

Axiomatization of Otto Neurath's Encyclopedism

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Neurath's Protocols Revisited

Abstract

In 1932, as part of his contributions to the ongoing debate in the Vienna Circle about the related issues of the logical form, the semantic content and the epistemic status of scientific evidence statements (protocols), Otto Neurath put forward a complex proposal whose formalism has long remained misunderstood. In my book *Overcoming Logical Positivism From Within* (1992) and elsewhere I have provided an interpretation that represents the proposal as outlining a set of interlocking empirical conditions on the acceptance of observation statements (with some further thoughts on their bearing on whole scientific theories). In the present paper I shall review the interpretation of Neurath's proposal given and respond to various criticisms.

These (sometimes mutually inconsistent) criticisms can be summarized to the effect that my interpretation

- (1) is unduly rigid in certain subclauses;
- (2) uses a four-part division of his proposal that misrepresents Neurath's basic intention;
- (3) is still either too foundationalist in spirit;
- (4) threatens circularity; and
- (5) overlooks the complications introduced by Neurath's contemporaneous concept of *Ballungen*.

In response I shall concede that some of my earlier formulations can be improved but defend the interpretation given in all essentials. Most importantly, I shall defend—with reference to previously not yet considered archive materials—the four-part analysis previously offered as properly reflecting Neurath's intention to codify aspects of what could be called the “pragmatics of science”, the acceptance of singular observation statements and their bearing on theoretical generalizations. In second place, it has to be stressed again that Neurath's proposal

provides for acceptance conditions, not truth conditions: what may look like a vicious circularity is but the reflection of an understanding of epistemological justification as deeply holistic in nature; moreover, any judgment as to the satisfaction of any one or all of the acceptance conditions is itself fallible. As for *Ballungen* I shall argue that on a moderate reading of their import their office is to reinforce, in a logico-linguistic garb, the Neurath principle of old: the bearing of protocols on the acceptance of theories is itself conditioned by plausibility considerations, since for a confirmation or disconfirmation to be effected a translation is required from the “physicalistically cleansed everyday language” to the “system language” containing the derived predictions.

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