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Wittgenstein versus Carnap on physicalism: a reassessment.

Stern, David (2006) *Wittgenstein versus Carnap on physicalism: a reassessment.* In: [2006] GAP.6 Workshop on Rudolf Carnap (Berlin, September 2006).

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Abstract

The "standard account" of Wittgenstein's relations with the Vienna Circle is that the early Wittgenstein was a principal source and inspiration for the Circle's positivistic and scientific philosophy, while the later Wittgenstein was deeply opposed to the logical empiricist project of articulating a "scientific conception of the world." However, this telegraphic summary is at best only half-true and at worst deeply misleading. For it prevents us appreciating the fluidity and protean character of their philosophical dialogue. In retrospectively attributing clear-cut positions to Wittgenstein and his interlocutors, it is very easy to read back our current understanding of familiar distinctions into a time when those terms were used in a much more open-ended way. The paper aims to to provide a broader perspective on this debate, starting from the protagonists' understanding of their respective positions. Too often, the programmatic statements about the nature of their work that are repeated in manifestoes, introductions, and elementary textbooks have occupied center stage in the subsequent secondary literature. Consequently, I focus on a detailed examination of a turning point in their relationship. That turning point is Wittgenstein's charge, in the summer of 1932, that a recently published paper of Carnap's, "Physicalistic Language as the Universal Language of Science", made such extensive and unacknowledged use of Wittgenstein's own ideas that Wittgenstein would, as he put it in a letter to Schlick, "soon be in a situation where my own work shall be considered merely as a reheated version or plagiarism of Carnap's." While the leading parties in this dispute shared a basic commitment to the primacy of physicalistic language, and the view that all significant languages are translatable, there was a remarkable lack of mutual understanding between them, and deep disagreement about the nature of the doctrines they disputed. Three quarters of a century later, we are so much more conscious of the differences that separated them than the points on which they agreed that it takes an effort of historical reconstruction to appreciate why Wittgenstein once feared that his own work would be regarded as a pale shadow of Carnap's.

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