

*Review of Jeremy Shearmur and  
Geoffrey Stokes (eds.), The Cambridge  
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In 1935, Rudolf Carnap (‘s wife) wrote to Ernest Nagel (fellow logical empiricist in America) that Karl Popper is overemphasizing the theoretical differences between his work and that of logical empiricists. They argued that Popper should camp with the Vienna Circle; not just because their differences are not that deep and significant, but because the Vienna Circle became a well-established brand in the mid-1930s and Popper would have better chances for recognition, success and appreciation if he would march under the banner of the Circle. The history of philosophy of science, however, proved Carnap to be wrong: Popper himself, or better, “Popperian”, became a well-established banner, and many nuanced and modern views of the Vienna Circle became actually known as Popperian ideas.

It was just timely thus, that *The Cambridge Companion* series devotes a volume to the philosophy of Popper. Jeremy Shearmur and Geoffrey Stokes finally edited it, and it became a valuable volume with thirteen essays on the various aspects of Popper’s life and works. The volume is important for various reasons. At first, Popper is indeed among the most well-known and influential philosophers of the twentieth century. Secondly, Popper became that philosopher of science whose philosophy had a measurable influence on and interest among (natural) scientists as well. There are various popularizing accounts of contemporary physical sciences where the author claims that he/she is following the lines of Popper’s ideas on falsification.

The idea of falsification – which means, taken of course broadly and in a somewhat simplified manner, that a theory counts as scientific if it is apt for testing and one can determine those conditions under which it could be falsified and thus abandoned – genuinely pervaded most discussions on science, scientific method, metaphysics and pseudo-science. Popper seemingly became that philosopher who set the agenda for many

of those natural scientists who are willing to consider philosophical questions and perspectives. It is not at all accidental then, that Imre Lakatos famously distinguished various “Poppers” (or pictures of Popper) with different levels of sophistication: falsification might mean different things with different complexity and the simple equation that ‘if something is falsifiable then it is scientific’ might not be the last word (at all).

For these reasons, it is even more helpful to have this new volume. Thankfully, the somewhat worn-out idea of falsification does not surface that much and the various chapters are not built around this achievement of Popper. From the thirteen chapters the first is a general overview of the volume and the main themes of Popper; from the twelve original contributions, only two are devoted to the core of Popper’s philosophy of science. But even these chapters deploy new ideas and perspectives: Peter Godfrey-Smith discusses a skeptical Popper with regard to testing and hypotheses, while Gunnar Andersson reconstructs Popper’s ideas on empirical base (test statements) and observations.

Besides general philosophy of science, there are further essays that reveal the specific character of Popper’s thought concerning science. His philosophy of psychology is treated in chapter three, where Arne Friemuth Peterson shows how Popper tried to reduce or handle psychology as a part of biology from his early years on to the end of his career. But psychology, or better, philosophy of mind is the specific topic of Frank Jackson in chapter ten as well, where he shows the importance and original character of Poppers three-world idea and its relevance to the mental sphere. Biology and Darwinism are the topics of Michael Braide in chapter six in the context of Popper’s thought on evolution and philosophical thinking.

Further special topics that deserved a stand-alone chapter are probability and its interpretation (by David Miller in chapter nine), Popper’s philosophy of nature (by Nicholas Maxwell in chapter seven) and metaphysics and realism (by Alan Musgrave in chapter eight). The latter two are especially awareness-raising. Maxwell calls our attention to the following disturbing remark: “Popper’s pursuit of cosmology is paradoxical: his best-known contribution – his proposed solution to the problem of demarcation – helps to maintain the gulf that separates science from metaphysics, thus fragmenting cosmology into falsifiable science on the one hand and untestable philosophy on the other” (p. 170). Philosophy of nature in twentieth-century philosophy of science is a strange beast; it meant for many some form of meta-scientific investigation of the physical sciences, especially their results and their methodology. But for Popper,

it was a much broader and culturally more significant endeavor, consisting of some ontology and metaphysics as well. Musgrave also discusses metaphysical realism and he shows convincingly that, for Popper and possible for others as well, realism and skepticism might go hand-in-hand. “Sceptical criticisms are directed not against our claims about the world, but against dogmatism regarding those claims” (p. 224).

The volume, finally, ends with three chapters on Popper’s socio-political thoughts. Ian Jarvie argues that Popper’s philosophy of the social sciences deserves much more credit and there are many further topics and issues that could be elaborated on. Geoffrey Stokes draws some parallels between Popper and Habermas (during and after the notorious *Positivismstreit*), furthering thus some “reconciliation” between the two philosophers (p. 318). Finally, Jeremy Shearmur provides a brief survey of Popper’s involvement in political philosophy with some actual criticism of his ideas.

As it can be seen hopefully, the volume treats all the major topics of Popper from his long career and devotes equal attention to the diverse fields he contributed to. As it is often forgotten, Popper’s *Logik der Forschung* from 1934 was translated into English only in 1959 (that is, just three years before Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that changed the scene significantly), thus Popper was known for many as a social and political philosopher whose *Open Society* and *The Poverty of Historicism* were reviewed and criticized widely. Thus it is quite fortunate that this line of his philosophy is treated extensively in this volume.

There is one point, however, that could be further discussed, and that is the general method and scope of the volume. Almost all the individual chapters discuss Popper’s work from a somewhat internal point of view. That is, they reconstruct Popper’s philosophy that mainly stands alone and as something that evolved frequently on the base of some internal criticism, by sharpening concepts and ideas. His thought is critically appraised often by quite friendly terms, without giving much credit to its context.

Popper’s idea on World 3, for example, comes quite often to the surface. Popper thought that the world is stratified into three distinct levels. World 1 is the world of physical objects of the sense-experiences; World 2 is the world of our inner mental life, one might perhaps also say, of consciousness. Finally, World 3 is the realm of abstract objects that were created by humans. Most of our intellectual achievements and products belong here (language, games, institutions, customs, etc.), thus World 3

is of utmost importance. But no one is discussing in details where the idea of World 3 comes from and how it found its place in Popper's philosophy. I do not want to conjecture here about this historical question, but as the Kantian roots and overtones of Popper's thinking is often emphasized in the chapters, perhaps it would be not that implausible to look for the origin of World 3 in the philosophy of neo-Kantianism, or to be more precise, in the so-called *Geisteswissenschaften* and in their objects, the *geistige Gegenstände* (cultural or mental objects).

In order to get a better understanding of Popper, we would need even more historical work on this thought, the evolution of his ideas and concepts, especially in the context of their origins in Vienna, New Zealand and London. Malachi Haim Hacoen who contributed a chapter to this volume as well on “the young Popper” did such a work nicely before. One of the editors, Jeremy Shearmur, also noted that more contextualization and external reconstruction would be helpful (p. 371), but perhaps we should not be unsatisfied. What we got is first-rate work from Popper-experts, and the *Cambridge Companion* series is meant to survey and present the general life and work of a given scholar, not philological and deep historical contextualization. But in order to do that, we have now the logical and conceptual space of philosophical analysis ready at hand.

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