

Der Wiener Kreis

M. Geier

July 28–29, 2017

Why the Wiener Kreis? Apart from the residence of its members? Neurath suggested the name for its positive connotations, such as Wienerwalz, Wienerwald, Wienerbrot. And Wien was of course somewhat exotic, after 1871 a German outpost outside Germany, part of an ancient empire on the eastern outskirts of Europe, once even threatened by Muslim conquest. The Habsburg empire, was a multinational conglomeration, before the notion became fashionable, and as such riddled with contradictions, old-fashioned and modern at the same time, an authoritarian monarchy yet liberal. It was thoroughly Catholic, and as such a counterweight to Prussian Lutheranism¹ which it resented. Traditionally the most powerful of the states of the Holy German Reich, it had seen its supremacy wane during the 19th century and its influence on the German states come to an end in 1866, after a humiliating defeat at the hands of Prussian troops, and a subsequent rearrangement as a dual monarchy the K. u. K. It was German of course but still not German², yet it partook of the great cultural and scientific advance made manifest in Germany during the 19th century, when Germany became the more or less undisputed authority as to science and technology, a position, be it progressively more and more threatened, it would uphold until the 1930's. German thoroughness, not to say pedantry would be a catchword, sometimes uttered with respect, more often by derision, in general discourse. The fact was that it boasted a number of high-class universities, more than any other country, and the vision of Wilhelm Humboldt, as to what a university, really should be had tremendous influence, not the least in the United States. The student population may not always have been a paradigm of virtue, and there was much drinking and carousing coupled with rowdy behavior, yet out of it emerged an academic elite, much abetted by the tradition of freedom, which entailed moving from one university to another³. Of course the Austrian lands were part of it all in an era when movement across national borders were still rather unproblematic, yet there were some important differences, according to the author. In German reigned the idealistic tradition in philosophy, starting with Kant, then continued by Hegel and Schopenhauer, and a hoist of lesser, but equally earnest names⁴. This was

¹ The Hohenzollerns at the reigns of the Brandenburgian and later Prussian dynasty were actually Calvinists, but of course part of the Protestant fold and reaction.

² Due to its cosmopolitan make-up, in which the Germans constituted a minority, it was more or less disqualified to unify a German reich based on ethnic uniformity.

³ Something that is nowadays emulated by the post-doc system, but such mobility comes too late when people are already entrenched in their careers.

⁴ This is of course a simplification, to list Kant with Hegel would make Popper turn in his grave, after all Kant really belongs to the British empirical tradition, having Hume as one of his most important influences; and Schopenhauer was along with Kirkegaard a very vocal and strident opponent of Hegel, but of course they shared a high-minded spirit when it came to philosophy which was liable to go to the

not to the taste of the Catholic Habsburgers, and hence the idealistic philosophy did not get such a dominating control in Austria as it had in Germany, in fact the authorities cherished opponents of the Lutheran (and Prussian) Kant, thereby unwittingly nourishing vipers at their breast. It also meant that there was an opportunity for scientists to venture into philosophy, and those brought a no-nonsense, scientific attitude towards the field. Metaphysics had its heyday in Germany during the 19th century, of course there had been grand metaphysicists before, as anyone halfway versed in the history of philosophy knows very well, but before it had been individual endeavors, now it had become an academic institution. Thus it was natural for there to be a back-lash and an outright rejection of metaphysics. On one hand we had the practical 'yankees' with C.S. Pierce and William James (whom the author does not mention) with their pragmatism⁵, on the other hand we have scientists like Mach and Boltzmann who were by dint of their professions and accomplishments, able to forcefully present a scientific perspective⁶. Serious philosophers, witnessing the success of the natural sciences, regretted the muddle in which philosophy had found itself in, with endless and fruitless quarrels among themselves. The natural explanation was the lack of clear and generally accepted definitions without which any sensible discussion is impossible and hence any progress. This would provide an important theme for the Wiener Kreis, Already Kant rallied against the metaphysicians, and in modern argot, their unfalsifiable doctrines, which hence could flower, if not necessarily blossom, in bewildering profusion. If there is one thing that Kant is generally known for it is his 'Das Ding an sich' which he claimed was unknowable, but which was later seen as a metaphysical notion. Mach's program was radical, he wanted to throw away anything metaphysical, such as 'Das Ding an sich' and relegate all scientific theories as mere convenient fictions without any ontological basis, and only retain direct sensory data. This is known as the instrumental approach, of which the French mathematical physicist Poincaré was a distinguished proponent, (if not quite as radical as Mach whose denial of the physical existence of atoms is legendary), claiming that the choice between Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry was not a physical one. Now, as Popper has remarked, this does not differ essentially from the idealism of a Berkeley, if not as elegantly expressed, and by totally rejecting 'Das Ding an sich' it leaves the door wide open to solipsism⁷. However, philosophical reflections on physics proved to be essential at the time, as modern

extreme.

⁵ To be exact pragmatism and pragmatism respectively, Pierce a more subtle and profound thinker than his friend and colleague James, took exception to the easygoing adoption of the latter of his own approach, and changed the term.

⁶ Pierce was no mean scientist himself, although of course not on the same level as his Austrian counterparts, while James laid the ground work for a scientific psychology, as opposed to the more fanciful approaches of Freud and Jung, but was in scientific matters a more amateur, as the whole discipline of psychology was in a very undeveloped state, and his great achievement was to bring about a general synthesis, drawing on the works of mostly German experimental physiologists, Fechner and Weber being two typical representatives.

⁷ I discovered solipsism on my own in my mid-teens, as many proto-philosophers that age no doubt do, as I pondered the question how I could be sure that there was something beyond my sense perception? The idea was a very scary one, and I found comfort in the thought that it might only been emerging

physics underwent a profound revolution at the turn of the century. One source was the empirical discovery of radioactivity, the other was Einstein's relativity theory. For the latter philosophical thinking of the meaning of absolute time and space, as Mach had engaged in, turned out to have been very inspirational for Einstein, whose theory was in fact a purely cerebral creation, and constitutes a beautiful mathematical edifice. With the ramifications of radioactivity it was different. Those eventually led to quantum theory for which there is no satisfying philosophical interpretation, in spite of valiant efforts⁸, but remains in a philosophical muddle, although the practical applications far exceed those of relativity theory⁹. Relativity theory and Quantum Mechanics are not compatible, and there has been in recent decades heroic efforts to bring about a synthesis, a so called TOE ('Theory of Everything') through modern string theory. This is physics as pure mathematics, following in the dictum of Dirac, that a beautiful mathematical explanation trumps inconvenient empirical findings (and Dirac was always vindicated, experimental results always eventually coming around to his point of view). The result was a purely cerebral construction with no real connection to the physical world as such, and hence not even wrong. But this is going almost a century ahead of time and with no direct relevance, except possibly retroactive, to the Vienna Circle.

So why Vienna? Could this movement in philosophy not have happened in Paris, Oxbridge or in any of the Ivy League institutions on the American East coast instead? As noted Vienna and by implication Eastern Europe was not a scientific backwater as it would become after the Second World War, a fact which is obscured by the predominating western perspective of modern society. The result is the quaintness the notion now engenders. The mixture of modernity and an old reactionary empire¹⁰, hard-headed discussions conducted in coffee houses with whipped cream and livred waiters with the clatter of hoofs outside. In fact philosophy conducted in the Wienerwald, to the tune of Wienerwalzes and the imbibing of Wienerbrot. This makes for an intriguing and slightly exotic surface, whose gossipy delineation is the purpose of Sigmund's book, while that of the present promises initially at least to be more factual ('sachlich') and thus probe a bit deeper into the actual philosophies, yet in the end, not managing to probe much deeper than Sigmund. But after all both books are intended for a wider readership, intended more to whet your appetite than to satisfy it, and as such being open-ended. One is also struck with the great overlap. To some extent this is unavoidable addressing a fairly narrow topic, but it goes beyond the inevitable, or at least expected. That could mean a variety of things, on one extreme that both authors draw on the same secondary sources, and on the other, that indeed what we find in both books are the essentials, the most interesting and relevant teased out of a large corpus, and further research would not unearth much new and interesting. In short

madness on my part. Some years later I encountered it in books, along with the terminology, which was another comfort, but by that time the initial terror had mostly faded away.

⁸ On thinks of the Copenhagen interpretation. More intriguingly as an indication that reality is far more complicated than biologically evolved human cognition can fathom

⁹ it is notable that Newtonian mechanics is sufficient for space travel.

¹⁰ As noted, especially by Musil, the Habsburg empire was riddled by contradictions, in particular as a multi-ethnic state it still serves as an exemplar when it comes to fair and benign government in providing services, something that after the fall of the wall became fashionable to nostalgize about.

what you get is what is worth knowing.

Reading two closely related accounts brings presumably certain pedagogical benefits. The stereoscopic vision adds depth, or at least the illusion of such, and consolidates your memory. It is well-known that in order to get the most of a lecture or an account, you should know most of the material already, in mathematical jargon, a dense open set, so you could concentrate on the compactification. Thus the remainder of this review will be mostly a repetition of the previous, and in recollection the separate identities of the two books will invariably blur.

As noted the influence of Mach was crucial to the movement (Sigmund also emphasizes Boltzmann, whom Meier mostly ignores) but also the example of Einstein who can be seen to have acted as a good fairy. There was a precursor to it, namely an informal discussion club, indeed meeting in coffee houses, but later on when the whole thing became more formal, they met at one of the lecture rooms of the university. There are four central characters: The mathematician Hahn, the social scientist Neurath, and Carnap and Schlick both German and philosophers with a background in mathematics and physics (Schlick had in fact been the star student of Max Planck and won the accolades of Einstein in his presentation of relativity theory, before he turned his attention and ambition to philosophy, while Carnap had actually matriculated academically writing a thesis on philosophy), Such hard-headed backgrounds were a prerequisite for being accepted¹¹. In fact Schlick were handpicked for the leadership by Hahn and Neurath, wanting to look for guidance from a professional philosopher, and Vienna could not provide any of the right calibre. To set up Schlick on a Vienna chair was a crucial (and non-trivial) move, without which the movement would never have gotten off the ground. As a philosophical administrator, Schlick was superbly cut out for the job, and with his assassination the movement was in practice dead, although by the emigration of the remaining members, it would exercise a lot of influence, especially on American philosophy after the war, in spite of the disparagement it has suffered in retrospect. Now the truly fascinating aspect of the circle was how it fit in and related to the wider cultural milieu of Vienna at the time¹², and by extension the world at large. In addition to Mach, Meier brings forth Bolzano and Bretano as non-Kantian influences¹³ without making use of it later. Among the members at the margin one should

¹¹ One can wonder about Neurath in this context, whose background appears softer, but I guess he made up for it by sheer pluck.

¹² My introduction to this phenomenon was back in the mid-seventies, when 'Wittgensteins Vienna' made a splash. Wittgenstein I had of course heard of before in connection with Russell who was a teen-age idol, but not Loos, Kraus and Musil. Klimt I must have known about at least vaguely, but I discovered Schiele at the Belvedere at a visit in the summer of 1975. Schönberg I must likewise have heard about, but in the book all those characters came together.

¹³ Bolzano I first came across in the theorem of Bolzano-Weierstrass, only much later learning that he was foremost a philosopher. The Swedish philosopher Anders Wedberg compares him to Kant, in his three volume survey of philosophy. In Bolzano everything is laid out very clearly, while in Kant you get lost in a jungle. However, the authors sympathies lie with the latter, as far more exciting, just the way that wilderness is superior to a formal garden. That Kant is a wilderness anyone can testify to who has tried to read him (malicious commentators even claim that German philosophers consult English translations when they get stuck).

mention the mathematicians Redemeister and Menger and especially Gödel (considered a philosopher among mathematicians, and a mathematician among philosophers), but foremost of all Wittgenstein. Schlick took to him lock, stock and barrel, while Neurath viewed him with contempt as a mere metaphysician.¹⁴ To an outsider it is indeed hard to believe that those no-nonsense philosophers, would along with Russell and the Cambridge school, take his 'Tractatus', written in an oracular and self-parodied style¹⁵, so seriously. Carnap was influenced by him, but later it came to a break, Wittgenstein being very touchy. The actual (physical) connection between Wittgenstein and the circle was slight. In both books the efforts to seduce him to join the meetings are recounted at some lengths. Anyway the connection did bring about a reawakening in Wittgenstein of his former philosophical interest, embarking him on his second career as a philosopher¹⁶. Wittgenstein eventually broke with the Circle, as to be expected, but in my opinion, he had a detrimental influence, as he had on philosophy at large, with the ensuing emphasis on language and language games, which in the words of Russell reduced philosophy to some kind of parlor game¹⁷. Karl Popper on the other hand never broke with the circle, for the simple reason that he had never been part of it (in vain he tried to evade the accusations hurled at him by the likes of Adorno and Habermas that he was nothing but a logical positivist out of the Vienna Circle), in fact he was reportedly never invited to their meetings, although his interests and concerns were very much in line with theirs. In fact the Circle was open in principle to anyone one who had a scientific 'Weltanschauung' and Popper fitted the bill to a 'T'. He and Carnap were even friends of sorts, certainly very close philosophically, although much to the concern of the latter, Popper made everything to emphasize the distance. Popper was even seen, at least by Carnap, as the official opposition. Yet in the end there would be a definite split, and Popper would see himself as the one who gave the movement its death-knell.

Schlitz spoke of a 'Wendung' in philosophy, whose lack of progress since antiquity was a source of deep concern. Philosophy should simply be more scientific, and thus make real progress advancing ahead as the other sciences. Russell did speak about advancement of philosophy, but by amputation. A scientific discipline typically started as philosophical speculation, but when it became more mature it became a discipline on its own and chopped off from the philosophical stem. Similar sentiments were expressed by Popper when he refused to disparage metaphysics but saw it as a proto-science. Nevertheless Schlitz did not have in mind a mere aping of science, he was well aware that philosophy was very different. The purpose of philosophy is not to produce facts, as in science, or theorems as in mathematics, but to clarify the meanings of those fact, theorems as well

¹⁴ Whenever Tractatus was discussed line by line, Neurath dismissed it as mere metaphysics. It was suggested to him that in order to shorten his comments he should just shout 'M' instead, while he soon realized that it would be even more effective to simply utter non-M, the few times that was justified.

¹⁵ In my essay on the work I adopt for satirical reasons his decimal numbering system

¹⁶ One may even pinpoint this 'Wendung' in his life as occurring when he was dragged to a lecture given by the Dutch intuitionist Brouwer.

¹⁷ R.G.Collingwood a vocal opponent of the prevailing analytic philosophy voiced similar concern, regretting the passing of the time when the study of philosophy was meant to build character and prepare an individual for the challenges of life, and not a petty concern with mere technicalities.

as concepts and questions that we used and put¹⁸. Now what did it really mean to make philosophy more scientific? It meant foremost to rid it of all metaphysical garbage, to purify its language, and only allow statements which had meanings. And what did that mean? Simply that the meaning of a sentence is found in the method to be used in order to verify it. Metaphysical statements were not (even) wrong, they were just meaningless and had no place in a sober discourse. Now this is very close to Popper's notion of falsifiability. It is tempting to claim that what fundamentally distinguishes Popper from the logical positivists is that he does not believe in ultimate verification, and I have in the past been tempted to do so. However, things are not so simple, the logical positivists were no fools, and indeed in young Ayers book on Logic and Language, whose purpose it was to introduce the ideas of logical positivism to British philosophers, he does acknowledge falsifiability. I do believe now that the distinction is secondary and the spirit is the same as when it comes to clarification, but of course in the only systematic presentation of the philosophy of the Vienna Circle working it out from first principles is to be found in the works of Carnap, where I suspect he takes verification literally, and the whole edifice eventually peters out. So in that sense Popper, whether he cherished it or not, is the true heir of the Vienna Circle, true to his dictum taken from Thales, that a disciple should not uncritically adopt the teachings of his master but criticize and improve.

Hahn died in 1934, and two years later Schlick was shot. The assassination did not come as a bolt from the sky, as both authors point out that indeed Schlick had been pursued by the perpetrator and been threatened by death, threats taken seriously enough to give police protection, which, however, were to prove inadequate¹⁹. In the book by Meier, the actual shooting is described in some detail, while Sigmund dispenses with such gory details. Neurath had exiled himself first to Holland and then in 1940 managed an escape (and subsequent internment as an enemy alien) to England, where he with characteristic energy started from scratch, devoting himself to this project of direct visual communication (sidestepping the ad hoc signs of regular languages). He reportedly died laughing (in the middle of it, not laughing as a result of his dying) at the end of the War. Only Carnap of the inner circle survived into modern history.

Was logical positivism so bad after all? Is it to be seen as a dead-end, discarded on the dust-heap of human intellectual history. Taken literally of course, it has been superseded, but even that is an acknowledgment of success, because few philosophical theories are actually amenable to improvement. The need for it has not gone away, and as such it provides not only a sentimental inspiration for future generations.

July 30, August 5-6, 2017

¹⁸ I am fond of characterizing philosophy as the poetry of science, meant in an appreciative way, but not so received by professional philosophers

¹⁹ Schlick would have needed the protection accorded Salman Rushdie, but such resources were not available, and had not been available to Rushdie either but for his status as an international celebrity something Schlick obviously never attained.