The Vienna Circle’s responses to *Lebensphilosophie*

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2020

– Final draft. Forthcoming in *Logique et Analyse* (Special Issue on the History of Analytic Philosophy, edited by Sander Verhaegh and Filip Buekens) –

Abstract

The history of early analytic philosophy, and especially the work of the logical empiricists, has often been seen as involving antagonisms with rival schools. Though recent scholarship has interrogated the Vienna Circle’s relations with e.g. phenomenology and Neo-Kantianism, important works by some of its leading members are involved in responding to the rising tide of Lebensphilosophie. This paper will explore Carnap’s configuration of the relation between Lebensphilosophie and the overcoming of metaphysics, Schlick’s responses to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and Neurath’s reaction against Spengler.

**Keywords:** Vienna Circle • Lebensphilosophie • Carnap • Schlick • Neurath • Spengler • Nietzsche • Bergson

1. Introduction

The history of analytic philosophy has often been portrayed in a manner which emphasises its divergence from, and antagonism with, rival traditions.[[1]](#footnote-1) Logical Empiricism has been depicted as playing a protagonistic role in shaping this historical view, insofar as it opposed various metaphysical currents in its contemporary philosophical scene.[[2]](#footnote-2) An early example of this view was put forth by Horkheimer (1972).[[3]](#footnote-3) In 1937, Horkheimer had set up a picture of a division in Germanophone philosophy after the First World War. The split was between, on the one hand, a type of scientism which he thinks is exemplified by Logical Positivism and, on the other hand, what he sees as a metaphysical stance exemplified by *Lebensphilosophie* and some of its offshoots. Unfortunately, Horkheimer’s portrayal relies both on a caricature of Logical Empiricism,[[4]](#footnote-4) and on the vagueness of the term ‘Lebensphilosophie’ (to which we shall return).

Forman (1971) provides a more nuanced view of Logical Empiricism’s relation to *Lebensphilosophie*. Like Horkheimer, Forman (1971, 19-22) initially presents the Vienna and Berlin Circles, in their alliance with scientific rationality, as natural opponents to relativistic *Lebensphilosophie*. Forman, however, subsequently presents both Hans Reichenbach (Forman 1971, 45-46, 88-90) and, more prominently, Richard von Mises (Forman 1971, 48-51, 57-58, 80-82), as conduits for the influence of *Lebensphilosophie* on the development of quantum mechanics. Forman even vaguely admits that ‘the positivist tradition itself contained a substantial element of *Lebensphilosophie*’ (46), though he does not further expand this proposal.

Kusch (1995, 250-252) offers more detail concerning elements within the Vienna Circle’s self-conception which ‘catered to some of the contemporaneous intellectual and emotional needs’ (251) addressed by *Lebensphilosophie*. Kusch (251) mentions among these the Logical Empiricists’ organisation into loosely conjoined ‘circles’, in place of the more traditional division of philosophical views into schools propounding a specific set of doctrines. Kusch also notes that the Circle’s manifesto emphasises the significance of its attitude towards ‘questions of life’ (quoted in 251). Finally, Kusch refers to Schlick’s (1979) ‘curious’ (Kusch 1995, 252) paper ‘On the meaning of life’. Kusch sees this as an exceptional attempt to appeal to the contemporary mentality, by contrast to ‘Schlick’s other, more sober, scientifically oriented papers’ (1995, 252). However, as we shall see in what follows, some of Schlick’s earliest works (2006, 2013), as well as some of his last unfinished works (Schlick 1952) clarify that there exists a more intimate relation between Lebensphilosophie and Schlick’s more ‘sober’ work than that outlined by Kusch.[[5]](#footnote-5)

What we have seen in the above review of the literature is an increasingly nuanced grasp of the Logical Empiricists’ reactions to Lebensphilosophie. This paper aims to further this nuance by highlighting the variety of responses to different authors associated with Lebensphilosophie by different members of the Vienna Circle. There are, as this paper will show, various heterogeneous responses to *Lebensphilosophie* developed by members of the Vienna Circle. Having delved into the complications of defining ‘Lebensphilosophie’, I will start by noting Dilthey’s and Nietzsche’s influence on Carnap’s critique of Heidegger. I will move on to examine Schlick’s engagement with Nietzsche and Schopenhauer in his contribution to what he calls ‘the life-philosophy of the future’ (Schlick 1979, 116). Looking for further evidence of opposition between Logical Empiricism and Lebensphilosophie, I will turn to Schlick’s and Neurath’s responses to Spengler. In both cases, we find a series of arguments directed against a specific thinker, rather than some general opposition against something called ‘Lebensphilosophie’.

At the outset, I should briefly note, as well attested to by the relevant scholarship, that Carnap, Schlick, and Neurath had different views on how to deal with metaphysics, what tasks (if any) are proper to philosophy, how the scientific world-conception should approach ethics, and on the relation between theoretical and practical concerns. The differences between their responses to *Lebensphilosophie* reflect such metaphilosophical disagreements and point towards the heterogeneity of their views. There is, however, a common element that we shall see emerging in their approaches to *Lebensphilosophie*: an attempt to exactly delimit the extent to which the practical concerns of life can be dealt with by theoretical means. In what follows, I will show that Carnap, Schlick, and Neurath all, to some extent, acknowledge that, in those cases where it is conceived as a theoretical endeavour, *Lebensphilosophie* has somehow over-exceeded its reach and must be properly repositioned in relation to the practical questions of life it seeks to address.

1. A note on the term ‘Lebensphilosophie’

Before proceeding further, an attempt at delimiting the scope of the vague term ‘Lebensphilosophie’ is necessary. ‘Lebensphilosophie’ has been employed in reference to quite a wide variety of different philosophical works and positions. To start with, it might be noted that all these works are bundled together for containing some form of emphasis on the significance of some conception of ‘life’ to philosophy. The heading has encompassed a variety of work, ranging from academic philosophy to work that was produced outside academia and addressed wider audiences.[[6]](#footnote-6) Though perhaps it will not allow us to provide a strict definition, tracing the history of the term’s use during the first three decades of the twentieth century helps to clarify its scope.

Ringer (1969, 336) claims that the term originated from Dilthey’s students, and in 1911 Dilthey took it up as a name for positions advanced in his later works, in which he conceived of knowledge as derived ultimately from lived experience.[[7]](#footnote-7) In 1913, Scheler would present *Lebensphilosophie* as a new type of philosophy (which Scheler explicitly opposes to vulgar ‘Popularphilosophie’ (1913, 203)) that emerges from aspects of the writings of Nietzsche, Bergson, and Dilthey. By bringing these three figures together under one banner, Scheler retrospectively presents Lebensphilosophie as a tradition (though none of the aforementioned authors would have thought of their work in these terms). Scheler admits that a certain degree of vagueness is involved in delimiting the new *Lebensphilosophie*. From the three authors cited above, Scheler draws a quasi-metaphysical conception of life, as well as a connected epistemological account of intuition as granting unmediated access to lived experience. Like many authors associated with *Lebensphilosophie*, Scheler presents direct experience as superior to scientific knowledge.

Prior to the First World War, the use of the term ‘Lebensphilosophie’ had primarily pertained to academic discussions. After the end, and as a result, of the First World War, Spengler’s rise to fame gives rise to a broader usage of the term (see e.g. Forman 1971; Kusch 1995, 225-226).[[8]](#footnote-8) This is what Ringer calls ‘vulgar Lebensphilosophie’ (1969, 336). During this time, the term becomes associated with various irrationalist tendencies within Weimar culture. Lukács, for example, would go as far as to claim that after the war ‘all of the widely read bourgeois *Weltanschauungsliteratur* is *lebensphilosophisch* [sic]’ (translation of Lukács 1974, 88, quoted in Forman 1971, 16). While earlier uses of the term can still be made precise, its popularisation broadens the variety of uses to which it was put, making it difficult to delimit its meaning. Lukács’ analysis of Lebensphilosophie stretches the application of the term so far as to enable him to see it as ‘the dominant ideology of the entire imperialist period in Germany’ (88). Lukács argues that Lebensphilosophie is not a set of doctrines, but a general tendency which affects all contemporary philosophical schools. As we shall see, Lukács view of Lebensphilosophie as a tendency is at least partly applicable to the Vienna Circle, whose influence by *lebensphilosophisch* ideas was accompanied by their vehement attacks on Spengler.

Spengler’s 1918 *Untergang des Abendlandes* epitomised what the title of Rickert’s (1920) book would name as the ‘philosophical fashions of our times’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Spengler’s book is a study of a sequence of cultures, which it construes as living organisms, replete with souls, which are born and die. The cultural phenomena he explores, including art, mathematics, and natural science, also live and die as cultures rise and fall. Spengler’s study, replete with unsubstantiated overgeneralisations, relies on earlier *Lebensphilosophie* in its methodological appeals to an intuitive grasp of lived experience. Spengler opposes his methodology to the scientific reliance on mechanistic causal explanations, which he sees as outgrowths of ‘Faustian’ (i.e. modern Western) civilisation. Causal explanations construe their objects as ‘dead, inorganic, rigid [*starr*]’ (quoted in Forman 1971, 34). Instead of causation, Spengler talks of the destiny [*Schicksal*] of a living culture (see Forman, 33). The soul of a culture, Spengler thinks, is intuitively grasped by the historian by employing a morphological, rather than logical, approach. Morphology allows for the emergence of a ‘physiognomics’ of culture, which is characteristic of historical studies, as opposed to the natural sciences’ ‘systematics’ (see Kusch 1995, 226-229).

The fashionableness of *Lebensphilosophie* had led to a series of attacks against it by various academic philosophical traditions, including early analytic philosophy, Neo-Kantianism, phenomenology, and the Frankfurt School. Like most of the other academic critics of *Lebensphilosophie*, the Vienna Circle, as we shall see, also showed signs of influence by some of its strands.

1. *Lebensphilosophie* and Carnap’s critique of metaphysics

Horkheimer’s (1972) diagnosis of the opposition between Logical Empiricism and Lebensphilosophie indirectly refers to Carnap (1959) as the perpetrator of ‘The Latest Attack on Metaphysics’. A quick glance at Carnap’s text suffices to show that Horkheimer’s diagnosis concerning Carnap’s opposition to Lebensphilosophie is mistaken.

In summary, Carnap argues that there are two technical ways of showing metaphysical language to be meaningless. On the one hand, the sentences employed within it contain what he calls ‘pseudo-concepts’. These are words which in the history of language originally could be used in empirically verifiable sentences. Through their subsequent appropriation e.g. by theologians and philosophers, Carnap (1959, 65-67) attempts to show how some words lost their original sense and thus came to be ‘pseudo-concepts’, i.e. the sentences in which they occur no longer can be shown to be either true or false.

On the other hand, according to Carnap (1959, 67-73), metaphysical language involves ‘pseudo-statements’. These are statements which seem to be syntactically correct, and in fact are allowable by the rules of the ‘historical-grammatical syntax’ (69) of ordinary language. Nonetheless, according to Carnap (70-71), once such sentences are analysed using the language of modern logic, they may be shown to be meaningless. Logical syntax may allow us to correct some variants of these errors perpetrated in ordinary language, and also to translate these corrections back into ordinary language. But in the case of metaphysical ‘pseudo-statements’, according to Carnap (70-80), modern logic simply shows us that we should preclude them from entering into our attempts at theory-building altogether.

Carnap (78-81) thinks that metaphysics has historically been an attempt to produce theories about something which is better expressed in the arts. It is particularly clear in the case of artworks (e.g. poetry, or more obviously music) that what is at stake is not the production of well-formed statements that are either true or false. By contrast to artworks, work in metaphysics fails to realise the unsuitability of its chosen medium, i.e. theoretical statements, for the task at hand. Contrary to those that had pushed the logical positivist position towards the claim that metaphysics is simply devoid of meaning, Carnap claims that there is some element of meaningfulness towards which metaphysicians are reaching.[[10]](#footnote-10) Nonetheless, they choose the wrong medium for such expression. By contrast to metaphysicians, artists avoid argumentative engagement in theoretical debates, instead, simply expressing certain emotional attitudes. For Carnap, once the façade of theoretical debate over the truth or falsehood of its statements falls, what remains of metaphysics is precisely the attempt to express such feelings or attitudes. As Carnap puts it,

[…] metaphysics does indeed have a content; only it is not theoretical content. The (pseudo)statements of metaphysics do not serve for the *description of states of affairs*, neither existing ones (in that case they would be true statements) nor non-existing ones (in that case they would be at least false statements). They serve for the expression of the general attitude of a person towards life (“Lebenseinstellung, Lebensgefühl”). (78).

Here we see clearly how Carnap reconfigures *Lebensphilosophie* in light of his application of modern logic to metaphysics. As Gabriel (2003) has shown, the terms Carnap employs to talk of that which both the arts and metaphysics, the latter doomed to failure, attempt to give expression to, namely ‘Lebenseinstellung’ and ‘Lebensgefühl’, are a direct influence on Carnap from Dilthey’s student Herman Nohl. Following Gabriel’s suggestion, scholars have outlined a variety of ways in which Dilthey’s influence is at work in Carnap’s work (see e.g. Mormann 2007). Damböck (2012; 2017), for example, has situated Dilthey as part of a tradition of German empiricism to which Carnap may be seen as belonging. Given that Carnap does not here directly name him, the extent to which Dilthey’s or Nohl’s brand of Lebensphilosophie was influential on Carnap would require a more lengthy exposition than I can here undertake.

Nelson (2018) has attempted to partly explain Dilthey’s positive influence on Carnap by juxtaposing Dilthey’s political liberalism with ‘a reactionary role in Germanic culture’ (322) played by other figures associated with Lebensphilosophie, such as Spengler. There was, however, another progenitor of Lebensphilosophie whose name would be appropriated by reactionary politics, namely Nietzsche. I will now turn to the less well-known attempts by the Vienna Circle’s members to claim Nietzsche as Logical Empiricism’s predecessor.

1. Nietzsche and the Vienna Circle

Carnap (1959, 80) selects Nietzsche as his example of a figure in the history of philosophy who took the correct attitude towards metaphysics.[[11]](#footnote-11) In Carnap’s idiosyncratic (and possibly mistaken) interpretation of his oeuvre, Nietzsche served as the paradigm case of a philosopher overcoming metaphysics. According to Carnap, Nietzsche avoids metaphysical theorising altogether. Carnap here presumably has in mind Nietzsche’s work after *The Birth of Tragedy*, at which time he shakes off the Schopenhauerian metaphysics which had informed his earlier work.[[12]](#footnote-12) Carnap interprets Nietzsche as having realized the need to overcome metaphysics, and thus as dividing up his work into either purely empirical genealogies of particular phenomena on the one hand, or poetic musings on the other:

Our conjecture that metaphysics is a substitute, albeit an inadequate one, for art, seems to be confirmed by the fact that the metaphysician who perhaps had artistic talent to the highest degree, viz. Nietzsche, almost entirely avoided the error of that confusion. A large part of his work has predominantly empirical content. We find there, for instance, historical analyses of specific artistic phenomena, or an historico-psychological analysis of morals. In the work, however, in which he expresses most strongly that which others express through metaphysics or ethics, in Thus Spake Zarathustra, he does not choose the misleadingly theoretical form, but openly the form of art, of poetry. (Carnap 1959, 80)

This, in Carnap’s interpretation, is how Nietzsche undertakes the overcoming of metaphysics. It is thus no coincidence that the title of Carnap’s paper uses Nietzsche’s term, ‘Überwindung’, to designate the effect that logical analysis will have on metaphysics.

Prior to his presentation of Nietzsche as a predecessor to Logical Empiricism in 1931, Carnap’s (1967) *Aufbau* includes a few references to Nietzsche (105, 109, 261). Carnap notes Nietzsche’s position that ‘the self is not implicit in the original data of cognition’ (105), and again his objection to the Cartesian view that experience implies an experiencing subject (261). Carnap categorises Nietzsche’s views of the self as of the same type as those found in Mach (105), Avenarius (261), Schlick (105, 261), and Russell (261).

Similar links between Nietzsche and Logical Empiricism have been drawn by other Vienna and Berlin Circle members.[[13]](#footnote-13) Already in 1917, Philipp Frank talks of a ‘striking agreement’ (1970, 232) between Nietzsche and Mach, and even of ‘harmony’ in their epistemological views. He presents both as Enlightenment thinkers, critical of philosophical dogmatism. Like Carnap, he notes Nietzsche’s ‘expression of the positivistic world conception’ (232) in his critique of the ‘frequent misuse of concepts’ (233) in metaphysics.

Richard von Mises (1970) also sets up Nietzsche’s attitude as a predecessor for the critique of the Kantian schools (but, he notes, Nietzsche ‘was not sufficiently interested in the theory of knowledge’ (248)). Paralleling Carnap’s view of the history of language, von Mises talks of Nietzsche’s ‘full agreement with Mach’s ideas’ (250) concerning the evolution of concept formation, which originates in the development of language and moves to the formation of scientific concepts.

Neurath (1981) joins Frank and Carnap in talking of Nietzsche’s ‘critique of the metaphysicians’ (692), which he notes as having had ‘an immediate role in the flowering of the Vienna Circle’ (692). Like von Mises and, as we shall see, Schlick, Neurath would present Nietzsche as an opponent of Kant’s ‘anti-scientific attitude […] which reduces the power of science and thus opens the doors to metaphysical and philosophico-religious speculations’ (1955, 11).

1. Schlick’s responses to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche

Perhaps the earliest source of interest in Nietzsche, which undoubtedly influenced all abovementioned references to his portrayal as a predecessor for Logical Empiricism, is to be found in the early work of Moritz Schlick, to which I now turn. Schlick’s work constitutes an extensive counter-example to the picture of opposition between Logical Empiricism and Lebensphilosophie painted by Horkheimer. Schlick’s (2006) early work in philosophically-oriented physics was paralleled by an interest in what, in the homonymous book from 1908, he called *Lebensweisheit* [Life-wisdom]. Under this heading, Schlick had developed a eudaimonistic account of ethics intrinsically connected to his overall epistemological views. Schlick’s approach to ethics was heavily influenced by authors commonly associated with *Lebensphilosophie*, such as Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Schlick enlisted both in opposing his contemporaries’ Neo-Kantian and phenomenological accounts of the objectivity of values. In Schlick’s interpretation of Schopenhauer, empirical psychology is seen as able to provide a causal explanation of human action and moral behaviour. Schlick thus proposes that ethical questions can be phrased in terms of psychological causal questions about pleasure. Schlick interprets Nietzsche’s famous appeal to the ‘will to power’ as what he calls a ‘will to pleasure’ [Wille zur Lust] (2006, 66-72) which underlies all human action, from the practical demands of everyday life to scientific knowledge.

This interpretative position is further advanced in his recently published lectures, presented at the University of Rockstock from 1912 onwards, on Nietzsche (and in 1919 on his relation to Schopenhauer). It is obvious to Schlick that Nietzsche is not a philosophical system-builder, and he understands Nietzsche’s work as divided into three phases which are organically intertwined. According to Schlick, starting from an initial concern with art in early works, Nietzsche moves to a focus on the significance of knowledge and science, leading up to a third period where he develops his *Lebensphilosophie*. Contrary to Carnap, Schlick (2013, 101) acknowledges Nietzsche’s ambivalent position somewhere between poetry and philosophy, and interprets him as having produced neither a philosophical system, nor pure poetry (see also Mormann 2015).[[14]](#footnote-14) Nietzsche is rather, according to Schlick, primarily a thinker of modern culture. His most significant contribution is his overcoming of Schopenhauer’s pessimism, a position which goes hand in hand with modernity.

Nonetheless, Schlick does come up with systematic positions drawn from both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. As Textor (2018) shows, it is to Schopenhauer that Schlick’s *General Theory of Knowledge* owes its critique of the philosophical misidentification of knowledge with intuition or acquaintance. In the early Schlick, metaphysics is a result of this misidentification. Schlick further proposes (section 13) that our drive towards knowledge is explainable in biological and psychological terms. In Schlick’s view, the drive towards knowledge originally emerges from the practical demands of life. Even if subsequently a split between everyday life and scientific knowledge may present itself, the two continue to be intimately connected even in those cases where knowledge appears to be sought for its own sake. Scientific knowledge has to be, so to speak, ‘disinterested’, but in being so it better serves the practical demands of life.

The theme of ‘disinterestedness’ is central to Schlick’s self-proclaimed ‘amateur’ occupation with the question of the meaning of life, which underlies the aforementioned conception of ethics and epistemology. Schlick’s ‘The Meaning of Life’, first presented in 1921 and published in 1927, perhaps by contrast to later work done by the Vienna Circle, does not doubt that the very question that he is examining is a meaningful question. Schlick does insinuate that at least part of the question concerning the meaning of life can be seen from a perspective that ‘I might almost call a metaphysical one’ (1979, 127). There are also insinuations that what he is engaged in when writing about the meaning of life is not necessarily the technical task of a professional philosopher, but perhaps something rather more amateurish and personal.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The fact that he does not seem to be concerned with the kind of technical work (e.g. in the application of modern logic) that is usually associated with the Vienna Circle is not unrelated to what he discusses in the article. By contrast to the praise of technically-minded work in philosophy that we saw in Carnap, Schlick presents his conception of the limitations of technical work in the field of knowledge (and of art) as follows:

Not all the activity of the artist or thinker falls, of course, under the concept of creative play. The purely technical, the mere management of the material, as with the painter’s colour mixing, or the composer’s setting down of notes – all this remains, for the most part, toil and work: they are the husks and dross that often still attach to play in real life. (1979, 116).

In other words, as Schlick argues in his essay, the unavoidable technical work that the artist or the scientist must engage in is merely preparatory or propedeutic for a more vital process of creative play. And it is precisely this type of play that Schlick himself is engaged in when writing about the meaning of life, binding together the form and content of his work.

According to Schlick, the meaning of life is found in what he calls play. The word play is not used by him in its ordinary sense, but acquires a special sense designating activity that is not performed for the purpose of achieving some particular end. Thus, for example, by contrast to the activity of colour mixing mentioned in the above example, which is at least *prima facie* concerned with some specific end (e.g. allowing the painter to use some particular colour in his work), the creative activity of the artist is not a means toward an end, but undertaken for its own sake. The special usage of the term ‘play’ is intended by Schlick to cover all instances of such disinterested activity (regardless whether it falls within the realms traditionally delimited by philosophy as scientific, aesthetic, or ethical). Indeed, as Schlick mentions (116-117), any activity that can be undertaken with the particular disinterested attitude he describes may be transformed into play.[[16]](#footnote-16) Furthermore, the attitude of creative play, which is what gives meaningfulness to life, is an attitude which Schlick assigns to ‘youth’.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Schlick considers his own employment of the concept of play as a contribution that could be significant to ‘the life-philosophy [*Lebensphilosophie*] of the future’ (116). Furthermore, Schlick decidedly selects Nietzsche as a predecessor to his position on play. For Schlick, there are two types of unperturbedness in response to the question of the meaning of life that are untenable for an adult ‘seeker’ (112): one is the child’s, who has not yet posed the question, and the other is the sceptic’s, who rejects that there may be a meaning to life. While Schopenhauer’s pessimism was an attempt to take the latter route, Nietzsche’s optimism replies to it:

We know how Nietzsche, for example, sought to conquer this pessimism. First by the flight into art: consider the world, he says, as an aesthetic phenomenon, and it is eternally vindicated! Then by the flight into knowledge: look upon life as an experiment of the knower, and the world will be to you the finest of laboratories! But Nietzsche again turned away from these standpoints; in the end, art was no longer his watchword, and nor were science, or beauty, or truth. (Schlick 1979, 113).

Schlick thus interprets Nietzsche as ultimately rejecting any account of the meaning of life which involves purposive action, and therefore as a predecessor to his account of play as the meaning of life. This does not, nonetheless, prevent him from criticising other aspects of Nietzsche’s work (Schlick 1979, 127-128), such as his conception of the Übermensch. Insofar as the Übermensch is conceived in terms of mankind’s ‘creating something above itself’ (127), this involves a kind of purposive activity that determines the meaning of life. This doctrine is thus is incompatible with the preceding critique of purposive action.[[18]](#footnote-18)

So far, I have presented a picture of Schlick, inspired by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, as developing a kind of *Lebensphilosophie* underlying both his ethical naturalism and his conception of scientific philosophy. It may be objected that this was primarily part of an early realist phase in Schlick’s philosophical development, and that it was superseded during his Vienna Circle years, with the help of Wittgenstein’s influence. Contrary to such objections, it is notable that though his positivist turn did modify a number of his theses in ethics, the influence from *Lebensphilosophie* carries over to not only to Schlick’s *Fragen der Ethik*, but even more strikingly in his last unpublished writings, collected in *Natur und Kultur* (1952).

Apart from its vehement attack on Spengler, to which we shall return, *Natur und Kultur* contains a critique of Nietzsche’s appropriation by fascism. Schlick argues that ‘these prophets are mistaken in invoking Nietzsche’ (77) in defence of warmongering nationalism. Nietzsche instead talks of ‘the war of individual against individual, or of the individual against the herd’ (77), or of the struggle of man against nature; these, in Schlick’s view, have nothing to do with modern warfare among nations. Schlick (1952, 78) concludes that, though Nietzsche’s spirit is to be ranked amongst the highest of the nineteenth century, his analysis of power, which sadly became his most influential doctrine, should be counted among his errors.

1. Schlick’s objections to Spengler

Schlick’s (1952) critique of Spengler may offer a better example of the sort of opposition between Logical Empiricism and *Lebensphilosophie* painted by Horkheimer. In *Natur and Kultur*, Schlick objects to a series of theses developed by Spengler’s work, directly addressing particular views he develops in *Der Mensch und Technik*.[[19]](#footnote-19) Schlick’s main objection is directed against Spengler’s argument for the overall view of the course of history as leading to the inevitable downfall of Western civilisation. Schlick (1952, 42) takes Spengler as an example of a kind of historical fatalism taken to the extreme, rejecting any contribution of human volition to the progression of history.[[20]](#footnote-20) Underlying this fatalism, in Schlick’s view, is a kind of Aristotelian and scholastic essentialist view of cognition. According to Schlick, Spengler’s fatalism presupposes that human culture essentially contains a teleological process according to which it must flourish and then wither. Schlick notes that the scholastic view of *teloi* was overcome by modern empirical science, which since Galileo has been able to explain natural processes without reference to them. Like the process of blooming and withering in a plant, so too the history of culture is explainable by reference only to effective (*poietic*) causes, thus eliminating the metaphysical commitments required by teleological accounts.

Schlick (1952, 43-44) reconstructs a version of the fatalist Spenglerian argument as follows:

P1. Culture originates in intellect’s determination of actions. (Through the development of tools, as opposed to natural biological adaptation to the environment.)

P2. This results in a separation between culture and nature, and thus an opposition between the two.

P3. Because culture is essentially unnatural, any possible reconciliation with nature would mean its undoing.

P4. Culture’s development means it becomes increasingly unnatural (through an increasing determination of actions by intellect).

P5. The powers of nature are stronger than human intellect.

C. Therefore, culture’s downfall is an inevitable necessity.

Schlick thinks the Spenglerian argument is dogmatic, and notes that its conclusion can only be shown to be true or false by testing the empirical claims made by its premises. P2 is not self-evident; it is not clear that the relation between culture and nature is by necessity one of struggle. As Schlick points out, terms such as ‘opposition’ or ‘enmity’ are here used vaguely, and thus lead to the ensuing confusion. They are not logical terms, but rather indicate some incompatibility between valued goals. Thus Schlick proposes that we should rephrase the question whether culture is essentially opposed to nature in a more empirically-minded manner. The new question that takes its place is that of whether individuals’ rational actions must inevitably lead to the formation of institutions that breed displeasure (Schlick 1952, 45). Schlick thinks that there is little empirical evidence that this is inevitable. He speculates that in its early stages, culture and nature must have been closely intertwined. In such early stages, intellect’s intervention in action must have been motivated by the search for pleasure. Schlick’s hypothesis is that it must have succeeded in such a search, otherwise the intellect’s reign would have been over.

Having avoided Spengler’s dogma of an opposition between nature and culture in its early stages, Schlick does think that subsequent stages of cultural development do give rise to institutions that breed discontent.[[21]](#footnote-21) Schlick nonetheless thinks that we should be discussing the possibility of harmonisation between nature and culture, instead of dogmatically accepting their incompatibility. Schlick’s project in his later years, cut short by his untimely death, was to work out an approach to this harmonisation in which art and creative play would figure prominently.

Schlick further addresses criticisms against other particular positions advanced in Spengler’s work. Schlick claims that Spengler rightly decries avoidance of uncomfortable facts (1952, 33). Schlick then goes on to accuse Spengler of such avoidance, due to wishful thinking, in his account of technology. As Schlick points out, Spengler’s conception of technology [Technik] is too broad, allowing for the view that some animals employ technology. While Spengler sees the hand as a kind of proto-tool, and thus in Schlick’s view fails to correctly draw the boundary between nature and culture. Schlick, by contrast, argues that technology begins with the engineering of tools, and thus distinguishes nature from culture.

Schlick further demolishes Spengler’s view that humans are predators. Schlick points out that Spengler mistakenly argues that the fact that humans have stereoscopic vision backs his categorisation of humans as predators. But apes, who are herbivores, have stereoscopic vision, and, as evolutionary biology had demonstrated, this explains the persistence of this trait in humans. To maintain his view, Spengler needs to ignore the evidence of evolutionary biology, which, according to Schlick, is an example of the kind of preference for wishful thinking over facts which he elsewhere decries.

1. Neurath’s critique of Spengler’s relativism

Perhaps the most well-known attack against *Lebensphilosophie* by a Logical Empiricist is found in Neurath’s *Anti-Spengler*, published in 1921, more than a decade before Schlick’s attack on Spengler. In 1919 Neurath had been imprisoned and awaiting trial for his participation in the government of the Soviet Republic of Bavaria. During his imprisonment, he wrote *Anti-Spengler*, which would be publishedin 1921 (see Cartwright et al. 2008, 76). The conditions under which the book was written might help clarify the political significance of his polemic, which he ‘Dedicated to the young and the future they shape’ (Neurath 1973, 158).

Neurath accuses Spengler’s brand of *Lebensphilosophie* of indulging in a type of ‘pseudo-rationalism’. The attempt towards clearing away pseudo-rationalism is notably one that remains central throughout Neurath’s work, and is even directed against some of his fellow empiricists. For Neurath, pseudo-rationalism occurs where claims to knowledge overextend their reach, and seemingly rational approaches are made towards phenomena that cannot thus be approached. So, for example, Neurath elsewhere argues that foundationalism is a kind of pseudo-rationalism since, briefly put, it attempts to go beyond the bounds of knowledge in order to establish a type of false ‘certainty’ about something which we should have instead accepted as uncertain (see Cartwright et. al. 2008, 3 & 91-92).

Likewise, Spengler’s pseudo-rationalism is constituted by a failure to admit uncertainty. Spengler is a pseudo-rationalist in Neurath’s sense because he is engaged in an attempt to provide a complete and all-encompassing world-view that not only purports to explain the entire history of human culture, but also uses its ‘analyses’ to predict the downfall of Western civilisation. Apart from attempts to describe past events, Spengler also prescribes future action. Neurath (1973) opens by asserting that:

The wish to found action on perfect insight means to nip it in the bud. Politics are action, always built on inadequate survey. But a world-view, too, is action; embracing the manifold universe is an anticipation of unpredictable efforts. In the end all our thinking depends on such inadequacies. We must advance, even without certainty! The only question is whether we are aware of it or not. (158-159).[[22]](#footnote-22)

Spengler fails to acknowledge the inadequacies of our knowledge for determining our courses of action, and thus proceeds to act on the basis of a false certainty. Advancing without certainty also means, for Neurath, being aware that there is no certainty to be had in the realm of political action.

Pseudo-rationalism, in the way Neurath uses the term, not only involves a reaching out beyond the confines of what can be rationally asserted, but also (as noted above) a lack of awareness regarding this overreaching. Neurath diagnoses just such an ignorance in Spengler. As I shall demonstrate, Neurath is here repeating Russell’s earlier polemic against Bergson. Russell’s central accusation against Bergson is that he is engaged in pure poetry, rather than philosophy. Thus, as Russell admits, one of the difficulties with dealing with an anti-intellectualist such as Bergson is precisely that proof through argument may not play the role we usually expect it to play when we are engaged in philosophising. Poetry remains untouched by philosophical argument, whether it is used in favour or against the views it conjures:

a large part of Bergson's philosophy, probably the part to which most of its popularity is due, does not depend upon argument, and cannot be upset by argument. His imaginative picture of the world, regarded as a poetic effort, is in the main not capable of either proof or disproof. Shakespeare says life's but a walking shadow, Shelley says it is like a dome of many coloured glass, Bergson says it is a shell which bursts into parts that are again shells. If you like Bergson's image better, it is just as legitimate. (Russell 1992, 336).

Neurath’s *Anti-Spengler* mirrors Russell’s critique of Bergson. While Russell accuses Bergson’s writings of being mere poetry, Neurath further adds that Spengler indulges in prophecy. Like Bergson, Spengler fails to admit that what he writes is mere poetry or prophecy, conceiving of it instead as a rationalistic exercise. Neurath’s phrasing parallels Russell’s when he juxtaposes Spengler with two other prophetic (instead of poetic) writers:

Dion of Prusa cried woe over his epoch and compared Athens with the funeral pyre of Patroclus which was merely waiting for the flames to light it; H. G. Wells, now in the style of past experience, now in grotesque exaggeration, painted pictures of our future; but Oswald Spengler, instructively diagnosing, conjures the traditional force of insight, instead of confronting men as a poet and visionary. Through method and proof he wants to compel our approval, wanting systematically to 'predetermine' history, to 'calculate' the future of the Occident and to settle from the outset what we might still successfully tackle in the way of art and science, technology and politics, in times to come. …Is his work poetry? No. Then what? In Spengler's own verdict: an impure solution. (Neurath 1973, 160).

Neither Bergson nor Spengler admit that what they present as theoretical insight, supposedly founded on proof and method, is in fact a mere aesthetic creation. Both Russell and Neurath would agree that, if we take what is offered in their work as pure poetry, then the urge to attempt to rationally determine its truth or falsehood would not even emerge. The problem with Spengler, in Neurath’s account, lies precisely in the type of knowledge claim involved in the presentation of his work as theoretical. Spengler is a pseudo-rationalist because he offers an impure mixture of poetry and theory. To overcome pseudo-rationalism, for Neurath, means to demonstrate this, and delineate between the two.

Neurath proceeds by attacking particular flawed positions defended by Spengler, showing when Spengler falls into specific factual errors and overgeneralisations. Neurath, however, acknowledges that Spengler’s work is presented in such a way as to easily elude the specificity of criticism via counterexamples. Neurath (1973) notes that by preferring vagueness over exactness ‘Spengler the sceptic has destroyed all means of criticism’ (206). As already noted, Spengler prioritizes what he calls ‘morphology’ over logic, thus eluding any objection that points to logical errors by claiming that the subject-matter ‘must be understood “morphologically”, not “logically”’ (206).

One of the overall problems with Spengler’s account, as diagnosed by Neurath, lies in his attempt to shed light on the entirety of a cultural ‘world’ that is historically contingent. Spengler attempts to describe the main general characteristics of the historical procession of such cultural worlds. In addition to Spengler’s inadequate account of specific cases, Neurath claims that there is also something inherently problematic about his overall description of cultural worlds which had managed to ‘seduce too many readers’ (206).

Neurath agrees with Spengler that we cannot fulfil Descartes’ project of freeing ourselves from all received opinion and beginning to build our knowledge from *tabula rasa*:

We have to make do with words and concepts that we find when our reflections begin. Indeed all changes of concepts and names again require the help of concepts, names, definitions and connections that determine our thinking. (Neurath 1973, 198).

There is no way to build our knowledge piece by piece from the ground up, as Descartes had imagined. We can only address individual concepts piecemeal. As Neurath points out, dealing with each particular concept in some way presupposes the remainder of our conceptual scheme. Thus a thinker who deals with one isolated concept is by necessity also concerned with the entire network of concepts on which each particular concept relies, though no thinker is able to survey the entire network of concepts simultaneously.

Neurath illustrates this basic point of his anti-foundationalist epistemology by using various analogies. The first analogy is that of a miner trying to illuminate a mine with a lamp; moving the lamp will illuminate a new section of the mine, but will also necessarily cast a previously illuminated section back into darkness. Though Neurath does not directly explain this, this first image can help us understand the motivation behind Spengler’s project. In Neurath’s analogy, Spengler’s popular appeal is due to his attempt to describe the entire mine all at once. Furthermore, Spengler attempts to demonstrate through such overall descriptions that there are multiple mines, completely different to one another. Neurath’s image also helps illustrate how Spengler’s project inevitably fails. Spengler is a pseudo-rationalist insofar as he does not admit that our knowledge of the mine is limited to those parts of it which have been illuminated up to now. The correct way to proceed would be by drawing connections among these parts, rather than by talking of the mine as a whole.

The second analogy Neurath (1973) employs is that of his famous image of a boat which is rebuilt while at sea:

We are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support. In this way, by using the old beams and driftwood, the ship can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction. (199).

This image of human knowledge is irreconcilable with Spengler’s relativism in that the changes, however radical, would not justify us in talking of two completely unconnected boats. The image of the boat implies a reliance of some change in our overall set of beliefs on some other parts of this set which remain at least temporarily unchanged. Neurath’s boat analogy implies a certain degree of continuity in our knowledge which is incompatible with Spengler’s radical historicism. The latter account of the history of Western civilization would require that, at various points in this history, the entire boat has been destroyed and another has been built from scratch in its place.

The above anti-foundationalist conception of epistemology does not, by itself, constitute an argument against Spengler. Nonetheless, Neurath deploys some connected arguments against Spengler’s focus on incommensurable differences between cultures. Spengler’s brand of relativism, for example, leads him towards the thought that ‘Truths exist only relatively to a definite kind of men’ (quoted in Neurath 1973, 199). This, Neurath suggests, can be even further radicalised in the following forms: ‘“Truths only exist relative to one definite individual” or more generally still: “relative to a moment”’ (199).

Influenced by similar cases discussed by the French conventionalists, Neurath develops a series of thought experiments in order to refute this type of relativism. He takes his initial cue from projective geometry, where the sentence ‘an A is determined by two Bs’ could equally well apply to the case in which ‘A’ is taken to mean ‘line’ and ‘B’ is taken to mean ‘point’, and vice versa, the case in which ‘A’ is taken to mean ‘point’ and ‘B’ is taken to mean ‘line’. Two speakers each accepting the opposite interpretation could go quite far in a debate without knowing that they mean different things by ‘A’ and ‘B’. Neurath expands this thought experiment by conceiving of the ‘very improbable assumption’ (201) of a series of colour-statements (and then also sound-statements) which function in a similar way. Neurath’s suggested solution to this improbable scenario involves using a colour atlas, which:

gives us the possibility to recognise colours again, and always to reproduce such colours by means of material objects (pigments laid on paper). This leaves open the possibility that in the course of time all men's colours simultaneously shift in the same way, without changing the order, so that the colour atlas would provide only such relative colours and not fix absolute ones. (201)

Neurath points out that, though there is no analogous device by which we could intersubjectively determine that we are talking about the same smells, such an atlas would not be conceptually impossible. A similar problem could arise concerning feelings (Neurath mentions the examples of ‘elation, awe, love, desire, fear of another person’ (201)).Neurath thinks that it is usually possible to securely and meaningfully communicate about not only colours, sounds, and smells, but also feelings and moods. The criterion which he employs for being able to communicate about feelings is that of the interlocutors having already experienced them in themselves. Thus ‘the problem of somehow putting oneself into other people's frame of mind always starts from the existence of some common features to which the rest is tied’ (202). Such common features would allow us to comprehend some aspect of a foreign culture that at first glance might seem incomprehensible:

We can put ourselves into the frame of mind of Africans at a mourning ceremony which on the face of it strikes us as grotesque or ludicrous, by thinking of some such ceremony that directly impresses us. One might try also to let the Africans' feelings arise within oneself directly. How far one succeeds in this and how far success can be tested, is another question. (202).

If Neurath’s claim here is true, this would push Spengler’s position about completely irreconcilable cultural worlds towards implausibility, since Spengler would have to argue that there are no such common features shared between two cultural worlds. Thus, even if Spengler were to adjust his position so as to maintain the view that the highly unlikely scenario taken from projective geometry applies to the differences between the cultures he discusses, Neurath has shown that there are ways to overcome even such extremes of cultural relativism.

Behind Spengler’s attempt to magnify the differences between cultural worlds, Neurath detects a radicalization of a doctrine concerning ‘Weltanschauungen’ (World-Views) popularized by earlier strands of *Lebensphilosophie*. Rather than attribute differences between cultures to specific features of those cultures (and thus allow for the possibility that other common features can mediate our understanding, as outlined above), Spengler considers cultural differences as differences in world-view. As Neurath points out, a milder version of this was already at work in Dilthey:

Dilthey’s writings easily lead one, prior to analysis of logical links and factual knowledge, to refer differences between thinkers too quickly to questions exclusively or predominantly concerning differences in their world-views. This further strengthens the tendency to break off explanations prematurely as hopeless, on the grounds that one world-feeling stands opposed to another world-feeling, instead of carefully examining whether everything has been done that can be settled independent of world-feeling.

The contrasts of world-view that remain when we consider all logical mistakes and factual errors as eliminated would stand beyond true or false. (203).

The mention of those differences in world-view that are not due to factual or logical disagreements (and thus are not demonstrable as true or false) is one among various features of Neurath’s critique of Spengler that, as we have already seen, subsequently became central to Carnap’s account of the overcoming of metaphysics. Furthermore, in common with Carnap, Neurath’s argument against Dilthey does not seem to amount to a complete rejection of this type of *Lebensphilosophie*, but rather an attempt to delimit the domain to which its claims pertain. Neurath is not suggesting that we completely reject the very notion of differences in *Weltanschauung*, but rather that we should first consider how much of what is supposed to be a differences in *Weltanschauung* can be expressed in terms of empirically testable statements, thus resolving at least parts of what Dilthey and Spengler would all too soon proclaim to be an irresolvable disagreement. The basic problem with Spengler’s so-called ‘morphological’ approach is that it ignores too many facts and details, and thus results in too many supposed differences in *Weltanschauung* as a result of overgeneralisations.

1. Concluding remarks

In this paper’s analysis of the responses of Carnap, Schlick, and Neurath, what has become clear is that there is no uniform Logical Empiricist stance against *Lebensphilosophie*. Instead, there are different specific attitudes towards particular authors. Specifically, we have seen Carnap and Schlick (among others) interpreting Nietzsche as a predecessor for Logical Empiricism and its project of overcoming metaphysics. The main theme of Russell’s criticism of Bergson runs through Neurath’s critique of Spengler and Carnap’s critique of Heidegger. While Neurath takes a more critical attitude towards Dilthey, Carnap links him to his critique of metaphysics. Finally, while Neurath’s and Schlick’s criticisms present Spengler’s overgeneralisations as incompatible with the Scientific World-Conception, Reichenbach and von Mises would pave the path towards the integration of his critique of causality into physics.

At first glance, the attitudes of Carnap, Schlick, and Neurath appear at odds with each other. While Neurath seems to take a stricter polemical stance, Carnap appears more moderate, while Schlick even talks of his own work as contributing to *Lebensphilosophie*. Given our above analysis, this divergence is partly explainable as a result of their attitudes towards particular philosophers. While Dilthey and Nietzsche can be interpreted as being compatible with the empirically-minded approach of the Scientific World-Conception, Spengler’s many mistakes and overgeneralisations can easily be shown to be results of a failure to adhere to empirical methods.

Our detailed analysis of the Vienna Circle’s various responses to Lebensphilosophie allows us to discern some common general themes. Chief among these is the persistent attempt to strictly demarcate the theoretical questions addressed by science from practical concerns. While Schlick’s early work maintains that scientific knowledge is a result of the Nietzschean ‘will to pleasure’, it is also is at pains to show how science must be in a certain sense autonomous from such practical demands. Carnap and Neurath address the same theme from different perspectives in their accounts of the relation between theory and poetry. Neurath, as we have seen, stresses the point against Spengler’s premature abandonment of scientific inquiry in reducing all disagreements to differences between worldviews. Obversely, Carnap focuses on criticising the metaphysical overextension of theory where only the expression of emotional attitudes is appropriate.

Both Carnap, Schlick, and Neurath respond to *Lebensphilosophie* by positioning it in terms of their conception of the relation between strictly-speaking philosophical enquiry and more artistic or poetic concerns. In all three cases, an attempt is made to establish a division between the two, though each thinker has a different way of approaching the division. Such differences reflect broader metaphilosophical and political divergences within the Vienna Circle that recent historiographical work has brought to the fore.

**Acknowledgements**

Variants of this paper were presented at the 2019 annual meeting of the Society for the Study of the History of Analytic Philosophy held at Boston University, and at the third TiLPS History of Analytic Philosophy Workshop held at Tilburg University. I am grateful to all those present at both meetings for questions, comments, suggestions, and encouragement; among others, I owe thanks to Jim Hutchinson, Mark Textor, Sandra Lapointe, Mathieu Marion, Thomas Uebel, Flavia Padovani, Yemima Ben-Menahem, as well as Demetris Portides. For their editorial work, I would like to thank Sander Verhaegh and Filip Buekens. All errors are my own.

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1. Examples include the story of analytic philosophy’s emergence in opposition to various idealist traditions, and subsequent divergence from, among others, Lebensphilosophie, Phenomenology, and Critical Theory; see e.g. Russell 1928 and 1946 (chapter 31); Dummett 1993;Dahms 1994;Friedman 2000; Vrahimis 2013; Baghramian and Marchetti 2018; Vrahimis 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. E.g. McCumber 2001, 77-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also Dahms 1994; O’Neil & Uebel 2004; Vrahimis (Forthcoming b). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See e.g. Neurath 1937. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It should be noted that most of Schlick’s early works were only published after the publication of Kusch (1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Many of the authors associated with Lebensphilosophie, from the nineteenth century and up to the interwar period, were not professional academics. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Though Ringer does not specify this, the work he seems to be referring to is Dilthey (1911, 31 & 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See e.g. Forman 1971; Kusch, 225-226. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rickert’s (1920) criticisms, primarily directed against philosophical fashions rather than the views of specific authors, contributed to the confusion around the reference of the term ‘Lebensphilosophie’. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The latter position is partly due to Ayer’s response to Carnap; see Vrahimis (Forthcoming a). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For an extended discussion of Carnap’s ‘modernist’ use of Nietzsche, see Sachs 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Partly in accord with Carnap’s interpretation, Nietzsche scholarship has recently discussed a middle ‘positivist’ period in Nietzsche’s thought; see e.g. Cohen 1999; Hussain 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See also Tuusvuori (2000, 159-161). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See also Mormann 2015. Waismann (1979) would later portray Schlick, in a manner similar to his own portrayal of Nietzsche, as having ‘two personalities’ (xvi), not only that of a technically-minded philosopher, but also that of a ‘frustrated poet’ (xv). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This is also supported by Schlick’s mention that ‘in my leisurely hours I have been occupied with working out a “Philosophy of Youth”’ (1979, 123) which is a projected (though never completed) continuation of the work he was engaged in through his discussion of the meaning of life (see also Waismann 1979, xvii). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Schlick (117) mentions that there are some activities to which no one can take this attitude, and which are deemed by him the sources of evil and unfreedom. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Both ‘play’ and ‘youth’ are dissociated by Schlick from their original uses, and transformed through new definitions into what Carnap would later call ‘metaphysical concepts’ (1959, 65-67)**.** ‘Youth’, like ‘play’, is redefined by Schlick to designate not a quantifiably measurable period in the process of aging, but rather a willingness to adopt a certain attitude of playfulness. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Lebensweisheit* had been less critical of this concept, and closes by conceiving of a future Übermensch living life as a game of love (Schlick 2006, 331). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Stadler (1991), in his contrast between heterogeneous positions found within the Vienna Circle, has pointed to Schlick’s criticism of Spengler’s brand of *Lebensphilosophie* in *Natur und Kultur* as one of the basic points of agreement with his fellow Vienna Circle members, and in particular with Neurath. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Contrasting Spengler’s position to others, Schlick notes that ‘even in Hegel history is the product of human volition’ (41-42). Elsewhere (48) he claims that the position he develops in *Natur und Kultur* approximates Hegel’s in many ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Schlick elsewhere (1952, 10) directly refers to Freud’s famous discussion of civilisation and discontent [Unbehagen]. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The theme of pseudo-rationalism as a lack of acknowledgement of the limitations of our possible insight for action is already developed in Neurath (1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)