

Otto Karl Wilhelm Neurath was a philosopher of science, sociologist, and political economist. He was born on December 10, 1882, in Vienna, Austria-Hungary (now Austria) and died on December 22, 1945, in Oxford, England. Neurath was one of the leading figures of the Vienna Circle, a group of philosophers who sought to prevent confusion rooted in unclear language and unverifiable claims by converting philosophy into “scientific philosophy,” which ought to share the bases and structures of empirical sciences’ best examples.

Neurath lived through turbulent times in the history of Europe and tried to make sense of them in some of his writings. He was a socialist and radical, the Bavarian socialist government lasting from November 1918 to May 1919 appointed him head of the Central Planning Office. This political activity led to him being expelled from his post of teaching economic theory at Heidelberg University in Germany. He was active in socialist politics in Vienna from 1921 to 1934 but after the Nazis came to power in Germany and Austria allied itself with them in 1934, he had to escape to Netherland to preserve his life and later to England where he stayed until his death.

But Neurath is not best known for his political participation but for his contribution to philosophy in the first four decades of the twentieth century. He is one of the founder members of the Vienna Circle, probably the most famous and influential group of philosophers in the first part of the twentieth century. Those considered to be members were among others, Moritz Schlick, Rudolf Carnap, Philip Frank, Hans Hahn, Herbert Feigl, Fritz Waismann, Kurt Gödel, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. I think Alfred Ayer should be linked to this group because of the influence in England of his first book, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, originally published in 1936, formulating and arguing for the ideas of the Vienna Circle. Anyone acquainted with the history of philosophy knows that these men, they were all men, turned out to be some of the most prominent philosophers in the world in the twentieth century.

The members of the Vienna Circle formulated a theory of language that became very influential. It was called logical positivism, also known as logical empiricism, that emerged in the late 1920s. The central thesis of logical positivism is the verification principle (also known as the verifiability criterion of meaning), which asserts that only statements verifiable through direct observation or logical proof are meaningful in terms of conveying

truth value, information, or factual content. The Vienna Circle sought to prevent confusion rooted in unclear language and unverifiable claims by converting philosophy into “scientific philosophy,” which ought to share the bases and structures of empirical sciences’ best examples, such as Albert Einstein’s general theory of relativity.

Logical positivists believed that scientific knowledge is the only kind of factual knowledge, and all traditional metaphysical doctrines are to be rejected as meaningless. They took all sciences’ basic content to be only sensory experience, and only the verifiable was scientific and thus meaningful (or cognitively meaningful), whereas the unverifiable, being unscientific, were meaningless “pseudostatements” (just emotively meaningful). Unscientific discourse, as in ethics and metaphysics, would be unfit for discourse by philosophers.

It must be admitted that this description of the central tenets of the Vienna Circle does not apply to all the members, and they had different opinions about various parts of this description. Wittgenstein, for example, never accepted this as a description of his views and famously rejected Russell’s description of his views in the latter’s introduction to *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein’s first book, and in his later work he flatly rejected the scientism involved in believing that a factual, scientific language was somehow more fundamental to other uses of language.

I believe it is true to say that nowadays very few, if any, philosophers believe these theories of language formulated by various members of the Vienna Circle. I shall name three reasons for this. First, the verification principle cannot be established by the same scientific procedures as the truth of scientific statements. Observation is not the method to confirm that principle, it needs firmer grounds. Two, the logical structures of statements about the good are the same as about observable events or characteristics of persons and things. Why should the good not have the same logical status as other properties? Why should the good not be treated as objective as other properties? We can observe how some things are good for human beings, like eating healthy food, and other things bad, like not exercising regularly. Three, research on language has progressed enormously in the twentieth century both in philosophy, linguistics, and related fields. This does not mean that we fully understand language, the differences between languages, the relation between language and mind but we know enough to reject the analysis of language by the logical positivists. Fourth, we better realise how human experience is unreliable as a direct link to reality.

Experience is interpreted and determined by our concepts and hence by language and we must be wary of how reality appears to us.

Even though philosophy has developed in ways not congenial to many of Neurath's ideas this does not apply to all his ideas. One of his most important ideas was the unity of the sciences which he discusses in some of his works in this volume. A significant development in science in the last twenty or thirty years is the movement away from strict disciplinarity and formulating interdisciplinary projects to investigate scientific questions. This is based on the realisation that the social world and the physical world are extremely complex and if we want to find good answers to important questions about reality scientist must be prepared to work together to find those answers. To name one example, lawyers are specialists in law and its interpretation, but law is also a part of a complex social world and cannot ultimately be understood if not as a part of this social world. This means that sociologists, philosophers, criminologists, and others must contribute to the full understanding of law as a social phenomenon. Interdisciplinarity does not necessarily mean the unity of the sciences but that the various disciplines are fluid and they can influence and understand each other.

Neurath's works in this volume of his writings start in 1909 and last until 1931. They cover various subjects of interest for him, economics, logic, philosophy of science, socialism, Marxism, the labour movement, and physicalism. He writes also about Carnap, Russell and Sombart and there is a long discussion of Spengler's ideas which I found interesting even though Spengler's ideas are notoriously a mess.

In summary, Otto Neurath was a philosopher of science, sociologist, and political economist who made significant contributions to the philosophy of science and the Vienna Circle. His ideas were criticized by leading philosophers, but his work remains influential in the philosophy of science.

Note

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