ORDINARY LANGUAGE CRITICISMS OF LOGICAL POSITIVISM


Abstract

In this paper, I fill out the received view of logical positivism within professional philosophy against which Thomas Kuhn’s Structure appeared. To do this, I look at the methodological dimensions of ordinary language criticisms of logical positivist analysis from P.F. Strawson and J.L. Austin. While no one would confuse Strawson and Austin for philosophers of science, I look to their criticisms given the general porousness of sub-disciplinary boundaries in mid-20th century philosophy, the prominence of ordinary language philosophy in the 1950s, and also because Kuhn was likely aware of their criticisms via Stanley Cavell. Their main charge is that the positivists base their ideal language analysis on an impoverished, yet overreaching account of meaning because they ignore ordinary linguistic practices. I then show how these methodological criticisms run parallel to points Kuhn makes against logical positivist approaches to the study of scientific knowledge. The parallels I draw emphasize methodological, rather than doctrinal dissatisfaction in mid-20th century philosophy with logical positivism’s perceived neglect of linguistic and scientific practices. An insight shared by these parallel criticisms is that logical positivists cannot declare linguistic and scientific practices irrelevant to their philosophical aims without an antecedent investigation of the practices under question.