


Article

G. H. von Wright on Logical Empiricism

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Abstract: Georg Henrik von Wright (1916–2003) started his studies in theoretical philosophy at the University of Helsinki in 1934. His teacher, Professor Eino Kaila (1890–1958), was an associate of the Vienna Circle who had changed the course of Finnish philosophy with his own version of logical empiricism. Under Kaila’s supervision, von Wright wrote his early studies on probability and defended his doctoral thesis *The Logical Problem of Induction* in 1941. Von Wright met Ludwig Wittgenstein in Cambridge in 1939 and 1947 and eventually became his successor there in 1948–1951. Later, von Wright characterized these two philosophers as his “father figures”: “Kaila had turned me into a logical positivist or empiricist. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, thoroughly eradicated *this* personality of mine.” This article studies von Wright’s changing relation to logical empiricism. The main sources include his correspondence with Kaila in 1937–1958 and his books *Den logiska empirismen* (in Swedish in 1943; in Finnish in 1945) and *Logik, filosofi och språk* (in Swedish in 1957, in Finnish in 1958). In his “Intellectual Autobiography” (1989), von Wright described the former book as “a farewell to the philosophy of my student years”. Wittgenstein’s influence can be seen in von Wright’s denial of the unity of science and his cool cultural pessimism as expressed in his critical essays. But it is also evident that logic and exact thinking continued to be central tools and ingredients of his subsequent and highly appreciated work as an analytic philosopher.

Keywords: analytic philosophy; induction; Kaila; logic; logical behaviorism; logical empiricism; logical positivism; philosophical method; syntax; semantics; translatability; Vienna Circle; Wittgenstein; von Wright



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1. G. H. von Wright between Kaila and Wittgenstein

In an essay titled “What Philosophy Is for Me” (2003), the renowned Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright tells that he had two “father figures” in philosophy: Eino Kaila and Ludwig Wittgenstein.¹

“Kaila had turned me into a logical positivist or empiricist. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, thoroughly eradicated *this* philosophical personality of mine. But he did not eradicate what I had absorbed from Kaila: a strong interest in logic and the application of logic in the analytical treatment of philosophical problems still remained. Another thing that remained was the profound respect for the achievements of the exact sciences (especially physics) that Kaila had imparted to me. These interests, which I inherited from Kaila, may have been the ones that have had the most visible and powerful effects on my later development and my scientific-philosophical activity. My philosophical ‘style’ is probably characterized as logico-analytic, and as such it doesn’t much resemble Wittgenstein’s.”

Von Wright adds that he has learnt from Wittgenstein “more than from any other philosophical writer”, but he got from Wittgenstein “the compulsion to be independent” and “has not been able to do philosophy in Wittgenstein’s style”.

In his “Intellectual Autobiography” (1989), von Wright says that he learnt his method as a philosophical logician from Kaila, but for the content of his philosophical thought,

he had learnt the most from Wittgenstein. Especially, the latter made him realize that one cannot hope for “final solutions” in philosophy.²

When Georg Henrik von Wright (1916–2003) enrolled at the University of Helsinki in the fall of 1934, his professor of theoretical philosophy was Eino Kaila (1890–1958).³ Already in 1920, Kaila had defended the realist interpretation of scientific theories which postulate theoretical entities (like atoms) against Mach’s phenomenalism. After 1923, he sought contact with the representatives of the new exact philosophy, first Hans Reichenbach and then Moritz Schlick and Rudolf Carnap. Even though Kaila was not a formal logician, he was impressed by the use of novel logical methods as a tool of philosophy.⁴ In his 1926 monograph on probability logic, *Wahrscheinlichkeitslogik*, Kaila called his position “logical empiricism”, in contrast to older psychological empiricism.⁵ He visited the Vienna Circle in 1929 and published in 1930 the first philosophical critique of the phenomenalist constitution system of Carnap’s “logistic neopositivism” in *Aufbau*.⁶ With Åke Petzäll in Sweden, Jørgen Jørgensen in Denmark, and Arne Naess in Norway, Kaila was the leading representative of the new philosophical movement in Scandinavia (see [10]). He spent the spring terms of 1932 and 1934 in Vienna, developing and defending his own version of logical empiricism.

Kaila’s appointment in Helsinki in 1930 was a turning point of Finnish philosophy. He quickly introduced logical empiricism into the curriculum, was praised as a legendary lecturer, and educated the new generation of professors of philosophy (G. H. von Wright, Oiva Ketonen, and Erik Stenius) and psychology.⁷ In 1948, Kaila was elected as one of the first ten members of the new Academy of Finland, a prestigious position which he held until his death in 1958 at the age of 68. But Kaila did not publish in English and never visited England in his lifetime, and in the postwar years, he was rather isolated from the new anglophone analytic philosophy.

G. H. von Wright followed Kaila’s lectures on logic and psychology. Already in 1936, he wrote his pro gradu thesis on the demarcation problem, as defined by Karl Popper in 1935, with special emphasis on the difficulties in the verification and falsification of probability statements. For the final examination of his master’s degree in 1937, he read Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922). After publishing his first scholarly articles on probability,⁸ von Wright agreed with Kaila that the topic of his doctoral thesis would be the justification of induction. As the dream of postgraduate work in Vienna was destroyed by the *Anschluss*, von Wright decided to continue his studies in Cambridge, where his favorite themes were developed by C. D. Broad and R. B. Braithwaite. But when von Wright arrived in Cambridge in March of 1939, he learnt to his surprise that the great Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) was living and teaching there. The young Finn obtained permission to follow Wittgenstein’s lectures on the foundations of mathematics and became a friend of the impressive Austrian–British philosopher. Returning home in July before World War II and the Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union broke out, von Wright finished his doctoral thesis, *The Logical Problem of Induction*, in Helsinki in 1941. He was appointed as the first Swedish-language professor of philosophy in Helsinki in 1946. Visiting Cambridge again in 1947, von Wright’s friendship with Wittgenstein deepened, and eventually, he was appointed as Wittgenstein’s successor as professor of philosophy in 1948. After Wittgenstein’s death in 1951, von Wright decided to return to Finland, where he established a glorious career as a member of the Academy of Finland from 1961 until his death in 2003 at the age of 86. He was well known as a sharp logician and analytic philosopher, but also as a bridge-builder between philosophical schools. As an executor of Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass* with Elizabeth Anscombe and Rush Rhees, he devoted half a century to the delicate task of editing the remaining manuscripts.⁹ In Finland, he was recognized as the leading public intellectual due to his time-critical essays.

These biographical facts show how the life and career of G. H. von Wright developed in interaction with his two “father figures”. But his statement that Ludwig Wittgenstein “thoroughly eradicated” the philosophical personality and creed that he had learnt from Eino Kaila may give the misleading impression that von Wright’s philosophy could be

neatly divided into two disjoint temporal periods, an early stage with Kaila and a later one with Wittgenstein. As we shall see, von Wright's entire philosophical endeavor from 1934 to 2003 demonstrates his friendship with, respect for, and loyalty toward his two teachers. Their influence was present in all stages of von Wright's philosophical work. But these amazingly successful 70 years also reflect the great transitions in 20th-century philosophy, especially the rise of logical empiricism and its gradual dilution to a current of analytic philosophy.

2. The Logical Problem of Induction

G. H. von Wright learnt logic from Kaila's lectures and Carnap's *Abriss der Logistik*, and later also from Carnap's 1934 book *Logische Syntax*. From Kaila's teaching and Schlick's 1930 article "Die Wende der Philosophie", he embraced "the Vienna Circle's triumphalist belief that philosophy had achieved 'den sicheren Gang einer Wissenschaft'" ([1], p. 81). This was also his early impression of Wittgenstein: in his pro gradu thesis, he stated that the theory of knowledge as "applied logistics" had finally become a science thanks to the *Tractatus*.¹⁰ After the final oral exam, Kaila gave von Wright the credit that he had helped his professor understand the *Tractatus* better ([2], p. 6).

Kaila assisted von Wright's early career by translating his article on probability from Swedish to German for the journal *Theoria* in 1938. Von Wright returned the favor by translating Kaila's monograph *Inhimillinen tieto* [12] into Swedish in the same year, 1939, as it appeared in Finnish. Letters from von Wright at Cambridge to Kaila in 1939 discussed issues with the proofs of the translation. Von Wright also reported the progress of his doctoral dissertation on "the problem of Hume". In the "Autobiography", he acknowledges that he was continuing Kaila's work on induction and probability, adding only little to what he had inherited from his supervisor ([2], p. 21). But the correspondence also reveals that a tension arose from his contact with Wittgenstein, even though they never talked about probability with each other ([2], p. 22). Von Wright's first remarks about Wittgenstein are puzzled, as "he does not know any philosophical doctrines except his own",¹¹ and it is difficult to judge what the value and aim of his lectures are,¹² but later they had some "wonderful" discussions about proof theory.

In May 1939, von Wright presented a lecture in the Cambridge Moral Science Club with the title "The Justification of Induction". He concluded that "the problem of finding a justification of induction is no problem at all in the proper sense of the word":

"What matters is not that the justification of induction is lacking, but rather that there is nothing to justify at all. The inductive problem—as so many problems in philosophy—is like a mist, and to solve the problem is merely to make the mist disappear."¹³

Wittgenstein was present in the meeting, but the correspondence with Kaila does not give any indication that Wittgenstein would have had a role in the preparation of this lecture, whose original conclusion turned out to be the central thesis of von Wright's dissertation in 1941.

When Kaila remarked in a postcard that Georg Henrik seemed to have "more congenial sympathy" to Wittgenstein's style of thought,¹⁴ von Wright replied with a long letter about the "honest" choice between Wittgenstein and Carnap—Tarski:

"Of course it is us utterly important to be familiar with the modern logical calculus and the theory of foundations of mathematics. Training in logic must in fact play a central role in our curriculum for the next ten or fifteen years. But, to speak frankly, logic is not philosophy any more than Darwin's theory was fifty years ago (when no philosopher could bypass it as a material), and for this reason I suspect that the future will look upon Carnap's *Logische Syntax* with the same pity which we now look on Haeckel's monism. Philosophy has always become frozen when it has reached a stage where one tries to demonstrate something either deductively or with reference to facts. It lives only as long it is a fight

against those unclarity and false expectations that lie at the bottom of our systematization in science.”¹⁵

Kaila certainly understood that von Wright’s conclusion that “philosophy is not a doctrine but an activity, the clarification of thoughts” comes from the *Tractatus* and answered: “Your declaration of independence for me is solely a joy”.¹⁶

In September 1940, now in civil service in Finland, von Wright felt that his dissertation was “bad”, adding that he would be happy if Kaila did not think that he had been “strongly dependent on some other philosopher’s ideas and methods”.¹⁷ Kaila replied in a friendly manner that the dissertation was “good” and needed only minor revisions. As the official opponent in the public defense on 26 May 1941, Kaila praised the new important results as equally as valuable and independent as those of Keynes and Reichenbach.

Von Wright’s critical conclusion was that the impossibility of justifying induction is a grammatical or tautological feature of our definition of induction as non-deductive ampliative inference. This elimination of Hume’s problem is in harmony with the early Wittgensteinian view that philosophy aims to clarify our thinking. It is also in line with Schlick’s hope that eventually, there would be no fundamental problems left in philosophy ([2], p. 7). Indeed, in his “Autobiography”, von Wright states that the negative message of his dissertation, i.e., that the craving for justification of induction is a self-contradictory demand, was “inspired mainly by Wittgenstein” ([2], pp. 46–47). But von Wright’s positive message was the recommendation to turn to the “constructive task of inductive philosophy”, and here, one can see him continuing in Kaila’s footsteps.

As examples of the constructive task, or “the application of formal logic and mathematics to the analysis of inductive propositions”, he mentioned the treatment of eliminative induction in the Bacon–Mill tradition and the formal analysis of inductive probability. On the former topic, von Wright published his *A Treatise on Induction and Probability* in 1951, dedicated to Broad. Von Wright was, in fact, dissatisfied with his own formal treatment in 1941, also pedantically criticized by C. D. Broad, who otherwise praised the young Finn’s achievement in *Mind* in 1944. In 1945, von Wright made an important attempt to explicate the frequency theory of probability. In 1957, he published a revised and enlarged edition of his dissertation, dedicated to Eino Kaila. A possible influence of Wittgenstein’s philosophical style can be found in the new section on “the goodness of inductive policies”.¹⁸

To summarize my evaluation, the elimination of Hume’s problem does not fit well with the account that von Wright later gave about the first Cambridge visit: Wittgenstein completely “shook me up” so that “the basic problems of philosophy, which I had considered settled, revived”.¹⁹ The impact of Wittgenstein’s new orientation in the late 1930s has to be found elsewhere in von Wright’s philosophical work. Von Wright’s neat distinction between the critical and constructive tasks of inductive philosophy is thus a compromise which gives credit to both of his father figures, Wittgenstein and Kaila.

3. Logical Empiricism in 1943

Eino Kaila published the book *Inhimillinen tieto* (in Swedish, *Den mänskliga kunskapen*) in 1939 [12]. Carnap’s suggestion to translate it into English was delayed until 2014 [16]. It summarized the position of logical empiricism in four theses:

Denial of synthetic a priori: The metalogical statements ‘Sentence A is analytic’ and ‘Sentence A is a priori’ are equivalent.

Testability: Every statement concerning reality must possess real content, i.e., some definite consequences with respect to experience.

Translatability: Every theory concerning reality must be translatable into the language of experience.

Logical behaviorism: Sentences about a subject’s immediate experience are equivalent to certain sentences about the states in the subject’s body.

Kaila distinguished his view from “logical positivism” by rejecting the principle of *verification*, which demands that every factual sentence must in principle be capable of complete verification or falsification. His main reason was that unrestricted generalizations

or “invariances”, which had a crucial place in his version of the constitutional system, are not verifiable.²⁰ Carnap gave up the thesis of translatability in 1936 by arguing that dispositional concepts are not explicitly definable by observation statements, but Kaila still sought their definitions in second-order logic.²¹ The chapter on “formal truth” includes a discussion of Tarski’s semantic definition.

In 1943, G. H. von Wright published a book in Swedish, *Den logiska empirismen* [18] (in Finnish in 1945), which gives with its 188 pages an excellent overview of “a principal movement on modern philosophy”. In his “Autobiography” (1989), von Wright described this book as “a farewell to the philosophy of my student years” ([2], p. 11). It concentrates on philosophical issues without commenting on the political agenda of the Vienna Circle.

The first chapter introduces the predecessors of logical empiricism: Mach’s phenomenalism, Poincaré’s conventionalism, Peirce’s pragmatism, and Russell’s new logic. This brief historical account is acute but does not mention the potential background influence of neo-Kantianism (Wittgenstein, Carnap) and critical realism (Schlick, Kaila) (cf. [10]).

The second chapter is devoted to the new philosophy of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. The thesis about *meaningfulness* states that every meaningful sentence must be a truth function of elementary sentences about immediate experience. It implies the thesis of translatability and has been formulated by the neopositivists as the principle of verification. Logical truths are tautologies, but (in contrast to elementary object sentences) “language sentences” like ‘ $p \vee \sim p$ is a tautology’ are meaningless. Classic philosophical problems in metaphysics are pseudo-problems which arise from misunderstanding the logic of everyday or scientific language. Thus, as anticipated by Lichtenberg in the 18th century, philosophy is the activity of *Sprachkritik*.

The third chapter deals with the logistic neopositivism of the Vienna Circle: Schlick’s phenomenalism, Carnap’s constitution system, Kaila’s constitution of the physical world from phenomenal invariances, the unity of science based on the language of experience, Carnap’s critique of metaphysics, and A. J. Ayer’s emotivist value theory.

The fourth chapter moves on to physicalism, as advocated by Neurath’s account of protocol sentences. Carnap’s view (since 1931) that the choice between phenomenalism and physicalism is a matter of convention is accepted. Logical behaviorism is not vulnerable to the critique of psychological behaviorism, but it is a mistake to interpret the empirical connection between mental experiences and neural states as a constitutional definition. Probability statements are mentioned as examples of sentences which are not verifiable or falsifiable. Progress in the theory of truth has led to “a synthesis, prepared by pragmatism, of evidence, coherence, and correspondence theories”, but Tarski’s semantic definition is not mentioned at all.

The fifth chapter introduces Leibniz’s idea of logical language as calculus, Hilbert’s proof theory, propositional calculus, finitism in metamathematics, Gödel’s main results, and finally, Carnap’s metalogic in *Logische Syntax* (1934). Carnap shows that Wittgenstein’s language sentences are not meaningless but expressions in the syntactic metalanguage. Carnap’s tolerance principle accepts linguistic conventionalism, as one is allowed to freely choose the rules of syntax. But this tolerance need not lead to choices which are “arbitrary” in a psychological sense.

The final chapter gives an evaluation of “the status quo and crisis of the new philosophy”. Spreading to a worldwide philosophical movement from Vienna has created the danger of superficiality and fragmentation. Still, some main results of logical empiricism must be accepted as valid: the denial of synthetic a priori, the principle of testability, and epistemological monism. But the choice of elementary sentences and the phenomenalist or physicalist basis are matters of convention. For the thesis of translatability, one has not found a final solution, so (in spite of Carnap’s heavy criticism in 1936) its status is left open here by von Wright. The last section on logical analysis as the method of philosophy raises some doubts and still open issues about Carnap’s metalogical approach. Even though the source is only hinted at, it seems evident that they are derived from von Wright’s encounter with Wittgenstein in 1939. Wittgenstein’s advice of using philosophy as a therapy leads to

a psychological relief, and it need not always be the case that the same effect is achieved logically by formulating the rules of syntax. The validity of the metalogical approach must be reconsidered, since metalogic presupposes at least the same resources as the object language (e.g., Gödel showed that the consistency proof for arithmetic cannot be given in arithmetic itself). The hierarchy of object language, metalanguage, metametalanguage, etc., starts and ends with natural language, so that the syntactic rules of formal languages do not suffice to relieve the secret of language itself.

The book *Den logiska empirismen* qualified its author as a docent of philosophy and three years later professor of philosophy at the University of Helsinki. Von Wright was still engaged with logical empiricism when he returned to England in 1947 for a three-month tour in Cambridge, Oxford, and London. In a long letter to his friend Max Söderman, von Wright described the new situation of philosophy by writing that “philosophy in England is experiencing positivistic or logico-empiricist phase”, shown by the dominant position of A. J. Ayer in London. Ayer had been “very much influenced by our teacher Kaila”, who is now mentioned “with respect everywhere”.²² But friendship and discussions with Wittgenstein were even more important than before.

“Wittgenstein’s influence is behind everything, not only modern English thought, but actually also the whole of the logical empiricist stream of thought. I do not mean especially *Tractatus*, the youthful work that he has left behind himself a long time ago. Although he has not published anything since then, his thoughts penetrate the philosophical atmosphere here. This does not mean that he is beloved, rather a feared and hated one. He has researched the landscape of modern philosophy with a perfection, seriousness, and depth that probably has counterparts only among the greatest thinkers in history. . . . It means that every attempt at improving it or developing it further will be seen as a mannerism or decline. It seems to me that if something new and lasting should be created, then it should be in opposition against and not along the lines of thought that Wittgenstein has drawn.”²³

While it is well known that Wittgenstein influenced the Vienna Circle with his *Tractatus*, it is remarkable that also Wittgenstein’s later work after his return to philosophy is portrayed here as an important background of logical empiricism. When von Wright was invited to Wittgenstein’s professorship at Cambridge on May 1948, Kaila rejoiced and congratulated him in a letter from Princeton.²⁴ Von Wright assured the newly appointed Academician Kaila from Cambridge that he “has meant for my development more than anyone else”²⁵ and proceeded to systematically investigate logical truth and eliminative induction, modal logic, and deontic logic.

4. Logical Empiricism in 1957

After returning from Cambridge to Helsinki, von Wright lectured in the Philosophical Society of Finland on Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* (24 September 1952) and *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (29 September 1952). The latter work was going to be published only in 1953, but von Wright was very familiar with it as a manuscript. Kaila’s student Pertti Lindfors, perhaps not the most reliable witness due to his polemical style, has reported that Kaila’s reaction to Wittgenstein’s later philosophy in this meeting was “furious”: it used pre-scientific psychological vocabulary, was hostile to science and experimental psychology, and ignored the philosophical significance of scientific facts ([19], p. 100).

By von Wright’s example and influence, Wittgenstein scholarship has flourished in Finland (e.g., Erik Stenius, Jaakko Hintikka, Lars Hertzberg, Heikki Kannisto, André Maury, Thomas Wallgren, Hanne Appelqvist) [11,20]. His fifty years of commitment to the editorial work on Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass* has been truly exemplary. But von Wright also made it clear that the Oxford philosophy inspired by Wittgenstein’s later philosophy never strongly appealed to him: “ordinary language philosophy left me completely cool” ([2], pp. 41, 45).

In 1957, von Wright published a book in Swedish, *Logik, filosofi och språk* [21] (in Finnish in 1958), which provides a broad overview of contemporary analytic philosophy

and its historical background. An extended second edition appeared in 1964 (in Finnish in 1968). The historical part on logic covers Aristotle, Leibniz, Boole, Frege, Russell, Hilbert, Gödel, Brouwer, Wittgenstein's philosophy of mathematics, and non-classical logic. The main chapters on philosophy deal with Russell, *Tractatus*, logical positivism, philosophical semantics, Moore, Wittgenstein's later philosophy, and Oxford philosophy (Ryle, Austin, Stevenson, Hare).

For us, it is most interesting to see how logical positivism or empiricism is presented here in the larger context of analytic philosophy. Von Wright states that this movement "flourished only a decade". The chapter concentrates on Schlick and Carnap, without references to Kaila's works. Von Wright notes that logical empiricists understood language in a formal sense, which differs from Wittgenstein's conception of everyday language. Their critique of metaphysics overlooks Wittgenstein's thesis that some things can only be shown, not said. The earlier rejection of logical behaviorism is repeated. The logical empiricists have not realized how they themselves are involved with metaphysics. Carnap's principle of tolerance is now seen by von Wright as a sign of "phlegmatic indifference to genuine philosophical problems", which cannot be handled adequately by allowing rules of language to be purely conventional. For von Wright, the attempt by Carnap to find rescue from the semantic approach means that logical empiricism disappears as a philosophical school.

As a critique of Carnap's philosophical methodology, von Wright's objections to tolerance fail to appreciate the significance of Carnap's account of explication. In his "Autobiography", von Wright himself characterized the task of philosophy as "the explication of conceptual intuitions" ([2], pp. 48–49), using the same term of 'explication' as the proto-logical empiricist Carnap. For von Wright, the appeal to intuition was needed to "fill gaps in linguistic usage", so that he was here making an objection to later Wittgenstein's account of "meaning as use". For Carnap, explication was a method of transforming an inexact concept into a new exact concept, where the explicandum may belong to everyday language or to a previous stage in the development of scientific language. Without appealing to intuitions, Carnap gave non-conventional conditions of adequacy for explications (similarity, exactness, fruitfulness, simplicity).²⁶

The chapter on logical semantics presents Tarski's definition of truth. Von Wright observes the difference between sentences and propositions as truth-bearers—without noting that Tarski always assumes that the language is already interpreted. Von Wright also denies that it would be an explication of the correspondence theory of truth. Frege's and Carnap's distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* is discussed. Quine's critique of the analytic–synthetic division and his treatment of ontology in terms of bounded variables are outlined briefly, but Quine's 1951 rejection of the thesis of translatability as a "dogma of empiricism" is not mentioned.

The chapter on Wittgenstein's later philosophy suggests that his conception of philosophy is not altered, but the changing conception of language is shown by summarizing what the first part of *Philosophical Investigations* tells us about language games and family resemblance.

5. Whatever Happened to Logical Empiricism?

Names of philosophical schools are conventional labels, but they also serve to define and strengthen identities. It has been typical to characterize "logical positivism" and "logical empiricism" by a set of shared *theses*, as Kaila [12] and von Wright [18] did,²⁷ and then, these initially diverse movements were changed rapidly by intensive internal debates. Indeed, as von Wright has noted, in logical positivism and logical empiricism, there have been "more seeds of self-criticism than perhaps any other philosophical current" ([1], p. 81). But if philosophy is understood as an *activity* rather than as a doctrine, then it might be more appropriate to seek for the identity of logical empiricism in its method—and then, there is a much longer extension and continuity in this tradition. *Der Wiener Kreis* of course had a temporally limited history from the Schlick Circle of 1924, *Manifesto* of 1929, Schlick's

murder in 1936, and the *Anschluss* of Austria in 1938 up to the last research seminar of Viktor Kraft in 1952, which von Wright called the “funeral” of the Vienna Circle ([23], p. 201 [14], p. 67). The influence of this movement was then transmitted to the United States and Great Britain by the exiles from Vienna, Berlin, and Warsaw (e.g., Reichenbach, Feigl, Carnap, Hempel, Gödel, Tarski, Waismann, and Popper) and their interaction with pragmatists (Dewey, Morris, White, Quine) and scientific realists (Sellars, Putnam) ([10,24]). The fate of Kaila, von Wright, and their students is a fascinating part of this intellectual history.

In the postwar years, it gradually became unfashionable to call oneself a “logical empiricist”. Instead, most former logical empiricists were willing to call themselves “analytic philosophers”. Eino Kaila was an exception. Already in his 1936 review of Carnap’s *Syntax*, he had opposed the “linguistic turn”, arguing that philosophy cannot be restricted to the “formal mode of speech”. Kaila was, rather, a synthetic philosopher, whose ambition was to solve the riddle of reality by close co-operation with science.²⁸ Kaila’s last lecture course in 1947–1948 was entitled “Revisions of logical empiricism”. In the early 1950s, he returned to the critical realism of his youth by rejecting the thesis of translatability but maintaining the demand for testability. Keeping up the spirit of unified science, his great projects in the 1950s included “terminal causality” and the significance of “field theories” in physics, biology, and psychology. After Kaila’s death in 1958, von Wright showed his appreciation and loyalty by writing articles on his teacher’s philosophy and promoting publications and conferences about him. In 1972, von Wright proposed that the Philosophical Society of Finland should start annual Eino Kaila Memorial Lectures, but he withdrew the motion when the meeting was not unanimously in favor.

G. H. von Wright became a celebrated analytic philosopher with his studies in probability, induction, modal logic, the logic of norms, philosophy of law, action theory, tense logic, preference logic, truth logics, conditionals, and causality. Here, he applied the logical method, whose basics he had learnt from Kaila. This is evident from his main monographs from *Norm and Action* in 1963 up to *Six Essays in Philosophical Logic* in 1996. As logic and exact thinking continued to be central tools and ingredients of von Wright’s highly appreciated work as an analytic philosopher, one could call (perhaps against his own wish) his metaphilosophical position “logical empiricism”. It is remarkable that von Wright’s methodology, with axiomatic systems in philosophical logic and probability theory, was predominantly syntactical. It was his student Jaakko Hintikka (1929–2015) who developed new logics (such as inductive logic, epistemic logic, the logic of questions, independence-friendly IF logic) with sophisticated proof-theoretical and semantical tools (such as model sets, the possible worlds semantics, and game-theoretical semantics). One might say that, among the mainstream analytic philosophers, Hintikka remained the most faithful to logical empiricism. He stated in 2001, imitating Mark Twain, that the rumor about the death of logical empiricism was an exaggeration. Against the critique by “the new philosophers of science” like Kuhn, Hintikka argued that the mistake of logical empiricists was not the use of formal logic as a tool for solving analytic problems but only the use of too-weak logical theories.²⁹

Besides logical works, von Wright wrote seminal analytic studies in ethics (*The Varieties of Goodness*, 1963), where his inclination to accept non-cognitivism in value theory is in harmony with the tradition of logical empiricism. The main influences came from Aristotle, Kant, and Moore. In the 1960s, von Wright had a period when he was impressed by the exact methods in the social sciences (statistics, systems theory, cybernetics). But his contrast in *Explanation and Understanding* (1971) between causal explanations in natural science and practical reasoning in the humanities distances itself from the logical empiricist program of the unity of science (also clearly shared by Kaila). Here, influences from the later Wittgenstein and Anscombe’s study of intentionality brought von Wright into contact with the Continental tradition of hermeneutics—and with his co-operation with Apel, Habermas, and the Yugoslavian Praxis group, von Wright became an important bridge-builder between philosophical schools. He also attributed his awakening interest in Hegel and Marx to his “neo-Wittgensteinianism” ([2], p. 41). In his later comments, he criticized Bertrand

Russell's and W. V. O. Quine's scientific conception of analytic philosophy. Repeating his thesis in the inaugural lecture in Helsinki in 1946 that logic has grown from philosophy into an independent discipline, von Wright predicted that logic would not enjoy the same prominent position in the 21st century as in the 20th century analytic philosophy [27]. He also thought that analytic philosophy of the mind had become heavily loaded with metaphysics [28]. His last scholarly book, *In the Shadow of Descartes* (1998), develops a novel position which is an alternative to reductive and eliminative materialism, phenomenism, and Cartesian substance dualism. With some influence of Kaila's adherence to the parallel theory and non-reductive monism [17], von Wright denies that mental phenomena are identical with bodily states, as logical behaviorism previously claimed, but rather argues that mental consciousness has behavioral (both overt and neural) *criteria*, where a criterion is a non-causal semantic relation.

G. H. von Wright was also known as the author of eloquent essays in his mother tongue Swedish. Even before his return to Helsinki from Cambridge, he published an essay in the journal *Nya Argus* in 1951 on Spengler's and Toynbee's philosophies of history, which was republished in the collection *Tanke och förkunnelse* (Thought and Prophecy, 1955) together with studies on Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. It was important to von Wright that he found in Wittgenstein's views on culture serious doubts about the modern conception of progress by means of science and technology (cf. [29]). They shared interest in Oswald Spengler's prophecy of the decline of Western culture. This similarity of their cool cultural pessimism is reflected in the selection *Vermischte Bemerkungen* that von Wright edited in 1977 (cf. [11]). The collection *Humanismen som livshållning* (Humanism as an Attitude in Life, 1978; in Finnish 1981) defends the human good and dignity.³⁰ In the 1980s, von Wright argued that industrialized society faces a legitimation crisis. His book *Vetenkapen och förnuftet* (Science and Human Reason, 1986; in Finnish in 1987) questions the social and environmental consequences of the form of life based on science and technology but concludes with the recognition that "reason is the hope of mankind".³¹ Here, von Wright was entering the new specialties of environmental philosophy and philosophy of technology (cf. [31]). Unlike many contemporary critics of modernity, it was remarkable that von Wright, as a consistent humanist, never had any nostalgia for the closed religious societies of the premodern era or any attraction to postmodern nihilism. The critical time diagnosis of a famous scholar received significant attention and sparked heated debates in Finland and Sweden. In Finland, the aging Academician was voted Finland's leading intellectual in two polls in 1989 and 2002 in the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* [32].

In 1990, von Wright confessed that he had never been able to pin down the relation of his literary essays to "his philosophical—or perhaps more accurately, scientific—personality". They arose from a growing inner compulsion but did not purport to be science in the strict sense ([1], p. 87). The standard of comparison is here clearly the conception of philosophy that von Wright adopted from Kaila's logical empiricism. Moreover, von Wright's role model as a critical public intellectual was Kaila in his heydays in the 1930s and 1940s rather than the insulating scholar Wittgenstein.³² Thus, even in von Wright's diagnosis of our time, the influences of his two father figures are present and intertwined.

Let me end with a personal note. My own philosophical awakening happened in the summer of 1965 after first-year studies in mathematics: a family friend gave me copies of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Kaila's *Inhimillinen tieto* from his bookshelf. Von Wright's *Den logiska empirismen* was one of the first works of philosophy on my reading list. Soon, Jaakko Hintikka and G. H. von Wright became my "father figures": the former taught me the logical methods that I have used in my own research as a philosopher of science, and the latter was my role model as a public philosopher. In my inaugural lecture in 1981 for the chair of theoretical philosophy (as the successor of Kaila's successor Oiva Ketonen), I presented von Wright as a counterexample to Richard Rorty's thesis in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1980): Rorty [34] had argued that "systematic philosophy" should be abandoned and replaced with "edifying philosophy", which aims at *Bildung* (education, self-formation) instead of knowledge. But, as shown by von Wright's example, the same

person can act as a systematic and edifying philosopher, and these two interrelated aspects of philosophy, at their best, support each other ([35], pp. 6, 18).

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Notes

- 1 See [1]. This essay was originally presented as a lecture for the union of philosophy students in Helsinki in 1990.
- 2 [2], p. 16. This autobiography was written in 1972–1973 for the volume in *The Library of Living Philosophers*. See also the memoirs of von Wright in 2001 [3].
- 3 For Kaila's career and philosophy, see [4–6]. For Kaila's bibliography, see [7].
- 4 For Kaila's 1930 statement on the new method of philosophy, see [8].
- 5 Von Wright suggests that Kaila was the first to use this term (see [4], p. xxx).
- 6 See [9], Essay 1.
- 7 The next generation of professors was mainly educated by von Wright's most important student Jaakko Hintikka.
- 8 For von Wright's bibliography, see [7].
- 9 See [11] for this huge project of "creating Wittgenstein".
- 10 *De empiriska satsernas avvägsningsproblem: undersökningar i modern kunskapsteori* (23 May, 1936), 45, 59, The von Wright and Wittgenstein Archive, University of Helsinki. The bold statement about epistemology as a science, by a 19-year-old student, was in harmony with Kaila's conception of the new method of philosophy (cf. [8]), but as we shall see, von Wright had to reconsider this reference to the *Tractatus*, at least when he met Wittgenstein in 1939. The account given in the "Autobiography" is incomplete, as von Wright describes there his "initial conviction" that philosophy is not one of the sciences ([2], p. 45).
- 11 Von Wright to Kaila, 5 April 1939. [13], p. 131. Kaila and von Wright always used Swedish in their correspondence. A valuable introduction is given by Bernt Österman. Some translations of the letters into Finnish are given by Juha Manninen in [14].
- 12 Von Wright to Kaila, 4 May 1939. [13], p. 154.
- 13 Quoted by Manninen in [14], p. 63.
- 14 Kaila to von Wright, 6 July, 1939. [13], p. 174.
- 15 Von Wright to Kaila, 9 July, 1939. [13], pp. 176–177. Translation by Manninen in [14], p. 63.
- 16 Kaila to von Wright, 13 July, 1939. [13], p. 178.
- 17 Von Wright to Kaila, September 1940. [13], p. 188.
- 18 In the meantime, in the mid-1940s, Rudolf Carnap started to develop his formal system of inductive probability (cf. [15]). He avoided Hume's problem, as his framework does not include inductive acceptance rules. Von Wright was critical of Carnap's approach to logical probability but appreciated the extension of Carnap's inductive logic by Hintikka and his students.
- 19 See [2], p. 11. No list of these problems is given, but probably they were related to the problems of logical truth and philosophical logic that occupied von Wright in the 1940s. Later, Wittgenstein also challenged von Wright's adherence to the scientific optimism of the Vienna Circle.
- 20 See [9], Essays 2 and 3; [17].
- 21 Carnap assured Kaila in a letter on April 27, 1937, that he cannot be "unfaithful to empiricism" (cf. [6]). Carnap's letters to Kaila were preserved by von Wright in The von Wright and Wittgenstein Archive, University of Helsinki.
- 22 Kaila is not mentioned in Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* in 1936, but in his *The Foundation of Empirical Knowledge* in 1940, Ayer acknowledges his great debt to Kaila in the chapter on "the constitution of material objects".
- 23 Von Wright to Max Söderman, 12 June, 1947. Translation by Manninen in [14], pp. 65–66.
- 24 This trip to New York and Princeton, where Kaila met Hempel and Gödel, was organized by his son Olli.
- 25 Von Wright to Kaila, 21 August, 1948. [13], p. 211.
- 26 [15], pp. 3–5. For criticism of philosophers' intuitions, see Hintikka in [22].
- 27 Cf. also the presentation in [10].

- 28 Neuber argues that Kaila had a special position among the logical empiricists in his attempt to find “a non-linguistic way out” for the problem of realism [25].
- 29 [26]. See also [22].
- 30 For some English translations, see [30].
- 31 Von Wright sees some promise in the in the new holistic theories in physics but does not mention Kaila’s unfinished studies on “field theories” in the 1950s here.
- 32 For von Wright’s troubled relation to another role model, Bertrand Russell, see [33].

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