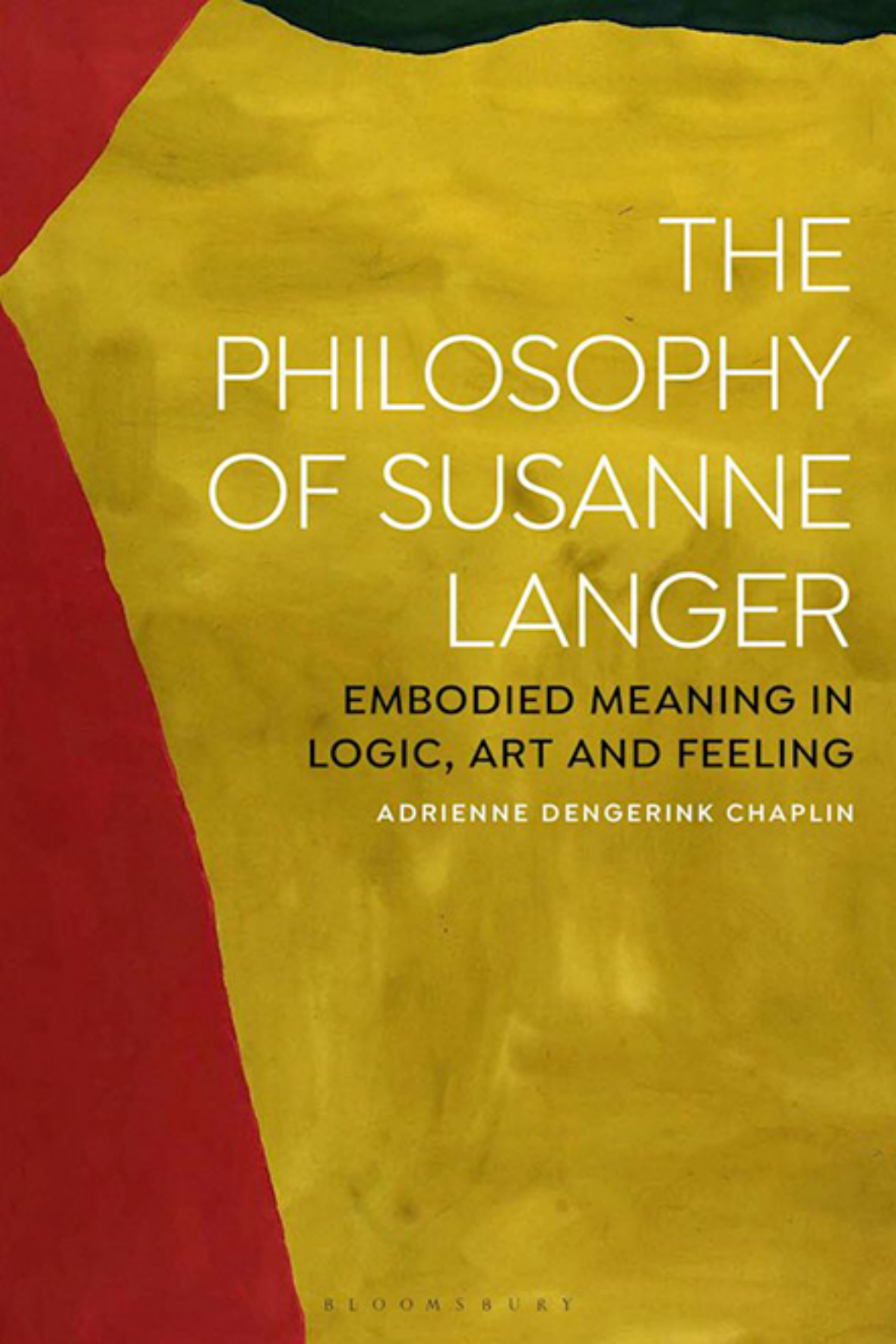
THE PHILOSOPHY OF SUSANNE LANGER
EMBODIED MEANING IN LOGIC, ART AND FEELING
ADRIENNE DENGERINK CHAPLIN
BLOOMSBURY

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# The Philosophy of Susanne Langer

## Embodied Meaning in Logic, Art and Feeling

Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin

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# Contents

# Acknowledgements

This book has been long in the making. My first introduction to Susanne Langer was in the early 1980s at a graduate school in Toronto while completing my philosophy studies at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Langer's strikingly insightful writings on the philosophy of art left an immediate and enduring impression on me. After a long interval and a move to England, I returned to Langer with a doctoral thesis on her aesthetics entitled 'Mind, Body and Art: The Problem of Meaning in the Cognitive Aesthetics of Susanne K. Langer'. Much of that research found its way into the chapter on art in this book. By the time of its completion, however, I had become increasingly aware that Langer's aesthetics could not be understood without an awareness of her wider intellectual framework and the specific sources that shaped it. Many misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Langer's conceptual apparatus could be traced back to this lack of historical philosophical understanding. This led me, several decades later, to embark on a more comprehensive study of her work as a whole in the light of its formative influences.

Because of its long gestation I have incurred more debts than I can remember or am able to record. Over the years I presented various papers on Langer at different conferences of the Canadian, British, and Dutch societies of aesthetics as well as those of the International Association for Aesthetics in Rio de Janeiro and Krakow. I am grateful for the feedback received in those settings. Chapters 9 and 10 use material from publications based on those papers: 'Art and Embodiment: Biological and Phenomenological Contributions to Understanding Beauty and the Aesthetic', *Contemporary Aesthetics* 3 (2005) and 'Feeling the Body in Art: Embodied Cognition and Aesthetics in Mark Johnson and Susanne K. Langer', *Sztuka I filozofia/Art and Philosophy* 28 (2016).

Many of my debts go to my various teachers and advisors: the late Johan van der Hoeven, Calvin Seerveld, Sander Griffioen, Paul Crowther and Lambert Zuidervaart. I am very grateful for their careful reading and constructive comments on previous work. I also want to thank Bloomsbury's anonymous readers who made several valuable suggestions. Responsibility for any remaining defects is, of course, entirely my own. Most of all, I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my husband and fellow scholar Jonathan Chaplin, who patiently commented on successive drafts and has been supportive throughout the long journey. I could not have wished for a more congenial and stimulating companion.

Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin
Cambridge, Spring 2019

## Note on the Cover Artist

The image on the front cover is a slightly cropped version of Helen Frankenthaler's painting *Blessing of the Fleet* from 1969. Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) was an American abstract expressionist painter and major contributor to the history of post-war American painting. She pioneered a soak-stain technique that produces luminous colour washes that merge with the canvas. Between 1958 and 1971 she was married to fellow painter Robert Motherwell.

Photograph of Dr Susanne K. Langer by permission of the Estate of Susanne K. Langer

# Introduction

> *As every person has his mother tongue in terms of which he cannot help thinking his earlier thoughts, so every scholar has his philosophical mother tongue, which colors his natural* Weltanschauung.
>
> Susanne K. Langer[1]

This book is a presentation of the philosophy of Susanne K. Langer (1895–1985) against the background of major advances in twentieth-century European and American thought. Langer is one of the most original and fertile American thinkers of the twentieth century, yet her work is still insufficiently recognized and frequently misunderstood. To illuminate the evolution and shape of Langer's thought, this book focuses on her four most formative sources: her mentors Henry Sheffer and Alfred N. Whitehead, and the philosophers Ernst Cassirer and Ludwig Wittgenstein. This reveals how her thinking was not only forged out of a critical engagement with significant intellectual traditions of her time but also anticipated many of the major developments and philosophical 'turns' of ours. The book argues that, apart from a knowledge of these sources and their European roots, interpreters cannot adequately understand the radicality and intellectual breadth of her achievements, nor can they fully recognize her abiding relevance.

Langer's works spanned over fifty years and can be divided into three main periods. The first focused on logic and epistemology: *The Practice of Philosophy* (1930) and *An Introduction to Symbolic Logic* (1937). The second engaged with the philosophy of science, culture and art: *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), *Feeling and Form* (1953) and *Problems of Art* (1957). The third concentrated on the philosophy of mind, feeling and embodied cognition: *Philosophical Sketches* (1962) and the trilogy *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (1967, 1971 and 1982). Throughout these very diverse works runs one unifying theme: the way humans make sense of the world, or what Langer calls their 'pursuit of meaning', whether in science, language, art, myth, even dreams. The 'new key' in philosophy is the recognition that the basic 'sense-data' and 'facts' that make up human experience and knowledge of the world are inherently symbolic. Facts, on Langer's terms, are formulated events rooted in the perceptions of patterns and forms highlighting particular aspects of the world. The pursuit of meaning and its articulation in communicable forms is, so Langer argues, a deeply embodied fundamental human need.

Despite her impressive output, Langer's work as a whole is still largely unknown. Recurrent refrains among the small numbers of scholars that *do* study her is that she is

one of the most 'neglected' (McDermott; Berthoff), 'ignored or disparaged' (Gardner), 'misunderstood' (Reimer), 'unknown' (Johnson), 'undervalued' (Campbell), 'unsung' (Damasio), etc., philosophers of the twentieth century.[2] Campbell provocatively suggests that, were it not impossible to rank unknown figures, it would be tempting to characterize Langer as 'the greatest unknown philosopher in the American tradition'.[3]

While Langer is best known as a philosopher of art, her earlier work on logic and epistemology, and her later work on the embodied mind and feeling deserve equal, if not greater, attention – if only for a better understanding of her philosophy of art itself. Many misinterpretations of her aesthetics could have been avoided if readers had been more aware of her broader intellectual framework as outlined in these earlier and later works. This was, of course, not possible until her later works actually appeared. Yet, as one critic put it, 'Few thinkers of Langer's stature were so criticized, and few continue to be as misunderstood, because misconstruals of her earlier work have not been corrected by that which she was to explain later.'[4] Another significant obstacle to her reception is that her first major first book, *The Practice of Philosophy,* containing most of the guiding principles for her later work, has long been out of print, as has her seminal collection of essays, *Philosophical Sketches,* outlining the central themes of her later trilogy *Mind*. It can only be hoped that a renewed interest in Langer's thought will inspire publishers to produce new editions of these important books.

With a much changed philosophical and disciplinary climate since Langer's time, there are currently signs of a renewed interest in Langer's work, especially in America, Germany, Italy, Poland and the Czech Republic.[5] British interest so far has not been keeping up. Interestingly, in a 1951 review of Langer's best-selling book, *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), Scottish philosopher of science Lancelot Law Whyte lamented the fact that there had still not been a British edition of the book at the time. As he writes,

> The Harvard edition went out of print, few copies having reached this country. The Mentor edition … appeared in 1948, and over 80.000 copies have been sold. But owing to war conditions, lack of interest by publishers, and the fact that the book does not fall within any one of the dominant 'subjects', such as symbolic logic, philology, philosophy of art, religion, etc., there has as yet been no United Kingdom edition. This has had the unfortunate result that, though known to a handful of specialists, this scholarly, original and delightful work has not yet reached the wider circle of philosophical, scientific and general readers outside the United States.[6]

This, in effect, is still the case. Although, among an older generation, there is still a vague collective memory of her name and the title of her best-selling book, *Philosophy in a New Key* – perhaps some even own a copy of its 35¢ Mentor edition – few British people know much more about Langer than that.

## Reasons for neglect

There are several reasons why Langer's work was overlooked and neglected by professional philosophers in Langer's time, not only British but also American. Let me list the major five reasons. First, Langer's philosophy diverted from – and challenged – many of the

prevailing paradigms that were informed by the regnant scientistic philosophies. That also meant that the field of study for which Langer had become best known, that is, philosophy of art or 'aesthetics', was not considered a serious topic for rigorous research and was therefore routinely relegated to the margins of the discipline.[7] As W. V. O. Quine summarized the mood at the time, 'Philosophy of science is philosophy enough.'[8]

A second reason for the lack of attention was the fact that Langer's wide-ranging, holistic and boundary-crossing approach did not sit easily with the increasing specialization, technicalization and fragmentation of mainstream professional philosophy. Even though Langer herself, in her early years, actively contributed to the discussion of technical logical problems and to the birth of American analytic philosophy as a whole – she was a co-founder of the Association for Symbolic Logic and review editor for the *Journal of Symbolic Logic* and the *Journal of Philosophy* – she was always more interested in the broader questions of meaning that shaped the way philosophical problems were being formulated.

A third reason for her lack of recognition by fellow philosophers was that her ideas were often ahead of the time, sometimes by several decades.[9] Langer frequently anticipated what were to become major developments or 'turns' in philosophy long before they became widely known and accepted. She was, for instance, one of the first philosophers to emphasize the fundamentally metaphorical nature of language and the importance of social context in its use and understanding; she highlighted the constitutively transformational and hermeneutical character of the human mind and understanding; she drew attention to the pre-theoretical and social aspects of major paradigm shifts in revolutions in science; she emphasized the crucial role of the body and intuition in concept formation and cognition; she was one of the first to recognize and accept a plurality of genuine modes of knowing, including myth and art; she was one of the first to recognize the importance of a better understanding of animal mentality and behaviour for an account of the difference between humans and (other) animals; and she was one of the first philosophers to draw heavily on the results of the empirical sciences, demonstrating how the same 'data' could be interpreted very differently depending on different variables. Her ideas contained radical critiques of modern logocentrism and the traditional subject–object dichotomies of modern thought. Many of these critiques anticipated those developed by such later thinkers as Francois Merleau-Ponty, Thomas Kuhn, Paul Ricoeur, John Searle, Jacques Derrida, Michael Polanyi, Charles Taylor, Antonio Damasio, Mark Johnson, Gilles Deleuze and many others. Donald Dryden calls her 'a prophet and visionary'.[10]

A fourth important reason why Langer's work was not recognized and, indeed, often seriously misunderstood, was a lack of familiarity among her fellow philosophers with the principal European sources that had shaped her thinking. Langer's thought was deeply formed by an engagement with the German neo-Kantian tradition that dominated European philosophy in the early twentieth century. Langer's own German background provided her with the language skills and access to philosophical sources that were largely unknown by her American contemporaries. Frequently, this gave her a much better grasp of the latest developments in European philosophy than that of her fellow philosophers.[11] It also enabled her to draw constructive links between, on the one hand, hermeneutically inclined 'continental' philosophy and, on the other, Anglo-American analytical and pragmatist philosophies.[12]

Last but not least, the fifth reason why Langer's work was often neglected was because of her marginalization as a woman in a predominantly male discipline. Langer developed her philosophy at a time of systemic institutional discrimination against women in the academy in general and deep-rooted cultural prejudice against women in philosophy in particular. Although often referred to as the first female professional philosopher in America, she did not, in fact, have a tenured position until her appointment at the Connecticut College for Women in 1954, at the age of 59. Despite being awarded several honorary degrees and awards, she was not part of the academy's institutional network with its established career paths, privileges and prestige.[13] As a result, she did not exercise the direct influence on students or other scholars that would have been routine for her male colleagues.

## Approach

This study is the third comprehensive monograph on Langer's work as a whole. The first, as yet untranslated, is *Susanne K. Langer: die lebendige Form menschlichen Fühlens und Verstehens* (Susanne K. Langer: The Living Form of Human Feeling and Understanding), written by German philosopher Rolf Lachmann in 2000.[14] The second, *Susanne Langer in Focus: The Symbolic Mind*, by American philosopher Robert E. Innis, was published in 2009.[15] Both are excellent expositions of Langer's philosophy as a whole and reveal her as an important twentieth-century philosopher whose radical and innovative thought merits rediscovery and critical development. My book complements these two studies by focusing in detail on her most formative philosophical sources.

In his monograph, Innis locates Langer explicitly in relation to the American semiotic and pragmatist traditions, especially Peirce, James and Dewey.[16] While he admits that American philosophy was 'neither a source nor a resource for Langer', he considers Langer's philosophy to supply 'independent confirmation of some of American philosophy's central theses and focal concerns' and to provide 'an additional resource … for development of its continuing relevance and analytical power.'[17] While I fully agree with Innis's assessment that there are strong overlaps and parallels between Langer's thought and the American tradition, this is nevertheless not the whole story, nor is it the story as told by Langer herself. For good and for bad reasons, Langer often explicitly distances herself from the American semiotic and pragmatists thinkers. Instead, she repeatedly and emphatically points to four thinkers who, she says, have influenced her most, that is, her mentors Sheffer and Whitehead, as well as Cassirer and Wittgenstein. While it is generally known to those with even a cursory knowledge of Langer *that* she was influenced by these four thinkers, there is often a limited understanding of exactly *how* and *to what extent* that influence operated. Moreover, Langer's appropriation of these sources does not always conform to 'standard' readings. Indeed, sometimes it corrects them. Langer's reading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus,* for instance, challenges the view that it represents a positivist copy theory of language and, instead, interprets it in terms of the same 'symbolic turn' that could be seen in Sheffer, Cassirer and Whitehead. Langer's reading, as I will explain, is much closer to the way the early founders of the Vienna Circle had read the early Wittgenstein. The fact that two its founders, Moritz Schlick and Herbert Feigl, recognized in Langer a kindred spirit based on their reading of her

first book, *The Practice of Philosophy*, suggests the need for a more nuanced – and more neo-Kantian – reading of these early Viennese logical positivists than is often the case.

As well as Langer's own readings of her four sources, the sources themselves are currently undergoing revivals and re-readings, generating fresh interpretations and applications. Both Whitehead and Cassirer are attracting a surge of new scholarly interest, and alternative readings of the *Tractatus* by the New Wittgensteinians have drawn renewed attention to the early Wittgenstein. Sheffer, too, is beginning to be rediscovered, partly as a result of the new burgeoning field of history of analytic philosophy. Not only does Langer's early (re-)reading of these four thinkers shed new light on them individually, it also draws out intriguing and previously overlooked parallels *between* their respective philosophies.

In addition to Langer's four main sources, several other thinkers have exercised an influence on and served as an inspiration for Langer. These include Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, William James, the *Gestalt* theorists Kurt Koffka, Wolfgang Köhler and Max Wertheimer, and numerous other scholars working in a wide variety of specialist disciplines. Yet, although all these thinkers have in some way found their way into Langer's corpus, none of them had as much formative influence as Sheffer, Cassirer, Whitehead and Wittgenstein. In order to examine their influence more closely, I have taken the unusual step of starting, not with Langer's own texts, but with these sources themselves. Here, my intention has been to bring these sources more alive by placing them in their own historical and philosophical contexts. This approach enables a closer engagement with the thinkers themselves, in the way Langer herself might have encountered them, allowing for a closer comparison between their works and hers.

This approach has the specific advantage of being able to trace the genealogy of several central Langerian terms such as form, feeling, meaning, logic, symbol, act and process, as they arose in their original philosophical contexts. As I hope to make clear, Langer's use of these terms is often idiosyncratic and can be easily misunderstood outside of the context in which they originally germinated. Throughout her work Langer regularly defined and re-defined her foundational key terms to the point of appearing inconsistent or indecisive in her use of them. Langer is fully aware of this risk but considers such ongoing revisions an essential part of the philosophical project. This is evident from some personal correspondence between her and the art critic Herbert Read in 1957. In one his letters Read writes that she has 'no more devoted admirer in the world' than him but that he questions her use of the word 'feeling' in her definition of art ('forms expressive of human feeling') as this suggests 'an all-too-Germanic expressionism.'[18] Langer's reply to Read sheds helpful light on her general approach to philosophical terminology and I will quote it here at some length:

> Dear Sir Herbert, …. Your letter caused me considerable distress, for I gather from your criticism that I have completely failed to make my thoughts clear. If, after reading the lecture on Expressiveness [in *Problems of Art*], and also the parallel passages in *Feeling and Form* and even *Philosophy in a New Key*, a competent critic can still insist that 'expression' must mean giving vent to emotion, I can only conclude that I cannot write my native language. You say that *my* use of the word 'feeling' is ambiguous, because to '*most readers*' it connotes emotion rather than sensation. A philosophical writer is always in a quandry, because common words are uncertain

> coin to most readers. Common words are repositories of old concepts, so in trying to express a new and *ipso facto* unpopular concept we have our choice of giving an unusually broad – or, contrariwise, unusually restricted - meaning to a common word, or inventing technical terms that fill the book with Greek compounds or other neologisms. Since I try to write primarily for the philosophical profession, people trained to use words as they are defined and not as they are commonly bandied out, I usually choose to give familiar words explicit meanings, i.e. meanings to be accepted for the discourse in which I am employing them. One simply cannot be bound, in such difficult discourse, to the viable and vague connotations those words might have for 'most readers.'[19]

In view of Langer's stated explanation of her use of philosophical terms, it becomes all the more important that we examine the original contexts in which they were developed. My close reading of Langer and her sources means that, wherever possible, I have used direct quotations to highlight parallels between them. In the case of Langer, this has the added advantage of putting on display her own eloquent and shining prose.

Considering Langer's explicit acknowledgement of her four main sources, it may seem surprising to find so few direct references to them in Langer's actual texts. I suggest that the principal reason for this is simply that she had so profoundly absorbed their thinking that it had become hard for her to identify exactly what were their thoughts and what were her own. She herself once called it the mark of a great teacher that one was not able to attribute thoughts to them which had become part of the fabric of one's own mentality.[20] Or, as she put it elsewhere, 'As every person has his mother tongue in terms of which he cannot help thinking his earlier thoughts, so every scholar has his philosophical mother tongue, which colors his natural *Weltanschauung*.'[21] Langer's sources had become part of her mother tongue.

## Aims and content

The main aim of the book is to illuminate Langer's thought in the light of her formative sources and to rediscover its potential for further critical development. By making the overall architecture of her thought more intelligible, it invites re-readings and re-appraisals of aspects of her philosophy that have often been studied without an understanding of her philosophy as a whole. This applies particularly to her aesthetics which is often discussed in isolation from her earlier and later works.

This book involves close readings and interpretations of the main primary texts and provides extensive quotes. This also enables the book to serve as a first introduction to Langer's works for new readers. For those seeking to follow up critical discussions of detailed aspects of her work, I have supplied ample references in notes.

This book contains ten chapters arranged in three parts. Part One, 'Context' (Chapters 1–3), covers the biographical and cross-Atlantic philosophical context of Langer's philosophy and her status as a woman in philosophy. Part Two, 'Sources' (Chapters 4–7), treats Langer's four main philosophical sources in terms of their different conceptions of *form*: Logical form (Sheffer), Symbolic form (Cassirer), Organic form (Whitehead) and

Expressive form (Wittgenstein). Part Three, 'Contributions' (Chapters 8–10), contains expositions of the three main areas in which Langer made constructive philosophical contributions, treated in chronological order: logic and semiotics in the 1920s and 1930s (Chapter 8); art and aesthetics in the 1940s and 1950s (Chapter 9); philosophy of mind and feeling in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s (Chapter 10).

Chapter 1, 'Life and work', presents an overview of Langer's personal and professional life. It describes her education at Radcliffe College under her two mentors Henry Sheffer and Alfred N. Whitehead and points out her role as co-founder of the Association for Symbolic Logic and consulting editor of the *Journal for Symbolic Logic*. It draws attention to the enormous interest in her book *Philosophy in a New Key* – it sold well over a half million copies – but that, despite her growing public profile, she did not gain a permanent position until a late age.

Chapter 2, 'European philosophy in America', locates Langer's thought in the context of important cross-Atlantic developments in philosophy in her time. It describes the many exchanges between American and European philosophers and the rise of logical positivism through the Vienna Circle. It examines the fact that the Circle's founders considered Langer's first book to contain clear resonances with their views. It describes Langer's involvement with the seminal Fifth International Congress for the Unity of Science at Harvard in 1939 which became a gathering point for the refugee philosophers that were to exert an important influence on post-war American philosophy.

Chapter 3, 'Philosophy and women', discusses Langer's status as a women philosopher at a time of large-scale institutional discrimination against women and deep-seated cultural prejudice against women philosophers. The chapter includes a brief history of Langer's *alma mater,* Radcliffe College, a women's college founded to give women access to the education offered to men by Harvard College at a time that Harvard did not accept female students. It concludes by exploring the question whether Langer's philosophy can be said to reflect the fact that she was a woman.

Chapter 4, 'Henry Sheffer: Logical form', outlines the influence of Langer's mentor, the logician Sheffer, on Langer in three important respects. First, his conception of logic as the study of pattern and forms rather than deductive reasoning is shown to have provided the initial basis for Langer's thinking about forms and structures in general, including those in art. Second, his insight that the same reality could be represented by a plurality of (logical) forms, systems and notations is revealed to have influenced Langer's thinking about art as being one form of representation alongside others. Third, his emphasis on the need to focus on understanding the *meaning* of logical concepts and forms, rather than on the refining of their technical notation, is presented as inspiring Langer's lifelong interest in 'the meaning of meaning'.

Chapter 5, 'Ernst Cassirer: Symbolic form', highlights the importance of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms for Langer's concept of art as a non-discursive symbolic form. The chapter provides a brief history of neo-Kantianism and elucidates how Cassirer extended and transformed Kant's fixed and universal forms of intuition and cognition into historically evolving, culturally based symbolic forms of perception and experience. The chapter explains that, although Langer only met Cassirer for the first time in 1941, she had been familiar with his trilogy *Philosophie der symbolischen*

*Formen* (1923, 1925, 1929) long before it was translated into English in the 1950s. Since Cassirer had always intended a fourth volume on art, Langer's *Feeling and Form* can, in an important sense, be said to have completed that project. The chapter describes how Langer's own English translation of Cassirer's *Sprache und Mythos* (1925) in 1946, provided an early introduction of Cassirer to the English-speaking world prior to the publication of his translated *magnum opus*, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1955–7).

Chapter 6, 'Alfred N. Whitehead: Organic form', focuses on Whitehead's conception of the organism's ongoing fluid and reciprocal engagement with its environment as the model for Langer's biological understanding of human mentality. As part of the first cohort of Whitehead's students after his arrival at Harvard in 1924, Langer witnessed the development of Whitehead's process philosophy first-hand. The chapter discusses the relevance of the three main periods of Whitehead's intellectual development for Langer, including those prior to his arrival in America. It shows how Whitehead's concept of nature as a temporal process with an organic rhythm of birth, growth and decline is reflected in Langer's understanding of art (and music) as a 'living form' and how his notions of feeling and affect as the basic modes of human engagement with the world shaped Langer's notion of art as 'the form of feeling' or as 'the articulation of life *as felt*'. It suggests that Whitehead's conception of philosophy and metaphysics as an 'adventure of ideas' is echoed in Langer's notion of philosophy as 'the pursuit of meaning'. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Whitehead's 'mysticism' and Langer's reservations about what she considered his *too* speculative thinking.

Chapter 7, 'Ludwig Wittgenstein: Expressive form', discusses Langer's reading of the *Tractatus* through the lenses of Sheffer, Cassirer and Whitehead. It provides a brief history of the Vienna Circle and its complex relations to Wittgenstein and argues that, unlike neo-positivist empiricist interpretations of the *Tractatus* by British philosophers Ayer and Russell, Langer's neo-Kantian reading of Wittgenstein has much in common with the readings of Vienna Circle members Schlick and Herbert Feigl. It points out that Langer is one of the first American philosophers to recognize the *Tractatus* as part of a broader linguistic or, on Langer's terms, *symbolic* turn. It is often thought that Wittgenstein's later 'repudiation' of the *Tractatus* was a rejection of a putative copy or correspondence theory of language. Langer's reading reveals a much greater continuity between his earlier and later works than is often assumed. The chapter concludes by highlighting the main point of difference between Wittgenstein and Langer: whereas Wittgenstein urged us to stay silent about matters that lay outside discursive language because they had no adequate form in which they could be expressed, Langer argued that there are non-discursive or 'presentational' forms that can articulate non-verbal lived experience in terms of their structural analogies with human feeling.

Chapter 8, 'The logic of signs and symbols', explains Langer's expanded notion of meaning in terms of three central distinctions: between signs and symbols, between discursive and non-discursive symbolism and between conventional and formulative types of symbolization. It traces Langer's choice of terminology for these distinctions and points out its implications for key questions around indication and representation, reference and denotation, meaning and truth. The chapter focuses

on the importance of abstracted patterns or *Gestalten* in Langer's philosophy of perception and cognition and discusses the role of analogy and isomorphism in the process of symbolization.

Chapter 9, 'Art as the form of feeling', discusses Langer's philosophy of art as developed in *Feeling and Form* and *Problems of Art*. For Langer, art and music are not *symptoms* in the sense of self-expression or emotional catharsis, but *symbols* in the Cassirerean sense of vehicles for meaning. The chapter explains the role of intuition and abstraction in Langer's philosophy of art and clarifies her two notions of form in terms of, first, logical structure and analogy and, second, shape, contour or *Gestalt*. The chapter examines the notions of resemblance, representation, semblance and virtuality that undergird her classification of the different arts on the basis of their dominant virtual projection: virtual space (the visual arts); virtual time (music and theatre); virtual power (dance); virtual life (the poetic and narrative arts); virtual memory (architecture). The chapter elucidates Langer's notion of organic or 'living form' as the foundation of her innovative conception of art as the form of feeling. The chapter concludes with an account of Langer's emphasis on the cultural importance of art as the education of feeling.

Chapter 10, 'Mind as embodied meaning', presents Langer's biologically based philosophy of mind and feeling as developed in her trilogy *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*. The chapter shows how Langer challenges traditional divisions between mind and body, as well as those between thinking and feeling. On Langer's terms, feeling is not opposed to reason but is a generic term for all human mentality or consciousness, from basic sense awareness to logical reasoning. The chapter describes how, for Langer, symbolization is a fundamental human need alongside biological needs, such as breathing and eating. Unlike other animals, humans *desire to make sense of the world* and do so by means of the production of symbolic forms. The chapter explains Langer's view of the three phases of consciousness as organic, psychical and symbolic; her understanding of the origins of life; and her conception of the difference between humans and (other) animals in terms of their motivations, behaviour and mentality. The chapter elucidates Langer's distinction between feeling as intra-organic bodily processes and feeling as encounters with the external world, and highlights the implications of this model for her understanding of art as the form of internal, organic feeling and of external life as felt. The chapter describes how, for Langer, the most fundamental and primordial encounters with the world, as expressed in art, myth and ritual, are articulations of aesthetic and affective lived experience.

The *Conclusion* draws attention to the numerous ways in which Langer anticipated future developments in philosophy and created possibilities for building bridges between different movements and traditions. It suggests that Langer's main contribution to philosophy lies not primarily in any one contribution to a specific field, but in the way she integrated many diverse fields into a larger philosophical vision rooted in a conception of human beings as symbolic animals. It points out that a key element in this vision was her recognition that the world could be seen through a range of different prisms or 'symbolic forms', each of them highlighting different aspects or dimensions. It further highlights how Langer's emphasis on embodied meaning anticipates postmodern critiques of dichotomies between subject and object, mind

and body, reason and feeling, and other logocentrically freighted divides. It shows how Langer draws creatively on her sources and how, in an impressive leap of philosophical imagination, she was able to produce a generative synthesis that opened up new avenues of thought. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the potential for further critical development of Langer's thought.

Part One

# Context

1

# Life and work

## Public and private

Unlike many twentieth-century philosophers, Langer never wrote her memoirs. She was a private person who, especially in her later years, withdrew from public and social life. What we know about her comes from a small number of letters, interviews and recollections from family, close friends and a few journalists, including music journalist Winthrop Sargeant, who wrote a lengthy profile article on her for the *New Yorker* in 1960, and art critic James Lord, who published an extensive interview with her in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1968.[1] Philosopher Donald Dryden published a comprehensive intellectual biography in 2003 that was subsequently annotated with more details.[2] And Wesley Wehr, a young painter and composer turned palaeontologist, recorded his personal recollections of Langer as a friend, thereby providing a few valuable glimpses into her character and personality.[3] What emerges from these various writings is a portrait of a highly original and independent thinker who combined a fierce logical intellect with an intensely creative and imaginative mind. She was known to impress scholars from diverse disciplines to shed light on seemingly intractable problems in their fields and her formidable skills in logic made her a daunting discussion partner and teacher.[4] Winthrop Sargeant describes her as 'a woman of iron will, impatient of laziness and self-indulgence' while an obituary in the *New York Times* refers to her as 'a maverick'.[5]

Following the successes of *Philosophy in a New Key* and *Feeling and Form* Langer had become an acclaimed author with a high public profile.[6] Yet, she often eschewed public attention and sought peace and solitude in remote places. Matter of fact about her own achievements, she often would play down the originality of her ideas by pointing to the sources that had influenced and inspired her.

## Early life and student years

Susanne K. Langer was born in New York in 1895 as the second of five children to Antonio Knauth, a successful corporate lawyer, and his wife Else M. Uhlich Knauth. Having emigrated from Germany to the United States in the 1880s, Langer's parents

settled in the Upper West Side of Manhattan in New York's old German émigré 'colony'. Langer grew up in an intellectually and artistically rich milieu with music at its centre. Her maternal grandmother had been a professional pianist who had been close friends with Johannes Brahms, while Langer's father, like Susanne herself later, was an accomplished amateur cellist. She was a gifted child who wrote complex family plays at an early age and read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* when she was in her early teens.[7] Long summers were spent at the family's large second home on Lake George where she was free to roam and develop her love for nature. Raised multilingually, Langer spoke German at home and then learned French at a private primary day school. She did not learn English until she was 10 and retained a German accent throughout her life.

After several years of home instruction, Langer enrolled at Radcliffe College in 1916. Radcliffe was a women's college that offered equivalent courses to Harvard University at a time that Harvard did not accept female students. As I will explain in more detail in Chapter 3, although Radcliffe students sat the same Harvard exams as their male counterparts, they did not receive the same Harvard degrees.[8] Langer stayed connected with Radcliffe College until 1942, having become a tutor there in 1926. Langer's undergraduate supervisor was the logician Henry Sheffer who introduced her to the new developments in formal and symbolic logic. Langer recalls having been pleased to discover that this 'traditionally stiff and scholastic pursuit [had] as much scope for originality as … metaphysics'.[9] She had been inspired by Sheffer's ability 'to see logic as a field for invention' and describes 'the growing sense of mental power that came with following his expositions, expecting to understand, even before the end of a discourse, a whole intricate conceptual structure with the same clarity as its simplest initial statements'.[10] Sheffer, in turn, had been clearly impressed with Langer's aptitude for philosophy and logic. As he wrote in a letter of recommendation on her BA graduation in 1920, she had 'a firmer grasp of philosophy problems than many a Harvard Ph.D.'[11]

In September 1921 she married Harvard student William Leonard Langer (1896–1977), who, like Susanne herself, was a second child of a German immigrant family. They spoke German at home. William had just finished his master's degree in modern European history at Harvard and was to become a distinguished scholar in that field. He had been awarded a fellowship at the University of Vienna to study the alliances that had led up to the First World War and they spent their first year of marriage abroad.

During her time in Vienna, Langer attended lectures at the university with, among others, philosopher Karl Bühler. Bühler (1879–1963) was a leading philosopher of language and a *Gestalt* psychologist, who had just been appointed at the philosophy faculty. Bühler's pioneering work on language formation was to prove highly relevant to Langer's thought. He was one of the first to explore how meaning and reference in signs and symbols did not originate in the isolated individual but in the social context of its animal and human ambience.

After returning to Cambridge, William began writing his doctoral dissertation and Susanne commenced her Master's degree at Radcliffe College. On 30 August 1922 their first son, Leonard Charles Rudolph, was born.[12] The birth prompted a return to her childhood love of writing fairy tales and other stories – possibly also inspired by a

rekindling of her German roots during her recent visit to Europe – resulting in the publication *The Cruise of Little Dipper and Other Fairy Tales*. It was illustrated by her childhood friend and later professional illustrator Helen Sewell.[13]

After gaining his doctorate in 1923, William was offered a position at the history department at Clark University and the family moved to Worcester. For Langer, this meant a weekly 40-mile train journey from Worcester to Cambridge to continue attending her seminars and lectures. Even so, she completed her Master's degree in 1924 with a thesis entitled 'Eduard von Hartmann's Notion of Unconscious Mind and Its Metaphysical Implications'.

In 1924 Langer started her doctoral studies with British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead who had just arrived in the United States that same year. She completed those studies in two years with a doctoral thesis on Whitehead and Russell's *Principia Mathematica*, entitled 'A Logical Analysis of Meaning'. In May of the same year she gave birth to a second son, Bertrand Walter.

Langer had desired to work with Whitehead because of his co-authorship of the *Principia Mathematica* and his reputation as a philosopher of science. Whitehead's own thinking, however, had moved on to different concerns and topics that were to form the basis of his seminal work *Process and Reality.* Although Whitehead's supervision of her thesis was minimal, his ideas and teaching were to have a major influence on her own thinking. When Langer wrote her first book, *The Practice of Philosophy*, in 1930, Whitehead wrote a short preface for it, commending the book as 'an admirable exposition of the aims, methods, and actual achievements of philosophy'.

From 1924 onwards, Langer had started contributing regular reviews to *The Journal of Philosophy.* Versatile in English, German, French and Italian, she became the journal's main reviewer of foreign publications. This exposed her to insights into the latest developments in philosophy in Europe. In 1926, with Whitehead's recommendation, she published her first article, 'Confusion of Symbols and Confusion of Logical Types' in the British journal *Mind*, then under the editorship of G. E. Moore. The article consisted of a detailed critique of the theory of types as developed by Bertrand Russell in the second edition of *Principia Mathematica* published the year before (1925). Her regular discussions with Whitehead as the co-author of the first edition of *Principia Mathematica* (1910–13) had provided her with valuable insight into the thinking behind this work. Other articles on logic to follow included: 'Form and Content: A Study in Paradox' (1926), 'A Logical Study of Verbs' (1927), 'The Treadmill of Systematic Doubt' (1929) and 'Facts: The Logical Perspectives of the World' (1933), all of which were published in the *Journal of Philosophy*.[14]

## Home

When, in 1927, William Langer was offered a tenured position in modern history at Harvard, the family moved back to Cambridge. William Langer's Harvard career included seminal publications such as *The Diplomacy of Imperialism 1890–1902* (1935), on European international relations, and the editorship of *An Encyclopedia of World History* (1940) and the twenty-volume series *The Rise of Modern Europe* (1963).

His academic career was interspersed with periods in government service in the areas of international relations and foreign intelligence, including a year as assistant director of the Central Intelligence Agency in the early 1950s. He received honorary degrees from both Harvard and Yale.[15] His autobiography *In and Out of the Ivory Tower* was completed just before his death in 1977.[16] Dorothy Ross opens her review of it as follows:

> William L. Langer intended this autobiography as an exemplary tale of how a poor boy from an immigrant family made good in America. Distressed by the iconoclasm of the sixties, he offered his life as a testament to the American dream and as a defense of the establishment – its openness to merit, its hard-working patriotism, and its contribution to the American defense since World War II. It is a tribute to Langer's basic good temper and immense intellectual curiosity that the book generally escapes the narrow defensiveness of that purpose.[17]

In his book, William Langer depicts what appears to have been a traditional marriage with little domestic involvement on his part, as can be gleaned from his comment that even the arrival of a second son in 1925 'did not greatly affect the regimen of their lives'. We are told that his 'wife enrolled as a graduate student in philosophy at Radcliffe and usually went to Cambridge by train to attend lectures in modern logica by Henry Sheffer and a seminar by Alfred North Whitehead' and we know from another source that on evening seminars at his home, 'Mrs. Langer [would appear] in the doorway at ten, with beer and coffee'.[18] Yet at no point does he mention that she became an important philosopher and well-known author in her own right.

## Teaching and travelling

For Langer, the move back to Cambridge marked the beginning of a long series of part-time tutorships for Langer at her *alma mater* Radcliffe College. Since Radcliffe did not have its own tenured faculty, employment was on a sessional, hourly paid, basis. It was not until 1954, at the age of 59, that Langer secured her first tenured position. Despite her low academic status, however, Langer was highly productive in terms of research and publications. In addition to numerous articles and reviews, she wrote nine books, edited two, and translated one. Her first book, *The Practice of Philosophy* (1930), was well received abroad, attracting praise from leaders of the Vienna Circle.

In 1933 the Langer family had embarked on a European tour which included a visit to the then 74-year-old Edmund Husserl. Langer had discussed Husserl's ideas in her 1926 PhD thesis and she had been keen to meet him. The visit took place at Husserl's home in Schluchsee, Germany, in August 1933, just seven months after Hitler had been appointed chancellor. Since Hitler had imposed a ban on books by Jewish authors, Jewish-born Husserl had been very concerned about the ban's consequences for the planned publication of his vast *Nachlass* and the financing of his editorial assistant Eugene Fink. The Langers even helped him to apply (unsuccessfully) for a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation for the project.[19] Upon his death five years later, Husserl's papers were

narrowly rescued from Nazi destruction and transported from Freiburg to Leuven.[20] As will be discussed more fully later, many Jewish European philosophers were to be profoundly affected by the Nazi's racial policies. Many, including Ernst Cassirer, were forced to leave their home country and settle abroad. Post-war American philosophy has been considerably influenced by the influx of émigré philosophers from Europe.

## Professional involvements

In 1936 Langer was one of the founders of the Association for Symbolic Logic, alongside significant pioneers in logic such as C. I. Lewis, Alonzo Church and W. V. Quine.[21] The association is still internationally active today. Between 1936 and 1939 Langer served as a consulting editor of the association's new journal, the *Journal of Symbolic Logic*, frequently reviewing new publications in foreign languages as she had done previously for the *Journal of Philosophy*.[22] In 1937 she wrote one of the earliest textbooks on symbolic logic, *An Introduction to Symbolic Logic,* which became a standard text at many universities. It appeared in three editions (1937, 1953 and 1967) and was republished as recently as 2011.[23] Langer was a member of the organizing committee of the Fifth International Congress for the Unity of Science taking place at Harvard University in 1939.[24] Other members of the committee included American philosophers P. W. Bridgman and Quine, as well as European émigrés Herbert Feigl and Rudolf Carnap who had both moved to the United States in previous years. The Congress, which took place during the invasion of Poland, was to become an important international gathering point for major European philosophers who had been forced to flee their countries after Hitler's rise to power. In total, there were two hundred attendees, sixty of whom, including Langer, presented papers.

## Publishing success

After the Congress, Langer started to turn her attention to a critical examination of the dominant paradigms that shaped the philosophy of her time. This led to her discovery of the new theme that was emerging in a variety of disciplines and fields of study: the notion of the mind as a symbolic transformer. This 'new key' became the central theme of the book for which she became best known: *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*.[25] First published by Harvard University Press in 1941, it contained both a synthesis of all her previous thinking as well as the seeds of the works that were to follow. In some ways the book can be considered as an extended research plan for her future work, from *Feeling and Form* in 1953 to the third volume of *Mind: An Essay in Human Feeling* in 1982.

*Philosophy in a New Key* made publishing history by becoming a major success.[26] When Harvard University published it in hardback in 1941, very few university publishers issued paperbacks. However, in 1945 Penguin Books, a US company with ties to British Penguin, approached Harvard University Press for the rights to publish a cheap 25¢ paperback edition with a larger print run for a $750 advance on royalties.

This new imprint was first published under the name Pelican Books but, following the takeover of Penguin Books Incorporated by the New American Library, issued under the name 'A Mentor Book', with a 35¢ sales price printed on the back. By 1951 over 100,000 copies had been sold. In view of its obvious success, Harvard University Press issued another hardcover edition and, in 1971, published its own paperback edition. It became one of Harvard University Press's best ever sellers. It is estimated that, to date, the total sales of all editions combined, is well over 570,000 copies. As historian and librarian Max Hall tells the story,

> Susanne Langer's book, published in 1942, was *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*. She had written two previous books and was known as a logician but, at forty-six, had never held a professorial appointment. Women authors were not new to the Press; indeed the first had appeared on its lists in 1913, the year of its founding. But hardly anyone, woman or man, has ever written a Press book that attained a larger total sale than Susanne Langer's. By 1984 *Philosophy in a New Key* had sold at least 545,000 copies. This figure included about 12,000 in the Press's hardcover; 447,000 as a low-priced commercial paperback; 43,000 as a Harvard Paperback beginning in 1971; at least 32,000 in a Japanese translation; and about 11,000 in nine other translations. The book became required or recommended reading for students of semantics, general philosophy, English, aesthetics, music, and the dance.[27]

Langer's lucid, lively writing had made complex contemporary philosophy accessible not only to philosophers but also to a broad range of readers in fields outside philosophy, including practising artists. Although Langer herself had never pushed for a paperback edition – she had initially been unenthusiastic about the idea – it gave her public recognition and reputation that reached well beyond the narrow confines of the academy and professional philosophy. The book was to give Langer a national profile. She was in growing demand as a public speaker and was sought out for interviews in such publications as the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Book Review.*[28]

## New York

The year of publication of *Philosophy in a New Key* coincided with a difficult period in Langer's personal life. Following strains in their marriage, William left her for another woman and, at his request, the couple divorced in 1942.[29] According to her son Leonard, the break-up affected Langer deeply and contributed to her growing solitary and itinerant life.[30] She ended her long-standing affiliation with Radcliffe College and moved back to her city of birth, New York. She rented an apartment on the East Side in Manhattan from where she embarked on a succession of visiting professorships and temporary appointments at, among others, the University of Delaware (1942–3), the Dalton School (1944–5), New York University (1945–6), Columbia University (1945–50), Northwestern University (1950), the New School of Social Research (1950), University of Washington (1952–3) and the University of Michigan (1954).

Her appointment at Columbia University in 1945 had initially begun as a replacement for Ernst Cassirer who had died very suddenly and unexpectedly from a heart attack in the spring of that year, less than a year after his arrival in New York. Langer had met Cassirer for the first time in 1941 but had already been familiar with his German trilogy *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923–9) long before it was translated into English. From a letter from Cassirer to Langer one year before his death, it was clear that he had been interested in some form of closer cooperation (*engere Zusammenarbeit*) with her on his research projects, in particular over the book he was working on at the time, *The Myth of the State*.[31] Sadly, this cooperation was never to materialize. She did, however, produce an English translation of his *Sprache und Mythos* which was published in 1946. As is clear from his correspondence, Cassirer had always planned to write a book on art but his premature death prevented that from ever happening. Langer poignantly dedicated her 1953 book *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key* 'to the happy memory of Ernst Cassirer'.

Langer's twelve-year period in New York (1942–54) coincided with New York's eclipsing of Paris as the centre of modern art after the war. Alongside many intellectuals and scholars, there had been an influx of refugee European artists to New York during the war who brought fresh inspiration and ideas to the city. Inspired by the modernist movement in Europe as epitomized by Picasso and Mondrian, New York was beginning to establish itself as a dynamic international centre. The new 'New York School' became associated with such movements as 'abstract expressionism' and 'action painting'.[32]

Some of the students attending Langer's classes at Columbia University were practising artists, some of whom belonging to the (second-generation) abstract expressionist school such as Fay Lansner. Her writings on art had put Langer much in demand as a speaker at art colleges. Her theories based on her notion of art as 'the form of feeling' resonated with the new wave of abstract painters who felt she articulated in philosophical terms what they were grasping for artistically.[33] She also influenced formalist art critic Clement Greenberg as is clear from his many references to her in his 1971 Bennington Lectures.[34] Greenberg is known for his role in promoting the work of painters such as Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman.[35] Newman himself was highly sceptical about the value of philosophy or theory of art for practising artists. But so, ironically, was Langer herself. She would have been in full agreement with his famous quip which is said to have been directed to her: 'Aesthetics is for artists as ornithology is for the birds', suggesting the irrelevance of academic aesthetics for artistic practice.[36] The comment was first made during a panel discussion in which Langer participated around the theme 'Aesthetics and the Artist' at the fourth annual Woodstock Art Conference in New York in 1952.[37] There is some irony in the fact that it was Greenberg's Langer-inspired criticism that considerably helped to further Newman's career.

Outside America, Langer influenced the Danish abstract painter and art theorist Asger Jorn who adopted many of her concepts for his own theories.[38] Among writers, she was avidly read by Walker Percy, who drew substantially on her ideas in his book *The Message in the Bottle*.[39] English art historian and critic Herbert Read was another admirer, as was the philosopher of art Arthur Danto.[40] Paul Hindemith was one of

many musicians who was attracted to her views and is said to have once told a class at Cornell University that Langer's philosophy of music was the only one that made sense to him.[41] Langer may well be the only philosophy of music who had a choreographed dance dedicated to her. A performance of *Batter: A Tribute to Susanne Langer*, choreographed by Kenneth King, took place in the Synod House of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York in 1976.[42]

## Connecticut College

It was not until 1954 when, at the age of 59, Langer accepted her first tenured position as professor and chair of the philosophy department at Connecticut College for Women in New London. She moved from her city apartment in downtown Manhattan to a colonial farmhouse in leafy Old Lyme on the coast of Connecticut, where she lived until her death in 1985.[43] Two years after her arrival in Old Lyme, Langer was awarded a substantial annually renewable grant from the Edgar J. Kaufmann Foundation to support her research and writing. Edgar J. Kaufmann was a wealthy Pittsburgh businessman whose son, Edgar Kaufmann Jr (1910–1989), an art collector and philanthropist had become a close friend and admirer of Langer's writing. Kaufmann Jr had studied art and architecture in Europe and had worked as one of Frank Lloyd Wright's apprentices. In 1946 he was appointed the director of New York's Museum of Modern Art's department of industrial design and, from 1963 to 1986, taught architecture and art history at Columbia University.

During her time at Connecticut College, Langer wrote *Feeling and Form* (1953); *Problems of Art* (1957) and *Philosophical Sketches* (1962), the latter consisting mainly of assembled public lectures.[44] In 1962, enabled by the Kaufmann grant, she retired from teaching in order to devote herself entirely to research and writing. While remaining connected to the college as a research scholar and emeritus professor, she embarked on what was to become her final project and *magnum opus*: the trilogy *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (1967, 1971 and 1982).[45] This work attracted the attention of philosophers of mind and consciousness as well as of brain and neuroscientists, receiving positive reviews in specialist science journals.[46]

Langer received several honorary doctorates from various schools and universities, including Columbia University, and was, in 1960, elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Despite her growing fame and reputation as a writer and a speaker, she avoided public attention and related social duties and formalities. Instead, especially in later life, she increasingly sought solitude, simplicity and stillness. She had bought a wood cabin deep in the woods of Ulster County, New York, where she would spend her summers reading, walking and writing, undisturbed by visitors or telephone.[47] Until a late age, she would venture by canoe into the most remote wilderness she could find. The same pioneering and adventurous spirit that characterized her attitude to nature also characterized her approach to philosophy.

2

# European philosophy in America

Langer wrote at a time of major advances in American and European philosophy and was herself an astute and insightful commentator on these developments. This was particularly clear from the panoramic overview and penetrating analysis offered in her article 'The Deepening Mind: A Half-Century of American Philosophy (1950)'.[1] This chapter outlines major developments in European philosophy in the early twentieth century and the important cross-Atlantic exchanges between American and European philosophers that were to lead to the birth of analytic philosophy in America and shape the intellectual climate in which Langer developed her own writings.

## The crisis in American philosophy

During Langer's first term of studies at Radcliffe College in the autumn of 1916, Harvard's philosophy department experienced two unexpected losses: idealist philosopher and logician Josiah Royce had died very suddenly at the beginning of the academic term, and this was followed by the death of psychologist Hugo Münsterberg three months later.[2] As Langer recalls,

> It was a hard period for a Department of Philosophy which had boasted of its 'Great Five', James, Royce, Palmer, Santayana and Münsterberg. James had died in 1910; Palmer had retired, Santayana returned to Europe, and a few months after Royce's death, Münsterberg fell dead in a Radcliffe classroom. A few men whose influence was just beginning to reach beyond Harvard were carrying on.[3]

These 'few men' included Henry Sheffer who took over Royce's classes and became Langer's mentor for her undergraduate studies. In addition to this local crisis, however, there was a more far-reaching national one. This crisis concerned the diminished status of philosophy *as such* in the face of the rapid growth and success of the empirical sciences. A growing dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the large metaphysical systems and speculative philosophies, which had dominated the field so far, had led many students to the natural sciences. Philosophy had become dry and unexciting, and irrelevant to a younger generation of American students. As Langer observed,

'Philosophy proper was usually left to persons of tamer temperament – some very learned, some merely earnest, but most of them conservative teachers, rehearsing old arguments, with little heat and equally little light.'[4] Students impressed with the successes of the natural sciences expected philosophy to adopt the same rigorous methods as employed by them. Although this trend was also recognizable in Europe, it was, so Langer argued, more pronounced in America,

> This unreflecting mood of what one can only call 'worldly faith' – blind faith in the conquest of nature through science – was even more marked in America than Europe, partly because our resources were more seductive and the material foundations of our culture more lavish, partly because we had no established philosophical tradition to hold the balance against so much practical activity, as the familiar and respected learning of the European universities did at all times. Philosophy, in that cheerfully intoxicated era, was at best a stepchild everywhere, but in our country it was a waif, and a little immigrant at that. Its ancestors were in England and Germany. In the nineteenth century, only our oldest universities had really had a home for it, and there it had lived in modest seclusion, no trouble to anybody.[5]

As a result, a general disdain for philosophy had been replaced by a growing excitement for the sciences:

> Natural science had not only captured the laurels, but had also lured the best talent of the age into its service. A few excellent men, like Peirce, Royce, and James, do not constitute a profession; and characteristically, even among these three who come immediately to mind, only Royce was primarily a philosopher. Peirce was a logician and mathematician …; James' greatness lay, above all, in psychology.[6]

However, so Langer observes, after the Second World War there had been significant changes in this situation. Two factors, in particular, had contributed to this change. The first was a gradual disillusionment with science, a recognition of its limitation in solving the problems of life and the world. This led to a renewed interest in the wisdom of the great philosophers of the past who wrestled with the big questions about life and the meaning of existence. As she comments,

> The wave of [cultural] optimism has broken in a deluge of fierce disappointment, with war and tyranny, turmoil and want and despair. The blind faith in science has ended in disillusion and no faith at all. For the 'civilized' nations today are destroying their own cultural and economic life faster than they can build it up; however great their scientific achievements, the greatest are always for purposes of destruction. Society has become no more rational, no more humane, and certainly no happier than before the discovery of evolution or the invention of motor vehicles and electronic machines. Splitting the atom has resulted primarily only in splitting mankind.[7]

She continues,

> Thirty-five years of political upheaval and moral collapse have been very sobering. Our country is still the least affected, but by no means unscathed. Every intelligent person feels the inadequacy of popular thought to fathom the cosmos science has revealed, and to guide us in controlling the terrific powers we have harnessed. … Consequently they will lend an ear to any philosopher, ancient or modern, who is reputed, or even rumored, to understand the laws of nature, life, and mind. Two decades ago Aristotle and Plato were not even names to the majority of college graduates in America. Today the 'basic writings' of these great intellectuals may be bought in the drugstore. … Whitehead's brilliant but difficult *Science and the Modern World* has a successful career in a pocket edition. In the 1930s such a thing would have been impossible. This is a simple, common-sense index to the new seriousness that besets us.[8]

Even so, Langer writes, disillusionment with science was not the only impetus for a renewed interest in philosophy. A growing awareness of the philosophical dimensions of the scientific enterprise as such led to closer study of its methods and its processes of theory formation. With Einstein's theories of relativity, the question how the natural sciences processed and interpreted data had become even more important. Since science drew increasingly on mathematics for the formulation of its laws, philosophers of science began to realize that laws of physics were ultimately dependent on such non-empirical entities as signs and symbols for their formulation. In Langer's words,

> The second reason for the rebirth of philosophy … lies in the advance of science instead of the failure of morality. It is the fact that scientific thinking itself, especially in physics, has reached a point where the philosophical foundations implicit in its elaborate structure come into view, and they look entirely different from the metaphysical framework of classical mechanics that philosophers have been aware of heretofore. Space and time, matter and motion, have become problematical again, through the prodigious growth of mathematics and the scientific insight it continues to generate.[9]

This growing interest in the philosophy of science and, specifically, the role of mathematics in philosophy and science attracted many American philosophers to the work of mathematicians Russell and Whitehead in Cambridge and to that of the logical positivists in Vienna. This interest led to the first wave of invitations to European scholars to visit America.

## Cross-Atlantic exchanges

One of the first philosophers to receive such an invitation was Bertrand Russell. Since the publication of *Principia Mathematica* in 1910, Russell had gained a growing reputation among young philosophers in America.[10] As George Santayana wrote

to Russell in 1912, '[T]here is no one whom the younger school of philosophers in America are more eager to learn of than you.'[11] In 1914 Russell was invited to give Harvard's Lowell Lectures and teach during the Spring Semester.[12] When Royce died in 1916, the philosophy department worked hard to secure Russell as his replacement but President Lowell blocked the appointment due to Russell's political activism and pacifist stance in Britain at the time. Bruce Kuklick writes,

> On the day that Royce died, [department chair] Woods acted: he wrote to Russell that he was the only man who could make good Royce's loss. Russell had consented to come in the spring of 1917, and Woods hoped to have him permanently. But in summer 1916 the British government prosecuted and convicted Russell for his pacifistic activities under the Defense of the Realm Act; he could not leave Britain for the duration of the war. Royce's position, one in the first instance reserved for a logician, was still unfilled after the war, and the department wanted to renew a half-time offer to Russell. But Lowell would now have none of it: great as his abilities were, an iconoclast like Russell would not do at Harvard.[13]

In the event, the post was, initially temporarily, filled by Henry Sheffer, who took over Royce's classes as well as the mentorship of Langer, who had just arrived at Radcliffe to commence her undergraduate studies.

After 1914 Russell continued to lecture at Harvard and other public venues throughout the United States and, in 1940, delivered Harvard's William James Lectures, introduced by his old colleague and co-author of the *Principia Mathematica*, Alfred North Whitehead, who had by then been appointed at Harvard.[14] Based on his reputation as Russell's co-author, Whitehead had been offered a chair at the philosophy department in 1924 but, as we will examine later, his interests had since moved in very different directions.

## The Vienna Circle

Another frequent visitor to America was the philosopher Moritz Schlick, founder of the Vienna Circle and the movement that became known as logical positivism.[15] Schlick lectured widely throughout America and was a visiting professor at Stanford University in 1929 and 1932.[16] Schlick is an unexpected but important point of reference when locating Langer in relation to broader philosophical developments in Europe and in America. Schlick was familiar with Langer's first book, *The Practice of Philosophy*, and much in agreement with it. Both Schlick and Langer had a deep admiration for Wittgenstein and drew heavily on the *Tractatus*. Both Schlick and Langer, moreover, had been significantly shaped by the neo-Kantian tradition and this coloured their reading of Wittgenstein in ways that differed significantly from the British empiricist readings of Russell and Ayer. As this is a crucial factor in understanding the affinity between Schlick and Langer, it is necessary to provide a brief history of the Vienna Circle.

As a leading centre of European philosophy in the early twentieth century, Vienna responded to the major revolutionary developments in science – especially Einstein's theories of relativity (1905, 1917) – and in mathematics – especially Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* (1910, 1912, 1913). Since 1907 a group of scholars had been meeting regularly as the Ernst Mach Association (*Verein*) named after the distinguished philosopher of science and *Gestalt* psychologist.[17] Ernst Mach (1838–1916) represented the stream of post-Kantian philosophers who opposed the metaphysical idealism of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, and wanted to re-emphasize the role of sense-impressions in Kant's theory of knowledge. Drawing on Comte's empiricist positivism, Mach's phenomenalist philosophy differed nevertheless from Comte's classic positivism by considering scientific laws as *descriptions* of observable sense-impressions rather than statements about the physical (or, indeed, '*meta*physical') reality behind them. Mach, like the neo-Kantian Cassirer, rejected both physical realism and metaphysical idealism on the grounds of their lingering metaphysical assumptions about ultimate reality.

Mach's ultimate philosophical ideal was to create a 'unified science' around a single method derived from the natural sciences. Philosophy was not merely to include a philosophy of science, it had to become scientific itself. Interestingly, this scientific aspiration for philosophy is described in almost poetic language by Mach in his inaugural lecture in Vienna in 1895:

> As the blood in nourishing the body separates into countless capillaries, only to be collected again and to meet in the heart, so in the science of the future all the rills of knowledge will gather more and more into a common and undivided stream.[18]

It was, as one commentator put it, 'another way of standing Hegel on his head: unification not through metaphysics but through the elimination of metaphysics'.[19]

In 1922 Mach was succeeded by the theoretical physicist Moritz Schlick as professor of *Naturphilosophie*. In the autumn of 1924, Schlick re-kindled Mach's interdisciplinary discussion group, initially known as the Schlick Circle but later to become better known as the 'Vienna Circle'.[20] The core group included the mathematician Hans Hahn, political economist Otto Neurath, mathematician and philosopher Olga Hahn-Neurath, legal theorist Felix Kaufmann, physicist Philipp Frank, Schlick's student Herbert Feigl and assistant Friedrich Waismann, and, from 1926, Rudolf Carnap. Hahn's student, Kurt Gödel, attended intermittently. From 1928, another graduate student, Rose Rand, was an active member who made extensive notes and transcriptions of the discussions between 1930 and 1935.[21] Despite the public appearance of a unified philosophy, however, leading members often pursued very different projects resulting in sharp disagreements and shifting alliances.

In addition to the group in Vienna, a regular gathering of scholars took place in Berlin under the leadership of philosopher of science Hans Reichenbach (1891–1953). Both Reichenbach and Schlick had begun their intellectual careers as neo-Kantians.[22] Neo-Kantians, as we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, sought to re-interpret Kant's critical idealism while avoiding any form of Hegelian metaphysical idealism

or Comtean scientific positivism. Both Reichenbach and Schlick rejected Mach's phenomenalistic positivist view of knowledge as the passive reception of simple *sense-data* and emphasized instead the active and constructive role of the mind. Drawing on *Gestalt* psychology, they conceived of knowledge as the mind's particular way of ordering the sense-manifold so as to recognize something *as* a thing.[23] Cassirer, Reichenbach and Schlick were in regular contact and lively debate throughout the late 1910s and 1920s and commented on each other's work. All three were leading interpreters of Einstein's theory of relativity and other developments in science and mathematics.[24] In order to pursue their ideal of a science united around a universal method and language, the Vienna Circle had used Whitehead and Russell's *Principia Mathematica* to reduce mathematical formula to symbolic logic. It was, however, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, published in 1922, that, even while being differently interpreted, was to become a defining influence on the Circle. For some members at least, the *Tractatus* meant that not only could mathematics be reduced to logic, but *all* philosophical language could be reduced to unequivocal logical propositions, purified from any ambiguities. Meaningful propositions, so they interpreted Wittgenstein, could now be sharply delineated from meaningless pseudo-propositions tainted by metaphysical language.

## Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

Notwithstanding their different interpretations, the *Tractatus* made an overwhelming impression on most members of the Vienna Circle. They read the entire work on several occasions, sometimes reciting it aloud, line by line. Carnap refers to Wittgenstein as 'the philosopher who, besides Russell and Frege, had the greatest influence on [his] thinking'.[25] Schlick, especially, was enthralled. Schlick's wife recalls that he had approached his first meeting with Wittgenstein 'with the reverential attitude of a pilgrim'.[26] As Schlick wrote ecstatically to Cassirer in 1927,

> I have been through the logical school of Russell and Wittgenstein, and now place such heightened demands on philosophical thought that I can read most philosophical productions only with the greatest effort of will. … Even the personality of Wittgenstein (who is likely never to publish anything again) is truly great. The *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* I regard as the most brilliant and significant achievement of modern philosophy. … I firmly believe that philosophy has been brought to a critical juncture by the impulse originating from logic, and that we are approaching the Leibnizian ideal of philosophizing. The boundary against empty talk and questioning must be drawn much more sharply than before.[27]

According to fellow Circle members, Schlick's deferential attitude towards Wittgenstein went so deep that it sometimes clouded his critical judgement and made it difficult to distinguish between his own views and those of Wittgenstein. Feigl even suggests that Schlick attributed to Wittgenstein views he had himself developed years earlier:

> In his *Allgemeine Erkenntnislehre* (1918) there were … anticipations of some of the central tenets of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. I think it was Schlick's extremely unassuming character, his great modesty and kindliness, and his deep personal devotion to Wittgenstein that made him forget or suppress the great extent to which his views, independently developed and quite differently stated, already contained important arguments and conclusions regarding the nature of logical and analytical validity; the semantic explication of the concept of truth; the difference between pure experience (*Erleben*), acquaintance (*Kennen*), and genuine knowledge (*Erkennen*), etc. Indeed so deeply impressed was Schlick with Wittgenstein's genius that he attributed to him profound philosophical insights which he had formulated much more lucidly long before he succumbed to Wittgenstein's almost hypnotic spell.[28]

In the Preface to the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein claims that the book 'will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it – or similar thoughts'.[29] Perhaps, in Schlick's case and, as I will argue, in that of Langer, that was indeed in the case.[30]

## Schlick and *The Practice of Philosophy*

In 1930 Schlick was sent *The Practice of Philosophy* by Langer's New York-based publisher Henry Holt. Upon reading the work he wrote an enthusiastic reply with the words, 'Exquisite style, lucid, fluent and brilliant, has been a source of real joy for me.'[31] Schlick's German editors refer to the exuberant language used by Schlick as 'fast überschwenglich' (almost gushing).[32] Schlick's enthusiasm for Langer's book can arguably be explained by their similar conceptions of philosophy – Langer's definition of philosophy as 'the pursuit of meaning' was adopted by Schlick as the title of one of his own lectures – and, significantly, by their very similar readings of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.[33] In his 1930 lecture, 'The Future of Philosophy', Schlick states,

> The view which I am advocating has at the present time been most clearly expressed by Ludwig Wittgenstein; he states his points in these sentences: 'The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a theory but an activity. The result of philosophy is not a number of "philosophical propositions", but to make propositions clear.' This is exactly the view which I have been trying to explain here.[34]

In the same lecture, he refers to Langer's book again as 'very excellent' and states his agreement with her notion of philosophy as the 'pursuit of meaning'. On one point, though, he feels the need to take Langer to task:

> From what I have said so far it might seem that philosophy would simply have to be defined as the science of meaning, as, for example, astronomy is the science of heavenly bodies, or zoology the science of animals, and that philosophy would be a

> science just as other sciences, only its subject would be different, namely 'Meaning'. This is the point of view taken in a very excellent book, '*The Practice of Philosophy*', by Susanne K. Langer. The author has seen quite clearly that philosophy has to do with the pursuit of meaning, but she believes the pursuit can lead to a science, to 'a set of true propositions' – for that is the correct interpretation of the term science. Physics is nothing but a system of truths about physical bodies. Astronomy is a set of true propositions about the heavenly bodies, etc. But philosophy is not a science in this case. There can be no science of meaning, because there cannot be any set of true propositions about meaning.[35]

Langer, as it happens, never referred to philosophy as 'a science' in the sense of 'a set of true propositions'.[36] As we will see, she agreed with Schlick – and *pace* Ernst Mach – that philosophy was not a science. Schlick simply misread Langer on this point.[37] Langer agreed with Wittgenstein's view in the *Tractatus* that philosophy is 'not one of the natural sciences' (4.111) and that it is 'not a theory but an activity' (4.112). The word 'practice' in the title of *The Practice of Philosophy* is a direct reference to that. She also agreed with Wittgenstein that 'philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations' and that the 'result of philosophy is not a number of "philosophical propositions", but to make propositions clear' (4.112).[38] However, apart from this minor misreading on Schlick's part, his overall affirmation of her book and his own interpretation of Wittgenstein point to a strong similarity in their respective reading of Wittgenstein. Both understood him not as primarily a philosopher of knowledge, science or logic, but, as was generally recognized only much later, as a philosopher of language. In that context, it is interesting to note that Richard Rorty included Schlick's essay 'The Future of Philosophy' as the first chapter in *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (1967).[39]

Many of Schlick's lecture notes were later reworked for publication and became important documents for the dissemination of logical positivist thought in America. Most important among these were 'The Turning Point in Philosophy' (1930), 'The Future of Philosophy' (1930), 'The Pursuit of Meaning' (seminar 1931/32) and 'Form and Content' (1932).[40]

## The Manifesto

When Schlick was abroad on his first visit to Stanford University, Hahn, Neurath and Carnap had, unbeknownst to him, drawn up a manifesto for the Vienna Circle – *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung: Der Wiener Kreis* (*The Vienna Circle Manifesto: The Scientific Conception of the World*).[41] It was launched at the First Conference on the Epistemology of the Exact Sciences in Prague in September 1929 and was to become the Vienna Circle's public face. Placing themselves *over against* the (neo-)Kantian tradition and instead within the lineage of empiricists Locke and Hume, positivists Comte and Mach, and logicians Frege and Russell, the authors describe their approach as, on the one hand, 'empiricist and positivist' – knowledge is based on experience which rests on the immediately given – and, on the other, 'logical analytical' – the logical analysis

of empirical material enables the unification of all disciplines into one science. Using what they called 'the far-reaching ideas of Wittgenstein', the different approaches taken by Russell's logicism, Hilbert's formalism, and Brouwer's intuitionism could now be united in 'a single solution':

> [L]ogical analysis overcomes not only metaphysics in the proper, classical sense of the word, especially scholastic metaphysics and that of the systems of German idealism, but also the hidden metaphysics of Kantian and modern apriorism. The scientific world-conception knows no unconditionally valid knowledge derived from pure reason, no 'synthetic judgments a priori' of the kind that lie at the basis of Kantian epistemology and even more of all pre- and post-Kantian ontology and metaphysics. … It is precisely in the rejection of the possibility of synthetic knowledge a priori that the basic thesis of modern empiricism lies. The scientific world-conception knows only empirical statements about things of all kinds, and analytic statements of logic and mathematics.[42]

The overriding message of the Manifesto, however, was the radical erasure of all forms of metaphysics from philosophy – the clearance of 'the metaphysical and theological debris of millennia.'[43] Logical positivism promised a position not only free from metaphysics, but opposed to metaphysics.

Although the movement's anti-metaphysical stance was primarily philosophically based, it was also motivated by social and political developments. Metaphysics was associated with 'irrational' ideas that enabled idealist philosophers such as Hegel, Nietzsche or Heidegger to create mythological notions of nation, race and state that were prone to be misused as instruments of political oppression. One of the aims of positivism was, as Edward Skidelsky described it, '[T]o purge science of the nationalist, imperialist, and racist rhetoric that increasingly accompanied it. Its exorcism of metaphysics was at the same time an exorcism of ideology.'[44] More generally, the Vienna Circle's commitment to a scientific world-conception was based on a socialist desire to improve people's basic living conditions, both through advanced technology and better education. Under the democratic slogan 'knowledge for all', the Ernst Mach Society had produced a range of popular publications and had organized public lectures for general audiences.[45] They supported the Bauhaus's ideals of the New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), with its preference for clean lines and its rejection of ornamentation, which resonated with their philosophical ideals of clarity, transparency and simplicity.[46] As we are told in the Manifesto, 'Neatness and clarity are striven for, and dark distances and unfathomable depths rejected. In science there are no "depths"; there is surface everywhere.'[47] Rejecting obscurity and promoting transparency as much in philosophy as in art, Carnap defends their ideals passionately in the Preface to his book *The Logical Structure of the World* (1928):[48]

> We feel that there is an inner kinship between the attitude on which our philosophical work is founded and the intellectual attitude which presently manifests itself in entirely different walks of life; we feel this orientation in artistic movements, especially in architecture, and in movements which strive