

# Ludwig Klages and his philosophy of language

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# Contents

Abstract . . . . . 3  
Keywords . . . . . 3  
Acknowledgement . . . . . 16  
References . . . . . 16  
About the Author . . . . . 19

## Abstract

This article outlines the philosophy of language of the vitalist philosopher Ludwig Klages, as it can be found in his late work *Language as the Source of Psychology* (*Die Sprache als Quell der Seelenkunde*). First published in 1948, this treatise is full of examples of how everyday usage of words should give us pause for thought – underlining the link between philosophy and life that is inherent to the project of vitalism or *Lebensphilosophie*. In line with the remit for submissions to this issue of the *Journal of European Studies* intended to mark 50 years since its inception, the article reflects the interest of its contributor (translation studies and the history of ideas), forms part of a larger project to retrieve the thought of a largely forgotten thinker, and showcases a work that occupies a key position in the history of twentieth-century thought and has been seminal to the contributor's own development. For ultimately Klages's philosophy of language illustrates the truth of Goethe's maxim, 'the point of life is life itself'.

## Keywords

biocentrism, expression, *Lebensphilosophie*, 'linguistic turn', Ludwig Klages, philosophy of language, symbol, vitalism

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A great deal of philosophy in the twentieth century was concerned with the question of language. From the 'language games' of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and his famous proposition in his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 'the limits of my language are the limits of my world', to the logical positivism of Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and A. J. Ayer (1910–89); from the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) to the poststructuralist 'deconstruction' advocated and practised by Jacques Derrida (1930–2004); to say nothing of the Prague linguistic circle, the Moscow linguistic circle, and numerous other instances of the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy, the question of language moved to the forefront of philosophical concerns. So it should come as no surprise that the vitalist philosopher Ludwig Klages (1872–1956), for his part, also developed a theory of language – one which emphasized its essentially symbolic function. In this respect, there are important links to be drawn between Klages's approach to language and the work of such thinkers as Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945), the author of *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923–9); Owen Barfield (1898–1997), the author of *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (1857); and Jean Gebser (1905–73), the author of *The Ever-Present Origin* (1973). In varying degrees and in different ways these writers can all be seen as a response to the question, once posed by the Dundee-born Episcopalian minister turned Neoplatonist Kenneth S. Guthrie (1871–1940) in the following terms,

‘Which is the truth – the symbol or the fact?’ (1904: §1).<sup>1</sup> In other words, is language simply a tool for utilitarian communication? Or is it a source of authentic revelation about the deep structures of our world? Using texts selected by Hans Kern (1902–1847) and revised by Hans Kasdorff (1908–93) for an anthology of Klages’s writing called *Vom Sinn des Lebens* (1982), this article offers a guide through Klages’s philosophy of language as well as (for the first time) translations into English of key passages from his late, great treatise, *Language as the Source of Psychology* (*Die Sprache als Quell der Seelenkunde*), first published in 1948 but still as fresh today and full of examples of how everyday usage of words should give us pause for thought.

Already in the 1930s, Klages had begun to explore a specific area in which to apply his biocentric insights: rhythm. In *On the Essence of Rhythm* (*Vom Wesen des Rhythmus*) (1934), he offered an extended meditation on how rhythm demonstrated the fundamental Klagesian antithesis between ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’.<sup>2</sup> As he put it, ‘the beat repeats, but rhythm renews’ (Klages, 1991: 526), thus illustrating the conflict between a mechanical (and, in his view, ultimately morbid) view of the world and an approach that emphasizes and appreciates warmth, liveliness, spontaneity: the rhythmic (because never quite exact) pulse of life! And when, in this work, Klages derives the real meaning of ‘rhythm’ from its etymology of *rheein*, i.e. ‘to flow’, he points the way forward to the major development in his thought in the late 1940s.

For with *Language as the Source of Psychology*, Klages shows himself to be in line with at least one of the major trends of philosophy in the twentieth century, and undertakes his own version of the ‘linguistic turn’. Although the shift towards considering the relationship between philosophy and language is largely associated with Wittgenstein, structuralism, poststructuralism and French feminist thought, a concern with language had long been evident in the German tradition in the thought of Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88) and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). Yet Klages’s approach to language is, in keeping with the rest of his philosophy, an eminently symbolic one. What, he asked, does language tell us about the way we ‘see’ – and, in this sense, construct – the world? So Klages investigates the symbolism of sounds, names, conceptions of space, use of past tenses and the like, for two of the most important principles of the Klagesian theory of expression are: first, that language is an excellent guide to psychology; and, second, that from words used in an everyday context one can make important psychological deductions (Wertham, 1930: 382). His study demonstrates the fecundity of his philosophical approach, and *Language as the Source*

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<sup>1</sup> This short work was conceived by Guthrie as the first of a series of ‘Important Philosophical Poems’ – but none of the other planned works appeared. For further discussion of Klages’s theory of the symbol, see Bishop (2014).

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of this fundamental distinction in Klages’s thought, see ‘Geist und Seele’ (1917–19), in Klages (1991: 1–154); and Klages (1981: 70–6, 803–924, 1223–37).

of *Psychology* remains one of the great unread philosophical treatises of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Klages's argument begins arrestingly and, as one would expect from a vitalist, with an example from in the midst of life as it is lived:

The sight of a cave-bear, of the rising sun, of a block of stone rolling down a mountain; hearing a storm, a roaring waterfall or the intrusiveness of an action such as a vigorous grasp at something; a careful holding-on, a reluctant letting-go – all this produces a strong emotion in the heart and mind, and this in turn produces, through the medium of *vision*, an irresistible urge for *representation* of the event's content through an articulated sound or cry which immediately signifies that content. If a gesture of signalling is associated with it or if the gesture subsequently or in repetition comes to its aid, then the sound or cry has become one which *names* the meaning.

So articulated sound and the meaning of a sound are simultaneously there, while the naming function only accrues to the meaningful sound through the signalling gestures which can, but do not have to, accompany or follow it. Of course, to the sound or cry there is inevitably attached an expression of the condition of the soul by which the vision is accompanied, as it resounds strongly or weakly, briefly or protractedly, falteringly or fluently, more or less vibrantly, more or less rhythmically, with much or little melodic up and down, with hardly perceptible or clear differences of accentuation, and from these there *can* slip into it something which partially occurs in . . . exclamations. This aside, it is not in the least a so-called animal sound of expression such as the unarticulated scream out of anger or anxiety, but a cry that *represents* its meaning and to this extent is its vocal emblem or symbol. (Klages, 1989: 276)

With typically bold originality, Klages argues that language *precedes* logical thinking and judging; although logic uses language for its work, language has a primordial aspect that points to a dimension of reality which logic fails to comprehend (or even to acknowledge). Hence, in the words of the title of Klages's late monograph, we can understand 'language' as 'the source of psychology':

Because the meaningful experience that expresses itself in the acoustic emblem presupposes the predominance of the soul over the body, of vision over sensation, but in no way presupposes the spirit, the creation of the word takes place not only internally, but also temporally *prior to* the beginning of the process of judging and understanding, in which form language (including the possibility of a plurality of languages) was already present

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<sup>3</sup> For the intellectual significance of Klages's works as a whole, see Kozljanič (2004: 149–93) and Bishop (2018).

when this process began to set to work by using language for its own purposes, and from which its dependence on the word inevitably proceeds. And this dependence remains, even if the thought-*impulses* from now on become increasingly dependent on a language whose vocabulary and syntax were moulded by many previous statements of judgement, and which is so rich in conceptual words whose meaning-tone is often only weak, yet never entirely absent, and gradually gives direction with its modest demands to the understanding. For how long there was a pre-rational humankind, we do not know; but we do know that a humankind endowed with understanding and guided by willed purposes, and which likes to call its process of development ‘world history’, constitutes, even if we go back beyond demonstrable dates by ten thousand years, only a short segment in comparison to the *existence* of humankind which might well, at two hundred thousand years, be underestimated.

Within the context of indescribably complicated transport facilities, of a similarly involved financial system, a technology that has become fantastic, utterly complex legal principles, and the conceptual span – too wide for an overview – of all the sciences, particularly chemistry, physics, and mathematics, such abstract conceptual words have of course developed (including similarly abstract neologisms and combinations) that it is not unusual for difficult investigations to be required in order to recapture the experiential content on which they are based and, in this way, recreate their connection with a reality that lies outside the spirit. But a point of contact can always be found, and if one has found it, then one realizes, not without astonishment, that the power of a word reaches right up into the thinnest threads of those fantasies that are swirling around outside space and time. (Klages, 1989: 279–80)

In five crisp bullet points, Klages summarizes the central tenets of his vitalist theory of language. This theory turns on the distinction between meaning (*Bedeutung*) and concept (*Begriff*):

Following our main work . . . we can summarize the results of our comparison of meaning [*Bedeutung*] and concept [*Begriff*] in the following way:

1. The meaning of a word can never be lacking; the concept is an artificial product, whose absence does not change the comprehensibility of language in the slightest.
2. Meanings are as old as language itself, concepts are not older than historical humankind.
3. Meanings change like names, but more quickly than they do, just as the soul changes more quickly than the ensouled body; concepts are

invented at some point and must at some other point make way for new concepts; but they do not change.

4. Meanings are *experienced* and for this reason are not definable; concepts, basically always definable, are *thought*.
5. The meaning of names is never exactly the same from one sentence to another, indeed it is not even the exactly same in a sentence that is heard as it is in a sentence that is read; the concept, wherever it occurs, occurs *only* as the same. (Klages, 1989: 289)

In his treatise on language, Klages draws on the concept of the spirit or *Geist* which he had expounded at length in his earlier writings, notably his three-volume work *The Spirit as Adversary of the Soul (Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele)* (1981 [1929–32]). In this passage, for instance, he points to the perception of time as an example of the spirit at work:

What is it that divides the constantly flowing stream of time into years, days, hours, minutes, seconds? Certainly not this stream itself, but a measuring and calculating power of judgement. However, it has to distinguish the segment of time called a second from the next second by using a point, which is therefore called the ‘second’ (from the Latin *secunda*, to be supplemented by *pars*), from the second the third has to be distinguished, and in turn sixty of them, that is, a minute (from the Latin *minuta pars* = little part) from the next minute and so on. The aforementioned points only fulfil the purpose of division because none of them has the least temporal duration, since if it were otherwise the minute would no longer consist of sixty seconds, but of sixty seconds increased by the duration of the dividing point. If the mental act which makes these temporally unextended cuts were a qualitatively more precisely determined piece of the time-stream itself which is called process, then it would never actually get *at* time and it would therefore be impossible for it to divide time. Consequently the ability to establish boundary-marking identifiers must be based on the ability to accomplish acts which are *temporally unextended* and accordingly get at time as if *from somewhere outside it*. Thus we have discovered the sense of the origin of concepts and to this extent the sense of the concept itself.

To establish spatially and temporally non-extended borders ‘in the flux of phenomena’<sup>4</sup> is the one and the same, forever repeated act of the spirit and the ability to accomplish this act, is itself the spirit. (Klages, 1989: 290)

For Klages, considering the operation of language in how we conceive, perceive, and in this way construct our world raises wider questions about our conceptual approach to ‘objective’ reality:

In splitting the character appearance [*Charaktererscheinung*], the act of comprehension [*der Auffassungsakt*] singles out from this appearance the object of perception or the thing, which is thus differentiated from the surrounding field of the thing, from any other thing, and inevitably from the person of the beholder. Just as it is certain that every conceptualizable achievement of differentiation refers back to a deed of the spirit, so it is equally certain that it no less refers back to the compulsion giving rise to this deed, as a consequence of which its product comes to light, not as something made or wrought by the spirit, but as something that has been found; and this is true of all objects of thought, including those which conceptual thought constructs in their thousands, to the extent that among them none occurs, not even among the most scientifically abstract or artificially imaginative or confusedly fantastic, whose construction material (to speak metaphorically) would not at some point have been things found – and thus have been in principle discoverable, although to be sure objectified, elements of reality. Whatever the carrier of comprehension [*der Auffassungsträger*] finds, whether by chance or whether at the end of many years of effort spent on research, and whatever they make out of these discoveries, what is found itself labels as an object of thought what the thinking spirit felt obliged to do through experienced semantic contents [*Bedeutungsinhalte*], and as a consequence something completely removed from the arbitrary wish of the person thinking.

If someone believes that they are convinced (as were, for example, Descartes and Leibniz) of the existence of ‘innate representations’ or (as was Kant) of the provability of ‘synthetic judgments *a priori*’, then this person must have encountered something on the investigative path that persuaded them to come to the one or the other conclusion, and this person can only have encountered this thing because the impulse to the decisive act of conceptualization *happened* to them. We shall of course not overlook that of many

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<sup>4</sup> An allusion to Schiller’s famous poem in elegaic metre, ‘The Walk’ (‘Der Spaziergang’), which includes these lines: ‘While, in his silent chamber, the musing Philosopher traces / Circles symbolic – explores Nature’s most mystical source; / Measures the forces of Matter – the hates and loves of the Magnet – / Follows sound through the breeze – light through ethereal space; / Seeks an infallible Law in the fearful changes of chance – in / *Fleeting Phenomena seeks after a pole that abides* [*Sucht den ruhenden Pol in der Erscheinungen Flucht*]’ (Schiller, 1844: 102–3).

things that are found or discovered innumerable cases of them are in fact only supposedly so and, in retrospect, turn out to have been deceptive, including those two things we have just mentioned; yet in itself this does not alter in the slightest the relation between the supposed discovery and the consciousness of the person who discovers it, but it permits us to rule that for every – put bluntly – illusory discovery its ultimate or deepest ground has to be sought in a disruption of the *experience of reality*. – By using the word ‘find’ in relation to what is inescapable, the German language convincingly reaffirms how discovery has the character of something that happens to one in the expression: ‘to find death’ [*den Tod finden*, i.e. to meet one’s death]. (Klages, 1989: 303–4)

If we think about *how* we use language, Klages argues, it will become clearer to us where this way of thinking comes from – namely, from the spirit or *Geist*:

The act of comprehension [*Auffassung*], which splits the character of the pre-conceptual word from its semantic content, is nevertheless partly determined by this character for the simple reason that the carrier of the spirit does not for a single moment cease being the carrier of life and correspondingly in the waking state it receives thought-related *impulses* from its experiential realm. If this were not the case, the object of thought would be not so much something derived from its context as something entirely detached from it, something entirely isolated, fundamentally unrelatable, incapable of becoming the subject of a judgement, let alone becoming the starting-point of a generalization. Thanks to this detachability from semantic names, what it encompasses remains a *differentiation* rather than *separation* and hence for this reason, depending on whether it is possible, a variously evaluable relation. From this most general level, however . . . let us turn now to particular aspects which distinguish the character of bodily recognition.

Suppose the content of an impression [*Eindrucksinhalt*] were a sudden bang which startles a carrier of life, whether an animal or a human being: anyone still having doubts would recognize, at least from this example, how greatly what we call comprehension can be compelled, indeed forced, from whomever accomplishes it. If for all cases without exception language has nevertheless chosen the character of seizing and grasping in order to announce what is thus inwardly taking place, then this may serve us as a guarantee that the *spirit-tainted* carrier of life – in the midst, as it were, of the animal effect of the impression, in this case of the bang – has also experienced the dynamic retrospective-force [*Rückwirkung*] of their ego; which confirms and underlines for us from the arena of experience, even if only indirectly, that the act of comprehension has the nature of a deed. But this

also confirms for us with all the emphasis one could wish that, without the impression-content [*Eindrucksinhalt*], the carrier of comprehension would find just as little opportunity for the act of cognitive perception as a grasping, seizing hand would in the complete absence of a tangible object or at least one that is perceptible, even like a passing breeze. (Klages, 1989: 306)

On Klages's account, the fundamental act of language is the cry or the song, yet the act of writing, he argues, also played a crucial role in the development of language. The idea that thought can exist entirely separate from language is, he concludes, a Platonic aberration:

Originally – of this there can be no doubt – speaking and audible speaking [*vernehmliches Sprechen*] were one and the same, and we may even associate primordial speaking partly with the cry and calling, partly and perhaps even more with singing than would still be permissible today, the former as it applied to a fellow human being, the latter insofar as a thought occasionally emerged in one's monologue with oneself. Furthermore, it is undisputed – and it can be supported by many facts – that the original act of speech, apart from the gesture of showing, was supplemented and accompanied by numerous gestures which were not, for instance, merely expressive [*expressiv*], but more especially representational [*darstellerisch*], as is still the case today (or more accurately as it was until recent times) among the remnants of peoples untouched by the process of history.<sup>5</sup> Of them we know from the middle of the previous century that they could converse with those who were deaf and dumb without having learned their system of sign language. There is substantial evidence that the inner speech-act only began to develop to a significant extent with the origin of writing, including the identification marks and cultic symbols which preceded it, in different places on the earth, that is, at very different times; therefore we may take the primordial human being to have been a thinking being in a narrower sense of the term only to the extent that they immediately gave voice to their thoughts through sign language, or through speaking, or through singing. As a result in those days a sentence was far more often than today a single cry, which required to be complete the visible situation that had given rise to it.

On the other hand, what we are used to calling thinking goes on mainly in silence, and this has encouraged the view, accepted especially by scholars, that thinking can be dissociated from speaking or any other kind of signalling: indeed, that words and sentences are, to a certain extent, the

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<sup>5</sup> By *außergeschichtliche Völker*, Klages means communities otherwise referred to as 'uncontacted peoples', 'isolated peoples' or 'lost tribes'. For further discussion, see Shelton et al. (2013).

clothes which the thought existing apart from them can also refrain from putting on – an aberration which reached its peak, towering even higher than the heaven of Platonic ideas, in its belief in an intellectual world which would forfeit nothing of its goods if there were no power of thought or if it had never existed. (Klages, 1989: 330–1)

By means of his linguistic analysis, Klages uncovers some of our presuppositions about ethical qualities and character traits. Take, for example, the German expression ‘*gutherzig*’, variously translatable as ‘kind-hearted’, ‘good-hearted’, or more generally ‘kindly’, although the English language also has the expression ‘to be of good heart’; what does it tell us about our concepts of kindness or goodness? How does language reflect our conceptions of ourselves and life? In other words, what are the ethical implications built into our (use of) language?

The word *gutherzig* [= good-hearted, kind-hearted] provides a compelling piece of evidence for the possibility of the greatest simplicity of word-meaning [*Wortbedeutung*] alongside a composite conceptual significance [*kompositäre Begriffsbezeichnung*]. In conversation a speaker knows exactly what they mean calling someone ‘good-hearted’, and can be sure that the listener understands the same thing; nevertheless in this particular unity of meaning two concepts are fused together: a talent for feeling [*Gefühlsbegabung*] and a motive [*Triebfeder*], the former of which belongs to the retrospectively acting concepts [*rückwirkende . . . Begriffe*], the latter neither to the spontaneous nor the reactive, but to the *passive* concepts. The goodhearted person is, like the weak-hearted one, capable of being moved more easily by feelings of sympathy than the cold-hearted one, but at the same time they are, in contrast to the weakhearted person, someone who participates not only in the sufferings of others but also in their joys, and the good-hearted person moreover has a quite variedly manifested *tendency* with a directional indicator [*Richtungskennzeichen*] of a willingness to concede [*Nachgiebigkeit*] in relation to declarations, requests, suggestions, concerns, applications, claims, demands, together with an inseparable tolerance [*Billigung*] of kinds of behaviour or action that are unwanted or inappropriate or in some way cause offence. This tendency has an accompanying disposition of feeling which could hardly be described in *one* word and could most likely be called ‘delight in what is peaceful’ or ‘displeasure at what is not peaceful’.

It is through both of these, and particularly through a willingness to concede, that one variety of good-heartedness is manifested for which the most suitable name is ‘good-naturedness’ [*Gutmütigkeit*]. As a talent for feeling good-naturedness stands without any reservations on the side of the good . . . as a motive it can mean weakness, to the extent that the good-natured

person can also often not say no even if negation were required in the service of what is valuable; but it can also through forbearance and patience contribute to avoiding disputes which, met by a lack of patience and severity, would unfailingly have ended with the defeat of the good. Good-naturedness is thus a quality relating to the personal *soul*, and as a result is determined in a predominantly vital way, and for this reason can be already found in its ego-less early forms in the animal kingdom, where not only the expert knows how to distinguish willing, sociable, peaceful, gentle, easily tamed species from difficult, aggressive, hard-to-tame ones. Indeed, this opposition can even apply to various individual specimens of the same species. There are, to choose just one example from many, dogs that – by their very nature, in other words, aside from influences from training, which can of course aim at more or less the same goals – are comparatively good-tempered as well as those that easily bite, which are then called vicious, since everyday language is not obliged to preserve the boundaries of concepts fit for scientific research.

The good-natured person often surrenders necessary and justified demands of self-assertion to the changing wishes of other people, not so much from a lack of *power* of resistance as from a weakness of *tendency* to resist, and in this way gets themselves into the most problematic situations (think, for example, of guarantees given under compulsion!). As a result, they can easily appear from the standpoint of ‘common sense’, to say nothing of the standpoint of the profiteer, to be a fool, someone who exposes themselves to the impossible and allows themselves to be misused out of, so it seems, a lack of power of judgement. As a consequence the word ‘good-naturedness’ has acquired a connotation of stupidity, reflected in such expressions as the ‘good, stupid sheep’, and is perhaps on the path to a development of meaning similar to the one experienced by the word ‘simple’, which used to mean ‘straightforward’ and ‘unpretentious’, but in the opposing light of diversity and complication has gradually come to mean ‘simpleminded’, or the word ‘silly’ [*albern*],<sup>6</sup> whose sense of unreflecting sincerity has transformed into its current meaning through the association with a lack of a considered and measured attitude in dealing with others, or the word ‘bad’

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<sup>6</sup> Is Klages recalling here the passage in Goethe’s short note of 1818 entitled ‘Doubt and Surrender’ (*Bedenken und Ergebung*; sometimes translated as ‘Indecision and Surrender’), contained in volume 1, part 2, of *On Morphology* (1820)? Here Goethe reflects on the problem of the ‘epistemological gap’ in the following terms:

Here we encounter the very difficulty, which is not always made clear and conscious, namely: that there appears to be a certain gap between idea and experience, which all our powers vainly try to overcome. Nonetheless our whole endeavour consists in trying to overcome this hiatus with reason, understanding, faith, feeling, illusion and, when all else fails, with folly [*Albernheit*]. (Goethe, 1955: 31)

For further discussion, see Brady (1987).

(*schlecht*), which, as a variant of ‘plain’ (*schlicht*) was forced, through being opposed to nobility, to exchange its meaning of ‘artlessly natural’ for the one of having ‘minimal value’ which Nietzsche<sup>7</sup> claimed for the slave mentality.<sup>8</sup> (Klages, 1989: 564–5)

In *Language as the Source of Psychology*, his last major treatise, Klages returns to one of the important themes of his intellectual career: the question of *Charakterologie* or *Charakterkunde*, i.e. the analysis of ‘character’. Rather than simply categorizing people into different groups. Klages tries – like the Swiss analytical psychologist, C. G. Jung (1875–1961), in his study of *Psychological Types* (1921) – to understand the mechanisms involved in the case of each typological category:

It is the – one might well say – enviable gift of the happy-go-lucky person [*des Leichtblütigen*], to every degree that they are capable of being moved and empathizing, to maintain, in relation to the person causing the emotional response and provoking empathy, the state of a comparatively interior sense of hovering aloft, i.e. not to be pulled down and to sink down or, to speak nonmetaphorically, not to be overcome and overpowered by the person causing the emotional response, and for this reason to free themselves easily from the feeling-determining cause [*gefühlsbestimmender Anlaß*] and to recover relatively effortlessly from any disturbances of balance. The structural characteristics of a greater tendency to be easily excited are an initial consequence of this. Even the happy-go-lucky person can occasionally not be able to avoid taking something seriously, but they will not get caught up in it and will not only be able to *look for* a way out of difficult situations but also *believe* in the possibility of ways out, irrespective of whether this is true or not. – With this hopeful confidence they are

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<sup>7</sup> See the argument presented by Nietzsche in his first essay in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), entitled “‘Good and Evil’, ‘Good and Bad’”, where he draws on the distinction made earlier – see *Human, All-Too-Human*, §45, and *Beyond Good and Evil*, §260 – between master morality and slave morality (see Nietzsche, 1968: 147–8, 394–8, 460–92).

<sup>8</sup> At this point, Klages adds the following footnote in support of his argument, drawing on works by Schiller: ‘The word “simple” [*einfältig*] deserves particular attention because it literally means something which has been just folded *once*, thus in contrast to something “manifold” [*Vielfältiges*] it means something almost *without* any folds. The intuitive content [*Anschauungsgehalt*] which only now becomes apparent has been brought to life in a wonderful way on numerous occasions by Schiller, as when he has Max Piccolomini say the following about Wallenstein (Act 4, Scene 3):

. . . — his life lies spread  
Immaculate without a single crease,  
Without one speck of dark to mar its gleam . . .  
or when in *The Maid of Orleans* he has Johanna say (Act 3, Scene 4):  
Whate’er is good, and cometh from on high,  
Is universal, and without reserve;  
But in the heart’s recesses darkness dwells!’  
(Klages, 1989: 564, fn. 111; see Schiller, 1979: 454; and Schiller, 1899: 92).

close to the elevation of the euphoric person, only without having to be euphoric, just as conversely they are some distance away from someone who is plagued by ‘scruples and doubts’ and is less exposed than their opposite to the negative states of heart and mind such as care, anxiety and confusion. An example of warm, feeling-type happy-go-luckiness is given to us by Eichendorff in the eminently likeable figure of Count Leontin in *Ahnung und Gegenwart*, in opposition to whom stands, in the figure of Friedrich, a personality who is of course only to a small extent stolid or phlegmatic, and to a much larger extent somewhat supra-ethical or supramoral.<sup>9</sup>

To all of these the counterpart is the stolid character [*der schwerblütige Charakter*]. This character does not hover or float, but rather stands or is rooted; must, once aroused or excited, pause a comparatively long time on the cause of this excitement, for each of their feelings needs as it were to be worked through; strides, even when they would rather, in a metaphorical sense, hurry and run; assimilates the feeling-content of what happens only after a considerably longer time than their opposite, takes some things more seriously than they deserve to be taken, and gravitates in differing degrees more to dark than to light states of heart and mind, even though they are, as it is worth remembering, by no means necessarily melancholy. – Although the names of both types in German (*Leichtblütig*, *Schwerblütig*) make one think of the circulatory system, a much more convincing comparison would be with the metabolism, so that one would, not without an increase in knowledge, ascribe to the happy-go-lucky person a more than usual swiftness, and to the stolid person a more than usual tardiness of the psychic metabolism. In this way one would, even if only metaphorically, have brought the vital foundations of both structures closer together and could, for instance, see with one’s own eyes that they are something entirely different from the typological opposition of the wandering and the locationbound kind of being. After all, the . . . more location-bound dweller of a Southern country certainly has more happy-go-lucky natures to show than does the more wandering dweller of a Northern country! – Nearly all the figures found in the works of Stifter<sup>10</sup> are stolid, the majority of

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<sup>9</sup> A reference to two characters from one of Klages’s favourite novels, *Ahnung und Gegenwart* (1815) by Eichendorff. For an interpretation of this work, famous for ‘the beauty and interest of individual episodes, the charm of world-famous poems set like jewels in a rich prose, its musical, lyrical treatment of moods, emotions, colours and characters, [and] the apparently deeply felt and in parts easily understood religiosity in a puzzled world seeking solutions to great problems’, see Riley (1959).

<sup>10</sup> The Austrian writer and poet, Adalbert Stifter (1805–68), a popular German writer (if relatively unknown outside Germany), especially famous his depiction of natural landscapes. Thomas Mann praised Stifter as being ‘one of the most extraordinary, the most enigmatic, the most secretly daring and the most strangely gripping narrators in world literature’, and noted that ‘the contrast between Stifter’s bloody, suicidal end and the noble gentleness of his writing has frequently been emphasized’,

them are also warm-hearted, while many of those who equally demonstrate warm-heartedness are moreover quite refractory. (Klages, 1989: 569–70)

What can be learned from the study of character, Klages concludes, is the different ways in which the spirit, whose effect is always a restricting or reducing one, intervenes in the life of the soul to produce the pathologies or aptitudes that constitute a particular sort of character. The chief insight, he reminds us, is one into ‘a remarkable problem’: how, despite and sometimes even because of the dominance of the spirit, the vital force of life is able to assert itself. (This is, of course, the central idea – presented sometimes more optimistically, sometimes more pessimistically – underpinning all his writings taken together as a whole):

Stylistically . . . mental clarity, clear-sightedness, and astuteness [*Geistesklarheit, Hellblick und Scharfsinn*] are terms which can in the majority of cases be used interchangeably; if one distinguishes them, however . . . then nothing precludes the same character possessing all three, even if usually in differing degrees. By contrast profundity [*der Tiefsinn*] only exceptionally joins them, and in any case, as we must emphasize, it can never replace them in linguistic usage. If the conceptually unquestionable difference among these three closely related aptitudes is sufficiently minor that for purposes of communication it can be ignored, then profundity is separated from them as it were by a gulf, such that in a case of unusual significance it can be accompanied by barely average clear-sightedness and astuteness, and mental clarity, clear-sightedness, and astuteness can simply occur without profundity. Each of these aptitudes is an intellectual talent, but astuteness is one predominantly conditioned by the soul, profundity is one predominantly conditioned by the spirit; and if the former serves the most unconscious drive by far to bring life under the dominion of the spirit, then profundity constitutes the perhaps most effective tool of the opposing drive. Thus light is shed on a remarkable problem.

Since under the sway of profundity the spirit, using the arms of the spirit, disputes with the spirit [*der Geist mit dem Geiste streitet*],<sup>11</sup> profound personalities are threatened by a lack of spirit-related clarity and from time to time do not get beyond brooding, that is, an as it were aimless excavation,

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adding: ‘More rarely has it been observed that behind the quiet, intimate precision of his descriptions of nature there is at work an inclination towards the excessive, the elementary and the catastrophic, and the pathological’ (Mann, 1968: 157–8).

<sup>11</sup> The logic of Klages’s argumentation, pointing to an inner dialectic within the spirit, recalls Nietzsche’s declaration in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that ‘life must overcome itself again and again’ (‘Of the Tarantulas’ and ‘Of Self-Overcoming’, in Nietzsche, 1969: 125 and 138), and Jung’s statement in *Transformations and Symbols of the Libido* (1911–12) that ‘libido opposes libido’ (1991: §§249, 398, 457).

in order to remain stuck for a lifetime between intuition and insight, a typical case of many so-called mystics. If, however, profundity is combined with considerable astuteness, then, provided astuteness takes the lead, profundity will be content with a belief in religious dogmas or find satisfaction in moralizing and, furthermore, will leave dissecting understanding unchallenged (a typical case: the deism of great physicians and the theism of most intellectuals);<sup>12</sup> and only when profundity takes charge can discoveries follow which lead toward the recovery of the *spirit's dependency on life*. (Klages, 1989: 592–3)

The thought of Ludwig Klages taps into the vitalist tradition that goes back to Nietzsche and, beyond him, to Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869), to Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), and arguably as far back as to Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829). It engages with innumerable thinkers in the classical tradition, including Cicero, Plutarch and Seneca, to say nothing of the Presocratics, Aristotles and Neoplatonists. And it draws (in ways that still urgently require further research) on some of the most important contemporary thinkers of its day, including Melchior Pálagyi (1859–1924), Hermann Lotze (1817–81), and Theodor Lipps (1851–1914) – some of whom have become almost as forgotten as Klages himself! Yet his thought is not simply an exercise in exploring some of the less well-known by-ways of the European philosophical tradition. It does something far more important than that; for it reminds us of the truth of Goethe's saying, 'the point of life is life itself'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Whereas the deist believes in a God who created the world but does not believe He governs it, a theist believes in a God who created and still governs the world.

<sup>13</sup> Or, in German, *Der Zweck des Lebens ist das Leben selbst* (Goethe, letter to Johann Heinrich Meyer of 8 February 1796; in Goethe, 1965: 215).

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