

Review of J. Alberto Coffa, *The Semantic Tradition from Carnap to Kant: To the Vienna Station*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 1991. 445 pp.

Pompous reviewers are apt to say that the book in hand ‘requires and repays close study’. I wish I could deny this rather back-handed accolade to Coffa. The heart sinks when you are told that a book is hard going, even if you are assured that it will be worth it in the end. But honesty forbids. *The Semantic Tradition* is a great history but it is undeniably hard work. This is not because of its style. It is a posthumous work edited by the author’s widow from a ‘good penultimate draft’, and in the Preface she explains how she tried to preserve the twinkle in her late husband’s eye. She succeeds admirably. The book is beautifully lucid and sparkles with *bons mots*. But it is a demanding read all the same. It is just so *rich*. Although Coffa wore his learning lightly, he was astonishingly well-read. And it is difficult to digest even this digest of his immense erudition. The philosophers that Coffa covers in such fascinating detail are often hard to understand and his own criticisms are searching and profound. But though the book is undeniably hard work, it is just as undeniably well worth the effort. Indeed it is a brilliant performance. But it is not for the non-philosopher.

What Coffa has written is a history and prehistory of the Vienna Circle. The subtitle, ‘To the Vienna Station’, derived from Edmund Wilson’s study of Bolshevik dogma ‘To the Finland Station’, really only covers the prehistoric part. If Schlick is the Lenin of logical positivism we are well past his advent by the time we get to the end of the book. Indeed the Vienna Circle is on the edge of dissolution.

The story, in outline, is as follows. Kant’s account of the synthetic a priori relied on the notion of intuition. Positivists (of the pre-logical kind), repelled by intuition, tried to convert the truths of arithmetic and geometry into empirical generalizations. The ‘semanticists’ (typified by Bolzano and Frege) rejected both options. Coffa is a little vague on what it takes to be a semanticist, but the basic idea seems to be that there is a realm of meanings which is to be distinguished from the realm of fact and the realm of psychology. (Semanticism therefore is continually at risk of degenerating into meaning-

Platonism, though there may be room for the objectivity of content without objective contents.) Meanings, moreover are emphasized: propositions, concepts and senses are the objects of enquiry and semantics rather than metaphysics is the first philosophy. (Popper therefore is only half-way to being a semanticist.) The semanticists were not (or not all of them) fanatical anti-Kantians. The program was to reduce philosophy's reliance on intuition rather than to eliminate it altogether. Thus the (original) aim of logicism in the hands of both Russell and Frege was to drive intuition out of arithmetic by demonstrating that it was an analytic discipline. (Though in the early stages, 'mathematics was a reality and logic a project'.) But Frege was still a geometric Kantian. It was Helmholtz and later Hilbert who tried to drive intuition out of geometry. By the end of the 19th century the Kantian conception of the a priori was in crisis. Relativity administered the *coup de grace*. But according to Coffa 'no defensible doctrine of the a priori' emerged from the semantic tradition. We had to wait till the 1930s for 'the first genuine alternative to Kant's conception'. 'Their view that meaning is responsible for the a priori was that period's decisive contribution to philosophy' (p.3). The people responsible were Carnap and Wittgenstein.

The work of Frege, Russell and the early Wittgenstein can just about be shoe-horned into this grand narrative structure. But when Coffa deals with the positivists proper, the story becomes tangled and episodic, rather like a philosophical soap opera, complete with soap opera tantrums on the part of the leading actors. It is thus rather difficult to summarize. The logical positivists started out as a bunch of neo-Kantians who took science seriously. But some, by taking science *very* seriously, were led to a new kind of 'transcendental approach to epistemology'. Their question was not so much 'What makes knowledge possible?' as 'What makes current science possible?' Carnap, by contrast, was inspired by Russell, who was an enthusiast for the scientific attitude rather than the results of current science. Carnap's early work, particularly the *Aufbau* was an attempt to carry through Russell's program as suggested in *Our Knowledge of the External World* in which logical constructions were to be substituted for inferred entities. This led to scientific idealism which in one form or another was the besetting sin of the Vienna Circle (just as it was the besetting sin of Russell, who in later life, at any rate, would have preferred to have

been a scientific realist). Coffa is at pains to distinguish between the naive phenomenalist idealism suggested by Carnap's overt remarks and a more subtle semantic idealism (so subtle as to almost elude definition) that he allegedly held. This position resembles a view that Dummett foisted on Frege. The idea is roughly that the question of whether this or that exists is trivially answered by science. But what an existence claim *amounts to* has to be understood in context. In particular it has to be understood in terms of the criteria for determining its truth. Thus Carnap seems to have meant something rather less by the average existence-claim than a scientific realist would mean - though given his annoying habit of mimicking the scientific realist's pronouncements it is rather difficult to say what it was that he was not saying. This 'holistic' doctrine is connected to another at least as elusive - the principle of tolerance. Crudely put, Carnap thought that people could say what they liked so long as they did not mean anything that Carnap would not have meant. If some of this sounds rather Wittgensteinian, then it illustrates another theme of Coffa's history. Carnap the leading "philistine positivist" and Wittgenstein the leading "subtle positivist" (both terms borrowed from Pears) were often not that far apart. ('Wittgenstein expressed his recognition of this point by accusing Carnap of stealing his ideas.') The middle Wittgenstein is often treated as a sort of staging post between the early and the later Wittgensteins. This much neglected time-slice finds its champion in Coffa, who presents the middle Wittgenstein as a philosopher in his own right, a powerful if eccentric, contributor to positivist debates.

In the Introduction Coffa says that what ultimately betrayed the positivists was their failure to come to terms with meaning. This seems a rather odd thing to say given their obsession with verificationism, which is, after all, a theory of meaning (or perhaps of *meaninglessness*). The problem was that they claimed to *know* about meanings which suggests that the realm of meaning is a realm of fact. But they could make no sense of the factuality of this new realm even though it was their own particular stamping ground. Hence meaning claims were dismissed as conventions or proposals. This led to a certain contrast between theory and practice. 'One finds [Reichenbach] arguing about the precise meaning of this or that claim with far greater ego-involvement than the mere proposal of a convention could possibly inspire.' In the last stages of the Vienna Circle, conventionalism

ran riot. They were worried about *protokollsätze*, the basic statements which verify or falsify theories. So suspicious were they of semantic notions like 'truth' that they did not like to say that these protocols could be verified by experience or reality. Thus the decision as to which protocols to accept was a matter of convention. As Russell pointed out, this was to abandon empiricism. The smarter members of the Circle were rescued from this absurdity by Tarski who provided them with a concept of truth they could use with a clear conscience.

There is more - much more - to this book. But it is time for some critical comments.

1. Was there really a 'semantic tradition' in philosophy? On Coffa's own showing it seems to boil down to three or four people who differed widely and were often ignorant of one another's work. A tradition surely demands rather more cohesion and self-consciousness.
2. Coffa offers an 'internal' rather than an 'external' history of positivism paying scant attention to the ideological motivations of his leading actors. Yet their passion for convicting their opponents of meaninglessness, often on the basis of rather flimsy theories of meaning, cries out for such an explanation.
3. Coffa celebrates Carnap's theory of the a priori but does not discuss Quine's 'Carnap on Logical Truth'. I have always considered this a devastating critique.
4. The book ends rather abruptly without the chapter Coffa intended to write linking the past to the present. But this is a compliment rather than a criticism. After 400 pages I still wanted there to be more.

I note with interest that name of A.J. Ayer does not appear in the index.