gem. This post-modernist strategy has a lot going for it, if one considers that the modernist movement of the *Unity of Science* had, as one commentator recently

pointed out, strong post-modernist tendencies. It was after all very much a pluralist endeavor.

The level of detail that Stadler is able or willing to give in treating the different aspects of the VC therefore varies greatly: from old-fashioned history of ideas, to detailed contextualized analyses of the way people were appointed to professorial chairs, to almost anecdotal information of how Karl Menger viewed his brilliant student Kurt Gödel. One of the more fascinating aspects of the book is that for the first time one is given an inside view of the deliberations that went on in the group of people that got together on Thursday evenings at the Physics Institute at the Boltzmannngasse, i.e. the Schlick-circle. Stadler publishes in extenso the minutes that were made by Rosa Rand of the debate on protocol sentences in 1930/31. The minutes are so detailed that one almost feels one is present at the meetings.

The story Stadler tells is one that initially is focused on Austria but by necessity becomes broader and broader, if only because after 1933 the dispersion of the VC slowly but irreversibly sets in and more and more members become affiliated to foreign universities. But that is only part of what is going on. After the publication of the VC manifesto in 1929 a serious attempt is made by Neurath and others to start an international movement. This results in the 1929 conference in Prague and finds its end in the Sixth International Congress for the Unity of Science held in 1941 in Chicago. Here Stadler not only reconstructs what one hoped to achieve by “going international”, but also very usefully provides detailed information about who presented what paper in which section at what time and location. This brings me to another strength of the book. Stadler not only tells an entertaining narrative in which in the many different facets of the VC come to the fore, he also provides lots of useful factual information like the calendars of all the international conferences, what was published in the “club house journal” *Erkenntnis*, as well as biographical and bibliographical information on all the members of the Circle and those closely associated to it. I have used this part of the book quite extensively for my own research and I am convinced that I am not alone in appreciating that this kind of documentation is finally brought together. In relation to this aspect of the book I do, however, want to make a suggestion. Without in any way criticizing the fact that this kind of documentation is made available in a traditional way, I feel that it would make sense in this day and age of internet, to publish it in an online version as well, especially because updating information and correcting mistakes can be done more efficiently.

One issue in Stadler’s interpretation needs correction. It is the difficult problem of why the VC, with its stress on a scientific philosophy, came into being in the first place. Alan Richardson has recently argued that the movement towards a scientific philosophy was much broader than what went on in Vienna. One can think of Bertrand Russell’s early work in which he rebelled against the then prevailing idealism in English philosophy but also of Husserl’s 1911 essay *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*. I do not feel that Stadler is appreciative enough of the wider reform movement that was going on, but I do not want to make this my main point. The question is why this

apparently widely felt need to reform philosophy and bring it more in tune with what was going on in the sciences happened at all. Stadler's answer to this important question is garbled. He is right in linking it to the so-called second scientific revolution, but goes astray by misconstruing this revolution. For Stadler this revolution is about the radical changes that took place in physics at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, with the introduction of the theories of thermodynamics and radioactivity, quantum theory and the two theories of relativity. But this confuses the rise of new and challenging theories with the rise of the social status of science and technology within society at large. Of course these new and radical theories had a profound effect on the emergence of a scientific philosophy. One reason was that they suggested that drastic amendments were needed in the traditional mechanistic world-view. But the rise of scientific philosophy is not primarily related to these new and challenging theories. It needs to be seen in relation and reaction to the changing status and social function the sciences acquired during the 19th century. Here is how the historian of science Roger Hahn describes what is at stake in the second scientific revolution: "this revolution was marked by the eclipse of the generalized learned society and the rise of more specialized institutions, and by the concurrent establishment of professional standards for the individual scientific disciplines. It was the crucial social transformation that ushered science into its more mature state. . . . Everywhere in Europe, the age of professionalized science cultivated in institutions of higher learning and perfected in specialized laboratories was replacing the age of academies that had dominated the scene since the middle of the seventeenth century". In summary the second scientific revolution is about the transition from science done by amateurs and gentlemen to science done by professionals, i.e. it is about professionalization. The call to arms for a scientific philosophy at the beginning of this century has to be seen as a "catching up" event, as an attempt to bring philosophy in line with the more dominant and independent position the sciences had been able to acquire. Doing philosophy while being almost ignorant of what happened in the sciences was deemed by those who called for a scientific philosophy to be pathetic. For example the emergence of non-Euclidian geometry in the hands of Lobatchevsky, Bolyai and Riemann simply meant that Kant was wrong when he concluded that the notion of space is a given a priori and is necessarily Euclidian. All the other sciences Stadler mentions of course only reinforce this general point. Hence my suggestion to view the rise of the scientific philosophy at the beginning of this century as a reaction to the changing social status and growing influence of the sciences. The sciences had freed themselves from the yoke of philosophy and were free to go their own way. The sciences were all too happy to do so. Some perceived that philosophy would be left in the dark if it would not reform itself. Here lies the origin of the drive towards scientific philosophy in general and of the VC in particular.

Before I sum up I have one final point to make. When I first learned about the VC it was presented as a coherent and important philosophical school, based at Vienna university. When my own research lead me to delving deeper into the

origins of the VC, it came as quite a shock not only to learn that the group was anything but united but also that it was a marginal group at the University of Vienna. Stadler's treatment of both of these aspects is exemplary and is among the best available. There is, however, one aspect that I feel is missing from his treatment. Unity is as much a construction of self-identity as it is of ascribed identity. As Stadler makes very clear in his book – he does so a number of times, so the point cannot be missed – the members of the Vienna Circle hardly share any substantive views on anything. Their motto might well have been, as he puts it at another place, “philosophy without science is empty and science without philosophy is blind”. It is clear that this attitude in no way determines the details of one's epistemology, methodology or ontology. This point having been made, the question of how the movement was perceived from the outside becomes important as well. How did outsiders deal with the group of radical reformers and in what way did their reactions contribute to the Circle's own sense of identity and coherence? I feel these questions are important in coming to terms with the VC as a sociological phenomenon and are not taken seriously enough in most of the current research on the VC. These questions need to be answered for another reason as well. We need to understand how it was ever possible to construe the members of the VC as political reactionaries when the fact of the matter is that quite a number of them were active on the left side of the political spectrum. When I studied philosophy in the seventies this was the dominant picture. It was wrong, as I now know, but somehow it was possible for it to come into existence. One scholar of the VC recently justified the renewed interest in the VC by pointing out that it was useful because it corrected the many false characterizations that were around, especially among science students. I feel this point should be broadened. The aim should be to come to terms with why and how these many misleading views could be put forward at all. I strongly suspect that some important lessons could be learned from this, lessons that might be very useful towards writing a more sociologically sensitive history of philosophy.

Let me draw to a close. The VC was the most influential of the reform movements in philosophy during this century. The movement had a lasting formative power on our current day understanding of what we take to be philosophy, both in terms of subject matter and in terms of style of argumentation. Understanding how the VC came into being and was able to transform the philosophical agenda helps to understand our current philosophical situation. Stadler has written an important and useful history of the VC. Although it is a rather large book, (it is over a 1000 pages long,) it offers a good reading; it is lucid and clear and provides a nuanced and well balanced picture of the various and numerous aspects of this intriguing Circle.

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