CONCEPTS, IDEAS, AND DEFINITIONS IN SCHLICK'S
ALLGEMEINE ERKENNTNISLEHRE

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I. Introduction

Many members of the Vienna Circle were physicists. So was Moritz Schlick, its leading member. He also was, on his mother's side, a direct descendant of Ernst Moritz v. Arndt, a prominent figure in the early national German freedom movement against Napoleon.1 Schlick is said to have had the advantage over the other members by his "intimate knowledge of philosophy."2 He may have had intimate knowledge of philosophy, but it often seems that he lacked proper training in philosophical thinking and expression. Exact thinking was what he advocated and surely had learned in his own field. After all, Max Planck was the advisor for his dissertation, and he remained in close contact with his teacher. He also corresponded with Einstein and Hilbert. But amazingly his philosophical writings are full of muddles and equivocations, much to my immense confusion. I learned eventually that other writers had discovered the same deficiency before I did. E.g. Karl Menger, in "Memories of Moritz Schlick,"3 writes about his imprecision in expressing epistemological ideas and in formulations of the Circle, about his arbitrary and loose use of the term "meaningless," and in general his careless use of terms. Also Joseph Margolis, in "Schlick and Carnap on the Problems of Psychology,"4 states that Schlick conflates the distinction between psychological and physical extension and the distinction between a realistic and idealistic conception of nature.

2. V. Kraft, *Der Wiener Kreis*, 1.
One would have expected from the Vienna Circle a new theory of knowledge. But only Schlick seems to have embarked on that endeavor. In 1925 he published the second and revised edition of *Allgemeine Erkenntnislehre* which was translated by A.E. Blumberg in 1982. It must be remarked that Schlick with his avid anti-psychologism and anti-idealism was firmly rooted in Brentano’s theory of intentionality in spite of his sharp criticism of what he believed Brentano’s theory of “inner perception” and “unity of consciousness” to be. Otherwise it can be said that his forerunners or contemporaries Brentano, Meinong and Husserl were read by him and were wholeheartedly misunderstood. Only Stumpf and Mach, and sometimes Brentano, receive honorable mention. At least Rudolf Haller’s conviction that the Vienna Circle belongs to a unity of Austrian philosophy is well supported in Schlick’s case.

In this paper I will focus my attention exclusively on *Allgemeine Erkenntnislehre* and, within these limits, on Schlick’s double-layered and ambiguous use of the word “Begriff,” which I translate as “concept,” and peripherally on the word “content” (“Inhalt”), which suffers the same abuse. Of course Schlick does attempt to give a clear definition of the terms and a precise outline of their use, but he falls short in all respects. “Concept” is a very important term because it is used in any scientific language or thought aptly describing our existing universe and also in purely theoretical systems. Schlick uses “concept” to mean once any kind of thought object and once a sign in the sense of designator. As thought object it remains bare of any sort of ontological status for Schlick, it is truly a “homeless object.” In the following I will examine the characteristics of concepts and Schlick’s difficulties with them. I will also propose a conciliatory solution of some of the difficulties which is already immanently present in Schlick’s own book.

II. *On Concepts*

A. Ideas

I will begin the chapter on concepts with a short description of ideas.