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4 Columbia Naturalism and the Analytic Turn: Eclipse or Synthesis?

Abstract: Historical reconstructions of the effects of the intellectual migration are typically informed by one of two conflicting narratives. Some scholars argue that the logical positivists contributed to the demise of distinctly American schools of thought. Others reject this "eclipse view" and argue that analytic philosophy can best be characterized as a synthesis of American and positivist views. This paper studies the fate of one of the most influential schools of U.S. philosophy—Columbia naturalism—and argues that both narratives are part of a larger story. First, I reconstruct the rise of the school, focusing on its naturalist analyses of science, morality, and religion. Next, I trace some of the naturalists' contacts with German philosophers and show that they encountered a bifurcation between historical and scientific philosophy in their discussions. I argue that a similar distinction gradually infected debates between naturalists, eventually resulting in a split within the Columbia school itself. The historically-oriented naturalists were overshadowed by the analytic movement, while the science-minded naturalists incorporated the views of the émigrés, thereby developing the tradition in new directions.

4.1 Introduction

A philosopher's centennial is usually an occasion for reflection and commemoration. But when Columbia University organized the John Dewey Centenary in 1959, the participants had little to celebrate. Dewey's school had played a central role in the development of American thought but most participants realized that Columbia's department of philosophy had lost "the enviable position it once held."[1] Though most Columbia philosophers were direct students of Dewey, the school had become badly split not even seven years after his death. Speakers at the event tried to keep the ceremony "publicly solemn"—commemorating Dewey's

Note: I thank Fons Dewulf for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1 "Dewey Centenary Commemorated," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, October 21, 1959; "Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Promotion of George Kline," ca. May 1959, Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs records, Series I. Office Files, 1939–2006, Columbia University Archives (hereafter, CUA-OVPR), Box 9, Folder 6.

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111335209-006

"philosophy of growth" and "democratic faith in human nature"—but privately complained about the "backbiting and conniving" behind the scenes.[2]

The causes of the conflict were many. An internal report commissioned by Columbia president Grayson Kirk describes a number of tensions and disagreements within the school. In addition to several "long-standing" and "fairly deep-seated personality conflicts," the professors disagreed about the department's hiring policy. Most philosophers preferred to appoint Columbia students trained in the naturalist tradition but a small group of professors, led by Ernest Nagel, believed this policy had led to intellectual inbreeding and preferred to "invite outsiders who … represent philosophical positions other than [our] own."[3] The most important source of conflict, however, was the future of philosophy itself. Most Columbia philosophers worried about the growing popularity of logical positivism and affiliated schools of analytic philosophy. They were convinced that philosophical problems are human problems and that it is misleading to address those questions in a strict analytic vacuum, divorced from any cultural-historical context. Historical instead of logical analysis ought to be the "very essence of … philosophy" since philosophical ideas emerge in specific communities in specific historical periods (Randall 1939, 83). Irwin Edman disqualified the positivists' "formalisms" as "barren" and "divorced from a subject-matter" and John Herman Randall Jr. said that there was no philosophical position to which he was "more opposed than the one known as 'analysis'."[4] Their opponents, however, sympathized with the analytic approach and felt that the department overemphasized "historical philosophy."[5] They believed that the "vigorous and technically precise" methods of the logical empiricists could be "salutary stimuli" to the Columbia school (Nagel 1956, xii) and urged the department to hire more philosophers with a background in logic and philosophy of science.

This paper investigates the split within Columbia's department of philosophy through the lens of the intellectual migration. Philosophical reconstructions of the

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2 "Dewey Centenary Commemorated", *Columbia Daily Spectator*, October 21, 1959; Sidney Hook to Ernest Nagel, October 12, 1959, Ernest Nagel Papers, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh (hereafter, ENP-ASP), Box 3, Folder 34; Hook to Nagel, October 20, 1959, ENP-ASP, Box 3, Folder 34.

3 "Report of the Committee on the Future Planning of the Philosophy Department," May 25, 1960, Office of the President records, Series I: Central Files, 1895–1971, Columbia University Archives (hereafter, CUA-OPR), Box 379, Folder 20; "Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Promotion of George Kline," OVPR, Box 9, Folder 6.

4 Edman (1941, 562); Randall to Hook, October 25, 1951, Sidney Hook Papers, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University (hereafter, SHP), 22.09. See also Jewett (2011).

5 "Report of the Committee on the Future Planning of the Philosophy Department," CUA-OPR, Box 379, Folder 20.

effects of the migration are typically shaped by one of two conflicting narratives. Some historians argue that European refugees, in particular the logical positivists, contributed to the demise of distinctly American schools of thought. They believe that U.S. pragmatists, realists, idealists, and naturalists developed a unique and refined philosophical culture that was simply eclipsed by the overly technical, analytic approach of the exiled empiricists in the 1930s and 1940s (Thayer 1968, 559). Others have argued that this "eclipse narrative is demonstrably false" and emphasize the *continuities* between European and American schools of thought. Prominent postwar philosophers such as Hilary Putnam and W. V. Quine, they argue, were influenced by *both* pragmatism and logical empiricism and used this dual heritage to create a fruitful new approach to philosophy (Talisse 2007, 133). This paper studies the impact of the intellectual migration on the Columbia naturalists and argues that both narratives are part of a larger story. First, I reconstruct the rise of the Columbia school, focusing on its analyses of science, morality, and religion as well as its contributions to the history of ideas (sections 4.2 – 4.3). Next, I trace some of the naturalists' contacts with German philosophers and show that they encountered a strong bifurcation between historical and scientific philosophy in their discussions (sections 4.4 – 4.5). Finally, I argue that a similar distinction gradually infected debates between naturalists, eventually resulting in a split within Columbia's department itself (sections 4.6 – 4.7). The historically-oriented naturalists, I argue, were overshadowed by the analytic movement, whereas the science-minded naturalists were able to incorporate the views of the émigrés, thereby developing the tradition in new directions.

4.2 Woodbridge and Dewey

The story of the Columbia naturalists starts in 1902, when the department appointed F. J. E. Woodbridge to replace Nicholas Murray Butler, who had just been elected president of the university. Butler had built a department which aimed to replace "dogmatic philosophy" with "historical, critical, and interpretative teaching" and relate its study "to the results of modern scientific research."[6] Woodbridge perfectly fit the profile because he combined a science-minded philosophy with a historical approach. He had studied with the German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus and was known for defending a realist metaphysics at a time when U.S. philosophy was dominated by idealism. He believed that modern philosophy was built on a

6 "The Department of Philosophy at Columbia," *Columbia University Quarterly*, December 1901, 143 – 144. Butler also identified a third aim, viz. to apply "philosophy … to the subject of education."

misleading dichotomy between subject and object, or man and nature, and was convinced that recent scientific results challenged such dualist modes of thinking. Yet he was also well-versed in the history of philosophy and took much inspiration from Aristotle, whom he interpreted as a "sober naturalist" who could help twentieth-century philosophers "transcend the assumptions of modern philosophy" (Randall 1957, 117, 128). In 1904, Woodbridge and his colleague J. M. Cattell created *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* (later *Journal of Philosophy*). The periodical was modeled after German science journals and became an important venue for publications of the Columbia school during its heydays in 1930s.[7]

Dewey followed Woodbridge to Columbia shortly after the publication of the first issue of the journal. The philosopher and educational reformer had had a conflict at the University of Chicago and Cattell was quick to see that he would be a major asset to the department. "Scarcely anything … so favorable to our work in philosophy, psychology and education" could have happened, Cattell wrote in a letter to Butler, correctly predicting that Dewey's arrival would have an "appreciable effect on the influence and prestige of the university."[8] Dewey, unlike Woodbridge, had started out as an idealist but had gradually "drifted away from Hegelianism," replacing his speculative approach with a "biological" one in the 1890s.[9] In his seminal address "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy," Dewey explained how the evolutionary framework had transformed his perspective on "the logic of knowledge" (Dewey 1909, 2). Whereas traditional philosophy rests on a "logic of the changeless, the final, and the transcendent," the Darwinian logic had led him to forswear inquiry into wholesale essences and to replace it with questions of how particular changes serve concrete purposes (Dewey 1909, 7). Just as a species is not a fixed and final kind but a constantly adapting entity responding to environmental changes and contingent selective pressures, the philosopher is not in the business of answering divine, immutable questions but responding to specific queries raised by our evolving society and body of scientific knowledge.

Together, Woodbridge and Dewey built the Columbia school, though they rarely identified as "naturalists" at first. In the early 1900s, philosophers still associated the label with crude reductionist theories, defining naturalism as the view that "mental and moral processes may be reduced to the terms and categories of the natural sciences" (Dewey 1901, 139–140). Yet much of the opposition to the

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7 "The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods," Journal of Philosophy Correspondence, 1892–1943 (hereafter, JPC), Box 1, Folder "James."

8 Cattell to Butler, April 26, 1904, CUA-OPR, Box 320, Folder 7.

9 Dewey (1930, 20); Dewey to Robet, May 2, 1911, (*Correspondence*, no. 01991).

label evaporated after the publication of George Santayana's *The Life of Reason* (1905–06), which developed a naturalist but non-reductive theory about man's place in the universe. Dewey first described his philosophy as an "empirical naturalism" in the second edition of *Experience and Nature* (Dewey 1925, 1) and Woodbridge called for "a thoroughgoing naturalism" in an address titled "The Nature of Man" (1932).[10] While traditional religions and modern philosophers try to *separate* man and nature by appealing to the transcendent or the supernatural, Woodbridge maintained, we should not believe that we are an "exception in the natural history of the world." In the face of our best scientific discoveries, "it has become intellectually impossible to believe that man is not a natural being in the same sense as animals, plants, and atoms" (Woodbridge 1932, 86, 89). It is the naturalist's job to investigate how humanity's evolving ideas and values both shape and are shaped by their cultural, social, and historical environments. In doing so, philosophers have "no private store of knowledge or methods for attaining truth" but must utilize "the best available knowledge of [their] time and place," such that their "road is the subject-matter of natural existence as science discovers and depicts it" (Dewey 1925, 408).

4.3 The Columbia School

Through Woodbridge and Dewey's influence, the Columbia school gradually developed into something more than just a loose collection of philosophers. By 1931, the department employed a substantial number of professors and instructors—Herbert W. Schneider, Edman, Randall, Horace L. Friess, Richard McKeon, James Gutmann, Corliss Lamont, and Nagel—who identified as naturalists and were direct students of the two.[11] At this point, Columbia naturalism had become more than a philosophical view about man's place in the universe. It was at once an intellectual stance, a worldview, and an emancipatory movement. The second generation typically classified naturalism as an intellectual "temper" or as a disposition to understand every branch of human behavior—scientific inquiry, moral deliberation, social interaction, artistic expression, and religious experience—as a natural phenomenon (Nagel 1931, ii; Edman 1935; Randall 1944, 355). Dewey's philosophical

10 Ironically, it may have been Santayana's accusation that Dewey's position constituted only a "half-hearted and short-winded" naturalism that led the Columbia philosopher to embrace the label. See Santayana (1925, 680) and Dewey (1927).

11 "Department Budget 1931–32," Coss to Butler, November 3, 1930, CUA-OPR, Box 343, Folder 8. Some of Dewey's students who would come to play an important role in the naturalist school—most notably Sidney Hook—had positions elsewhere in New York. See also Jewett (2011).

studies had always been intertwined with his progressive political agenda and work on educational reform, and many of his students followed him in his footsteps. Hook was involved in the American Workers Party and advocated the role of science in education, arguing that "method should be central in educational activity" (Hook 1946). Randall was one of the signatories of the humanist manifesto (Kurtz 1973). Nagel regularly published in progressive journals and was convinced that the ideals realized through scientific inquiry "are also the ideals which are indispensable to the successful operation of any society of free men" (Nagel 1954, 306). And Friess and Schneider worked on the cross-section between naturalism and religion, pioneering the empirical study of religious movements (Friess and Schneider 1932). The 1944 volume *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, often viewed as a manifesto of the school, served as joint public statement on the multifaceted aims of naturalism, displaying, in Randall's words, "a community of temper, of method, and even of general outlook, rather remarkable in any group of writers so crotchety and individualistic as professional philosophers" (Krikorian 1944; Randall 1944, 355).

Yet the naturalists were not just known for their progressive politics and systematic studies of science, morality, art, and religion. The school was equally famous for its work in the *history* of ideas. Combining Dewey's adaptationist perspective on the origin of philosophical problems with Woodbridge's attempts to use history to free philosophy from its dualist dogmas, many naturalists presupposed a genetic approach to the study of philosophy. "If men's minds are a mosaic or palimpsest of belief upon belief," Randall wrote in *The Making of the Modern Mind*, "it is of the highest importance that they understand the life-history of those beliefs, why they are there, and whether they are justified in being there" (Randall 1926, 6). Many second-generation naturalists had written dissertations on historical figures such as Schleiermacher (Friess), Spinoza (McKeon), Aristotle (Edel), and Schelling (Gutmann), or were known for their contributions to the history of philosophy (Randall 1926; Edman 1928; Hook 1936; Schneider 1946). The "Columbia school" was celebrated for its "historical studies" (Murphy 1937) and published several volumes of their *Studies in the History of Ideas* series (1918–1935). Even Nagel, who would come to play an important role in contesting Columbia's emphasis on "historical philosophy," published a host of papers on the history of logic because he believed that the discipline's problems will be "more persuasive" if we examine the context in which they emerged (Nagel 1979, 196; Mormann 2021).

The Columbia naturalists, in sum, challenged many dichotomies that were taken for granted at the turn of the century. Not only did they reject deeply-engrained philosophical distinctions between man and nature, subject and object, or self and society, they also aimed to integrate the study of philosophy and its his-

tory. Dewey, Woodbridge, and their students saw historical work as integral to philosophical inquiry because philosophical problems are contingent problems that emerge in specific historical contexts. It is deeply ironic, therefore, that the school eventually split into two factions itself: one which viewed philosophy as a humanistic discipline and emphasized the role of "historical philosophy" and one which saw it as a scientific field and focused on what they called "theoretical or 'creative' philosophy."[12] It were the naturalists' encounters with German philosophers that helped put this distinction on the philosophical agenda.

4.4 Hook's Year in Europe

The Columbia school worked in relative isolation during the first years of its existence. While German philosophy had had a major impact on American thought in the late nineteenth century, the First World War hampered international communication for more than a decade. Academics from allied countries organized a boycott on German scholarship and banned their former colleagues from international conferences until the mid-1920s.[13] Only at the World Congress of Philosophy in 1924, international communication started to be restored. Guido Della Valle, president of the organization committee, listed the "renewal of friendly relations" as one of the event's important goals as only "national or interallied" congresses had been organized for such a long period (Della Valle 1924, 391). A year later, American academia reinstated the tradition to have its most talented scholars travel to Europe for a year of study when the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation launched its now famous fellowship program to foster "international understanding."[14]

Sidney Hook was the first product of the Columbia school to be awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. In 1928–29, he spent an academic year in the Weimar Republic to write a "philosophic history of the period from Hegel to Marx with emphasis on the social and political forces which controlled the evolution of ideas."[15] Hook

12 "Report of the Committee on the Future Planning of the Philosophy Department," CUA-OPR, Box 379, Folder 20.

13 By "labeling a conception, a policy, or a mode of conduct 'German'," Frank Thilly wrote a few years after the end of the conflict, philosophers were able "to put the quietus on it: whatever was German was wrong" (Thilly 1920, 185). On the boycott, see Grundmann (1965) and Cock (1983). On Dewey's response to German philosophy during the war, see Dewey (1915) and, for a discussion, Campbell (2004).

14 *New York Times*, February 23, 1925.

15 Guggenheim Foundation to Hook, March 13, 1928, SHP, 16.18

was both a student of Dewey and a committed Marxist and was convinced that there are strong similarities between their views. Both Dewey and Marx had started their careers as left-Hegelians but gradually came to naturalize the dialectic in order to do justice to the philosophical implications of Darwinism (Hook 1935, 224). To the extent that they were different, Hook believed, "dialectical materialism must take its cues from the scientific pragmatism of Dewey" (Hook 1928, 154). The New York philosopher felt that his reading of Marx would open the door to a more democratic and more American version of socialism, which he tried to implement through his activities for the American Workers Party in the early 1930s. Dewey, in turn, was impressed by Hook's work and viewed him as "one of the most promising students" he had met in "forty years of teaching."[16] He regularly consulted his protégé on philosophical questions and told a former colleague that he almost felt ready to retire as Hook had "not only got the point but sees many implications I hadn't."[17]

Hook arrived in the Weimar Republic in July 1928 and spent most of his year in university libraries to study archival material concerning the development of Marx. Yet his correspondence reveals that he was equally interested in contemporary philosophical developments in the German-speaking world.[18] Throughout the year, Hook audited courses and visited a large number of philosophers in Munich, Berlin, Heidelberg, Bonn, Cologne, and Frankfurt, summarizing his findings in a paper ("A Personal Impression of Contemporary German Philosophy") in *Journal of Philosophy.* As one of the first such accounts from a scholar steeped in the "methods and traditions" of American philosophy (Hook 1930a, 141), the paper played an important role in shaping Columbia's reception of postwar German philosophy in the years after the boycott.

Hook's paper and correspondence reveals that he was deeply disappointed with recent developments in German philosophy. Although he was impressed with the "dramatic quality" of the lectures he audited (Hook 1930a, 150), he was disturbed by the philosophers' ignorance about science and logic. Even at the University of Berlin, where Einstein and Schrödinger had been revolutionizing physics, philosophers were indifferent and sometimes even outright hostile to the activities of their colleagues in the natural sciences (Hook 1930a, 147). In letters to his friend Ernest Nagel, Hook complained that there was "really very little" to

16 Dewey, Recommendation letter, February 4, 1926, SHP, 174.4.

17 Dewey to G. H. Mead, cited in Levine (1989, vii); Phelps (1997, 29).

18 See in particular the 34 letters and postcards Hook sent to Nagel between July 1928 and August 1929 (ENP-ASP, Box 3, Folders 10–11) and the 32 postcards sent to his family (SHP 3.12 and 133.16).

be gained from listening to German philosophers as most of them had "no interest in logical analysis and critical thinking":

> The longer I stay here the more contemptuous do I become of current philosophy in Germany … It seems … that the technical philosophers in evaluating a man's capacities, put down to his credit whatever historical philosophy he knows and then *subtract* his knowledge of math, physics and logic to get the total.[19]

The problems of philosophy, Hook complained, were almost exclusively "presented in terms of their history, not in terms of their logic" (Hook 1930a, 145).

Hook was particularly disappointed with the development of phenomenology, without doubt Germany's most dominant school of philosophy at the time. He had always admired Husserl for his work on the philosophy of logic but discovered that the Freiburg professor had turned to a transcendental-idealist position in the 1920s. In a letter to Nagel, Hook complained that the phenomenologists' arguments "are palpably weak and grounded in the faith that what is immediately perceived, felt, or experienced has absolute significance."[20] Already in his first month in Germany, Hook was "resolved to pen an attack on the basic assumption of the phenomenological school."[21] He published a paper on "Husserl's Phenomenological Idealism" in *Journal of Philosophy* (Hook 1930b) and criticized Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, published just a year before his arrival, in his "Impressions" paper. While Heidegger's anthropocentric focus on "life-of-man-in-the-world" reminded him of Dewey, his book was "such a jungle of arbitrarily-invented technical terms, that only the natural belief that where there is so much smoke there must be at least a little fire, keeps the reader at the grueling task of trying to make sense out of its pages" (Hook 1930a, 154). Phenomenology, for Hook, had turned into yet another version of idealism, Germany's national obsession. Whenever a professor exclaimed "*Aber, meine Herren, das ist Naturalismus*," he meant his students to understand that the position had been reduced to absurdity (Hook 1930a, 145).

The one major exception to Hook's negative assessment was Hans Reichenbach. While few German philosophers had "the stature of … Dewey," Reichenbach was clear-headed, open-minded, and deeply engaged with recent scientific findings.[22] Hook audited his lectures on probability and philosophy of science and was delighted to find a German philosopher whose views were "congenial" to his "pragmatic naturalism" (Hook 1978, 33). He got to know the Berlin philosopher when they

19 Hook to Nagel, July 11, 1928; May 8, 1929; May 30, 1929, ENP-ASP, Box 3, Folder 10.
20 Hook to Nagel, July 29, 1928, ENP-ASP, Box 3, Folder 10.
21 Hook to Nagel, July 29, 1928, ENP-ASP, Box 3, Folder 10.
22 Hook to Nagel, October 2, 1928; November 16, 1928, ENP-ASP, Box 3, Folder 10.

both attended a conference of the *Kant Gesellschaft* in Halle and learned that Reichenbach defended a "naturalistic interpretation of the *a priori*" and a pragmatic interpretation of probability (Hook 1930a, 159). In his "Impressions" paper, Hook introduced Reichenbach's philosophy of science to the American philosophical community, writing about his naturalism and his most recent book *Philosophie der Raum-Zeit-Lehre*, which he described as "the most lucid and comprehensive exposition of the philosophical implications of the theory of relativity that has yet appeared in Germany" (Hook 1930a, 159).

4.5 Woodbridge and Nagel

Hook was not the only Columbia naturalist to be charmed by Reichenbach's approach. In 1931, Woodbridge traveled to Europe to take up a position as Roosevelt Professor at the University of Berlin, where he regularly exchanged ideas with the German philosopher. The Roosevelt chair was part of an exchange program between Columbia and Berlin and had been created by Butler in order to stimulate the "intellectual bonds" between Germany and the American people.[23] Woodbridge was the first Roosevelt professor since 1914, when the program had been discontinued, and he used his year in Berlin to promote American philosophy. He lectured on American naturalism and realism but also kept a close eye on political developments. In letters to Butler, who had just been awarded the Nobel Peace prize, Woodbridge regularly reported on German politics, sensing that the country was at a "cross-roads" and could use some "realistic thinking."[24]

It is no coincidence that Woodbridge and Reichenbach got acquainted during the former's year as Roosevelt professor. About a month before Woodbridge arrived in Berlin, Reichenbach had written Hook that he "would very much like to gain more contact with American philosophy." The logical empiricist was convinced that the United States would be more fertile ground for his scientific philosophy than Germany, where he and his colleagues "always [had] to fight against historically-oriented *Schulphilosophie.*"[25] Hook had informed Reichenbach that Woodbridge would be coming to Berlin and said that his teacher's naturalism

23 Butler to Woodbridge, July 31, 1931, CUA-OPR, Box 342, Folder 8.

24 Woodbridge to Butler, December 14, 1941, Frederick James Eugene Woodbridge papers, 1884–1950, Columbia University (hereafter, FJEWP), Box 1, Folder: "Butler, Nicholas Murray, 1931."

25 Reichenbach to Hook, August 20, 1931, Hans Reichenbach Papers, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh (hereafter HRP), 014–51–28, my translation. See also Verhaegh (2020, section 5).

was "in fundamental agreement" with the German's scientific philosophy.[26] Naturally, Reichenbach was excited to meet the editor of *Journal of Philosophy*—a periodical he and his colleagues had been reading "with great interest"—and invited Woodbridge to give a talk at his *Gesellschaft für empirische Philosophie.*[27]

Woodbridge visited Reichenbach's society in January 1932 and gave a talk titled "Der Empirismus in der amerikanischen Philosophie" to a crowd of academics and philosophically-minded Berliners.[28] The sixty-three-year-old professor appears to have been impressed by Reichenbach and his society as he described it as "an active and progressive philosophical movement" in a letter to Stephen Duggan, whom he asked to arrange an American lecture tour for the German philosopher.[29] After the event, he began studying Reichenbach's work on the theory of relativity and wrote him that he hoped that they would have more time to talk about "the connection between Space and Geometry" in the future.[30] Though Woodbridge believed that philosophers should mostly "look for enlightenment" in the "biological sciences" as "philosophy is the outcome of human living rather than of physical movements," he was interested in the philosophical implications of relativity, which philosophers had been debating in his *Journal of Philosophy* for more than a decade.[31] He himself had been working on the topic "for some time" and hoped to learn more about recent developments from Reichenbach.[32]

Hook did not just help establish a connection between Reichenbach and Woodbridge. He also stimulated Nagel to engage with Reichenbach's work. During his year in Europe, Hook regularly mentioned the Berlin philosopher in his letters and postcards, urging his friend to read the German's publications on probability and the theory of relativity.[33] Nagel was completing a dissertation on "the logic of measurement" and later recalled that he studied Reichenbach's work "with enormous profit" (Nagel 1978, 42). Whereas Dewey and his other teachers provided only informal characterizations of concepts such as probability and measurement, Nagel adopted an axiomatic approach, just as Reichenbach had done in his books on relativity. He published a paper on measurement in *Erkenntnis* and regularly

26 Hook to Reichenbach, August 29, 1931, HRP, 014–51–27.
27 Reichenbach to Woodbridge, September 11, 1931, FJEWP, Box 1, Folder: "Correspondence 'R'."
28 Woodbridge to Reichenbach, November 3, 1931 and March 1, 1932, FJEWP, Box 1, Folder: "Correspondence 'R'"; "Chronik," *Erkenntnis*, Vol. 2, 1931, 310.
29 Woodbridge to Duggan, January 18, 1932; March 1, 1932; FJEWP, Box 1, Folder: "Corr. 'D'."
30 Woodbridge to Reichenbach, March 16, 1932, FJEWP, Box 1, Folder: "Correspondence 'R'."
31 Woodbridge to Paul J. Tomlinson, FJEWP, Box 1, Folder: "Correspondence 'T'." See Verhaegh (2024) on the reception of relativity in American philosophy.
32 Woodbridge to Reichenbach, March 16, 1932, FJEWP, Box 1, Folder: "Correspondence 'R'."
33 Hook to Nagel, November 16, 1928 and May 30, 1929, ENP-ASP, Box 3, Folders 10–11.

cited the German philosopher in his first published papers (Nagel 1929, 176; 1933, 538).

In 1934, it was Nagel's turn to travel to Europe on a Guggenheim fellowship.[34] By this time, however, his interests had largely shifted from Reichenbach to Carnap. The news about the Vienna Circle, in particular Carnap's *Der logische Aufbau der Welt*, had reached American shores and Nagel had been one of many U.S. philosophers to respond to the latter's ideas about meaning and verification (Nagel 1934). In September 1934, he met the German philosopher at the International Congress of Philosophy in Prague, where several members of the Vienna Circle were present. Carnap invited Nagel to come back to Prague sometime after the conference so that the two could discuss each other's ideas about "logic and methodology" in more detail.[35] Nagel was excited about the opportunity and spent a few weeks with the Carnaps in November 1934. In just a short period of time, Nagel was swayed by Carnap's technical approach, wondering whether it did not offer a more solid foundation for naturalism than the work of his teachers. In a letter to Hook, he favorably compared Carnap's method to Dewey's, writing that "Columbia's philosophy department" suddenly seemed like "a home for poets who have missed their vocation":

> At this distance, and under the influence of the positivists, Dewey's psychologizings and failures to come to grips with the detailed structure of scientific theories seem very serious shortcomings, and I am sure 'our brand' of naturalism will be better served by overcoming them.... But this is perhaps a passing mood, induced by contact with Carnap. He really has shown me that a man can have a larger vision, without being simply ecstatic or, as in the case of Dewey .... very muddy.[36]

Importantly, Nagel also commented on Carnap's *ahistorical* approach. In a report about Europe's emerging analytic movement, published in two installments in *Journal of Philosophy*, Nagel wrote that the philosophers he met in Vienna, Prague, Lviv, Warsaw and Cambridge had little interest in historical analysis. Instead of asking why philosophers such as Kant and Hegel had held "the ideas they do," like the Columbia naturalists, Carnap and his colleagues simply dismissed their views as logical "blunders." Nagel had been educated in an environment that emphasized a contextualist perspective but saw the "analytic" approach as "a welcome relief from the transcendental pose assumed by so many American writers in approaching systematic philosophy" (Nagel 1936, 7). While he believed it inaccu-

34 See Verhaegh (2021) for a reconstruction of Nagel's background and year in Europe.

35 Nagel to Carnap, November 10, 1934; Carnap to Nagel, November 11, 1934, Rudolf Carnap Papers, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh (hereafter, RCP), 029–05–20/2.

36 Nagel to Hook, December 3, 1934, SHP, 22.08.

rate to dismiss "all of traditional philosophy [as] a mistake," he described the method as "exhilarating to an unusual degree" (Nagel 1936, 7). Philosophers like Carnap were only interested in valid arguments, not in historical context.[37]

4.6 Historical and Logical Analysis

Hook, Nagel, and their naturalist colleagues were science-minded academics who saw historical work as integral to philosophy. In Germany, however, the two encountered a strong bifurcation between historical and scientific perspectives. Hook, we saw, observed how German idealists presented philosophical problems exclusively "in terms of their history, not in terms of their logic" and learned that Reichenbach had a hard time finding a job as a scientific philosopher in a country dominated by "historically-oriented *Schulphilosophie.*"[38] Nagel described analytic philosophy's ahistoricism in his report for *Journal of Philosophy*, signaling the lack of interest in "the genesis of doctrines" by the Vienna Circle and like-minded groups (Nagel 1936, 6). When Nagel, a few months after his return, mentioned that he was writing a paper on the "growth of modern conceptions in logic," he was again confronted with this ahistorical stance. Carnap, Nagel wrote, "expressed a strong distaste for the project," telling him that he would be "wasting [his] time." Better to solve logical problems, than to study their history.[39]

It is precisely some such distinction that eventually led to a split within Columbia's department of philosophy. While Nagel believed that the "vigorous and technically precise" methods of the logical empiricists would be "salutary stimuli" (Nagel 1956, xii) and attempted to convince his colleagues about the value of this approach, most of them came to see logical positivism as a dangerous development. Nagel expected that his colleagues would find Carnap's ideas "congenial and stimulating" but Edman qualified the latter's "formalisms" as "barren," describing the logical empiricists as a "philosophical cult" that reduced philosophy to a "series of definitions, postulates, [and] logical relations."[40] Randall was even

37 Note that I have exclusively focused on Nagel's impressions here. Some logical empiricists seem to have had more subtle ideas about the value of historical philosophy. See Dewulf (2020) for an overview.

38 Hook (1930a, 145); Reichenbach to Hook, August 20, 1931, HRP, 014–51–28.

39 Nagel to Hook, June 28 and July 5, 1936, SHP, 22.09.

40 Nagel to Coss, November 28, 1934, ENP-ASP, 029–05–19; Edman (1941, 562; 1934, 477). Naturally, I do not want to suggest that Nagel and Hook only encountered the distinction between logical and historical analysis in the German-speaking world. Both had been students of Morris R. Cohen at the City College of New York before they enrolled at Columbia graduate school. Cohen had a

more "hostile" to his German colleagues (White 1990, 30) and wrote Hook that he saw the analytic approach as *the* biggest threat to the discipline:

> There is no respectable philosophical position today to which I am more opposed than the one known as 'analysis'.... I have reluctantly become convinced that 'philosophical analysis' would if it could kill the philosophical enterprise completely... 'Analysis' is opposed to any serious consideration of any of the philosophic issues which seem to me important.[41]

Hook, in turn, replied that "if a battle-line is to be drawn between 'respectable philosophic positions'," there is "no doubt in my mind that it is on the side of the analytical philosophers that I belong." The analytic approach, Hook claimed, is strongly committed to "careful and clear statement," which is "indispensable condition for responsible philosophic activity."[42]

It is important to note that Hook and Nagel were not blind to the tensions between analytic and naturalist approaches to philosophy. Hook clearly explains the limits of a purely analytic perspective in an unpublished lecture, read at the 1939 Unity of Science conference at Harvard. "By taking statements in isolation from their historical contexts," Hook explained, "it is easy to show that they do not conform to any known scheme of logical grammar." Logical analysis is a useful method to demonstrate that a claim is ambiguous or meaningless but such a conclusion should not be the end but the *starting point* of an investigation. Naturalists see it as their task to understand the contexts which "have given rise to ... conflicting metaphysics and ideologies" as well as "to locate their meaning by correlating statements ... with behavioral responses to specific situations in which other forms of conflict arise."[43] Likewise, Nagel believed that "the historical approach, when wisely cultivated, can frequently produce the same kind of intellectual catharsis and *dis*solution of pseudo-problems as does the analytic method" (Nagel

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more analytic approach to philosophical problems and regularly criticized the Columbia approach as too "anthropocentric" (Cohen 1940). See e. g. Verhaegh (2021, section 5). At the very least, Cohen's teaching seems to have played a role in helping Hook and Nagel appreciate the analytic approach they encountered in Germany. Indeed, it seems no coincidence that the strongest opponents of the analytic approach had all been at Columbia since college.

41 Randall to Hook, October 25, 1951, SHP, 24.09. Even Dewey eventually soured on analytic philosophy and logical empiricism. While Nagel and Hook had helped Otto Neurath persuade Dewey to write a contribution for the empiricists' International Encyclopedia of Unified Science at first, he began to dismiss logical empiricism as an overly "scholastic" approach to philosophy in the early 1940s (Lamont 1959; 13; Randall 1953, 7). See Reisch (2005, ch. 4) for a reconstruction of Dewey's interactions with the Unity of Science movement.

42 Hook to Randall, October 27, 1951, SHP, 24.09.

43 "John Dewey and Logical Empiricism," unpublished ms., ca. 1939, SHP, 34.30.

1936, 7) and he regularly criticized Carnap for his exclusive focus on "ahistorical evaluation[s]" (Nagel 1979, 3). A naturalist should not just identify the "rationality of science with the use of exclusively formal canons," they should also critically assess the canons of rationality through a study of their development (Nagel 1979, 3).

But while Hook and Nagel believed that the analytic method could *supplement* the historical approach, their colleagues would have none of it. As several major representatives of the logical empiricist movement found prominent positions at U.S. institutions, their former teachers dug in their heels. Randall and his colleagues observed that analytic philosophers were mostly "unsympathetic towards the history of philosophy" and perceived the movement as an existential threat.[44] "Logical positivism," Nagel concluded, had made "a decided impression" upon "the younger men in the profession" but the "old-timers … distrust it, dislike it, and pretend that it has nothing very important to say."[45] Nagel regularly asked for new hires to strengthen the department's profile in analytic philosophy but had little sway with his colleagues. He was unable to convince them that Columbia should invest more in "foundations of mathematics" and got a "strongly negative reaction" when he suggested Reichenbach for one of the department's open positions in a faculty meeting.[46] Edman, the department's chair, preferred to hire a "pronounced 'humanist'" and suggested that Columbia already had a specialist in philosophy of science, viz. Nagel himself.[47] The department hired seven new assistant and/or associate professors in the late 1940s, and all of them had written a historically-oriented dissertation: Charles Frankel (on the French Enlightenment), Justus Buchler (on C. S. Peirce), Joseph Leon Blau (on the Christian interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance), John R. Everett (on John Bates Clark), Paul Kristeller (on Plotinus), Ernest Moody (on Ockham), and Albert Hofstadter (on Locke). Moreover, six of the appointees had a Columbia PhD, much to the annoyance of Nagel, who had long felt that his colleagues are "so damned smug that [they think] all philosophical virtue has been conceived in Morningside Heights."[48]

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44 Paul Kristeller to Philipp Wiener, April 13, 1957, cited in Dewulf (ms.).

45 Nagel to Neurath, January 2 and October 13, 1936, Otto Neurath Nachlass (hereafter, ONN), Wiener Kreis Archiv, Noordhollands Archief, Haarlem, Item 275.

46 Nagel to Fackenthal, April 12, 1944, Ernest Nagel Papers, Columbia University Archives (hereafter ENP-CUA), Box 1, Folder 6; Nagel to Hook, November 25, 1946, SHP, 22.09.

47 Edman to Gutmann, May 17, 1945, James Gutmann Papers, Box 1; Nagel to Hook, November 25, 1946, SHP, 22.09.

48 Nagel to Hook, November 25, 1946, SHP, 22.09.

4.7 The End of History

The opposition between historical and analytic approaches became even more pronounced in the 1950s, when the positivists and affiliated schools of analytic philosophy started to dominate American philosophy. Nagel had become a prominent figure in analytic circles and this significantly changed the balance of power within the department. The philosopher of science began to receive increasingly generous offers from prestigious universities and his colleagues realized that the department's "reputation … would … be damaged immeasurably if [he] were to go."[49] They faced the "constant possibility" that Nagel would leave and went through great lengths to keep him in New York. When the Columbia professor received invitations from "several colleges" in 1955, for example, the department created a special John Dewey Chair and approached a number of donors to collect money for a fund that should guarantee Nagel "a salary worthy of John Dewey's name."[50] By 1959, when the department celebrated the Dewey centenary, Nagel earned substantially more than his senior colleagues, some of whom had been hired a decade before him.[51]

At first, this shifting balance of power had little effect on the course of the department itself. Nagel was a rising star in American philosophy but the Columbia school kept investing in historical philosophy. After James Gutmann took over as the department's executive officer in 1954, the philosophers hired six new assistant professors and most of them were, again, historically-oriented scholars with a Columbia PhD: Sidney Gelber (who had written a dissertation on John Grote), George Kline (on Spinoza), Stanley Newburger (on Lalande), and James Walsh (on Aristotle).[52] But this simmering conflict inevitably came to a head. In 1959, when the department had to decide whether or not to promote Kline, one of these recent hires with a historical approach, the faculty was "seriously divided," with seven professors favoring and four professors opposing the promotion.[53] An *ad hoc* committee was appointed to resolve the situation and concluded that the disagreement had less to do with Kline than "with the future of the department." A majority (Gutmann, Randall, Friess, Buchler, Kristeller, Blau, and Cumming) was "content with the *status quo*" whereas "an important minority" (Nagel, Hofstadter, Frankel,

49 Gutmann to Barzun, February 27, 1958, CUA-OPR, Box 437, Folder 23.

50 Gutmann to Walter D. Fletcher, January 21, 1955, CUA-OPR, Box 437, Folder 22.

51 Cumming to John M. Mullins, June 9, 1960, CUA-OVPR, Box 9, Folder 6.

52 The only exceptions were Sidney Morgenbesser, a philosopher of science from the University of Pennsylvania and Richard Kuhns, a philosopher of art with a Columbia PhD.

53 Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Promotion of George Kline," CUA-OVPR, Box 9, Folder 6.

and Cooley) was "convinced that the department ha[d] been steadily deteriorating" and had "lost the important position it once held in American philosophy."[54] Importantly, the committee sided with the minority and used the report to warn the administration about the declining reputation of the Columbia school of philosophy in an increasingly analytically-oriented intellectual landscape:

> the *ad hoc* committee came to share the conviction of the minority group about the parlous state of the Department of Philosophy. Both at home and abroad several of us … heard the statement that Columbia [has] lost its place in the philosophical sun. A majority of our senior professors in the department have little reputation outside New York. Most of them were trained by either Dewey or Woodbridge, to one or the other of whom they seem to have—as one of our informants put it—a 'father fixation'. They have not only been living largely upon the reputation of their teachers, but have tended to build up a department that is seriously inbred … Indeed, the majority have opposed various attempts to invite outsiders who would represent philosophical positions other than their own. This is a serious condition in any department and likely to be fatal in a department of philosophy.[55]

Kirk, the president of the university, received the report in 1959 and responded to its alarming conclusions by installing a new committee which was to conduct a more in-depth investigation of the future of the school.[56] This second committee published a detailed report a year later, revealing that the conflict regarding Columbia's hiring policy was rooted in a more fundamental disagreement regarding, i.a., the opposition between historical and analytic approaches to philosophy. In a section titled "Ideological Conflicts," the committee writes:

> There is a clear division of opinion about the emphasis which should be given to the history of philosophy, on the one hand, and theoretical philosophy, on the other. The Columbia Department has long held an enviable position in the history of philosophy. Some members of the Department feel that there is an undue emphasis upon theoretical or 'creative' philosophy. The most severe criticism comes from … the minority group [… which] stresses the over-emphasis upon historical philosophy.[57]

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54 Gutmann to Barzun, May 14, 1959, CUA-OVPR, Box 9, Folder 6; Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Promotion of George Kline," CUA-OVPR, Box 9, Folder 6. Cooley was the department's logic instructor for years but had been promoted to assistant professor in 1953. Hofstadter started as a historical philosopher but had turned to more analytic topics in the 1950s (e. g. Hofstadter 1951; 1953). Frankel's remarks about scientific philosophy in "Philosophy and History," finally, offer some background concerning his stance in the debate (1957, 363–367).

55 Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Promotion of George Kline," CUA-OVPR, Box 9, Folder 6.

56 Nicolson to Kirk, February 12, 1960, CUA-OPR, Box 379, Folder 20.

57 "Report of the Committee on the Future Planning of the Philosophy Department," CUA-OPR, Box 379, Folder 20.

The minority, led by Nagel, sympathized with the analytic approach and felt that the department overemphasized "historical philosophy." The majority, led by Randall, resisted the analytic turn and complained that the others overemphasized "the philosophical fashions of the day: the philosophy of science and symbolic logic."[58] Importantly, this ideological conflict did not just inform the disagreement concerning Columbia's hiring policy. It also led to opposing views concerning the editorial policy of *Journal of Philosophy*, the periodical edited and published by the Columbia school. On the one hand, the minority complained that the journal had "lost the respected position it once held in the philosophical world" as it was "rare to find a single historical paper" in other philosophical periodicals. The majority, on the other hand, felt that there was *not enough* space for historical research and worked toward starting a new journal exclusively focused on the history of philosophy.[59]

The 1960 report significantly changed the course of Columbia philosophy. The committee recommended a number of reforms and the administration responded by appointing a new chairman, promising him new hires on the condition that the department would use the new funds to improve the "'balance' … between 'analysts' and 'humanists'."[60] The department had a discussion about its "tendency to 'inbreeding'" and decided to terminate the contracts of three assistant professors.[61] In the years following its publication, the department hired more outsiders in senior positions (e. g. Richard Taylor, Robert Paul Wolff, and Charles Parsons) and many of them had a systematic rather than a historical approach to philosophy. Combined with the retirement of Randall, Friess, and Gutmann, this led to a different, more analytically-oriented profile. *Journal of Philosophy*, finally, developed a more analytic profile, too. Arthur Danto, Morgenbesser and Walsh took over as editors in the mid-1960s and the journal virtually stopped publishing his-

58 "Report of the Committee on the Future Planning of the Philosophy Department," CUA-OPR, Box 379, Folder 20.

59 "Report of the Committee on the Future Planning of the Philosophy Department," CUA-OPR, Box 379, Folder 20. See Dewulf (ms.) for a reconstruction of Randall's, Schneider's and Kristeller's attempts to found a new periodical, which eventually resulted in the creation of *Journal of the History of Philosophy*.

60 Richard Herpers to Gutmann, December 5, 1958, CUA-OPR, Box 437, Folder 23; Barzun to Cumming, June 22, 1960, CUA-OVPR, Box 9, Folder 6; Cumming to Mullins, June 9, 1960, CUA-OVPR, Box 9, Folder 6; Cumming to Nagel, May 16, 1960, ENP-CUA, Box 1, Folder 20.

61 They were Newburger, Sommers, and Kuhns, who all held a Columbia PhD. Kuhns's contract was eventually retained and he stayed at Columbia until 1993. See "Report of the Committee on the Future Planning of the Philosophy Department," CUA-OPR, Box 379, Folder 20; and Gutmann's letters to Newburger, Kuhns, and Sommers, February 6, 1960, CUA-OVPR, Box 9, Folder 6.

torical papers in the period thereafter.[62] The one major remaining naturalist opposing the analytic tradition—Justus Buchler—left the department because he became increasingly "disturbed by the overall changes in the University's intellectual climate" (Gelber 1991, 12). Though the school still employed a large share of scholars working in the naturalist tradition—e. g. Nagel, Morgenbesser, and Isaac Levi—most of them had an analytic approach to philosophy.[63]

4.8 Conclusion

American philosophers today tend to associate "naturalism" with the views of W. V. Quine, an analytic philosopher with pragmatist *and* positivist roots. Quine had no direct ties with the Columbia school but started using the label in the 1960s to defend the position that philosophy is not "an a priori propaedeutic or groundwork for science" (Quine 1969, 126). Ironically, Quine first identified as a naturalist in his John Dewey Lecture "Ontological Relativity," held at Columbia in 1968. Though Quine admitted that he was "not much of a Dewey scholar," he told his audience that he shared the latter's view "that knowledge, mind, and meaning are part of the same world that they have to do with" and that they ought to be studied "in the same empirical spirit that animates natural science" (Quine 1968, 26).[64]

The popularity of Quine's ideas in postwar academic philosophy shows that the analytic turn did not lead to an eclipse of naturalism as such. On the contrary. Jaegwon Kim has suggested that naturalism is contemporary philosophy's dominant "ideology" (Kim 2003, 83) and a recent survey shows that about fifty percent of philosophers accept a naturalist position in metaphilosophy, thereby following Quine's suggestion that philosophy ought to be "continuous with science" (Bourget and Chalmers 2023, 7; Quine 1969, 126). Still, the popularity of Quinean naturalism also reveals that something *was* lost in the analytic turn. For the Harvard philosopher, like many of his analytic colleagues, never saw the value of a historical approach. While Randall, Edman, and even Hook and Nagel all shared the view that (1) philosophical problems are contingent problems that emerge in specific historical contexts and (2) that historical reconstructions can help us excavate the roots of our ideas, methods, and assumptions, Quine was known for joking "that there are two sorts of people interested in philosophy: those interested in philosophy

62 See Katzav (2018) for a reconstruction.

63 See also Strassfeld (2022, 125) who notes that Columbia's hires in the 1960s were "overwhelmingly analytic in orientation."

64 See Verhaegh (2018, 155–160) for a reconstruction.

and those interested in the history of philosophy."[65] Both advocates and opponents of the "eclipse view," therefore, tell an important part of a larger story. Naturalist approaches still prominently figure in contemporary analytic philosophy but to this day *Journal of Philosophy*, the brainchild of a Columbia naturalist who once wrote that "the serious study of history is characteristic of a certain maturity of mind" (Woodbridge 1916, 1), explicitly warns prospective authors that it "does not publish papers that are primarily historical."[66] Ironically, only historical research can help us uncover and contextualize what the historically-oriented branch of the Columbia school contributed to the development of naturalism before it was overshadowed by the analytic movement.

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65 See MacIntyre (1984, 39 – 40).

66 https://www.journalofphilosophy.org/memotoauthors.html (accessed December 2023).

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