

## Nagel's Philosophical Development

Sander Verhaegh\*

**Abstract:** Ernest Nagel played a key role in bridging the gap between American philosophy and logical empiricism. He introduced the European analytic approach to the American philosophical community but also remained faithful to the naturalism of his teachers. This paper aims to shed new light on Nagel's intermediating endeavors by reconstructing his philosophical development in the late 1920s and 1930s. This is a decisive period in Nagel's career because it is the phase in which he first formulated the principles of his naturalism and spent a year in Europe to visit the key centers of logical empiricism. Building on a range of published and unpublished papers, notes, and correspondence—including hundreds of pages of letters to his close friend Sidney Hook—I reconstruct Nagel's philosophical development, focusing especially on the philosophical influence of John Dewey, Morris R. Cohen, Rudolf Carnap, and Hans Reichenbach.

**Keywords:** Ernest Nagel; Naturalism; Logical Empiricism; Pragmatism; Rudolf Carnap

### 3.1. Introduction

Ernest Nagel is a crucial figure in the history of analytic philosophy. He played a key role in introducing logical empiricism to the American philosophical community but also remained faithful to the naturalism of his teachers at Columbia University and the City College of New York. In thus mediating between American and European schools of thought, Nagel paved the way for an approach that still pervades academic philosophy today. Not only was he one of the most prominent post-war philosophers of science, his contributions attempt to

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reconcile the empiricists' focus on "limited and determinate problems" (Nagel 1954/1956, 5) with the naturalists' comprehensive perspective on man, mind, and morality.

This paper aims to shed new light on Nagel's intermediating endeavors by reconstructing his philosophical development in the late 1920s and 1930s. This is a decisive period in Nagel's career because it is the phase in which he first formulated the principles of his naturalism (Nagel 1931a; 1935/1956) and spent a year in Europe to visit the key centers of logical empiricism. Building on a range of published and unpublished papers, notes, and correspondence, I reconstruct Nagel's philosophical development, focusing especially on the philosophical influence of John Dewey, Morris R. Cohen, Rudolf Carnap, and Hans Reichenbach.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is structured as follows. The first part provides an overview of Nagel's work in the years before he visited Europe. After an analysis of Nagel's naturalism in the early 1930s (Sections 3.2-3), I reconstruct the philosophical influence of Dewey and Cohen, Nagel's most prominent "intellectual mentors" (Sections 3.4-5).<sup>2</sup> In the second part of this paper, I examine Nagel's first encounters with logical empiricism. I reconstruct his year in Europe and examine his changing perspective on the views of Carnap, Reichenbach, and the Cambridge school of analysis (Sections 3.6-8). I end the paper with an overview of Nagel's contributions to the American reception of logical empiricism (Section 3.9) and I reconstruct his attempts to unite his naturalistic *Weltanschauung* with the empiricists' piecemeal approach (Section 3.10).

### 3.2. Nagel's Naturalism

Nagel was a dedicated naturalist from the start of his academic career. In his dissertation, he describes his philosophy as naturalistic and characterizes it as a position about the nature and the limits of "reflective inquiry". Although naturalists often disagree about the "generic traits" of reality, they are committed to a view about the way in which we acquire knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to Nagel's early publications, this paper is based on material from the Ernest Nagel Papers at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library (hereafter, ENP), the Hans Reichenbach Papers at the Archives of Scientific Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh (hereafter HRP), the Otto Neurath Nachlass at the *Wiener Kreis Archiv* in Haarlem (ONN), the Rudolf Carnap Papers at Pittsburgh's Archives of Scientific Philosophy (RCP), and, most importantly, the hundreds of pages of correspondence between Nagel and Sidney Hook (Box 22, Folders 8-9, Sidney Hook Papers, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University, hereafter SHP). Transcriptions are mine unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> See Suppes (1994, 258-259). In focusing on Cohen and Dewey, I do not want to suggest that they were the only U.S. philosophers to influence Nagel's development. A more complete account would also have discussed the influence of, for example, C. S. Peirce, F. J. E. Woodbridge, and George Santayana. For Nagel's early views on Peirce, see Nagel (1933b). Nagel briefly discusses Santayana's and Woodbridge's influences in Rempel Nunn's interview (this volume).

about the world. The “content of what is designated by ‘nature’” has changed significantly over the centuries but naturalists share the view that our everyday aposteriori methods, perfected in the sciences, have proven to be the only reliable way to find out what the world is like (Nagel 1931a, ii). More specifically, Nagel commits himself to a holistic picture of inquiry, arguing that we cannot fundamentally question our theory of the world all at once. We can only critically examine our beliefs in a piecemeal fashion because every inquiry presupposes “a large body of knowledge, which in *that* inquiry must remain unquestioned” (original emphasis). For Nagel, inquiry is impossible unless it is framed in a wider realm of accredited knowledge: we can modify theories that have been taken for granted in previous investigations but these revisions can be made only “if other uniformities are used with some confidence” (1931a, 56-57).

Nagel’s naturalism has important consequences for his view about the goals and methods of philosophy. He provides a lucid characterization of his position in *American Philosophy Today and Tomorrow*, a volume that primarily aims to collect “philosophic self-portraits” of the younger generation of American philosophers (Kallen and Hook 1935, v). In his contribution, Nagel argues that philosophy should be an attempt to understand the world of common experience. Our inquiries may reveal that our theories about the world require revision but philosophy can never show that our beliefs rest on an illusion:

Reflection has at its ultimate point of departure the qualitatively diversified world of common experience. [...] It is this world which man tries to understand by unraveling some threads of its structure, thereby making it familiar to himself. [...] The world which philosophy tries to understand should [also] be the world as it is found; and since what is found includes the familiar things and practices of daily life, I am unable to regard any philosophy as honest or tenable which concludes them to be illusions or unreal. (Nagel 1935/1956, 39-40)

The converse is also true: if philosophy cannot *question* the reality of our theory of the world all at once, we also cannot *ground* our knowledge by means of single “well-laid foundation”. Since no belief is sacrosanct, the road to truth is not a “marble stair” that provides security of position but a “treacherous, unblazed path where security of step is *never* guaranteed” (Nagel 1929a, 171). Or, as Nagel (1935/1956, 40) put it in his intellectual self-portrait, philosophy cannot “legislate for the sciences”.

Contemporary discussions in metaphilosophy often distinguish between methodological and metaphysical naturalisms. Methodological naturalists emphasize the continuity of common sense, science, and philosophy and argue that our aposteriori methods

of inquiry are the only reliable road to knowledge. Metaphysical naturalists, on the other hand, defend a view about the nature of reality, arguing that there is no distinct supernatural world of Gods and spirits, no transcendental Absolute, and no Platonic realm of abstract forms. The world we encounter in our everyday lives and our laboratories is self-sufficient; it is governed by its own laws and does not depend on a supernatural realm.<sup>3</sup> *Prima facie*, the two theses are independent. One could hold that the natural world is self-sufficient but believe that there are different methods to acquire knowledge about it; and, conversely, the view that our everyday a posteriori methods are the only reliable source of knowledge seems compatible with the presupposition that our everyday world depends on a supernatural realm of existence. For Nagel, however, metaphysical naturalism is a consequence of his methodological commitments. Due to the advances of science, we have a different view about the world we inhabit than we did a few hundred years ago. In consequence, our views about what constitutes the ‘natural’ are tied up with the advances of knowledge. It is impossible to spell out what it means to say that the natural world is self-sufficient without reference to our current best theories about nature, and hence to the methods we used in arriving at this picture of reality:

[N]aturalism is [...] not simply a set of fixed doctrines about the system of events which constitute nature. [...] Indeed, the term ‘nature’ has meant many things in the history of thought, and professed naturalists have rarely agreed [...] as to what are the specific set of principles descriptive of the order of birth and decay of things. In spite of variations in the content of their views, however, they share a common method by which they support them. If there were a heaven inhabited and operated by disembodied spirits, I can fancy some of them claiming kinship with naturalism in so far as they [...] are at pains constantly to submit their principles to verification. (Nagel 1935/1956, 41)

‘Nature’, in sum, is whatever we get to know by means of scientific method. To profess naturalism is to subscribe to a “method *as well as* [to] a metaphysics” (1931a, ii, emphasis added). Our views about the natural and supernatural would be empty if they would not be based on our current best theories about the world.

### 3.3. The Logic of Inquiry

Since Nagel characterizes naturalism as a view about the nature and limits of *inquiry*, it is perhaps not surprising that he spent much of his career analyzing key methodological tools

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, De Caro and Macarthur (2004), Papineau (2009), and Verhaegh (2018, Ch. 1).

and concepts. Most of his publications from the late 1920s and early 1930s are analyses of notions like convention (1929a), probability (Nagel 1933a), verification (Nagel 1934a), and scientific reduction (Nagel 1935a). The analysis of scientific method, Nagel maintained, is one of the central tasks of the naturalist:

naturalism [...] is more certain of the general adequacy of its self-corrective method than it is of the unalterable finality of any particular conclusion. [...] And that is why I think the analysis and practice of scientific method is so essential to a thoroughgoing naturalism.<sup>4</sup> (Nagel, 1935/1956, 41-2)

Even Nagel's dissertation, which deals with "the logic of measurement", is a case in point. The analysis of measurement, Nagel argues, is crucial because it is one of the essential tools by which we delimit and fixate "our ideas to things" (1935/1956, 17). Nagel's dissertation develops what is nowadays called a representational theory, the view that measurement is the numerical representation of *empirical* relations between objects (Adams 1966). Whereas measurement was traditionally defined as the assessment of *quantity* and *magnitude*, Nagel argues that these concepts are theoretically superfluous. Building on the work of Bertrand Russell and Norman Campbell, the Cambridge philosophers who first developed an explicitly representational theory of measurement (Michell 1992), Nagel appeals to Occam's razor in arguing that we can easily do without these concepts (Nagel 1931b, 325).<sup>5</sup>

In addition to analyzing central methodological concepts like measurement and probability, Nagel was also interested in the nature of logic itself. Several of his early publications (Nagel 1929bc; 1935/1956) deal with the question whether logic is about "words, thoughts, or objects" (Cohen and Nagel, Ch. 1). The problem, however, is that Nagel did not know how to square his naturalism with a satisfying philosophy of logic. He believed that anyone "who is committed to a whole-hearted naturalism" ought to accept that the validity of logic is ultimately grounded in reality (1929c, 708) but he also felt the "incompatibility between being an empiricist" and his view that logical laws can be certified "as being true on the basis of reflecti[on]" alone.<sup>6</sup> He occasionally flirted with a (modal) realist account, arguing that "the norm or correctness of logic is based on the possibilities in

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<sup>4</sup> In an unpublished radio lecture titled "The Philosophy of Science", Nagel makes a similar point, arguing that it is the "prime concern of the philosopher" to analyze and understand "the logical and physical method" of the sciences (May 1932, ENP, Box 7).

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of Nagel's theory of measurement, see Michell (2004, Ch. 5).

<sup>6</sup> Remmel Nunn's interview with Nagel (this volume). See Pincock (2017) for a more detailed reconstruction of Nagel's early views about logic.

the nature of things which are the objects of our discourse” (Cohen and Nagel 1934, 17-21) but also saw that this account was incompatible with his naturalistic commitments.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, Nagel came to the conclusion that a naturalistic “analysis of both logic and mathematics [...] is still but a hope rather than an achievement” (Nagel 1935/1956, 50). His despair was short-lived, however, for he was about to find a naturalistically acceptable philosophy of logic on his 1934-35 trip to Europe.

### 3.4. Philosophical Influences (1): John Dewey

It is not a coincidence that Nagel, from the very start of his career, described his worldview as ‘naturalistic’. For New York philosophy was dominated by naturalists in the interwar period. Especially at Columbia, the university where Nagel spent almost his entire career, a significant portion of the philosophy faculty (e.g. John Dewey, Irwin Edwin, Horace Leland Friess, John Herman Randall Jr., and F. J. E. Woodbridge) identified as naturalists. These ‘Columbia naturalists’ defended a variety of approaches to metaphysics and epistemology – ranging from Woodbridge’s Aristotelian naturalism to Dewey’s pragmatic naturalism – but they were all opposed to “ontological and methodological [...] dualisms”, whether it be a sharp bifurcation between the natural and the supernatural or a strict distinction between empirical and speculative methods of inquiry (Randall Jr. 1944, 357).<sup>8</sup>

Nagel’s naturalism was especially influenced by the views of John Dewey, one of his teachers as a graduate student. Dewey, like Nagel, emphasized the *methodological* character of naturalism. In *Experience and Nature*, published just after Nagel entered graduate school, Dewey argues for a “philosophic method” that is modeled on the aposteriori methods used in everyday and scientific inquiry. Dewey (1925, 1) dubs this view “empirical naturalism” and contrasts it with the speculative methods of traditional philosophy:

[The problem with a] non-empirical method of philosophizing is not that it depends upon theorizing, but that it fails to use [it ...] as a path pointing and leading back to something in primary experience. The resulting failure is three-fold. First there is no verification, no effort even to test and check. What is even worse, secondly, is that the things of ordinary experience do not get enlargement and enrichment of meaning as they do when approached through the medium of

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<sup>7</sup> One difficulty with interpreting the account defended in the first chapter of Cohen and Nagel’s *An Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method* is that it is very unclear to what extent Nagel contributed to the book. Archival evidence does not settle the issue, unfortunately. In a letter to Sidney Hook, Nagel complains that only a few phrases in the book are actually his (March 7, 1935, SHP). Carnap, on the other hand, reports that Nagel told him that he wrote the book almost by himself (November 14, 1934, RCP, 25-75-12).

<sup>8</sup> See Eldridge (2004) and Jewett (2011) for a history of the Columbia naturalists.

scientific principles and reasonings. This lack of function reacts, in the third place, back upon the philosophic subject-matter in itself. Not tested by being employed to see what it leads to in ordinary experience [...] this subject-matter becomes arbitrary, aloof [...] something which exclusively occupies a realm of its own without contact with the things of ordinary experience. (Dewey 1925, 6)

Most importantly, Dewey had a similar view about the naturalist's job description. Like Nagel, Dewey believed that it is the primary task of the philosopher to study the logic of inquiry. Although Dewey is rarely classified as a philosopher of science today, he was widely viewed as such in the first half of the twentieth century (Reichenbach 1939; Mirowski 2004). Dewey had been a practicing scientist until his early forties, founding one of the earliest psychological laboratories of the country, and his views about logic and scientific methodology – spelled out in his late-career magnum opus *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938) – formed the core of his pragmatic naturalism.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, there are strong connections between Nagel's and Dewey's views about ethics and politics. Most Columbia naturalists were socially engaged thinkers who played a role in the so-called "New York intellectuals" – a group of liberal-minded socialist democrats who regularly published in leftist journals like *The Nation*, *New Republic*, and, somewhat later, *Partisan Review*. The philosophical wing of this group was led by Nagel's close friend Sidney Hook, who, until his change of heart in the late 1930s, tried to merge Dewey's philosophy with Marxist theory.<sup>10</sup> Both Dewey and Nagel considered moral and political theory to be integral parts of a naturalistic *Weltanschauung*. They both disliked traditional approaches to ethics and rejected the use of static *a priori* principles to solve moral and political dilemmas. Rather, they believed that moral inquiry should be guided by the same experimental approach that controls our everyday and scientific investigations. Moral and social problems arise when individual desires and interests are to be adjudicated with socially-defined ends. As such, moral judgments should be viewed as hypotheses, which can be tested by analyzing the interacting interests of the members of a social group. In his philosophical self-portrait, Nagel summarizes the view as follows:

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<sup>9</sup> See Brown (2012) for an excellent overview of Dewey's philosophy of science.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview, see Cooney (1986) and Reisch (2005, Ch. 3). Nagel's own engagement with political and social affairs is evinced by his regular contributions to the above-mentioned periodicals. See, for example, "Dialectical Materialism in Science" (Nagel 1939/1956), "The Historian as a Moralist" (Nagel 1940/1956), and "On the Philosophical Battlefield" (Nagel 1948/1956).

I find it difficult to understand conceptions of the good which assign values an objective ontological status, independent of organic interests which generate desire. [...] This does not mean that the good or a value is to be identified with the objects of momentary desires. Desires, needs, or their objects are not primarily moral or immoral. Moral considerations arise only when [...] an organization of various interests is attempted. [...] The judgment that anything is a good [...] is a hypothesis which must be explored and evaluated in ways similar to those employed in the sciences. (Nagel 1935/1956, 50-51)

Considering the strong similarity between their methodological naturalisms, their self-professed job descriptions, and their moral and social views, it is perhaps not surprising that Nagel expressed his deep gratitude to Dewey in his dissertation, arguing that he found in the latter's work "a basis for whatever philosophy I can also call my own" (Nagel 1931a, i).

### **3.5. Philosophical Influences (2): Morris R. Cohen**

Despite the programmatic connections between Nagel's and Dewey's philosophies, the former's day-to-day contributions strongly diverged from those of his teacher. Dewey was rarely concerned with what he called "modern formalistic logic" (1938, 182) and he seldom employed its tools in the analysis of inquiry.<sup>11</sup> Nagel made more adequate use of the recent advances in the formal sciences, especially when they could help illuminate key methodological notions. Whereas Dewey, in *The Quest for Certainty* (1929), provided only informal characterizations of key methodological topics like measurement and probability, for example, Nagel aimed to provide more precise analyses by adopting an axiomatic approach to measurement (Nagel 1931a) and by developing a truth-frequency interpretation of probability (Nagel 1933a).

A second major difference between Nagel and Dewey is that the former was better versed in the European literature. Nagel had been born and raised in Nové Mesto, Bohemia (then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire) and had emigrated to the United States at age 10. Whereas Dewey was almost exclusively concerned with American philosophical and societal debates and predominantly responded to discussions that figured in New York-based publications like *The Journal of Philosophy* and *New Republic*, Nagel was also influenced by developments on the continent on which he was born. His truth-frequency interpretation of probability, for example, explicitly built on work of German contemporaries like Hans

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<sup>11</sup> Dewey's notion of 'logic' was more continuous with the traditional conception of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill. See Brown (2012, §4) for a reconstruction.



Reichenbach and Richard von Mises, and his theory of measurement was based on Russell's and Campbell's representational theories (see Section 3.3). Indeed, Nagel's knowledge of the continental literature is evinced by his numerous reviews of especially Germanophone works in the philosophy of science.<sup>12</sup>

Nagel's cosmopolitan outlook and formal approach to philosophy of science were likely stimulated by Morris R. Cohen, Nagel's most prominent mentor during his student years. Cohen, who spent most of his career at the City College of New York, was an all-round philosopher who contributed to a variety of disciplines – ranging from the philosophy of history to the philosophy of law – but primarily viewed himself a logician. Like Nagel, Cohen had been born in Eastern Europe and emigrated to the United States in his early teens. In the first decades of the twentieth century, he had played an important role in the American reception of the new logic (e.g. the contributions of Frege, Peano, and Russell) via his reviews and publications.<sup>13</sup> Nagel and Cohen's shared approach is memorialized by their *Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method* (Cohen and Nagel 1934), one of the first logic textbooks in the United States.

Philosophically, Cohen has been described as one of the most influential naturalists of the first half of the twentieth century (Larrabee 1944, 352 and Randall Jr. 1944, 363). Although he was wary of labels and never explicitly identified as a naturalist, he was viewed as such by Nagel, who described him as a "Platonic naturalist" in a 1928 homage to Cohen:

Professor Cohen has been, ever since we knew him, a Platonic naturalist. He made many of us take for our own his pious attachment to nature as the source of our being, and accept the methods of the physical sciences as fruitful sources for a metaphysics. To be docile to the lessons of experience, but withal to seek blessedness in the shadow of the ideal. (Nagel 1928, 97)

Cohen's 'Platonism' was opposed to Dewey's pragmatic approach, which the former dismissed as 'anthropocentric naturalism' (Cohen 1940). The distinction between the two is best reflected in their debate about the 'ontological basis of logic', a discussion that likely

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Nagel's reviews of *Die Form des Erkennens* by Wilhelm Grebe (Nagel 1930), *Das Unendliche in der Mathematik und seine Ausschaltung* by Felix Kaufmann, and *Geschichte der Naturphilosophie* by Hugo Dingler (Nagel 1932).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Cohen's review of *Principia Mathematica* by Bertrand Russell and A. N. Whitehead (Cohen 1912), as well as his "The Present Situation in the Philosophy of Mathematics" (Cohen 1911) and "The Subject Matter of Formal Logic" (Cohen 1918).

influenced Nagel, considering the latter's preoccupation with the philosophy of logic (see Section 3.3).<sup>14</sup>

Outside philosophy, Cohen probably also influenced Nagel through his role as a public intellectual. Like Dewey, Cohen was one of the prominent public philosophers of New York, as is evinced by his numerous contributions to especially *New Republic*.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the interwar period, Cohen's City College of New York was known for its political radicalism and many leaders of the 'New York Intellectuals' (e.g. Irving Kristol, S. M. Lipset, and Irving Howe) studied at the proverbial 'Harvard of the Proletariat'. Nagel and Hook, too, had been Cohen's students at CCNY, graduating in 1923, and were likely influenced by the latter's political views. Indeed, both Nagel and Hook would later remember him for his genuine 'liberalism' and contributions to the New York intellectual community (Nagel 1957; Hook 1976).

### 3. 6. Nagel's First Encounters with Logical Positivism

Considering Nagel's formal approach, his knowledge of the European literature, and his view that it is the philosopher's foremost job to analyze the logic of inquiry, it is perhaps no surprise that he was interested in the ideas of the Vienna Circle (led by Moritz Schlick) and the Berlin Group (led by Hans Reichenbach), which rapidly started to gain influence when Nagel got his first job at Columbia University. The Vienna Circle had recently published its manifesto *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung: Der Wiener Kreis* (Hahn, Carnap, and Neurath 1929/1973) and philosophers of science throughout Europe were actively advertising their novel views about meaning, method, and metaphysics via venues like *Erkenntnis*. In the United States, these views came to be known as 'logical positivism' after *The Journal of Philosophy* published the paper "Logical Positivism: A New Movement in European Philosophy", describing the approach as a synthesis of the positivistic-empirical tradition of Mach and Poincaré and the logical tradition of Frege and Russell.<sup>16</sup>

Nagel appears to have been familiar with the new wave in continental philosophy of science even before logical positivism hit American shores. He occasionally cited work of

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<sup>14</sup> For a reconstruction of the friendly opposition between Dewey and Cohen, see Rosenfield (1962, Ch. 10).

<sup>15</sup> A 1928 bibliography of Cohen lists more than 50 publications in the *New Republic* between 1914 and 1927 (Lazar 1928, x-xi).

<sup>16</sup> The authors of the paper, Albert Blumberg and Herbert Feigl, were both former students of Schlick and had recently adopted positions at American universities. Schlick himself also spent a period in the United States, accepting a visiting professorship at Berkeley in the 1931-32 academic year. The joint efforts of Blumberg, Feigl, and Schlick contributed greatly to the American reception of logical positivism in the early 1930s. For a reconstruction, see Verhaegh (2020).

Schlick and Reichenbach in his earliest publications (e.g. Nagel 1929a; 1930) and he was the first American philosopher to publish an article in *Erkenntnis* (Nagel 1931b).<sup>17</sup> In one of his memoirs, Nagel remembers that especially Reichenbach's work had made a strong impression on him during his student years:

I [...] studied with enormous profit [Reichenbach's] *Philosophie der Raum-Zeit-Lehre* shortly after the book appeared in 1928. [...] Here is a philosopher after my own heart, I remember thinking, who takes seriously the classical conception of the task of philosophy to provide a solidly based interpretation of science and its logic. (Nagel 1978, 42)

Although it is unclear whether Reichenbach's work directly influenced Nagel's development, there are strong connections between their views and research interests. They both were concerned with the conventionalist aspects of science (e.g. Reichenbach 1928; Nagel 1929a) and they both defended a frequentist interpretation of probability (e.g. Reichenbach 1932; Nagel 1933a).

Most likely, Nagel learned about Reichenbach's views via his friend Sidney Hook, who had spent a year in Germany on a Guggenheim Fellowship in the late 1920s. Hook had participated in meetings of the Berlin Group and had attended Reichenbach's seminars on philosophy of science and the theory of probability (Hook 1978). These encounters with Reichenbach had been the philosophical highlight of his year in Europe, as German philosophers outside the Berlin Group appeared to be unanimously opposed to his naturalism:

With few exceptions, German philosophers constitute one great idealist family. [...] It is something taken for granted. [...] In a discussion of the implications of a doctrine, when the professor exclaims, 'Aber, meine Herren, das ist Naturalismus,' he means his hearers to understand that the position has been reduced to absurdity. Naturalism means Locke and an empty mind or John Stuart Mill and the possibility that  $2+2=5$ . [...] William James seems to be the only American philosopher who is known – and he is more often 'refuted' than read. (Hook 1930, 144-146)

Reichenbach, however, was an important exception. Not only had he, in developing a "naturalistic interpretation of the *a priori*" proven to be a philosophical ally to the American naturalists (Hook 1930, 159-160), he was also a kindred spirit in ideological terms. In his "Memories of Hans Reichenbach", Hook remembers:

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<sup>17</sup> Nagel's *Erkenntnis* paper ("Measurement") was a revised version of a chapter in his dissertation. Paul Weiss, also a former student of Morris Cohen, published a paper in the same issue (Weiss 1931).

I [found] Reichenbach's philosophy congenial to my own pragmatic naturalism. [...] We became even friendlier when Reichenbach discovered that I had strong socialist views. He had never met an American socialist before and seemed as surprised to learn that there were American socialists as some proto-Nazi students at Munich had been when I told them that there was a Jewish proletariat in the United States. (Hook 1978, 33-34)

Hook appears to have described the views of Reichenbach and his group in several letters to Nagel, who immediately started reading up on his work.<sup>18</sup> It is probably also via Hook that Nagel learned about the views of Rudolf Carnap, who rapidly started to become more influential among European philosophers after the publication of *Der Logische Aufbau der Welt* (1928). In his "Personal Impression of Contemporary German Philosophy", Hook briefly mentions the work of Carnap – one of the latter's first mentions in the American literature – but describes him as less naturalistic than Reichenbach, likely because he knew that the Vienna Circle, at the time, disagreed with the latter's views about the aims of scientific philosophy.<sup>19</sup>

Nagel, too, was critical of Carnap's work in the early 1930s. He was especially opposed to (what he perceived to be) some of Carnap's central theses in the *Aufbau*. In "Verifiability, Truth, and Verification" (1934a), Nagel critically examines Carnap's translational reductionism, the view that "the meaning of a proposition is to be obtained by translating it into others until only such appear whose meaning may be directly apprehended in sense" (1934a, 146). Nagel's main problem with this thesis is that it is incompatible with his aforementioned holistic perspective on theory testing (see Section 3.2). Since any verifying process has "value only *within* a framework of pre-existing knowledge" (1934a, 143, original emphasis), there can be no such thing as a directly apprehended proposition. Any test presupposes a large body of knowledge:

[A]tomic propositions [...] require verification in terms of controlled observation, significant only against the background of theoretical assumptions, and therefore inviting further verification. [...] The doctrine of crucial experiments is inadequate, it is well known, because it is the whole body

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<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, Hook's letters to Nagel from the late 1920s are lost. Nagel's responses to Hook, however, reveal that the former started reading *Philosophie der Raum-Zeit Lehre* in the fall 1928, shortly after Hook had arrived in Germany (Nagel to Hook, September 4, 1928, SHP). Hook must also have told Reichenbach about Nagel's work. For a few months later, Nagel writes that Reichenbach sent him a reprint of "Ziele und Wege der physikalischen Erkenntnis" (Reichenbach 1929). See Nagel to Hook (July 23, 1929, SHP).

<sup>19</sup> For a reconstruction of the theoretical tensions between the Berlin Group and the Vienna Circle in the early 1930s, see Milkov (2013), Dewulf (2020, §2), and Verhaegh (forthcoming-b).

of relevant theory which is brought to an experimental test, and not an isolated proposition. The theory of [...] the final and indubitable apprehension of atomic facts, is inadequate for the same reason. (Nagel 1934a, 146)<sup>20</sup>

Just as we can only test the pendulum law for a particular swinging bob by presupposing a host of knowledge about the experimental set up, the measurement tools, and the behavior of free-falling bodies, we can only test an observational proposition like “this is darker than that’ by fixating background conditions about brightness, lighting conditions, and spatial coincidence (1934a, 142-144).

Little did Nagel know that Carnap, about a year before, had started to change his views about what he by then called ‘protocol sentences’. Spurred by Otto Neurath, the Vienna Circle’s proponent of physicalist naturalism, Carnap now accepted the view that protocol sentences are relative and revisable (Carnap 1932, 469).<sup>21</sup> Nagel was about to find out, however, for he had just been awarded a Guggenheim fellowship that allowed him to spend a year in Europe to familiarize himself with the newest trends in continental philosophy of science. It was this grant that would soon be taking him to Carnap in Prague, where he stayed for three crucial weeks to talk about syntax, science, and socialism.

### 3.7. Prague

Nagel boarded an ocean liner on August 18, 1934 and arrived in France about a week later. In his first days in Europe, Nagel attended the Eighth International Congress of Philosophy in Prague. Philosophically, the conference was “dull and fatiguing” (Nagel to Hook, September 8, 1934, SHP). In an extensive report for the *Journal of Philosophy*, Nagel complained that there was a “woeful lack of clarity, of analysis, of appeal to logic and empirical findings” and that “a majority of the papers were simply occasions for despair to all those who do not view philosophy as a substitute for music and poetry” (1934b, 600). Nagel was particularly worried because several philosophers were using the stage to argue for fascism and *Kultur-intoleranz*. In his report, he explained that the conference was fraught with “notes of national and social conflict”, describing plenary sessions in which speakers defended the fascist state or the view that every genuine culture is intolerant toward all others (Nagel 1934b, 589-596).

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<sup>20</sup> Note that Carnap never talks about ‘atomic propositions’ in the *Aufbau*. Nagel’s choice of words here is probably influenced by Blumberg and Feigl, who described the *Aufbau* as a book in which “all complex propositions are reduced to sets of atomic propositions which are unanalyzable” (1931, 287).

<sup>21</sup> For a reconstruction of Carnap’s development on this score, see Uebel (2007) and Carus (2007).

Less controversial was the first meeting of the Unity of Science movement, which had taken place a few days before and where the “nazis were not seen nor heard” (Nagel to Hook, September 8, 1934, SHP). Nagel had briefly met Reichenbach, Carnap, and a number of other key European philosophers of science and had used these exchanges to schedule research visits in Vienna, Warsaw, Lvov, Prague, and Istanbul. He had been especially excited to meet Reichenbach, who turned out to be interested in Nagel’s work and was curious to learn more about job opportunities in the United States. Reichenbach was “not happy” with his position in Istanbul (ibid.), which he had accepted after the Nazi government had dismissed him from his job in Berlin, and he had asked Nagel to help him find an American publisher for his book *Wahrscheinlichkeitslehre* (Reichenbach 1935) in order to promote his work in the United States.

Despite his enthusiasm about meeting Reichenbach, it was Carnap who had the biggest impact on Nagel’s development during his first months in Europe. After brief visits to Vienna, Warsaw, and Lvov, Nagel returned to Prague in November to spend three weeks with the German professor. He had been reading the latter’s *Logische Syntax der Sprache* in his first weeks abroad (Nagel to Hook, October 3, 1934, SHP) but it was in Prague that Nagel learned about Carnap’s new views in detail. Not only did the latter’s revised ideas about protocol sentences accommodate his worries about Carnap’s translational reductionism (see Section 3.6), he was especially impressed with his analysis of traditional philosophical problems, such as the question of the ontological status of logic (see Section 3.3). According to Carnap, philosophical problems are disguised questions about the syntax of language and to interpret them as questions about reality is to be confused about the nature of philosophical questions. Philosophical theses are often posed in what Carnap called the material mode of speech (in which we talk about facts and things) but should actually be phrased in the formal mode of speech (in which we talk about propositions and thing-words). Already after his first few meetings with Carnap, Nagel writes that he is “much taken with the neatness [...] with which [Carnap] gets rid of some skeletons”, that he is “half convinced that [his own] frequent to-do with the ‘ontological basis’ of formal logic is a mistake”, and that he is “not sure what is left of the problem when it gets formulated in [Carnap’s] ‘formal mode’ of speaking” (Nagel to Hook, November 19, 1934, SHP). Two weeks later, Nagel even describes himself as ‘under the influence of the positivists’ and wonders whether Carnap’s approach does not offer a more solid foundation for naturalism than the ‘muddy’ philosophizing of his teachers Dewey and Cohen:

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. I have the sense now that in spite of Dewey's attention to language he has never been able to show convincingly how to squeeze out the Platonism and absolutism from the sciences. And in general, the Columbia philos. dept. seems like a home for poets who have missed their vocation. 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 and Cohen, very muddy. (Nagel to Hook, December 3, 1934)

Nagel was not only impressed by Carnap's *philosophy*. The impact of the Prague weeks was reinforced by the latter's hospitality. Nagel, who was traveling alone because he was afraid to cause a "scandal of some proportions" if he and his then girlfriend Edith Haggstrom were to travel through Europe as an unmarried couple (*ibid.*, November 28, 1934), had been very lonely during his first months in Europe. In a letter to Hook, Nagel had even described his mood as a state of "near-panic" (September 27, 1934, SHP). He had had a few isolated meetings with logicians in Warsaw and Lvov but he had grown increasingly depressed about living in cities where he did not speak the language and where Jews were treated in an "unbelievably shocking" way (*ibid.*, October 17, 1934). His weeks with Rudolf and Ina, however, felt like a warm blanket. The Carnaps had been "extremely" hospitable, basically opening their house to Nagel in the weeks that he stayed in Prague<sup>22</sup> and they had been very tolerant about his private affairs, encouraging him to bring Edith to Europe and to let them stay with the Carnaps for a while (*ibid.*, November 28, 1934). Most importantly, Nagel and the Carnaps shared the same political views. Both the former's correspondence and the latter's diary reveal that they extensively discussed the political situation in Europe, their views about the disappointing performance of the social democrats, and their sympathies for communism and Trotskyism, even though they both opposed Trotsky's "petty politics" and the dogmatism of the communist party.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.8. Cambridge

Nagel left Prague in early December. And although he briefly returned to Austria to attend two meetings of the Vienna Circle, he used most of his remaining months to sooth his

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<sup>22</sup> Carnap's diary shows that he and Nagel met fifteen times between November 10 and December 5, meetings that often started early in the afternoon and lasted until late in the evening (RCP, 25-75-12).

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Carnap's diary entry for November 18, 1934 (RCP, 25-75-12) and Nagel's letter to Hook from November 19, 1934 (SHP).

‘frazzled nerves’. In January, Edith travelled to Europe and they spent the first four months of 1935 in France and Italy. Nagel felt guilty about the lack of philosophical activity in this period<sup>24</sup> but still decided to cancel his plans to visit Reichenbach in Istanbul. Traveling to Turkey would take too much time and there was a big chance that the latter would be coming to New York as a visiting professor in the next academic year.<sup>25</sup>

Only the final two months of Nagel’s stay were devoted to serious meetings with European philosophers. After a few days in the Netherlands, where he visited Arend Heyting and Otto Neurath, Nagel spent his last weeks in England. In his college days, Nagel had viewed Cambridge as the “holy of holies in philosophy” (Nagel to Hook, May 18, 1935, SHP) since it was the place where Russell and Whitehead had written the *Principia Mathematica* and where Norman Campbell had developed his representational theory of measurement. Once in England, however, Nagel quickly came to the conclusion that Cambridge was “no longer the intellectual Mecca” it had seemed to be when he was a college student (ibid., June 4, 1935). He attended lectures of G. E. Moore, John Wisdom, and D. C. Broad but was disillusioned by the state of the Cambridge school of analysis:

I [...] must say that on the whole I am disappointed. It is just analysis after analysis, but nothing seems to come out of it, and in the end they are less clear what it is they really mean than in the beginning [...] the Cambridge style is no longer my ideal of what philosophy should be like. (May 26, 1935)<sup>26</sup>

His first meeting with Wittgenstein was rather disenchanting as well:

I went to see Wittgenstein this week for permission to attend his lectures. He tore his hair, groaned, said it was impossible [...] that he couldn’t lecture with a stranger in the room, that I should ‘spare him that’, etc.... Most of the people around here think he is absolutely the greatest man that lives and ever lived. Maybe it’s true, but I wish I could have some evidence for it. I have seen some notes W. had mim[e]ographed last year and distributed; but they are terribly chaotic, and the few flashes of light they contain are not enough to judge by. (ibid.)

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<sup>24</sup> Between January and April, Nagel’s only seems to have briefly met Federigo Enriques and George Santayana. In a letter to Hook, Nagel writes: “[W]hen I think of other people going off for a year and returning home with well filled note-books or finished manuscripts ... I wish I would never have to return. It will take years for me to catch up” (Nagel to Hook, March 14, 1935, SHP).

<sup>25</sup> See Nagel to Reichenbach (July 22, 1935, HRP, 013-51-02). Hook had offered his old friend a one-year position at New York University. For a reconstruction, see Verhaegh (forthcoming-b).

<sup>26</sup> See also Nagel to Cohen (June 4, 1935): “I am a little disappointed with what I have found in Cambridge [...] perhaps in the days when Russell was here it may have been worth the pilgrimage. I still find the atmosphere invigorating. [...] But I am hankering for thicker air” (Cited in Rosenfield 1962, 400).



Nagel's period in England also had positive sides, however. He enjoyed meeting Susan Stebbing and was enthralled by A. J. Ayer's and Max Black's talks at a meeting of the Aristotelian Society ("better than anything I've seen at our sessions").<sup>27</sup> In addition, Nagel was pleasantly surprised to learn that there was an undercurrent of pragmatic naturalism in Cambridge. He had a chance to get a hold of some unpublished manuscripts from Frank Ramsey and was excited to read "how far Ramsay [*sic*] went in the direction of a Peirce-Deweyan pragmatism [...] advocating in part an instrumental theory of thought and a general 'fallibilism'" (ibid., June 23, 1935).<sup>28</sup> When he expressed his surprise in a meeting with R. B. Braithwaite, the latter ensured him that Ramsey was not the only Cantabrigian to be defend such a perspective, explaining that "the published works of the Cambridge men [...] should not be taken as indicating of what [is] the accepted doctrine" (ibid.). Just as Carnap had presented him with a model to combine his naturalism with the clarity and the precision of the logical positivists,<sup>29</sup> Ramsey's manuscripts confirmed that it is possible to reconcile pragmatic naturalism with rigorous analysis.

### 3.9. Impressions and Appraisals

In July 1935, Nagel returned to New York, where he used his newly acquired knowledge to update the American public about developments in Europe. He wrote a popular piece about logical empiricism in a literary magazine (Nagel 1938c, 59) and he published reviews of work by, among others, Carnap, Reichenbach, Tarski, and Black (Nagel 1935b, 1936c, 1938a, 1938b, 1938d). Most importantly, Nagel published an influential two-part paper "Impressions and Appraisals of Analytic Philosophy in Europe" (1936a, 1936b) in the *Journal of Philosophy*. In this paper, often credited as one of the first publications to use the term 'analytic philosophy' in print (Frost-Arnold 2007), Nagel describes the views of Wittgenstein, Moore, Schlick, Neurath, Carnap, and the Polish logicians, examining in detail their common focus on analysis and clarification:

In the first place, the men with whom I talked are impatient with philosophic systems built in the traditionally grand manner. Their preoccupation is with philosophy as *analysis*; they take for granted a body of authentic knowledge acquired by the special sciences, and are concerned not

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<sup>27</sup> See Nagel to Hook (ca. May 1935 and July 9, 1935, SHP).

<sup>28</sup> See Misak (2016) for a reconstruction of Cambridge pragmatism in this period.

<sup>29</sup> In a later report for the Guggenheim Foundation, Nagel would write that Carnap represented the wing of the Wiener Kreis "which converged on the ideas familiar from Peirce and Dewey" ("Impressions of European Universities: The Nineteen-Thirties", undated document, ENP, Box 4).

with *adding* to it [...] but with *clarifying* its meaning and implications. (1936a, 6, original emphases)

Nagel's paper also explicitly thematizes the connection between 'analytic philosophy' and American naturalism. Although Nagel recognized that most of the Europeans he visited are suspicious of comprehensive "philosophic systems", he maintains that they all subscribe to "a common-sense naturalism", accepting as a matter of course "the mechanisms which science progressively discovers" (1936a, 7).

Of all the philosophers discussed in "Impressions and Appraisals", Nagel is clearly most sympathetic to Carnap. Whereas the paper is somewhat negative about the Cambridge philosophers and argues that it is not easy to see, "without lapsing into the personal and the impertinent", why philosophers in the U.K. are so fascinated by Moore and Wittgenstein (1936a, 10), he introduces Carnap in exceptionally laudatory terms:

I chanced to hear Carnap take part in a discussion before knowing who the speaker was, and was immediately impressed by the gentle force of a luminous mind. I listened to him subsequently, in classroom and seminar as well as in private, and thought I understood what Emerson meant when he described character as a reserved force acting directly by presence, apparently without means. As a lecturer I found him admirably lucid, as the leader of his seminar incisive and yet sympathetic. In private discussions he was a patient listener to my problems, clarifying them not only by suggesting solutions, but answering many by reformulating the difficulties. He is one of the rare people with whom one does not have to agree in order to be understood by him. I had a sense of immeasurable thoroughness and of untouched intellectual resources by almost everything he said. (Nagel 1936b, 44-45)

Nagel's description of Carnap as a 'gentle' and 'patient' thinker is likely a response to the largely negative American reception of the latter's early views. In the United States, Carnap was best-known for his staunch solipsism and his ideas had been criticized even by philosophers generally sympathetic to verificationist theories of meaning (e.g. Lewis 1934; Morris 1934).<sup>30</sup> Whether or not the American reading of Carnap's early views was accurate, Nagel's paper seems designed to correct this image: more than seventeen pages of the article are devoted to an extensive analysis of Carnap's 'new' ideas (1936b, 32-49). Nagel introduces the distinction between "left wing" and "right wing" logical positivism and shows

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<sup>30</sup> In addition, most of Nagel's teachers at Columbia disliked logical positivism. In a letter to Neurath, Nagel explains that "the 'old-timers' distrust it, dislike it, and pretend that it has nothing very interesting to say" (January 2, 1936, ONN, item 275).

that the former faction no longer believes that there is a “theoretically necessary ultimate terminus to the process of verification”:

The dogmatism of indubitable atomic facts is replaced by the view that every protocol is theoretically capable of further verification. From a broad point of view there is no difference in kind between the verification of a theory and the verification of a singular proposition. Both are hypotheses, which commit their asserters to an indefinite series of further propositions. [...] Carnap’s wing in the Vienna Circle believes that not only is this revised theory of meaning and verification more faithful than the original one to the actual procedure of science, but that the annoying solipsism of the earlier version is made completely innocuous. (Nagel 1936b, 34-35)

As this is exactly what Nagel himself had proposed in his own critical analysis of Carnap’s views two years before (see Section 3.6), it is no surprise that he presents the latter’s new position as an improvement. Nagel also sympathetically discusses Carnap’s physicalism, which he connects to his own opposition to methodological dualisms (see Sections 3.2-3.3). Nagel explains that Carnap’s physicalism should be viewed as a “protest against” the “sharp division between *Natur* and *Geisteswissenschaften*”, and interprets the latter’s “unity of science” thesis in strongly naturalistic terms, arguing that it “asserts in so many words that the subject-matter for all empirical inquiry is the world of spatio-temporal events” and that “a common logical method is applicable in every department of knowledge” (1936b, 40-41).

### **3.10. Naturalism reconsidered**

“Impressions and Appraisals” played a major role in the American reception of logical empiricism and its publication likely helped Carnap to find a position in the United States. The paper was published in January 1936, a few weeks before Carnap started an extensive American lecture tour that would take him to, among others, Columbia University and that would result in two job offers. Carnap was thankful for Nagel’s support because it helped him in his attempts to correct the American misunderstandings about his philosophy (Verhaegh forthcoming-a). When the Carnaps arrived in the United States, they were awaited by Ernest and Edith Nagel, now a married couple and eager to be as hospitable as the Carnaps had been a year before.<sup>31</sup>

Reichenbach was less happy with “Impressions and Appraisals”, however. Nagel had only mentioned him in a footnote, explaining that exigencies of space made it impossible to

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<sup>31</sup> See Carnap’s diary (RCP 025-82-01) and Nagel’s letter to Neurath (January 2, 1936, ONN, item 275).

include a discussion of the latter's views about induction and probability (1936b, 30n2). In February 1936, Reichenbach sent Nagel a letter in which he explained his disappointment. The paper, Reichenbach maintained, portrays logical empiricism as a movement that is primarily interested in "abstract discussions about meaning". Nagel primarily had eye for views that were either "unfruitfully dogmatic" (Schlick's) or "unfruitfully conventionalistic" (Carnap's) and ignored the more subtle ideas that had been developed by Reichenbach's now-scattered Berlin group. About a month later, Reichenbach published an alternative perspective on "logicistic empiricism" in the *Journal of Philosophy*, introducing the American public to the work of his Berlin group.<sup>32</sup> Reichenbach's strong response to "Impressions and Appraisals" was likely induced by his personal situation. The Turkish government had blocked his visiting position in New York and he was more desperate than ever to find a job in the United States (see Verhaegh forthcoming-b). Still, the letter soured the relation between Nagel and Reichenbach for a few years. Indeed, Nagel's review of *Wahrscheinlichkeitslehre*, published a few months later, was lukewarm at best and argues that Reichenbach merely sketches but fails to work out in detail a convincing theory of probability (Nagel 1936c; see also Reichenbach 1938 and Nagel 1938d).

Although Nagel played an important role in promoting Carnap's philosophy in the United States, it would be a mistake to view him as a philosophical convert.<sup>33</sup> Nagel incorporated elements of Carnap's program into his own philosophy but he always viewed them as friendly amendments, never as a challenge to his naturalism. The most notable example of such an amendment is Carnap's perspective on the nature of logic. Whereas Nagel had toyed with metaphysical interpretations of logic in the first phase of his career (see Section 3.3), he came to view Carnap's position as superior, arguing that logical systems are linguistic proposals aimed at aiding scientists in their everyday inquiries:

The various systems of formal logic must [...] be viewed not as accounts of the 'true nature' of an antecedently identifiable relation of 'implication', but as alternative proposals for specifying usages and for performing inferences. [...] If everyday language requires to be completed and

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<sup>32</sup> See Reichenbach to Nagel (February 15, 1936, HRP, 013-51-01) and Reichenbach (1936). Reichenbach's negative portrayal of Carnap's position was not a surprise to Nagel. In Europe, Nagel had already noted that Reichenbach and Carnap respected each other but were far from friends. In a letter to Hook, Nagel wrote: "I don't think [Carnap] and Reichenbach love one another, I had that impression from Reichenbach when I saw him, and get hints of it from Mrs. Carnap; he of course is the essence of courtesy and admiration. I think R[eichenbach]'s cock[i]ness gets on the Carnaps' nerves, while Carnap's preciseness must irritate R[eichenbach]" (December 3, 1934, SNP).

<sup>33</sup> Unlike Quine, who, after spending a few weeks in Prague in 1933, came to perceive himself as Carnap's "disciple" for a number of years. See Quine (1970, 41) and, for a reconstruction, Verhaegh (ms.).

reorganized for the sake of attaining the ends of inquiry, the ‘justification’ for a proposed set of regulative principles [...] can be given only in terms of the adequacy of the proposed changes as means or instruments for attaining the envisaged ends. (Nagel 1944/1956, 76-77)

Nagel first extensively discussed this new perspective in his contribution to *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, often considered the Columbia naturalists’ philosophical manifesto, showing that he viewed his new position as an amendment rather than as a dismissal of naturalism. Indeed, Nagel sets up his paper by discussing his Carnapian account as one of three possible naturalistic perspectives on logic before he goes on to argue that the new position is the most plausible option.

There are a few reasons as to why Nagel never felt the need to abandon naturalism in the wake of his trip to Europe. First and foremost, Nagel believed the continental philosophers to be (closeted) naturalists themselves. I have mentioned Nagel’s attempts to connect analytic philosophy to American naturalism in “Impressions and Appraisals” (Section 3.9) but he repeats this assessment in his 1954 presidential address to the APA Eastern Division Meeting. In this address, titled “Naturalism Reconsidered”, Nagel argues that although analytic philosophers are wary of comprehensive philosophical perspectives and have directed their attention to the resolution of “limited problems and puzzles”, most of them *implicitly* share a naturalistic *Weltanschauung*:

Some of us [...] have dismissed as utterly trivial most if not all [...] analytical philosophy. I do not share this distress [...]. Concentration on limited and determinate problems has yielded valuable fruits. [...] On the other hand, philosophers like other men conduct their lives within the framework of certain comprehensive if not always explicit assumptions about the world they inhabit. These assumptions color evaluations of major ideals and proposed policies. [...] It is clearly desirable that such basic intellectual commitments [...] be made as explicit as possible [...]. [T]his evening seems to me an appropriate occasion for stating as simply and as succinctly as I can the substance of those intellectual commitments I like to call ‘naturalism’. (Nagel 1954/1956, 5)

For Nagel, naturalism and logical empiricism were compatible. The naturalist, like the empiricist, is skeptical of traditional systems of philosophy. Indeed, Nagel himself had defended a contextualist picture of inquiry from the very beginning of his academic career (see Section 3.2). Just as Nagel combined detailed analyses of measurement, probability, and verification with a strong commitment to methodological naturalism, he believed that the work of the empiricists, too, was compatible with a naturalistic outlook.

An additional reason as to why Nagel did not dismiss naturalism is that he believed some of Carnap's analyses to be fundamentally misguided. That is, even if Carnap's program *were* a genuine alternative to American naturalism, Nagel would not have adopted it. Especially Carnap's ideas about ethics and esthetics were an eyesore to Nagel.<sup>34</sup> In his popular piece on logical empiricism, Nagel dismissed the positivists' views on ethics as "superficial" and even in "Impressions and Appraisals" he rejects Carnap's position:

Perhaps the least satisfactory part of Carnap's views is his analysis of the propositions of ethics and esthetics. Ethical norms are declared to be imperatives and not statements capable of truth or falsity. [...] But it is surely not the case that ethical propositions are necessarily either assertions about some transcendental autonomous realm of values or statements simply about human feelings. They can be conceived as hypotheses concerning ways of organizing or reorganizing the human scene in the interests of the well-being of its members. Ethical statements would still be empirical and would refer to the want and the capacities of living beings; but they would be more than records of private feelings of those who make them. (Nagel 1936b, 48-49)

Although the two were like-minded in their political views (see Section 3.7), in other words, Nagel believed that Carnap failed to successfully incorporate them into his worldview.<sup>35</sup>

Second, Nagel believed that Carnap carried his syntactical analyses too far. Nagel, we have seen, was happy to adopt Carnap's suggestion that logical systems are linguistic proposals. He was dissatisfied, however, with the latter's attempts to extend his linguistic approach to philosophical systems more generally. Naturalism, for Nagel, is not a proposal. It is an empirically justified *Weltanschauung*, intellectually superior to the major alternatives American philosophers were offering (most notably, idealism and theism):

When naturalists give their allegiance to [...] the method of modern empirical science, they do so because that method appears to be the most assured way of achieving reliable knowledge. As judged by that method, the evidence in my opinion is at present conclusive for the truth of naturalism, and it is tempting to suppose that no one familiar with the evidence can fail to acknowledge that philosophy. Indeed, some commentators there are who assert that all philosophies are at bottom only expressions in different idioms [...] so that the strife of philosophic systems is mainly a conflict over essentially linguistic matters. But too many thinkers for whom I have profound respect explicitly reject naturalism, and their espousal of contrary

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<sup>34</sup> Other examples are Carnap's approach to semantics (Nagel 1942) and inductive logic (Nagel 1963). See Tuboly (forthcoming) and Mormann (this volume) for a discussion.

<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that Nagel's assessment is correct. Carus (2007), for example, argues that Carnap did incorporate his socio-political views into his philosophy.

views seems to me incompatible with the irenic claim that we really are in agreement on fundamentals. (Nagel 1954/1956, 12)

Nagel, in sum, remained a committed naturalist. His encounters with European philosophers of science had offered him a way to replace his teachers' 'muddy' theories with rigorous analyses.<sup>36</sup> Still, Nagel never gave up on naturalism itself. Even in 1954, twenty years after his year in Europe, when Nagel had the honor to be the first self-identifying analytic philosopher to read a presidential address to the American Philosophical Association, he chose to portray himself a naturalist, arguing that naturalism "embraces a generalized account of the cosmic scheme [...] as well as a logic of inquiry" (1954/1956, 6).

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<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in one of his rare retrospectives, Nagel writes that that the "vigorous and technically precise" methods of the logical empiricists were "salutary stimuli" to his own development, compelling him to "re-examine assumptions" and "to take a stand on a number of issues on which [his] earlier teachers were [...] unclear" (1956, xii).

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