

ARNE NAESS

## PLURALISM OF TENABLE WORLD VIEWS

I shall try to outline a philosophical point which I think might be acceptable from a combined logical and empirical point of view. From *the* world view (*wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung*) to the manifoldness (*Mannigfaltigkeit*) of tenable world views.

In the following, I consider humans as not insignificant parts of the world. Different views about humanity therefore imply different world views. A second premise I assume increases the manifold of which I speak. By “scientific” I do not here mean something like “implied by science” but a weaker contention: “compatible with science”.

What about religious views if a weaker contention is adopted? The formidable development of Christian theology since Søren Kierkegaard has reduced earlier tendencies to assume that there must be a conflict between Christian and scientific general views. The number of what were called Christian dogmas is reduced. Here I shall only suggest that this development – plus the considerable increase in the number of people who favor a sort of Buddhism – increases compatibility. But I find it premature to take up the many implied relevant questions. The only remark I tentatively make is that those questions suggest a possible scientific acceptability of certain world views which have a strong religious flavour.

Logical empiricists, as I understood their *Weltauffassung*, suggested a view of the world *derivable* from scientific knowledge. Because scientific knowledge – apart from mathematics and logic – was clearly considered hypothetical, the status of a definite articulation of such a view would, by necessity, be rather hypothetical.

One way to delimit the use of the term “science” is by assuming that it only comprises the natural sciences. In what follows, I include a large part of the humanities. Historical research is scientific in the fairly large sense to which I subscribe. A world view that clearly negates results of historical research is not a world view compatible with science. Historiography, the streamlined accounts of enormously complicated happenings, need not be compatible with scientific method. Two mutually incompatible accounts of a revolution may both be excellent, but not part of a science.

Suppose somebody asks you: “What is your world view?”, suggesting that he or she would write an article or a book describing (and criticising?) it. It is fairly clear that what would be considered an adequate answer would have to take into consideration that person’s value priorities. We should *demand* of a description of

a world view actually held by a human being that it take into account his or her value priorities. The logical empiricists took this seriously. Especially when political issues were being discussed, they outlined value priority views which were simply “dangerous”. That is, the increasingly powerful national socialist movement made public assertions of opposite views likely to result in repressive attacks, sometimes even in incarceration in a concentration camp.

The pertinent answer to the formidable question “What is your world view?” will assume different forms: if you and your family are politically repressed, or if you are engaged in a dangerous fight against oppressors, your world will be narrower. If you live in a peaceful country like Norway, and you are without severe political or personal problems, perhaps only then are you likely to take very broad questions such as those of cosmology seriously. Incidentally, descriptions of what is going on in the cosmos by professional cosmologists tend to be talk about vast, unimaginable explosions within vast areas of time. This may not give rise to dark or pessimistic, tenable world views.

The formidable power of the Catholic Church in Vienna was felt in everyday life. Traffic came to a halt when some religious procession required considerable space in the streets. I remember such an occasion in which traffic came to a complete standstill because a ‘relic’, a piece of bone that might possibly have belonged to Christ, was triumphantly paraded through the city. At least one of the logical empiricists, Otto Neurath, had respect for and perhaps was jealous of, the power of the Church. He admired certain trends within the philosophical traditions of Catholicism. He insisted that especially Thomas Aquinas, but also other theologians developed their ideas on a remarkably high logical level. For certain axioms, they derived conclusions in a logically safe way. It was not by chance that Otto Neurath again and again warned against what he called excessive respect for mathematics and logic: “Logic? Leave it to the Catholic experts!”. He himself had great competence in logic and the history of logic, but having been active in politics – not without serious consequences (prison) – he warned against trying to formulate logical empiricist political views on a high logical level. These views were, as could be expected in the 1930s, mostly socialist and sometimes Marxist.

But back to the question of limits to the diversity of world views compatible with the results of scientific research. More than most philosophers, I admire and cherish research rather than science. The endlessness of research, and the short life of definite scientific theories compared, for instance, to ethical norms, are for me a source of great admiration. It has reminded me of climbing: always risky to some extent, but manageable and mostly open to well-founded trust. I recommended in 1935 that the terms “antimetaphysical” (or even “ametaphysical”) be left out of the formulations of basic characteristics of logical empiricism. Rudolf Carnap’s view that philosophy in the future would essentially consist in the elaboration of the logical syntax of language, I found deplorable. I recommended that “research attitude” should be used as a central expression and slogan, rather than “scientific world view”. Our views should not be incompatible with a

consistent research attitude. (After all, there are innumerable questions we pose which are not even very thinly covered by painstaking research.) There is not much vitally relevant science to point to. Propaganda for more such research, and a more consistent research attitude, are both essential. The metaphysics of Spinoza includes a definition of freedom and of free choice. Very roughly, a decision is free according to him when taken under no external pressure whatsoever. But “God” (*Deus*) is defined in such a way that it does not invite research. If we start with the last part of the *Ethics*, and not the formidable first part, we are open for research and redefinition of terms. This, in turn, facilitates an intense research attitude in relation to metaphysical texts in general. From the last – the fifth – part, we may proceed to the broad, fourth part. Every point there has a practical, a life import. In short, it is possible to maintain a research attitude, even when interpreting and applying the “dense” metaphysics of Spinoza. When I was staying in Carnap’s home in California, this was one of the themes of our daily discussion.

On entering the Schlick seminar in Vienna in 1934, I presented myself as a kind of Spinozist. Spinoza enjoyed, of course, a high standing among the seminar members, but philosophy the way Spinoza practised it was of course fully, totally, decisively a matter of the past. So it was considered touching and in a way, admirable, to be a kind of Spinozist, but philosophically it was centuries too late.

What I am driving at is a complete acceptance of the kind of metaphysical formulations of a philosopher like Spinoza. That is, acceptance of their meaningfulness. But as for the kind of understandable contemporary articulations which would today be nearest to the meaning of his formulations is an open question. Different sets of answers would play a role in outlining different Spinozist world views. They would present examples of “scientifically” acceptable, mutually more or less incompatible world views.

Studying Immanuel Kant’s texts, we may arrive at similar, or at least analogous, conclusions. Considering the great number of mutually incompatible nineteenth century and later Kant interpretations, we might point to the possibility of a variety of modern Kantian world views.

What about old Chinese and Indian philosophies? We may tentatively interpret the texts so as to make them relevant to the questions of scientific compatibility. The pervasive relevance of yoga in Indian philosophy has been studied extensively in the West as a practice, a strangely close combination of a seemingly abstruse and vague philosophy with very definite, clearly described practices. As an example of basic philosophical terms rather different from western ones, I would like to concentrate on “emptiness”, “*sunyata*” in Sanskrit. At an East-West international philosophical congress, an Indian participant left his chair in a quiet way and crawled under the table. When asked closely later what he meant by this, he tried to make us understand that his movement was relevant and philosophically understandable within the Indian yoga tradition he belonged to.

The Vienna Circle and Logical Empiricism

Re-evaluation and Future Perspectives

Stadler, F. (Ed.)

2003, XXIII, 427 p. 6 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1269-3