Fascism as Illogical Reasoning.
Rudolf Carnap’s Forgotten Approach

Christian Damböck, Institute Vienna Circle

*In his now completely forgotten contribution to the Harvard Tercentenary Celebration in 1936, Rudolf Carnap outlines a theory of illogical reasoning that can be interpreted as a theory of fascist politics. While theories of fascism often see the loss of humanistic values as the primary problem, Carnap sees the values of humanism as natural components of the scientific world conception, so that anti-humanism and fascism can only arise as a consequence of the loss of the latter. According to Carnap, illogical thinking occurs in three forms: (a) political attitudes are disguised as facts or destiny, (b) inconsistent or logically misconstrued value systems are accepted, (c) insufficiently confirmed or empirically false premises are taken as a basis. Fascism arises from propaganda that spreads illogical thinking in society. I contextualize Carnap's 1936 approach to explain why it was not pursued further and why value-based theories of fascism continue to prevail today. On this basis, I also outline some consequences of a Carnapian understanding of fascism for contemporary politics.*

“Fascism” is used here as a generic term to refer broadly to political views that consciously or unconsciously espouse values opposed to humanism and the Enlightenment. Fascist politics is typically (a) racist and nationalist in that it considers one group superior to all others and believes that this group should rule the world. It also (b) rejects liberal democracy and seeks to replace it with the dictatorship of either a strong, charismatic leader or a group of experts. The roots of this concept are historical, since the form of fascism that will be discussed in the main parts of this paper reigned in Europe in the 1930s, led by the German National Socialist movement and the Italian Fascist movement. However, I also assume that an abstract notion of fascism based on this historical phenomenon can be helpful for a better understanding of contemporary varieties of fascism and populism, insofar as these phenomena often share the anti-humanist characteristics of fascism as it is understood here (cf. Eatwell 2017; Finchelstein 2017). The overall argument, which is relevant both to the historical fascism of the 1930s and to contemporary movements of populism, illiberal democracy, Trumpism, etc., is that all these varieties of politics can be better understood if we see them in terms of the phenomenon of *illogical reasoning* as characterized by Rudolf Carnap. According to this interpretation, the anti-humanist outlook of fascism is merely *an effect* of illogical reasoning; typical representatives of fascism do not even reject humanist values, or they do so erroneously while being misled by illogical reasoning. This interpretation contrasts with views of fascism that see the rejection of humanistic values as its primary characteristic. This essay is centered around a case study in the history of political philosophy, that of Rudolf Carnap. The main source is a lecture Carnap gave at the Harvard Tercentenary Celebration in 1936 (section 1), which is the most important though entirely forgotten source of his political philosophy (section 2). The reason his theory has been forgotten, and indeed never really developed, is that the competing theories of the Frankfurt School and American pragmatism (section 3) forced Carnap to withdraw his political ambitions and become a supposedly purely theoretical philosopher (section 4). Nevertheless, the theory has great appeal and can be used to explain contemporary political phenomena (section 5).

# Carnap at the Harvard Tercentenary Celebration in 1936

When Rudolf Carnap (1890–1970)[[1]](#footnote-1) emigrated to the United States in 1936 for political reasons, he was still a relatively unknown philosopher. During his time in Vienna (1926–1931) as a member of the Vienna Circle, he earned his living as a Privatdozent, and even at the German University in Prague (1931–1935), he attained only the title of associate professor. Although some of his writings brought him great fame among the philosophical avant-garde in Vienna and Berlin, as well as on the American East Coast, until 1936 Carnap was neither a public intellectual nor did he receive widespread academic recognition. This would change dramatically in the years that followed, when he became one of the most recognized and influential philosophers in the U.S. and, along with Hans Reichenbach, the leading figure in the movement of logical empiricism that became the dominant philosophical movement in the U.S. in the 1950s.

After several unsuccessful attempts to find an academic position or a fellowship (Rockefeller Foundation) abroad, Carnap's invitation to the Harvard Tercentenary Celebration was his ticket to America. As Verhaegh (2020) reconstructs, it was essentially an individual action of W.V.O. Quine, by then a Junior Fellow in the Harvard Society of Fellows, who managed to convince the officials to make this invitation, although those in the Harvard philosophy department who, like C.I. Lewis and Alfred N. Whitehead, already knew Carnap, had strong reservations about his superformal philosophy. Quines “Harvard campaign” (Verhaegh 2020, 14-17) was a mission impossible, since it had little support among the established faculty, and those invited to the Tercentenary were supposed to be world-leading scientists, some of them Nobel laureates and almost all of them full professors at leading universities around the world, in the last third of their careers. How Quine managed to push the unknown associate professor from a provincial university in Prague onto this list is still a mystery: the only explanation for how it worked is that Quine was already regarded by the Harvard faculty as a rising star, whose recommendations they were willing to prioritize over those of the senior faculty. In any case, this invitation became the decisive boost for Carnap’s academic career. He received an honorary doctorate from Harvard in a ceremony attended by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, gave lectures that were broadcast nationally, and was truly in the midst of an incredible academic event designed to demonstrate to the world the dazzling American university culture as an antidote to the darkness of European fascism. In other words, the Harvard Tercentenary was a national event of the most profound political significance, and Carnap was an integral part of it.

The Harvard Tercentenary also earned Carnap a position in the United States that he would hold for the next decade and a half, as a professor at the University of Chicago. There, Charles Morris began lobbying for Carnap already in 1932, initially with little success. Robert Maynard Hutchins, who had become president of the university in 1929 at the age of 30, was a strong liberal who, during the Cold War, kept a protective hand over left-wing intellectuals like Carnap and prevented any kind of sanctions against them. But Hutchins was still a political conservative, and he was especially opposed to the philosophical avant-garde. While the philosophy department at the University of Chicago had been dominated by American pragmatists until 1929, Hutchins tried – with only partial success – to get rid of the pragmatists and replace them with metaphysicians in the Thomist tradition, which was exactly the kind of philosophy he liked. But Hutchins was also a shrewd manager, always eager to jump on contemporary academic trends in order to enhance the University’s reputation. When he heard that Carnap had been invited to the Harvard Tercentenary, he immediately realized that he could score a major coup with his hiring, and suddenly Morris' inquiries were successful.

The year 1936, centered around the Harvard Tercentenary, was full of academic success for Carnap. In addition to teaching and lecturing in Chicago, he was invited to teach at a summer school at Harvard, and he was invited to deliver talks at twelve universities, including Yale, Princeton, and Columbia, a tour which he continued in 1937 and 1938 and which took him to every major university in the U.S. By the time Carnap returned to Harvard in late August for the Tercentenary, he was already a celebrity.

The celebrations began with a conference of mathematicians and logicians in the new lecture hall: “10:45 *my lecture* ‘Truth in Mathematics and Logic’, […] very large hall. 350 listeners! 3 microphones, the lecture is broadcast by radio and even sent to Europe on short wave.“ (Carnap forthcoming, entry 9/1/1936) The scientific highlight of the celebrations followed six days later with the symposium “Factors Determining Human Behavior,” whose aim was clearly political: how can we use science to understand human behavior, especially human misbehavior, in today's fascist societies? The symposium consisted of eight papers, besides Carnap, by physiologist and Nobel laureate Edgar Douglas Adrian, biochemist James Bertram Collip, psychologists Jean Piaget, Karl Gustav Jung, and Pierre Janet, former Harvard president Abbott Lawrence Lowell, and anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski. Carnap’s lecture had been broadcast two days earlier in the form of an interview with geologist Kirtley F. Mather (Carnap and Mather 1936; Reisch 2005, 51-52): “In great haste to Boston, to the radio station. 12h-12:15 our conversation; national broadcast, so-called blue network, over 40 stations nationwide.” (ibid, entry 9/5/36) The symposium lecture itself was considered a success by Carnap: “I read my paper Logic (as a factor determining human behavior). In it the Hottentot story, everybody laughs and understands it”. (ibid., entry 9/7/36)

The symposium did indeed arouse some interest across disciplinary boundaries. Published in 1937, it received several reviews, including one by the liberal theologian and defender of religious naturalism Henry Nelson Wieman, who devoted much of his review to an extremely positive assessment of Carnap’s contribution:

One of the more common and disastrous diseases which beset the human mind is to confuse expressive and cognitive statements. […] Large bodies of theology, political theory, and much else are accepted by people, and were created by their authors, as being descriptions of reality when they merely express a sentiment or stimulate some kind of behavior.
This incisive and deep-cutting criticism of Carnap’s is most wholesome and most needed. It will be resisted passionately in religion and elsewhere. But in time we shall accept it as true unless we first wreck our civilization by the practice which this criticism is designed to correct. (Wieman 1937, 323)

Wieman illustrates “this confusion of expressive with cognitive functions” with the aforementioned “Hottentot story” (see section 2.3 below) and he concludes:

We who work in the field of religion should take this criticism to ourselves. It is certainly right and good to use language to share sentiments and incite to worthy action. […] But great evil ensues when we fail to distinguish between words used to do this and words used to state what is present in reality as actuality and possibility. […] Carnap’s criticism will help to correct that chronic error in all those interests of man where deep sentiments and high passions are involved. (ibid, 324)

This review is remarkable because it identifies Carnap’s contribution as highly politically relevant and by no means a mere contribution to logic. As a religious naturalist, Wieman fully shares Carnap’s noncognitivism, and it is also noteworthy that Wieman obviously finds Carnap's contribution more interesting than those of the other highly renowned speakers at the symposium. This is all the more remarkable given that Carnap's contribution has had virtually no echo in philosophy and has never been taken up or pursued further by Carnap himself. One aim of this essay will be to find the reasons for this lack of philosophical reception of this lecture, which was certainly the most prominent appearance of Carnap’s entire career.

# Carnap’s approach

Carnap’s essay was first written in German (Carnap 1936) and then translated into English by Ernest Nagel.[[2]](#footnote-2) The text was written in great haste during a socially intense period at Harvard, based on notes taken by Carnap’s friend and fellow immigrant Herbert Feigl (Carnap forthcoming, entry 8/1/1936). Apart from the fact that Nagel's English translation of the text seems somewhat sketchy and tentative, Carnap's formulations are consistently dry and tend to be unwieldy. The examples scattered throughout the text do little to enhance understanding. The political aims are only hinted at. Nevertheless, with some interpretation the text reveals Carnap's entire philosophy of values and political philosophy, especially when seen in the context of his other works. In what follows, therefore, I reconstruct Carnap's argument with the help of additional references to Carnap's writings before and after the Harvard lecture.

## Values and instrumental reasoning

The negative side of Carnap’s philosophy of values is that values are ultimately a mere matter of attitude, and thus value statements cannot be true or false, but only reflect the attitude of a person or group. The positive side is that there is still plenty of room for rational deliberation in connection with values and practical questions. In the Harvard lecture, Carnap distinguishes three conditions for logical reasoning (Carnap 1937, 108-117), all of which can benefit reasoning about values. First, the “condition of clarity” (pp 108-112), which is to distinguish sharply between statements that reflect mere values and attitudes and those that assert some logical or empirical fact. The task is not to confuse or mix these two epistemic domains. Second, the “condition of consistency” (112-115) includes all analytical questions about the logical consequences and consistency of a statement. It is rational to accept only those value statements that are logically compatible with each other, and only if one is prepared to accept all their logical consequences. Third, “adequacy of evidence” means “that there be a sufficiently secure empirical foundation both for the universal laws we formulate and for the predictions we make with their aid.” (115) We must pay attention to all the available evidence and not trust unfounded empirical claims or fake news.

These three conditions of rational thought can be illustrated by a (slightly extended) toy example introduced in Carnap (1934b). The question is whether I should eat the apple in front of me. This question is in itself a practical question, the answer to which depends on my attitudes. "I should eat this apple" may reflect my current attitude, but it is not something that can be true or false in itself. So to say that “it is good to eat this apple” is true would simply violate the condition of clarity. However, the demand to eat this apple might logically follow from other attitudes. "I should eat this apple because I intend to satisfy my hunger and I know that this apple is capable of doing so". This sentence involves some reasoning about logical consequences (Condition 2), but also some empirical knowledge (Condition 3). There may be empirical circumstances that change the situation. For example, the apple might be poisoned. If I know that the apple is poisoned, and my intention is only to satisfy my hunger, then it might not be a good idea to eat it, because being poisoned might be an unwanted side effect. On the other hand, if my intention is to commit suicide – I poisoned the apple only to do so – then it may be rational to eat it. Another important scenario is that I intend to satisfy my hunger without unwanted side effects, but someone gives me the apple, which is in fact poisoned, but tells me the false story that it is all right. Then, in Carnap's framework, it would still be irrational for me to eat the apple: eating it would violate condition three, because I could have known that the apple was poisoned if I hadn’t been misinformed. We will return to this point below.

## Humanistic values are generally shared by scientifically minded people

The political importance of the criteria of rational thought stressed in the Harvard lecture was also emphasized in other writings of Carnap, for example in his unpublished manuscript *Introduction to Analytic Philosophy* of 1942. The condition of clarity, or, as he calls it there, “the distinction between conditional and absolute value statements”

[…] is of great importance, especially in political discussions. […] If you discuss with a political opponent, then first find out whether there is a common aim which is desired by both of you. If so, then the political discussion may be about a value statement with respect to ways toward that aim. That is a factual discussion, and factual knowledge, especially of social science, will be relevant. If both you and your opponent are aiming at a state of humanity where everybody has the opportunity of free development, then a factual or theoretical discussion is possible, for instance, with respect to the question of whether Capitalism or Socialism is better. “Better” means here a better instrument for the aim desired. (Carnap 1942, 88-89)

It is important to note that Carnap interprets the task of choosing between capitalism and socialism as a cognitive question. Assuming that political actors agree on basic humanistic values in the form of the ideal of individual freedom, it is an empirical and therefore scientific question as to which political strategy better serves this ideal. This is an open question, the answer to which does not depend on ethics, metaphysics or dialectics, but only on real empirical processes. This strategy is also characteristic of Austromarxism and was strongly defended by Carnap’s friend Otto Neurath (1931). The situation is different, however, when it turns out that the political opponents do not share the same fundamental values:

If, however, your opponent rejects your political aim, if he says that his aim is the state of humanity where a certain group dominates the rest of the world, then no theoretical discussion is possible. You may appeal to each other by picturing vividly the two different states of humanity. If neither of you succeeds in persuading the other one to give up his aim, then there is nothing left than each of you appealing to other people to support his aim. In this case, the final outcome will not be determined by theoretical arguments, but by the practical question, who of you will succeed in getting more power for his group. (Carnap 1942, 89)

In this scenario, Carnap considers only the case of a group of political actors who all act, so to speak, perfectly rationally. (The reason for this may be that Carnap is addressing philosophy students, for whom he assumes rational behavior.) In general, however, Carnap thinks that many, perhaps most, political and moral conflicts arise precisely from the inability to think rationally (see the next section).

If the scenario of a moral or political conflict between perfectly rational agents is only a special case – political conflicts often arise precisely from a lack of rationality, and not primarily from moral differences – it is nevertheless important that Carnap's philosophy implies that this scenario cannot be ruled out in principle:

It is logically possible that two persons *A* and *B* at a certain time agree in all beliefs, that their reasoning is in perfect accord with deductive and inductive standards, and that they nevertheless differ in an optative attitude component. (Carnap 1963a, 1008)

This is an essential possibility of Carnap’s noncognitivism about values, for the latter implies that absolute value statements cannot be epistemically justified and only reflect the moral attitudes or the moral sense of those who adopt them. If all epistemic possibilities are exhausted and we still disagree then it is necessarily impossible to resolve our disagreement at the rational level.

But as much as Carnap's metaethical views imply that moral conflicts between perfectly rational agents *are possible*, it is important to see that for him this is by no means the standard scenario for moral conflict. On the contrary, for Carnap, moral disagreement typically results from illogical thinking, and those who think perfectly rationally, those who adopt the scientific world conception, also tend to adopt humanistic values. This *naturalism*, which is also characteristic of the positions of other logical empiricists such as Neurath, Reichenbach and Carl Gustav Hempel, has perhaps never been formulated more clearly than in the preface to Carnap's *Aufbau*. After a brief outline of what he later called “scientific humanism” (Carnap 1963b, 83) Carnap adds:

We do not deceive ourselves about the fact that movements in metaphysical philosophy and religion which are critical of such an orientation [i.e. scientific humanism] have again become very influential of late. Whence then our confidence that our call for clarity, for a science that is free from metaphysics, will be heard? It stems from the knowledge or, to put it some what more carefully, from the belief that these opposing powers belong to the past. 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 for meaningful forms of personal and collective life, of education, and of external organization in general. We feel all around us the same basic orientation, the same style of thinking and doing. It is an orientation which demands clarity everywhere, but which realizes that the fabric of life can never quite be comprehended. It makes us pay careful attention to detail and at the same time recognizes the great lines which run through the whole. It is an orientation which acknowledges the bonds that tie men together, but at the same time strives for free development of the individual. Our work is carried by the faith that this attitude will win the future. (Carnap 1967 [1928], xvii-xviii)

Carnap’s naturalism is based on the belief that there is an “inner kinship” between humanistic values and the scientific world conception. There may be rational individuals who do not share humanistic values, but typically, and in the long run, these two things happen together. So, by and large, we can trust that once we get people to think rationally and respect science, they will also adopt humanistic values. If this is true, then it has far-reaching, not to say revolutionary, consequences for the way moral and political discussions work, for we can generally assume that all we have to do is teach people to think logically, and once we have done that we can generally trust that these people will also adopt humanistic values.

## Fascism grows with illogical reasoning

To be sure, the naturalistic theory as outlined in the previous section is something that Carnap simply assumes in the Harvard lecture. Without explaining exactly why he does so, he reduces political conflicts to the phenomenon of illogical reasoning. If the argument in the previous section is sound, then Carnap had very good reasons for making this restriction, because, leaving aside the exceptional cases of perfectly rational anti-humanists, the only relevant scenario for acting against humanistic values is the phenomenon of illogical reasoning in all its forms. Thus, understanding illogical thinking means understanding why and how humanistic values are absent in a society, in other words, understanding how *fascism* actually works, taking fascism as a form of politics that violates the values of humanism. Given the three requirements for logical reasoning that Carnap outlines in the Harvard lecture, he also highlights three scenarios for violating them.

(1) To violate the *condition of clarity* is to present noncognitive attitudes in cognitive disguise. The typical case is a fascist policy that devalues others and presents this as if it were a fact or fate rather than a subjective opinion:

For example, suppose that the following creed is promulgated in a certain country. “There is only one race of superior men, say the race of Hottentots, and this race alone is worthy of ruling other races. Members of these other races are inferior, so that all civil rights are to be denied them so long as they inhabit the country.” (Carnap 1937, 111)

This example is particularly unfortunate. The term “Hottentot” was used by German colonial rulers to refer to the Nama people and conveyed racist stereotypes to justify genocide (Salm 2010). Carnap, on the other hand, uses the term here as a pseudonym for the National Socialists, which was surely somewhat obvious to everyone in the audience. Nevertheless, to confuse perpetrator and victim and to use a racist and fascist stereotype as the name of the group practicing racism and fascism is highly embarrassing and unfortunate. Aside from the unfortunate choice of example, Carnap here takes up a line of argument that can be found in all of his earlier antimetaphysical writings and lectures. The point is that violations of the principle of clarity disguise the subjective character of a political program or set of values by creating the impression of irrefutable fact. As Carnap put it in his highly suggestive lecture “Philosophy. Opium of the Educated”, those who violate the principle of clarity

[…] try to dissuade people from enlightenment, from rational and scientific analysis of the situation, from wanting to change things themselves. In order to do this, the state, the social order, the whole course of history must be shrouded in a mysterious aura, a veil: the orders of life are said not to have been created by humans, so rational intervention cannot change them. […] Thus, the existing order is protected by concealment and veiling, combined with a sense of the sacred, the higher, to create reverence and awe. (Carnap 1934a)

The subjective decisions of some politicians to manipulate the masses are thus disguised as unshakable facts, as inevitable fate.

(2) To violate the *consistency condition* means several things that Carnap barely touches on in the Harvard lecture, but which he discusses at length in some of his later writings (Carnap 1963a, 2017). Carnap distinguishes between three typical cases. (a) Several absolute value statements held by a person contradict each other. A Nazi is against genocide and supports the Holocaust. (b) One can hold an absolute value statement and be unwilling to accept some of its logical consequences. A Nazi supports the Holocaust, but wants to prevent all the Jews he knows personally from being killed. (c) One can hold multiple values that do not follow from one or a small number of basic values. This is a more complex principle, to be sure, which has to do with the general logical empiricist understanding of consistent systems of values and laws, and which is famously reflected in Hans Kelsen’s understanding of law as having to follow from a basic norm (Kelsen 1967, § 34). Value systems are illogical unless they are constructed according to some simple general rules that unite all more specific values under the same general moral axiom.

(3) Violating the *adequacy of evidence* means that people ignore or distort facts, accept false facts, or accept statements about natural laws that lack sufficient confirmation, are not empirically supported, or are even refuted. Someone supports Nazism because they believe in the story of a Jewish world conspiracy. Someone opposes any action against tobacco use because they believe that smoking is healthy and clears the throat. Someone eats this poisoned apple because they believe it is not poisonous.

Carnap concludes the Harvard lecture as follows:

The conditions which logic sets for rational thinking […] are based on the simple fact that unless they are satisfied, thought and knowledge cannot perform their function as instruments for arriving at successful decisions in practical matters. [Advocates] of irrationalism are most successful in strengthening men in their biases and prejudices, confirming mankind in its errors instead of disciplining men’s thoughts to aim at objectivity. [Logics] task is to serve as spiritual hygiene, cautioning men against the disease of intellectual confusion. […] The logician himself has no remedy to offer, and must turn to the psychologist and social scientist for aid. (Carnap 1937, 117-118)

These conclusions say little about the political implications of Carnap's theory. In this respect, Carnap himself is partly responsible for the lack of reception of his approach. While he gives the impression at the end of his lecture that he is merely pointing out some nerdy detail of logical failure in his essay, he fails to mention that what these logical failures actually encompass, in a rather exhaustive way, is the whole phenomenon of fascism. Those who rule in a fascist way may themselves be logical thinkers – i.e., perfectly logical anti-humanists – but these "advocates of irrationalism" make others think illogically on all levels. Fascist propaganda therefore has three distinct aims, along the lines of the three types of illogical thinking that Carnap highlights. First, it disguises its political goals and attitudes by presenting them as facts and inescapable destiny. Second, they get people to accept all kinds of logical inconsistencies by overwhelming them and managing to cloud their rational faculties. Third, they simply feed people false facts, deny facts, and spread doubt (cf. Oreskes and Conway 2010) in order to make people receptive to their false messages. Fascism understood in this way is based on the phenomenon of *propaganda*, and the task of propaganda is to make people think illogically at all levels in order to trust the narratives of the state, which they wouldn't do if their logical thinking had not been distorted. *Fascism grows with illogical thinking that comes from propaganda.*

# The Frankfurt school and American pragmatism

In the 1930s, the theory that humanistic values are widespread among scientifically minded people, and that fascism, as a denial of these values, is usually associated with illogical reasoning, was not only defended by Carnap. For example, Hermann Broch characterized the phenomenon of mass hysteria in terms of a loss of rationality (Broch 1979), and even the empirical studies of the Frankfurt school initially pointed to the phenomena of emotional distortion and irrationality as key aspects of the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al. 2019 [1950]). In the 1930s and 1940s, however, other theories of fascism became popular, which argued that the phenomenon of fascism had to be explained differently, namely in terms of a lack of absolute values.

Although the Frankfurt school was involved in the aforementioned major empirical study of the authoritarian personality, which was in some ways a joint effort with people from the Vienna Circle – it included Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Marie Jahoda, and Paul Lazarsfeld (Dahms 1994, 226-258) – and initially had nothing to do with absolute values, one of the main proponents of the study, Theodor W. Adorno, together with his Frankfurt school mentor Max Horkheimer, developed a theoretical view that culminated in (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969 [1944]) and consisted of the following two elements. First, it blamed instrumental rationality as partly responsible for fascism, because engineering was involved in organizing the Holocaust. Second, it blamed moral relativism as the other essential source of fascism, because the latter could only be avoided by establishing an absolute justification of humanism on the basis of a variety of Hegelian dialectics.

The second challenge came from the camp of American pragmatism. This was all the more surprising to the logical empiricists because the American pragmatists were seen as allies to a much greater extent than had ever been the case with the Frankfurt School. Indeed, the pragmatists never abandoned the view that an essential antidote to fascism had to come from science and logical thought. And even the embedding of values in politics through instrumental rationality was shared with the logical empiricists. Thus, the pragmatist view as formulated, for example, in (Lewis 1946, Book III) is, soberly considered, virtually identical with the views of Carnap (see AUTHOR). However, in the 1930s, directly confronted with the phenomenon of fascism, some American pragmatists also developed the conviction that the logical empiricist view of values leads to a dangerous form of value relativism, with the consequence that value choices become arbitrary. Values, in turn, had to be justified by science and political deliberation (Misak 2000). That this view was still almost identical to the naturalistic approach of the logical empiricists can only be seen in retrospect: in the 1930s some pragmatists thought that their views were completely incompatible with logical empiricism.

# Reactions to Carnap’s approach

1937 and 1938 were not good years for Carnap's political philosophy. Not only did it turn out that positive reactions to the Harvard lecture, such as Wieman's, were rare exceptions: Carnap's approach was not taken up at all by other analytic philosophers. The years also brought some grossly hostile reactions from outside the logical empiricist camp, which, it seems, ultimately stopped the development of a logical empiricist political philosophy before it had really begun. The first blow came from the Frankfurt School. While Horkheimer and Neurath collaborated intensively and even invited Carnap to give a lecture at the New School for Social Research – the U.S. home of the Frankfurt School – in January 1937 – Horkheimer was willing to pay for a flight to bring Carnap to New York, but Carnap refused for reasons of time (Dahms 1994, 69-96) – it turned out that Horkheimer had been playing a double game, for already in the spring of 1937 Horkheimer's pamphlet “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics” appeared, a wild polemic against logical empiricism that identified Carnap as the arch-enemy. Horkheimer accuses Carnap's antimetaphysics of being just as bourgeois and fascist in its tendencies as the metaphysics that Carnap himself criticizes:

Neo-romantic metaphysics *and* radical positivism are both rooted in the sad condition of a large part of the bourgeoisie, which has completely given up hope of improving conditions by its own efforts and, fearing a decisive change in the social system, submissively submits to the rule of its most capital-rich groups. (Horkheimer 1937, 116, my translation, my emphasis)

In Horkheimer's account, logical empiricism becomes the primary vehicle of Nazi politics in the form of a political horror scenario of a fascist state,

in which protocol sentences flow to the scholar in an abundance similar to the spontaneous applause of the bad government, which would undoubtedly put […] science at the service of its all-encompassing apparatus of domination. – And yet the picture of the world and of humanity that would emerge might be very far from the truth that could be reached at that time. (Horkheimer 1937, 135, my translation)

Science as a whole inevitably becomes a fascist propaganda tool, unless it is controlled by supervising thinkers who master the art of dialectics and transcend science into a "theory in which the empirical elements are constructed into an overall picture that consciously mirrors reality sub specie of one's own broader interests" (ibid., p. 138, my translation). Only when science is "mirrored" into such a different picture, constructed by the dialectical thinker, do its results become politically acceptable. Not only empiricism, but science as a whole must be identified as politically suspect and fascistic in tendency. Science, like empiricism, must be controlled by dialectics, and “bourgeois metaphysics” must be replaced by a dialectical dictation of the correct values and political goals.

The blow came during the Congress for the Unity of Science in Paris in July 1937, Carnap’s last visit to Europe before the war. As he reports in his diary, Carnap read Horkheimer’s article in the morning and tried to swallow its contents in the afternoon during a long walk with Paul and Gabrielle Oppenheim and Carl Gustav Hempel (Carnap forthcoming, entry 7/23/1937). There was not much left to say. Hempel criticized Horkeimer's “ideological snooping”, but the bottom line was that the logical empiricists had lost a (supposed) ally.

The next blows came back in the U.S., from metaphysicians at the philosophy department in Chicago, especially Charner Perry, who countered Carnap’s views with an anti-scientific and value-absolutist view (Carnap forthcoming, entry 1/13/1940). But the hostile reaction was undoubtedly surpassed by Joseph Leighton, a second-tier pragmatist, who in his presidential address to the 1938 conference of the APA Western Division in Urbana, attended by numerous émigré logical empiricists, including Carnap and Hempel, remarked:

[…] if there are no objectively valid ethical values, then, since the Nazis have the guns and the guts, in short the superior force, and their reactions are more effective, the logical positivist would be not rational if he complained when he was put in a concentration camp or beheaded. (Leighton 1939, 126-127)

Leighton’s idea is that (a) logical empiricists regard values as arbitrary, and (b) this implies that there must be some kind of social Darwinism that forces us to accept the values of those in power. Therefore, the “logical positivist” must be okay with being killed by the Nazis. Again, Carnap had nothing to add, this time, because he was simply exhausted and also because he had spent his life avoiding supposedly fruitless discussions (at the price of sometimes missing the most important ones). After a sleepless night, he decided not to attend the discussions on the philosophy of values that were scheduled for the next day (Carnap forthcoming, entries 6/15/1938 and 6/16/1938). Back in Chicago, he decided to devote himself entirely to theoretical work. In fact, values and political philosophy do not reappear in Carnap’s published work until 1963.

The political agenda of logical empiricism remained largely unexpressed and undeveloped. The reasons for this are many. It begins with the obvious problem that the first relevant writings, mainly by Carnap, ranging from the Manifesto of the Vienna Circle (Stadler and Uebel 2012), to “Overcoming of Metaphysics” (Carnap 1932), to the Harvard lecture, all suffer from an overly technical style and a distinct lack of concrete political statements. In the case of the first two writings, this is partly due to the political pressure Carnap was under in Vienna. In the case of the Harvard lecture, it is also due to a less than ideal translation, the great haste with which the manuscript was written in the midst of a plethora of other activities, and a generally underdeveloped ability to articulate political messages. The latter, in turn, points to a general problem in Carnap’s philosophy. Carnap’s thinking is entirely based on his use of the distinction between internal and external questions (Carnap 1950). Internal questions are those things that the philosopher and the scientist can say within a given (formal) framework, and which always have the property of being cognitive and thus epistemically justifiable. External questions, on the other hand, are questions of framework choice, and include all sorts of things that we can say without having first chosen a logic or a scientific language to articulate what we want to say. Carnap does not want to forbid external speech, but he does want to limit it. This gives his philosophy its well-known tendency to be overly formal and technical. This characteristic of his philosophical style certainly leads to precision and clarity, but it also makes it very difficult for those who adopt it to articulate a political or moral position. It also includes a tendency not to articulate things directly, but to trust that they will reveal themselves indirectly. And this has led to misunderstandings on all levels. In particular, the very poor accounts that existed of Carnap’s philosophy of values (see especially Carnap 1935, 22-26) led to the misunderstanding that he held values to be arbitrary, and this of course fueled Horkheimer’s arguments and triggered the hostile reactions of some pragmatists. Also, Carnap’s antimetaphysics of his European years gave many the impression that he simply wanted to stop thinking about philosophical problems. Carnap was later able to dispel this impression, but as far as relations with continental philosophy were concerned, the damage had already been done.

In short, the political philosophy of logical empiricism remained an unfinished agenda until recently (cf. O'Neill and Uebel 2004). It is our task to excavate the agenda and try to place it in a recent context of political philosophy. This is what I try to do here for the special case of the logical empiricist understanding of fascism as illogical reasoning. What remains to be said, then, is how this conception might fit into the context of contemporary politics.

# Carnap’s approach and contemporary politics

A Carnapian understanding of fascism implies that debates about absolute values are of secondary importance, and that the cure for fascism lies primarily in overcoming illogical reasoning. Both elements of this theory will be revisited in this section and illustrated with contemporary examples. Some may criticize this as an impermissible overstep of historical perspective. However, the great flaw in the political writings of the logical empiricists was precisely that they left things too implicit: by believing that the necessary political conclusions could be drawn by the readers themselves, all they achieved was that the readers concluded that the philosophy of the logical empiricists contained no politics at all (Richardson 2009). It is therefore the task of historical reconstruction to make these political consequences explicit at all levels, including the present political situation; excessive purism would be counterproductive here. Placed in the broader context of the political legacy of logical empiricism, which includes, in addition to Carnap, Neurath, Reichenbach, Hempel, and others, these are the consequences for our contemporary understanding of the tensions between democracy and fascism:[[3]](#footnote-3)

(1) Democracy can be seen as a form of politics that requires the existence of a certain meta-consensus among fundamental values supported by the majority of people (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2006, 638-642). These are the humanistic values of individual freedom and equality. Democratic deliberation, on the other hand, never deals with either of these fundamental values, but only with derived, relative values and decisions that depend heavily on facts and empirical laws and are thus entirely cognitive. This is why Carnap (1942, 89) suggests that political questions can often be reduced to internal questions, which in principle can be solved by the sciences. However, this does not mean that political decisions can be left to experts, because there is still a great deal of empirical underdetermination. Given the facts and empirical laws, we are still left with a huge number of, in some cases radically different, options for what to do, what to prioritize, and what side effects to accept. This phenomenon of indeterminacy despite a consensus on fundamental values is perfectly expressed in Otto Neurath's concept of the “auxiliary motive” (Neurath 1983 [1913]), which encompasses all strategies for reaching a decision in a scenario of rational underdetermination. Democratic deliberation, then, is first and foremost *not* about values at all, but about concrete strategies of planning and scheduling, and those who deliberate bring their auxiliary motives, which are based on gut feelings, cultural traditions, emotional temptations, and even self-interest (Mansbridge et al. 2010, 72-80) or group-interests. A policy based on experts ceases to be democratic when it fails to distinguish clearly enough between facts and auxiliary motives, ignoring that only the former are a matter for experts (Neurath 1996, 248-261).

(2) The “hope” of Enlightenment advocates like Carnap is that there is an “inner kinship” that unites all rationally thinking people under the same umbrella of humanist values. This is, of course, only a fallible empirical hypothesis, but it is also no coincidence that this hypothesis was formulated at a time when fascism was gaining ground in Europe, for neither the fascism of the 1930s nor the movements of populism and fascism currently rocking the world imply that this hypothesis is necessarily false. The reason is twofold. We can assume that those who consciously adopt anti-humanist values, while still reasoning perfectly logically, are a tiny minority. And we can also assume that the vast majority of those who support fascist and populist policies do so only erroneously, insofar as they think illogically, and would no longer support these policies once they manage to start thinking logically. The latter scenario even includes a large number of those who explicitly reject humanist values by adopting sexist or racist attitudes, or by saying that they would prefer a strong leader and a totalitarian state to democracy. For example, that women cannot think or are less intelligent than men and therefore need their guidance is not a moral view or opinion, but simply an empirically false statement. The same is true of all kinds of racist beliefs that blacks or Latinos, people from the Far East, Jews or Muslims are in some way fundamentally different, less intelligent, or morally inferior. People who believe such things are usually simply misled by conspiracy theories, lies and misrepresentations. Evangelicals who oppose abortion believe that a new human soul is created by God as soon as an egg is fertilised, and therefore every abortion is a murderous act. But this belief is incompatible with the scientific worldview, since it is based on a form of creationism that is simply pseudo-science and obviously false. It seems unlikely that a sexist or a racist or a pro-life activist would hold on to their beliefs if we could get them to see the world as it really is and thus gain empathy for other groups (that such attempts all too often prove hopeless is another matter, of course). Racism is not primarily a matter of values, nor is it primarily a matter of feelings. It is primarily a matter of false facts and a distorted view of the world; and the distorted view of the world then activates people's moral feelings, which are a very good thing in themselves, but when activated by false facts they lead to racist and sexist stereotypes.

(3) The consequences of a Carnapian understanding of politics for political education, for strengthening democracy, and for fighting populism, fascism, and religious extremism, are, roughly speaking, *that we need to teach science and rationality, not ethics*. This has several implications. (a) There is not much to expect from including ethics, religion and political education in high school, if we take these things as abstract lessions about absolute values and categorial imperatives. What we need to teach is something more concrete and empirical, namely *cultural skills* that include understanding cultures, our own and others, in order to increase empathy and mutual understanding in society. But these are all empirical things and involve history and geography, not moral postulates. (b) Illogical thinking begins in education. People who are taught creationism or the Koran instead of science from elementary school through university are unlikely to become very rational. What should be taught instead, from elementary school on are facts and science. This includes not just the concrete stories about the world and the results of science: mathematics, and empirical laws. Teaching should also include information about how the acquisition of facts and science works. How do scientists argue, how do scientific institutions work, how are scientific claims evaluated and decided, how does science establish probabilities and hypotheses rather than absolute certainty, how does science differ from pseudoscience and conspiracy theories? (c) The most effective tool of fascism, apart from education, has always been the media. Without newspapers and radio, Hitler and Mussolini wouldn't have been able to effectively spread illogical thinking to their people. Today, while newspapers, radio and television are still important propaganda tools, by far the most effective weapon of fascist politics is social media. The antidote can only be that democratic forces manage to strike back and use the media for their purposes. The fascist slogan *Flood the zone with shit* must be countered by the democratic slogan *Flood the zone with facts*. (d) We should also rethink the organisation of our democratic institutions. How can democracy be both based on the scientific advice of experts and avoid disenfranchising the people by simply basing policy on the personal opinions of scientists while ignoring the personal opinions of the rest of society?

# References

Adorno, Theodor W., Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford. 2019 [1950]. *The Authoritarian Personality*. London: Verso.

Bächtiger, André, John S. Dryzek, Jane Mansbridge, and Mark E. Warren, eds. 2018. *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Broch, Hermann. 1979. *Massenwahntheorie*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

Carnap, Rudolf. 1932. "Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache." *Erkenntnis* 2: 219-241.

---. 1934a. "Philosophie - Opium für die Gebildeten." *Rudolf Carnap Papers, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, University Library System, University of Pittsburgh* (RC 110-08-17): <https://doi.org/10.48666/807585>.

---. 1934b. "Theoretische Fragen und praktische Entscheidungen." *Natur und Geist* 2: 257-260.

---. 1935. *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*. London: Kegan Paul.

---. 1936. "Logic (Factors Determining Human Behavior) [German Version]." *Rudolf Carnap Papers, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, University Library System, University of Pittsburgh* (RC 110-02-18): <https://doi.org/10.48666/846377>.

---. 1937. "Logic." *Edgar Douglas et al. (eds.): Factors Determining Human Behavior. Cambridge (Ma): Harvard University Press*: 107-118.

---. 1942. "Introduction to Analytic Philosophy." *Rudolf Carnap Papers, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, University Library System, University of Pittsburgh* (RC 115-02): <https://doi.org/10.48666/988835>.

---. 1950. "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology." *Revue International de Philosophie* 4: 20-40.

---. 1963a. "Abraham Kaplan on Value Judgments." *Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.): The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap, La Salle: Open Court*: 999-1013.

---. 1963b. "Intellectual Autobiography." *Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.): The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap, La Salle: Open Court*: 3-84.

---. 1967 [1928]. *The Logical Structure of the World. Pseudoproblems in Philosophy*. London: Routledge.

---. 2017. "Value Concepts (1958)." *Synthese* 194: 185–194.

---. forthcoming. *Tagebücher 1936-1970. Herausgegeben von Christian Damböck, unter Mitarbeit von Brigitta Arden, Philipp Leon Bauer und Brigitte Parakenings*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag (<https://doi.org/10.48666/939898>).

Carnap, Rudolf, and Kirtley F. Mather. 1936. "Harvard Tercentenary Celebration. Conference of Arts and Science. NBC Broadcast #3. September 5, 1936." *Rudolf Carnap Papers, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, University Library System, University of Pittsburgh* (RC 110-02-17): <https://doi.org/10.48666/950874>.

Dahms, Hans-Joachim. 1994. *Positivismusstreit. Die Auseinandersetzung der Frankfurter Schule mit dem logischen Positivismus, dem amerikanischen Pragmatismus und dem kritischen Rationalismus*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

Dryzek, John S., and Simon Niemeyer. 2006. "Reconciling Pluralism and Consensus as Political Ideals." *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (3): 634-649.

Eatwell, Roger. 2017. "Populism and Fascism." *Christóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Populism, Oxford University Press*: 363-383.

Finchelstein, Federico. 2017. *From Fascism to Populism in History*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Horkheimer, Max. 1937. "Der neueste Angriff auf die Metaphysik." *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 6 (1): 4-51.

Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. 1969 [1944]. *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*. Frankfurt/Main: Fischer.

Kelsen, Hans. 1967. *Pure Theory of Law*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Leighton, Joseph Alexander. 1939. "History as the Struggle for Social Values." *The Philosophical Review* 48 (2): 118-154.

Lewis, Clarence Irving. 1946. *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*. La Salle IL: Open Court.

Mansbridge, Jane, James Bohman, Simone Chambers, David Estlund, Andreas Føllesdal, Archon Fung, Christina Lafont, Bernard Manin, and José Luis Martií. 2010. "The Place of Self-Interest and the Role of Power in Deliberative Democracy." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 18 (1): 64-100.

Misak, Cheryl. 2000. *Truth, Politics, Morality. Pragmatism and Deliberation*. London: Routledge.

Neurath, Otto. 1931. *Empirische Soziologie. Der wissenschaftliche Gehalt der Geschichte und Nationalökonomie*. Vienna: Springer.

---. 1983 [1913]. "The Lost Wanderers of Descartes and the Auxiliary Motive." *Otto Neurath, Philosophical Papers 1913-1946. Edited by Robert S. Cohen and Marie Neurath*: 1-12.

---. 1996. "Visual Education. Humanisation versus Popularisation." *Elisabeth Nemeth and Friedrich Stadler (eds.): Encyclopedia and Utopia. The Life and Work of Otto Neurath (1882-1945), Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers*: 245-336.

O'Neill, John, and Thomas Uebel. 2004. "Horkheimer and Neurath: Restarting a Disrupted Debate." *European Journal of Philosophy* 12 (1): 75-105.

Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. 2010. *Merchants of Doubt. How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. London: Bloomsbury.

Reisch, George A. 2005. *How the Cold War Transformed Philosophy of Science. To the Icy Slopes of Logic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Richardson, Sarah S. 2009. "The Left Vienna Circle." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 40: 14-24, 167-174.

Salm, Jürgen. 2010. "Man nannte sie 'Hottentotten'." *Deutschlandfunk* retrieved online 11/26/2024: <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/man-nannte-sie-hottentotten-100.html>.

Stadler, Friedrich, and Thomas Uebel, eds. 2012. *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung. Der Wiener Kreis. Hrsg. vom Verein Ernst Mach. (1929)*. Vienna: Springer Verlag.

Verhaegh, Sander. 2020. "Coming to America: Carnap, Reichenbach and the Great Intellectual Migration. Part I: Rudolf Carnap." *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* 8 (11): 1-23.

Wieman, Henry Nelson. 1937. "Review to "Factors Determining Human Behavior by Harvard Tercentenary Publications"." *The Journal of Religion* 17 (3): 321-324.

1. The main historical source for this section is (Carnap forthcoming). Some information could also be gathered from the University of Chicago, Special Collections Department, Office of the President, Hutchins Administration Files and Richard P. McKeon Files. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Rudolf Carnap Papers, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, University Library System, University of Pittsburgh (RC 110-02-16, <https://doi.org/10.48666/950861>). The published version (Carnap 1937) is based on this typescript. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The view I characterize here is based on a general understanding of democracy that combines deliberative democracy (Bächtiger et al. 2018) with logical empiricism. For the details see (AUTHOR). While in this earlier paper I deal with democracy in general, the present paper is a direct continuation, dealing with fascist and populist threats to democracy, again, through a logical empiricist lens. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)