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Title : “Admitting Popper to the Wiener Kreis”

The young Karl Popper applied for a membership of the Wiener Kreis, but he was never admitted. In his later work Popper became a fierce critic of logical positivism. My talk aims to show that the methodological opposition that fueled his attacks is unfounded, and that Popper’s membership would in fact have been very beneficial to science.

One of the main points of disagreement between the later Popper and the logical positivists was over the problem of induction. Where people like Reichenbach and Carnap developed inductivist solutions, Popper maintained that the problem was in essence insoluble, and that we can at best falsify, and never confirm, hypotheses on the basis of observation. But how irreconcilable are inductivism and falsificationism really? I will argue that the two are in fact quite compatible. This becomes apparent if we view the controversy from a logical perspective: inductivism is about the validity of inferences from observation to prediction, and falsificationism is about the premises in such inferences.

The opposition of falsificationism and inductivism has left a distinctive and sometimes destructive mark on the use of statistics in the sciences. I will show that the logical perspective is particularly helpful here. For a small conceptual price we may buy the Popperian conjectures a place in a Bayesian inductivist scheme. This scheme can then be extended quite naturally to include the controlled introduction of new hypotheses, making way for the rational reconstruction of hypothesis formation and theory change. If only for the fact that Popper could have sparked these developments, it seems that he should have been admitted to the Wiener Kreis after all.