Questions about Reception

The American reception of logical empiricism: A quantitative and a qualitative study

Thursday, June 2
2 pm - 4 pm
in Videoconference

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In the 1930s, hundreds of European academics fled to the United States, escaping the quickly deteriorating political situation on the continent. Among them were a few dozen philosophers from a variety of different schools: logical positivists, critical theorists, and phenomenologists. Especially the first group would have a tremendous impact on American philosophy. Although the local intellectual climate had been dominated by distinctively American traditions such as pragmatism, U.S. philosophers soon began to advance views that were heavily indebted to the positivists, turning the country into a bastion of what we nowadays call ‘analytic philosophy’.

How could a small group of academic refugees have such an impact on American philosophy? And why were U.S. philosophers more receptive to logical positivism than to other schools of philosophical refugees? In the coming few years, Tilburg University will host a research project, funded by the Dutch and the European Research Council, that aims to take some first steps toward answering these questions. In this talk, I outline the project, and reflect on the methods we use to map and explain the American reception of European philosophy in the years before and after World War II. I will argue that there are different ways to study reception, depending on one’s research question and definition of influence.