

## A.W. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-century Thought. Explication as Enlightenment*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. €77  
(Hardback) ISBN-13: 978-0-521-86227-1

Jelena Issajeva  
Lääne-Viru College

*Keywords:* Carnap, the Vienna Circle, program of Enlightenment, ideal of explication, conceptual engineering

For the last decade or two, the philosophy of the Vienna Circle has regained much attention. This retrospective look and historical reinterpretation of its actual doctrines resulted in a revival of interest in logical empiricism within contemporary analytical philosophy. Under closer examination, the Vienna Circle's philosophy appears to be widely underestimated and misunderstood. In particular, Rudolf Carnap's—the Vienna Circle leading figure's—philosophical views have traditionally been represented in an oversimplified manner, restricted to a narrow, technical context, which lead many to believe that Carnap was a strict logicist, who only cared about scientific knowledge. The recent book by A.W. Carus entitled *Carnap and Twentieth-century Thought. Explication as Enlightenment* discredits this view, by providing a comprehensive interpretation of Rudolf Carnap's philosophical views. Carus' book, thus, not only proves the inadequacy of the standard textbook view on Carnap's philosophy, but also shows the viability of his ideas and their far-reaching implications.

From the first pages the reader notices that one of the author's major goals is to delineate Rudolf Carnap's place among the thinkers of the twentieth century, which justifies the multidimensional scope of the book. Carus locates Carnap's philosophy in a broader historic-cultural context, tracing back the gradual developments of his views and highlighting various influential factors. The book might be roughly divided into three large parts, the first dedicated to the cultural and intellectual inheritance of Rudolf Carnap, the second introduces his early philosophical thinking and the third describes the later Carnap. Following this historical perspective enables the

*Corresponding author's address:* Jelena Issajeva, Rumjantsevi 1-16, 40232 Sillamäe, Estonia.  
Email: jelena.issajeva@gmail.com.

author to provide a detailed and comprehensive analysis of Carnap's philosophy, and fill in the gaps of previous research.

Importantly though, the author also takes another perspective—a teleological (p. 40), more ambitious one. Carus puts together a continuous and coherent story of Carnap's philosophical development in the period of 1910 to the 1940-ies, outlining his gradually evolving conception of the ideal of *explication* in the later years. Moreover, he attempts to show that Carnap's project of explication and pluralistic language engineering—which are the major pillars of his later philosophy—are of lasting value and can serve as a useful tool for solving long-standing philosophical problems.

Carus starts with a description of the background—both cultural and intellectual—of Rudolf Carnap that significantly influenced his philosophical thinking and constituted the foundation for Carnap's earlier philosophical inclinations. Among these pre-philosophical influential factors, Carus mentions Carnap's training as a child, family traditions, socio-political activities in the adolescence, war-experience, early scientific and philosophical readings. To reconstruct this initial stage of the story, Carus bears on recent historical research, but also uses unpublished archives—correspondence, lecture notes, drafts, manuscripts—of Rudolf Carnap. Moreover, Carus conducted a series of interviews with Carnap's students, former colleagues and family members. This thorough analysis involving every dimension of Carnap's life, prepares the reader, I believe, to independently uncover those implicit and neglected aspects of Carnap's philosophy that are introduced and articulated in the later passages.

After accounting for Carnap's cultural and intellectual inheritance, Carus proceeds to the discussion of his early philosophical development. The problems that Carnap and his colleagues in the Vienna Circle tried to solve went far beyond issues of mere academic relevance. One of the central motivations behind their philosophy was the promotion of a cosmopolitan culture, promoting the progress of freedom (both individual and social) via better and more precise knowledge. In effect, one of the fundamental problems according to Carnap was the absence of a clearly defined relation between scientific knowledge and the practical—i.e. spiritual, political, social—realm. This problem, Carus argues, goes back to the long-standing confrontation between the tradition of the Enlightenment and that of Romanticism, i.e. between *reason* and *intuition*. In particular, the First World War and the instability of the democratic society were seen as side-effects of the absence of this relation. This constituted the background for the Vienna Circle's version of the Enlightenment program and Carnap's project of rational reconstruction (as briefly explained below), which was intended to address these issues. In order for a democratic post-war society to survive, the conceptual structure

of traditional society—often ambiguous, irrational and old-dated—should be replaced by a new one, based on the natural sciences. And it was precisely the task of the rational reconstruction project to establish this conceptual replacement, and thus to establish the relation between the theoretical and the practical realm. Carus emphasizes that these pragmatic aspects of Carnap's philosophical thinking have often been ignored, and that his rational reconstruction and Enlightenment program have thus been narrowed down to the merely epistemological level. Carus attempts to bring the initial scope of Carnap's project back into discussion.

The broader Enlightenment program and its central component of rational reconstruction were fundamental to Carnap's philosophical development during the early Vienna period (1926–1931). These ideas were most comprehensively elaborated in his *Der logische Aufbau der Welt*. Rational reconstruction constituted a twofold project that consisted of the clarification of the vague concepts of ordinary language and their further reconstruction to a more precise and correct language of science. This whole enterprise was based on strict deduction and was aimed not only at improving natural language, but also at providing a framework of objectivity that would enable mankind to escape from a merely subjective worldview, based on irrational superstitions and unreflected conventions.

Did the earlier Carnapian idea of rational reconstruction succeed in establishing the general program of Enlightenment? Carus gives a negative answer. Though, Carnap's rational reconstruction seemed to fulfil the first requirement of Enlightenment—it suggests a criterion for defining knowledge (as a uniform deductive system)—it failed to establish the second, i.e. to reconcile the theoretical and practical realms. Carnap's attempt to formalize ordinary language via strict deduction has led him to several internal technical problems that impeded Carnap from pursuing the rational reconstruction in its initially intended way.

Obviously, a revision of his earlier philosophical project was called for. The subsequent gradual development of Carnap's philosophical thinking towards a new and more viable version of the project signifies, according to Carus, the final teleological stage of his philosophizing. It is noteworthy that Carus repeatedly emphasizes that the ultimate goals Carnap wanted to achieve remained unchanged (p. 32). He still sought to establish a clear relation between the theoretical and practical dimension of human life, but this time on completely different grounds. The new project was called “the ideal of explication” and appeared to be a more elaborated, subtle alternative. Carus admits that Carnap has not explicitly given a doctrinal expression of this revised version of the project, partly because of his non-doctrinal personal character (p. 241). But a detailed analysis of Carnap's philosophy and

life enables Carus to gain insight into Carnap's later ideal of explication.

The new project, as Carus reconstructs it, saw the central dialectical relation between ordinary (or evolved) language of speech and formal (or constructed) language of science as less rigid, more dynamic and relativized. The initial radical break between these two languages was now softened and the relation of explication between languages was seen as two-sided, equal, dialectical interchange between the two conceptual frameworks. The governing idea of his new ideal of explication was the principle of tolerance, according to which the language in which knowledge is to be reconstructed is no longer fixed, but can be freely chosen, whereas the criteria for this choice are purely pragmatic—the usefulness of the language for serving some human purposes. Hence, there is no single “correct” language of reconstruction any more, but an “open sea” of possible candidate languages of construction (p. 19). This yields, according to Carus, Carnap's linguistic pluralism. The practically chosen language becomes then the one, in which knowledge is expressed. Thus, knowledge has for Carnap indispensable practical uses—both social and individual—as the Enlightenment program presupposes. As Carus states, knowledge shapes our practice and practice shapes our knowledge in a mutual and equal way. (p. 20) Carnap's ideal of explication makes reason and intuition become equal partners.

This final ideal—consisting in the creative enterprise of conceptual engineering—is seen by Carus as the most beneficial and strikingly novel resolution of the traditional confrontation between Enlightenment and Romanticism, combining the theoretical and practical dimensions of life. Our social practices and activities, moral values and communicative system can be progressively improved to be more self-conscious and rational by a gradual explicative replacement of its concepts by constructed ones, according to our own practical purposes. And this approach constitutes, according to Carus, the underestimated and neglected legacy of Rudolf Carnap's philosophy. Hence, Carnap seems to create a tool to achieve the Vienna Circle's central program of Enlightenment—the establishment of a new democratic, conscious and rational society enlightened by scientific knowledge and thus facilitating the reform of human mental and social life.

The reader, so far astonished with the simple and yet unnoticed solution, might ask: what exactly makes the ideal of explication the most promising framework to establish the Enlightenment program? And Carus is ready to give the answer: the Carnapian ideal fulfils both criteria of the Enlightenment program—not only does it give rise to a criterion for defining knowledge, but it also elaborates a relatively unrestricted way to reconcile the theoretical and practical dimensions, thus restoring the program's consistency and credibility.

Once the Carnapian ideal of explication—the ultimate standpoint towards which his earlier development has been progressing—is formulated and explained, Carus proceeds with an argument proving the contemporary viability of this project. He insists that the Carnapian ideal of explication is capable of resolving the tension between scientific knowledge and practical values even today, since it places the pursuit of knowledge and the pursuit of the good in a coherent interrelation (p. 23). To make the argument sound, Carus directly applies Carnap's approach to solve contemporary issues at stake. In particular, he suggests a new solution in a Carnapian explicative style to the famous Habermas-Rawls debate, contrasting either of the alternative positions with the Carnapian ideal. Such implications may well lie beyond the issues that Carnap had himself explicitly addressed, but it is precisely one of the author's aims to uncover the hidden potential of Carnap's mature philosophical ideas.

Although, the sketch-analysis of Carnap's ideal and its "revolutionary" consequences (p. 19), that Carus suggests at the end of the book, are just a preliminary, it might still provide the reader with a promising and thought-provoking outlook on the resolution of long-standing philosophical and practical problems. How credible his argument of extending and practically applying Carnap's ideal of explication is, is perhaps left for the reader to decide. But the overall argumentative line and its exposition is clearly stated, and consistent enough to convince even the most sceptical reader that there is at least something in the argument that should be further considered. This conviction, I believe, is also strengthened by the brief consideration of possible objections that might be raised in response to the Carnapian ideal. All in all, it is true—and Carus himself agrees—that further investigation of Carnap's explication project is needed (p. 308). But his major goal of reviving the genuine philosophical doctrines of Rudolf Carnap via placing them back into the broader multi-dimensional context—the goal that seems naturally to precede the more detailed articulation of Carnap's ultimate project—has been successfully achieved.

To conclude, Carus presents a detailed and foundational work for the reinterpretation and evaluation of Rudolf Carnap's philosophical commitments within twentieth-century thought. One might suppose that it is the lack of such a reliable and comprehensive interpretation that historically caused so many misunderstandings of Carnap's philosophy and the doctrines of the Vienna Circle. Carus not only corrects these past misunderstandings, but also uncovers philosophical ideas that were previously neglected or underestimated. He persuasively shows that once Carnap's philosophy is adequately understood and situated in its original multi-dimensional context, it appears to be a useful tool in solving many of our contemporary as

well as long-standing questions not only in philosophy, but also on the practical side of human life. Thus, contrary to the typical view on Carnap as a strict logician, interested exclusively in the syntax of the language of science, Carus portrays Carnap as a practical-minded conceptual engineer, bridge-builder and ingenious “forerunner of present fashions” (p. 8). This new, contextually based perspective on the interpretation of Carnap’s philosophy is undoubtedly of special interest to analytical philosophers and Vienna Circle scholars. However, due to its broad scope and combination of the historic-cultural-philosophical issues considered, the book might be useful not only for professional academics, but also for other readers, who seek for a comprehensive insight into the twentieth-century intellectual thought.

Despite the sketchy explanation of the ideal of explication itself, the book is far-reaching, ambitious and thought-provoking. It claims to suggest a viable way of creating a new kind of intellectual culture that would combine the most recent scientific knowledge and the social-practical life into one coherent, mutually influencing and progressively developing whole. This adventurous and engineering spirit, manifesting itself in the belief of the conjoint reformation of the theoretical and practical dimensions of the world, is embodied in Rudolf Carnap. And it is this enlightened spirit that A.W. Carus encourages us to follow.