Carnap on ontology

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1   Introduction

Carnap (1956) ("ESO") famously argues that the choice of what languages to use should be up to "those who work in any special field of investigation" (mathematicians, natural scientists, semanticists) and that the use of language that appears to commit those practitioners to abstract entities like numbers, sets, properties and propositions "does not imply embracing a Platonic ontology" (206). Recent discussions about ontology, including discussions of the ontology of abstract objects, and discussions of what we're doing when we're doing ontology (metametaphysics) have tended to begin with this article.

In this paper I review what Carnap says and several recent accounts of what he was up to: Stroud's, Friedman's, and Quine's. I will suggest an assessment: Quine was right that there is an issue about the analytic/synthetic distinction that is fatal to Carnap's proposal (but Quine was wrong about which one it was). I think this means that Carnap's hope, to locate the problems of metaphysics in problems about language, is not satisfied. This means that ontology cannot be "easy" or "lightweight" since the questions don't have straightforward answers lying in the meanings of our words.

2   What it appears to say

In the **Appendix** below I excerpt the long beginning section of ESO that Quine quotes.

Metaphysics is a kind of use-mention error. (This is vivid in *Der Logische Syntax der Sprache* §86 (Friedman, 1987, 540); (Thomasson, 2015) notes approvingly that (Price, 2009) describes it this way.) There are internal questions and external questions. An internal question can be settled by appeal to the meanings of the words in which it is expressed, and empirical investigation (depending on what the question is). Arithmetic answers, for example, the question whether there are any primes between 7 and 17, and hence the question whether there are any numbers; observation now enables us to answer the question whether there is any water on the far side of the moon, and hence the question of the reality of the external world. Since the language in which internal questions are expressed fixes how they are to be answered, different languages permit apparently different questions and ways to answer them. Assuming that no language choice cuts off

access to what there is, languages are chosen purely for practical reasons: is it, for example, more pleasant to do mathematics, or physics, or grocery shopping, using a language for numbers and physical objects, or instead using a nominalist, number-free language, perhaps a phenomenalist, physical-thing-free language?

Metaphysics, then, according to Carnap, raises a (confused) external question about numbers. The answer to the internal question about numbers is clearly "yes". The philosopher wants to ask: "but—*really*—do numbers exist?" The philosopher's question evidently leaves the "framework for numbers" behind, since it doesn't get the clear "internal" answer. So, Carnap suggests, it's not an internal question. It is an external question. Clearly the external question, whatever it is, cannot be answered in the usual way. Carnap thinks that therefore it cannot be answered. Here is his version of the back and forth (Carnap, 1956, 219):

> Suppose that one philosopher says: "I believe that there are numbers as real entities. This gives me the right to use the linguistic forms of the numerical framework and to make semantical statements about numbers as designata of numerals." His nominalistic opponent replies: "You are wrong; there are no numbers. The numerals may still be used as meaningful expressions. But they are not names, there are no entities designated by them. Therefore the word "number" and numerical variables must not be used (unless a way were found to introduce them as merely abbreviating devices, a way of translating them into the nominalistic thing language)." I cannot think of any possible evidence that would be regarded as relevant by both philosophers, and therefore, if actually found, would decide the controversy or at least make one of the opposite theses more probable than the other. (To construe the numbers as classes or properties of the second level, according to the Frege-Russell method, does, of course, not solve the controversy, because the first philosopher would affirm and the second deny the existence of the system of classes or properties of the second level.) Therefore I feel compelled to regard the external question as a pseudo-question, until both parties to the controversy offer a common interpretation of the question as a cognitive question; this would involve an indication of possible evidence regarded as relevant by both sides.

Carnap offers a more and a less tolerant response to the philosopher's question. Earlier in ESO he suggested (207) that those who do metaphysics "have perhaps in mind" a practical question about the language (rather than a question framed using the language). This is the "use mention error" idea. The philosopher thinks she has a question to ask about the reality of the numbers. She is evidently not asking what she thinks she is asking (since that gets a perfectly clear answer). So "perhaps" she is asking a different question: about the words with which she is expressing the question. Carnap's proposal is that there is a reasonable question for her to be asking: a practical or pragmatic question about whether to use the language of things (numbers, propositions, properties ...).

The less tolerant response comes out in the dialog about philosophy of mathematics. Assume that we are confident that there really is no "possible evidence that would be regarded as relevant by both philosophers". Assume also that the practical question is

uninteresting (for example: *of course* it is more practical to use the number vocabulary). Then it doesn't really matter what they might be interpreted as saying: the question they are asking is a pseudo-question (*not* a practical question, and also not a question answerable in any other way) and should be revealed and dismissed as such.

3   Stroud's Carnap

(Stroud, 1984, Chap. 5) discusses Carnap's "internal and external" as a strategy for dealing with philosophical skepticism. Carnap's terminology appears to follow the Kantian tradition for dealing with skepticism of holding that "the significance of our terms is restricted to their empirical employment". We can certainly feel the threat of First Meditation skepticism, and our signal inability to provide a satisfying answer to it, while continuing to act as though there is no such problem. (Hume inside and outside his study.) The thought is that there is a difference of some sort between how we talk when we're not doing philosophy, and how we talk when we talk about skepticism. So perhaps there is something systematic going on with our use of language that leads to our metaphysical problems.

Stroud's Carnap in this chapter is a verificationist who aims to overcome skepticism. Stroud expresses the thesis of the verificationist criterion of meaningfulness (VCM) this way: "any apparently well-formed indicative sentence that would not be rendered at least more likely to be true than another is, literally, meaningless—it says nothing that could be true or false" (171). The skeptical arguments conclude that we have no reason to think that any apparently well-formed indicative sentence is any more likely to be true than any other. If the skeptical arguments were correct, then most well-formed indicative sentences about our knowledge of the world would be, according to the VCM, meaningless. Yet (using Carnap's terminology again) the linguistic framework for our claims about the world seems to be perfectly in order: we can raise and settle many questions about things in the world. So there must be something wrong with the skeptical arguments. Stroud notes that Carnap then *adds* his hypothesis about what the skeptical philosopher was really doing: asking about the language in which the question was framed. The idea about languages or systems or frameworks (the internal/external questions distinction) "goes well beyond a simple appeal to the" VCM (186). Stroud's central arguments against Carnap are directed against this view.

Carnap starts his discussion of the "the world of things" imagining that we start with a language that has no words for "the spatio-temporally ordered system of observable things". We add the framework for that language (the "thing language"): nouns, variables for those reference positions, quantifiers to range over them, and the word "thing". We associate application conditions with the thing language to set when sentences using it are true and when false. Imagine now that a philosopher concerned about skepticism raises a question about this new linguistic framework, namely, is the domain of the new language real—are there really things? Carnap thinks this is a pseudo-question. Using the "thing language" and our experience, it's obvious and trivial that there is a piece of paper on my desk. The question "is the thing world real" could be construed, in its own terms, as the question "does the thing world fit in the whole system at a particular space-

time position ..." and the answer to that question is clearly 'no'. But that is not what the philosopher wanted to know. So the question the skeptical philosopher must be asking is a question about *whether to use* the thing-language. That question, Carnap emphasizes, is a practical question; a pragmatic question; a question about what to do rather than a question about what is true or what there is (a "theoretical" question). There *is no* further question about the reality of the piece of paper on my desk.

It is essential to Carnap's claim about internal and external questions that the move to a new language, as he is conceiving it, is not made for any "theoretical" reason. A theoretical reason would be a truth, such that the old language cannot express that truth and the new language can. The idea is not that we learn something about the world, and then introduce new words for that stuff. The idea is rather that we could have had, for example, a phenomenalistic language, talking only about how it looks to me at a moment. We could add the "thing language" which defines the new "thing" words in terms of the old phenomenalistic language. The new language is able to say no more, and no less, than the phenomenalistic language. Whatever truths there are can be expressed in either language. (There is no special obstacle to describing two languages such that one is genuinely expressively impoverished relative to the other (English, and English modified to be unable to talk about things, for example). The more impoverished language would be a theoretical alternative, in the sense I'm defining, since there would be facts that the more impoverished language could not state that could be stated in English, and hence a theoretical reason to prefer English.) The thing language may be able to say the same things more economically than the phenomenalistic language. Indeed it probably does: it's a lot easier to talk about the beer in the fridge than the experiences I might have if I had certain other experiences. That it is easier is not a reason to think it is truer. (It is a theoretical—empirical—truth about the phenomenalistic language that it is more difficult to use than the thing language. This is not a theoretical reason to use the thing language, since it is not a truth about what the phenomenalistic language is able to express.) In what follows I will call alternative languages that satisfy this condition "non-theoretical alternatives". (For more explication and discussion of this idea, see (Stroud, 1984, 189-191).)

It follows—and this is critically important—that there is no language-independent fact of the matter whether there are things: no "theoretical" difference between what can be said in the new thing language and whatever was said without the thing language. Nothing is left out. If anything were, then there would be a theoretical question about whether the thing language is better suited to represent the world (for example: are there really things?). This is mandatory for (Stroud's version of) Carnap, since all the skeptic needs to get the problem going is the independence of the world from what we say and think about it (194).

Carnap agrees with Quine's criterion of existence: the values of the variables in the best theory we have are the things that exist. If we had not adopted the thing language—if for example we did not adopt language in which we could say "there are mountains in Africa"—then there would be no variables that ranged over things. *There would be no things.* There would be no mountains in Africa.

Stroud raises a series of problems for this view. Listing (some of) them more or less in order:

1. (191) Carnap is offering an epistemological theory about us, our language, experience, and the world. Apparently, then, all non-theoretical alternative languages must contain terminology for these things. So that terminology is common to all non-theoretical alternative languages. What is its status? It cannot be 'external' since then by Carnap's lights it would be meaningless. If it is 'internal' to all non-theoretical alternative languages, then those alternatives aren't really alternatives at all, since they all say the same things, with no philosophically important difference between them.

2. (191-2) What language is Carnap using in order to express this idea, since apparently it needs to be able to claim something about the relation between two alternative languages? Are his claims 'internal' or 'external'?

3. (193) The claim that there would be no mountains in Africa is an "idealism of truly heroic proportions". This consequence is essential to Carnap's response to skepticism (194): if there *did* remain a truth about mountains even if we spoke a language with no resources to talk about mountains, then the skeptical question would, after all, be meaningful, and the answer would be: indeed, we do not know anything about the world around us. Carnap's view on skepticism turns out to be as costly, and as obscure, as Kant's transcendental idealism or Berkeley's idealism.

4. (196-197) There is the traditional question about the VCM: on the face of it, it is neither verifiable nor analytic.

5. (200-203) The verificationist claims that the application conditions for the thing language specify how to confirm whether a given sentence about the world is true or false. This claim entails that these application conditions specify empirical conditions that *suffice* for the truth of the given sentence. If we could remain in the phenomenalistic Eden, this is a simple matter, since statements about the external world *just mean* some statable claim about experience. But for the thing language it is not a simple matter. In fact, Stroud points out, it is precisely the same problem that the skeptical arguments exploit: there is no course of experience that suffices for the truth of any statement about the external world.

And, finally, the VCM is no more credible than the skeptical arguments, and so it has no advantage over them: they provide the obvious counterexample.

I will come back to consider this series of problems below. For the moment, I want to turn to a quite different picture of Carnap's project, in the *Aufbau* and later work.

4   Friedman's Carnap

Carnap's imaginary history of the introduction of the "thing language" is not really intended as any sort of history. It is rather an echo of his earlier work in the *Aufbau* and the *Logische Syntax* to vindicate the objectivity of what we say about the world (Friedman, 1987). What Carnap means by "objective" is "intersubjective", that is, capable of verificable intersubjective agreement (*Aufbau* §66). To the extent that we can distinguish

between what we mean by 'objective' and Carnap's intersubjectivity, we will to that extent find Carnap's view to be a species of anti-realism. Carnap thinks that if a claim is purely formal and structural, it is objective. The sciences, he thinks, aim for purely formal and structural descriptions of the world. In the *Aufbau* he tries to articulate the formal and structural character of experience. If this succeeds, then we can objectively communicate what we experience. Moreover, the way would be clear to do the same sort of thing for what we say about the world of things. If this structural analysis succeeds, we also vindicate empiricism: *one* way of presenting the objective reality of the things we say is to show how it all traces back to structural relations over what we experience. The point of all this is not to reduce all thing talk to phenomenal experience talk (the project of reductive phenomenalism). Carnap later noted that it didn't matter to him whether the reduction bottoms out at experience or physical objects. The critical thing is that the reduction displays the structure, which is the only purely objective feature of what we say about things.

Carnap's attitude toward empiricism, and experience, was complex. He thought that natural science is the model for epistemology and for philosophy, and hoped to set philosophy on a scientific footing using the new tools of mathematical logic. Hence it is natural for him to have a lot of sympathy with the many radical empiricists of the early 20th century. To the extent that phenomenalism was a version of radical empiricism, he had sympathy with that as well.

The reduction he articulated in the *Aufbau* bottoms out on a relation between momentary experiences, the relation of recollected similarity. This relation doesn't get its own structural analysis. Given the resources of set theory, normally there are indefinitely many models for a theory built up around an uninterpreted relation. How could we isolate the intended model for the construction of experience on the basis of recollected similarity? Carnap's suggestion in the *Aufbau* is that there are "experienceable 'natural' relations" and that recollected similarity is one of them. The problem (Friedman, 1987, 532) then is that this looks awfully like the basic concept for the phenomenalist, something like "ostensible quality"; and it looks like a subjective basis, since we have no guarantee that *that* looks the same to me as it does to you. To keep the whole edifice built on this foundation objective, Carnap proposes that "experienceable 'natural' relations" are "founded" and that foundedness is a basic concept of logic. But that obliterates the difference between logical truth and empirical truth: if the whole edifice of the formal structure of my experience is built up on a basic logical concept, then the whole edifice is a logical truth.

Carnap did flirt in 1928 with verificationism as a strategy for dealing with this problem. But verificationism didn't work out very well. Carnap acknowledged this. Ultimately his response (in the *Logische Syntax*) is to propose that the business of philosophy is the syntactic description of our theories. We distinguish between object languages in which the theories are stated, and a metalanguage capable of describing the object languages. Then some sentences are well-formed, some are only apparently well-formed, and some are clear syntactic non-starters.

About metaphysics   Throughout his life (and sensibly so, to many contemporary minds) Carnap was skeptical of many of the big traditional metaphysical problems: the reality of the external world, the reality of abstract objects. Verificationists did aim to show that the philosophers' claims were unverifiable hence meaningless. That didn't work. Carnap's phenomenalist basis in the *Aufbau* wasn't intended to work that way; it was only intended as a demonstration that experience talk, and object talk, has a structural description that is objective. Neither the phenomenal nor the physical language had metaphysical priority as far as Carnap was concerned. But Carnap did think that it should turn out that the metaphysician's claims (properties are real, properties are not real, the thing world is real, the thing world is not real) wouldn't have a place in the structural hierarchy that was the goal of the *Aufbau*. That would mean that they had no communicable objective character. Whatever else we might say about them, this should show that they don't have the kind of objective, serious, fact-stating character that Carnapian science has. And perhaps that is reason to put the debates behind us.

Again, the project of the *Aufbau* didn't work, and Carnap acknowledged that. He moved on to the project of logical syntax, and the argument we see in ESO that metaphysical dispute is at root a use-mention error.

Alspector-Kelly's Carnap   (Alspector-Kelly, 2001) notes, correctly as far as I can see, that one of Carnap's stalking horses in ESO was (Goodman and Quine, 1947) and their bracing declaration at the start of that article that "We do not believe in abstract entities ... We renounce them altogether". This appears to be a mere prejudice: in fact, a "metaphysical intuition" that nominalism is right and Platonism is wrong. Carnap's attitude in ESO (and throughout his career) was that neither position—nominalism nor Platonism—succeeds in saying anything objective about the world.

It is unclear whether this clarification of Carnap's goals really helps, though. Why should we not accuse Carnap of the very thing Alspector-Kelly wants to absolve him of? It's not as though he has a successful argument to show that metaphysical arguments all fall down in some way. It's rather that he has a (prior) conviction that the problems are bogus. They feel bogus. Somehow we ought to be able to use this machinery of science, analysis, logic, etc., to show that they are bogus. In other words, he looks like he's doing exactly what philosophers have always done, and what Quine and Goodman were doing. We have a hunch that p, and we look around for arguments that p, and we try to work out and articulate the best case for p that we can. It would be great if we could settle one of these issues for once and for all, and reveal the great mistake that our predecessors were making. But that's a judgment probably best left to one's successors. And in this case I don't think it's clear that Carnap succeeded.

5   Stroud's Carnap again

Stroud's concern with Carnap is about skepticism. Stroud's Carnap is a verificationist who aims to explain meaning: not simply to say something informative or systematic about meaning, but to explain the very possibility of meaning anything in language or thought. Kant's transcendental project has a similar foundational character. Once we

have clear what makes thought possible, we can offer a comprehensive critique. We can delimit the scope and limits of thought. We can show that the skeptic does something illegitimate when she argues to the conclusion that we cannot know anything about the world around us.

Carnap evidently in 1950 was not a verificationist. It's unclear to me whether he took skepticism seriously. He uses the question of the "reality" of the thing world as the prime example of the strategy he develops in ESO. That is not the traditional skeptical question; it is rather a certain kind of answer to it. Even Berkeley ((Soames, 2009) takes Berkeley to be Carnap's stalking horse in ESO, as does Stroud) doesn't doubt that there is a world of real things outside my ideas: God, my mind, and other minds. Carnap's real target in ESO is the nominalism/realism dispute about abstract objects. His semantic theory quantifies over meanings and propositions. Quine and other "tough minded nominalists" gave him a hard time about that. His goal was to use his foundational, critical tools to show that this dispute is misguided. We should be tolerant when those in semantics or mathematics or ontology use the language that best suits their purposes. We should acknowledge that there is no further question of ontology beyond what vocabulary to use.

In this section I want to note a couple of points on which I think Stroud is completely correct about Carnap's project. There are also a couple of points on which I think he is not correct. Then I want to talk at some length about Stroud's complaint that Carnap's view is a "heroic idealism". I think Carnap does have a serious problem here, but it's not quite what Stroud describes. The upshot is that Carnap did not succeed in showing that there is no further question of ontology beyond what vocabulary to use.

(5) above was Stroud's observation that the verificationist has exactly the skeptic's problem to overcome: namely, how to infer from observations to claims that go beyond the observations (claims about external objects, about theoretical entities, and claims about other times and other places (the problem of induction)). Carnap does write in ESO as if these were not issues. He says, about internal questions about the thing world, "These questions are to be answered by empirical investigations. Results of observations are evaluated according to certain rules as confirming or disconfirming evidence for possible answers." Carnap could be thinking that, for example, my word "paper" somehow carries an (idealistic) non-skeptical epistemology with it, so that a full explication of its meaning exhaustively spells out necessary and sufficient conditions for confirming that paper is present. This would be a version of verificationism, for example the one Quine attacks in (Quine, 1951b). But Carnap did gave up on verificationism in 1928, and presumably in 1950 the difficulties in the way of any such project were completely clear to him. So he would at this point be thinking that the epistemology of thing talk is more holistic and Duhemian. Confirming "there is a piece of paper" then depends partly on what the meaning of "paper" is, and partly on lots of other things. The judgments are defeasible, and hostage to reasons for thinking that my normal means of learning about the world are defective or compromised. The thing world is fully objective, in the sense that the best supported judgment may still be false.

So (and this is one of Stroud's points against Carnap) any plausible epistemology connected with 'internal' uses of the thing language is going to include the resources to get the skeptical arguments going. The "internal and external" strategy is not going to work for skepticism. The problem is raised using ordinary words with their ordinary meanings.

The problem does not depend on imposing some unusual or peculiar epistemic standard on our empirical claims.

Problems (1) and (2) concerned the language in which Carnap expresses his theory. First, suppose that versions of the words "us" and "experience" must appear in any non-theoretical alternative language to English.[1] That clearly doesn't mean that uses of those words is external to English. Their being internal to the alternatives means only that their meanings are such that there are clear conditions for confirming and disconfirming sentences that use them. It also doesn't mean that there is no philosophically interesting variation elsewhere in the languages. For example there might be two languages, one realist about properties, the other capable only of expressing a successful nominalist reduction of property language to non-property language. Those would be philosophically interesting alternatives, even if there was no difference between what they say about epistemology.

Carnap's examples of "frameworks" and "accepting language" do not encourage the thought that he is talking about something like "conceptual schemes". He seems quite literally to be talking about introducing a vocabulary and some semantic machinery linking it (by way of confirmation and disconfirmation relations) into the rest of the language. What he needs, then, in order to introduce the internal/external distinction is to be able to talk about words, their meanings, and epistemology. The claim in ESO was that when the "ordinary" methods of answering questions leave a philosopher's question unanswered, then either the question is meaningless or else is a different question, one about whether we should use the language with which the question is expressed. Without the VCM there is no straight path to the claim of meaninglessness. But there is certainly something very plausible about the claim. If one were designing a new vocabulary, and found that there was a glaring gap in the confirmation/disconfirmation conditions ("we just have no idea what to say about confirming whether there are mountains *in Africa*") that would be reason to think the vocabulary was defective.

The traditional worry for the VCM (Stroud's problem (4)) was that it was neither verifiable nor analytic. Since ESO genuinely doesn't seem to be committed to the VCM, it's unclear why Carnap should be burdened with this particular concern. He might say that some version of what he is saying *is* analytic (for example: if a question cannot be answered by consulting the application conditions associated with the words it uses, then it cannot be answered, full stop). He might say that his overall philosophical account of what is going on in metaphysics is relatively *a priori*. It is an explanation of what we are doing. Support for the explanation comes from how well, comparatively, it accounts for the practices of metaphysicians.

So I don't think that there is a good objection based on challenging Carnap to explain what language he is speaking when he articulates his internal/external distinction and the idea of non-theoretical alternative languages.

What about Stroud's claim ((3) above) that Carnap's theory is "an idealism of truly

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[1]It's not evident why we should accept this. (Cappelen and Dever, 2013) disagree with (Perry, 1979) that indexicals are essential; so one could reasonably argue that we could do without self-referential indexicals. About experience: Quine may have been arguing in (Quine, 1960) that the right starting point for epistemology is surface irritation rather than experience.

heroic proportions"? This one is tricky. I'm going to argue that Stroud's argument is not strong. I think Stroud misses something important about non-theoretical alternatives: that they are symmetrical as far as commitment goes. But this points us to a similar, and traditional worry about Carnap's view, roughly that he has no coherent underlying ontology (by contrast, idealism at least has a coherent underlying ontology). I'll start by quoting Stroud's argument at some length:

> I am asking whether it is Carnap's view that that statement we can now make and understand about mountains in Africa would no longer be true if we abandoned the thing language, or would not have been true if we had never adopted it.

> If that does follow from Carnap's view it is difficult to see how his view could possible be right. To say that it would not have been true that there are mountains in Africa if we had not adopted the language of things, or that it would not be true if we were to abandon that language, seems to amount to the absurd idea that whether there are mountains in Africa or not depends on how we choose to speak or think. That would be idealism of truly heroic proportions (193)

Suppose there is a non-theoretical alternative to the thing language; call it Thingless. In Thingless, it is not possible to say "there are mountains in Africa". There are no variables the values of which are mountains.

Speaking the language we do (let's assume English, but the argument applies for any natural language), should we say that speakers of Thingless are missing something, or that they deny something, or fail to say something, that we think is true about the world, viz., that there are mountains? The answer, I think, pretty clearly, is 'no'.

If I didn't have the words, then there would be no truth to express *in my language*. But, given that the words have the relation they are stipulated to have to the rest of the language, it's trivial for me to see that if I did have the words, many of the sentences I could construct using those words would be true. In that sense, it would be true that there are mountains even if I lacked the word 'mountain'.

Suppose a Thingless speaker considers our linguistic behavior. She sees we have this sentence "there are mountains in Africa" and that we think that it is true. She figures out what it means. Should she say that it is false? Clearly, no. She sees, according to Carnap, that she could introduce a framework for things, and if she did, she would have a system of words that have more or less clear application conditions, and that, given those application conditions, the sentence would be true.

Stroud's verificationist is forced into acknowledging that what we now say about mountains in Africa would no longer be true if we abandoned the thing language, because if he does not, he is compelled to agree that there is a truth of the matter that is independent of language choice. If he does agree to that, then he loses the advantage against the traditional epistemologist. He is once again saying that there is a reality independent of us and our language choices; and once again letting the skeptical reasoning go through.

But if Carnap in ESO is not a verificationist (and perhaps isn't really concerned with

skepticism at all except as a model for his strategy for abstract objects) then he is not motivated in this way. He is free to appeal to what a speaker of one language can know is true about sentences in another language, and to hold that if we had not had language for mountains, we could have known that such a language was a non-theoretical alternative to our own, and hence that truths in that language are genuinely true.

Stroud's Carnap seems to be committed to the idea that how things are depends on how we talk: what Thingless speakers can say differs from what we can say, and so if they can't say there are mountains, then how things are (according to them) differs from how we think things are. But Thingless is by stipulation a non-theoretical alternative to English. It "says the same" as English. (I'll return to the question of what "says the same" means in a moment.) "says the same" is symmetrical: if English says the same as Thingless, Thingless says the same as English. This "symmetry" of non-theoretical alternatives underlies my argument above that the Thingless speaker would be able to figure out what my words "there are mountains in Africa" meant and to figure out that what I say is true. If we can say, in English, and confirm that there are mountains in Africa, then Thingless says the same. Clearly it says it in different terms, since it has no words for things. But it has to say something, otherwise it would be unable to express some theoretical truths, and it would not after all be a non-theoretical alternative.

The same goes for applying the idea to abstract objects. In effect Carnap claims that problematic claims in ontology are easy: they are unproblematic in the way the ordinary claims are unproblematic. But that requires thinking of the non-theoretical alternatives as non-symmetrical: the ontological commitments of our ontologically loaded sentences can be read off their equivalents in the non-loaded language. But the alternatives are theoretically equivalent. So the "unproblematic" claims in ordinary English have the same commitments as the "problematic" claims that are supposed to follow from them by way of the language-extension rules, the ones that talk about propositions, properties and numbers.

So it turns out, I think, that the idea of non-theoretical alternative languages is irrelevant to questions in ontology. Carnap is surely correct that we should use whatever linguistic forms best serve our purposes in inquiry and explanation. He seems to have thought in ESO that this attitude gets past the endless and fruitless disputes in ontology. He is right that some language choices are ontologically neutral, those between non-theoretical alternatives. But it's real neutrality: it says nothing about the underlying ontology. The only thing we know about the underlying ontology, given a pair of non-theoretical alternative languages, is that they say the same: they are talking about the same underlying ontology. About what the underlying ontology is like, though, they are silent.

What could Carnap say about this question about the underlying ontology? What could he say about what "say the same" means?

I speak English, I have words for things, and my best theory of the world has variables for things. Someone else might speak Thingless, lack words for things, and her best theory of the world has no variables for things. By the Quine/Carnap criterion of existence, I hold that there are things, and she does not. It is true that, since English and Thingless by hypothesis are non-theoretical alternatives, either of us can come to see that what

the other says is true. (In the sense of (Hirsch, 2009) this is a verbal difference: each conversant can determine that what the other says is true in her language.) So which is it: is my ontology what I, parochially, say there is, using my own language and best theory, or is it what I, non-parochially, see one could say there is, using my best theory and non-theoretical alternative ways of expressing it?

 I can see roughly three ways to go here.

1. Insist or somehow try to argue that I am right and she is wrong.

2. Say that both of us are right. Each of us can see quite clearly what the difference is between our languages, and hence that it is pointless to argue that one is right and the other is not.

3. Say that the Quine/Carnap criterion of existence is incorrect. Since the Carnapian idea of a framework leaves open non-theoretical alternatives, then strictly speaking there are non-theoretical alternative ontologies.

Option (1) is the least appealing alternative, since I see quite clearly what she is saying, why she is saying it, and why it is true in her language. Given that the alternatives are non-theoretical, it is merely parochial of me to hold that my way of talking is better than hers.

 Option (3) invites the question "what is the right criterion of existence then?" For empiricists like Carnap and Quine, the answer is: observational evidence. (Soames, 2009, 442) notes that "the stunningly counterintuitive bedrock" of Carnap and Quine's agreement is that nothing matters except empirical adequacy. For someone who is not a verificationist about meaning, and is at least agnostic about empiricism, the question is more difficult. (Hirsch, 2009) suggests that expressing the same set of possible worlds is the relevant sort of equivalence. (Hawthorne, 2009) argues that philosophers have disagreed about whether that is the bedrock equivalence: some ontologists wish to use hyperintensional language, such that substitution of intensional equivalents can shift the truth value of sample sentences. The question of the nature of the underlying sameness is precisely what is at issue in the metaphysical conversations. Second, as I argued above, there is next to no prospect of really making clear sense of the idea of non-theoretical alternative languages for any of the cases in which we are seriously interested. Finally, this line of thought doesn't seem to be revealing an alternative to the Quine/Carnap criterion. Suppose we found some sort of "neutralism" on which we can see how, for example, we could speak the language of things, and we could speak the language of phenomena, and we could see how the neutralist basis made our respective theories true. Obviously in such a situation we would simply add neutralism to our kit of theories, and claim that the neutral basis is what there really is. That would be simply to wield the Quine methodology once again.

 Option (2) is the most generous. It is a version of maximalism (Eklund, 2009): generalize the Quine criterion to include the domain of the variables of all non-theoretical alternative languages. It is related to the claim in (Davidson, 1973) that there are no conceptual schemes. The Davidsonian "argument" would go: the concept of truth is such that there can't be someone who speaks a language the ontology of which is inaccessible

to another. Assume that "argument" with all its idealizations goes through. Then alternative languages do not bring with them alternative ontologies. Whatever we can make sense of as a way of talking about the whole world will have its more or less distinctive ways of describing the world. Any one of them is just as good as any other.

Option (3) doesn't really answer the question of what "the same" is supposed to mean. It invites the thought that Carnap's view is the "cookie cutter" view with its attendant difficulty that it's impossible to say anything about the "dough". Maximalism appears to dodge this worry. We've discovered that truth is invariant under transformation through non-theoretical alternatives. If Davidson was right, this should be no more philosophically troubling than the thought that temperature is invariant under transformation through equivalent scales (Centigrade, Kelvin, Farenheit). But the case of ontology is philosophically troubling, because the temperature case is not analogous. It's a simple matter to explain why temperature is invariant under choice of scale: the underlying phenomenon is mean molecular kinetic energy. It's not a simple matter to explain why truth is invariant under choice of alternative language. An explanation requires describing the explanans and showing how it explains the phenomenon. But we cannot do that, since any description requires a choice of language. So I think that maximalism doesn't succeed in dodging the bullet.

There is a signature Carnapian move available at this point: just rule the preceding discussion out on the ground that it is illegitimately "external". The whole point of ESO was to argue for tolerance about useful linguistic forms and to get over worrying about what, if anything, there is in the world for them to refer to.

At this point, however, this move seems to be entirely *ad hoc*. The view as originally described runs into difficulties; the way out of the difficulties is to say that there's a meaningless question being asked. But it's not the same meaningless question with which the realism/nominalism dispute began (are there really properties or only ways of talking). It's a new question: what, if anything, is invariant under change of non-theoretical alternative language? If verificationism had survived, we could say that there's no empirical investigation that could settle the question (since all empirical investigation operates within the various alternative languages). It's hard to see what else Carnap could draw on.

One final question for this section: *are* there any examples of non-theoretical alternative languages? That's a big question, but the prospects for a positive answer are not good.

The most thoroughly investigated case is mathematics. (Goodman and Quine, 1947) attempted a nominalist reduction of mathematics. Quine decided that the attempt failed. (Field, 1980) showed that you can pretty much get what Goodman and Quine hoped for: at least for Newtonian mechanics, there is a way to do physics without numbers. The result is complex. It depends on some assumptions that may not be fully nominalistic. It does not obviously extend to all physics or natural science. It's also essentially unusable: no-one could do physics without numbers.

The literature on straightforward translation of property talk is not encouraging (Jackson, 1977). There have been a number of recent attempts—prominently (Thomasson, 2015)— to defend the idea that an inference like

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Melvin is a cat

Therefore Melvin has the property of being a cat

is trivial because it is based in a straightforward way on the meanings of our terms. The idea appears to be open to the following objection: this inference is not analytic and it is not trivial. I will come back to this in the next section on Quine. (Hofweber, 2005) argues that the trivial argument is underwritten by a focus shift. His view is burdened by a complex semantics for the quantifiers. (Schiffer, 1996) argues that the inference is trivial and so properties are language created language dependent entities. This view would support the idea that there are alternative languages for properties, but at the cost of precisely the sort of "heroic idealism" that Stroud finds in Carnap.

The critical thing that talk of properties offers is quantification. If I can quantify over properties, I can say "there is something these two objects have in common". The most obvious way to express this without quantification is infinite disjunction: "these two objects are F, or they are G, ...". Clearly these are impossible to use. It's not clear what sort of translation we could display that would show us that we have two non-theoretical alternative languages.

6 Quine's Carnap

But we could still imagine an optimistic Carnap at this point in the conversation. If there were any non-theoretical alternative languages, then we could think of the different ontologies as so many variations in terminology, no more worrying than differences in scales for temperature. There is no empirically significant difference among them. The only question then is which kind of terminology is best, as a practical matter, for doing the work we want to get done. And even that question isn't really philosophically interesting. It's reminiscent of arguments on programming blogs about whether Python or Ruby or R or C++ or plain old C is the best language.[2] These are questions about fandom or faith or community membership, not questions of any substance.

This optimistic Carnap says that we can do all the ontology we need to do by attending to the language we seriously use. We do talk about numbers, properties, propositions and meanings, and we do so in serious inquiry, so we have good reason to think their referents exist. If there are in fact no philosophically interesting non-theoretical alternatives to ordinary English (including mathematics, semantics and property theory) then so much the better for ontology: ordinary English used seriously talks about all those things. Any philosopher's argument that there's something amiss here must attempt to say or ask something that is not supported by the ordinary English meanings of the words. The controversies are meaningless.

In this section I'm going to argue that Carnap has not succeeded in showing decisively that these controversies are meaningless. I'll develop this point against Quine's account of Carnap on ontology.

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[2]For programming languages, there are measures on "saying the same"; for example, all of these languages are Turing complete.

(Quine, 1951a) offers two criticisms of Carnap. Both are odd, on the face of it, since the views Quine criticises are not views that Carnap expresses. I think Quine was wrong in the details of his criticism of Carnap. But I think Quinean dubiety about meaning and the analytic/synthetic distinction does apply exactly to the claim that the controversies are meaningless.

6.1 Quine's two criticisms

Category/subclass   After the examples of the strategy described above, for the thing, number, property and proposition frameworks, Carnap offers a brief characterization of what he takes to be essential for introducing a framework (Carnap, 1956, 213-14):

> The two essential steps are rather the following. First, the introduction of a general term, a predicate of higher level, for the new kind of entities, permitting us to say for any particular entity that it belongs to this kind (e.g., "Red is a property," "Five is a number"). Second, the introduction of variables of the new type. The new entities are values of these variables; the constants (and the closed compound expressions, if any) are substitutable for the variables. With the help of the variables, general sentences concerning the new entities can be formulated.

Quine comments as follows on this passage (Quine, 1951a, 68-9):

> It begins to appear, then, that Carnap's dichotomy of questions of existence is a dichotomy between questions of the form "Are there so-and-sos?" where the so-and-sos purport to exhaust the range of a particular style of bound variables, and questions of the form "Are there so-and-sos?" where the so-and-sos do not purport to exhaust the range of a particular style of bound variables. Let me call the former questions category questions, and the latter ones subclass questions. I need this new terminology because Carnap's terms 'external' and 'internal' draw a somewhat different distinction which is derivative from the distinction between category questions and subclass questions. The external questions are the category questions conceived as propounded before the adoption of a given language; and they are, Carnap holds, properly to be construed as questions of the desirability of a given language form. The internal questions comprise the subclass questions and, in addition, the category questions when these are construed as treated within an adopted language as questions having trivially analytic or contradictory answers.

Quine then argues, plausibly, that the category/subclass distinction is relative to how a logical system is expressed: "what I now think to have shown is that it is of little concern even under the theory of types. It is a distinction which is not invariant under logically irrelevant changes of typography" (71).

Analytic/synthetic   Moreover, Quine suggests, it's not a distinction Carnap needs. What he *does* need is for certain claims to be analytic (71):

> I think it is a distinction which he can perfectly well discard compatibly with the philosophical purpose of the paper under discussion. No more than the distinction between analytic and synthetic is needed in support of Carnap's doctrine that the statements commonly thought of as ontological, viz. statements such as 'There are physical objects,' 'There are classes,' 'There are numbers,' are analytic or contradictory given the language. No more than the distinction between analytic and synthetic is needed in support of his doctrine that the statements commonly thought of as ontological are proper matters of contention only in the form of linguistic proposals. The contrast which he wants between those ontological statements and empirical existence statements such as 'There are black swans' is clinched by the distinction of analytic and synthetic. True, there is in these terms no contrast between analytic statements of an ontological kind and other analytic statements of existence such as 'There are prime numbers above a hundred'; but I don't see why he should care about this.

At that point Quine registers his dissent. He thinks there is no proper distinction between analytic and synthetic. So there is no proper distinction between ontological statements and empirical statements of existence. "Ontological questions then end up on a par with questions of natural science" (71).

6.2   Responses

Category/subclass   Carnap had earlier made a distinction like the one Quine sketches (Alspector-Kelly, 2001). In that system, the sentence '4 is a number' is properly rendered as 'the numeral '4' is a number-symbol', that is, as a metalinguistic characterization of its type. It is not a predication of an object. The truth of a metalinguistic characterization like this depends on what the logical system is like: if the rules setting the system up do in fact count '4' as one of the numerals, and the 'number-symbol' predicate is true of numerals, then this claim comes out analytic.

Carnap does not, however, say anything like this in ESO. Introducing the category word ("property", "proposition", "number", "thing") isn't flagged as generating a special kind of truth. Claims using the word are not flagged as any special sort of ontological claim. Carnap doesn't say that "categorical" predication isn't predication *of that kind of thing*. So it is mysterious why Quine thinks "it begins to appear" that this is the right way to think about Carnap's proposal. Quine *says* "I need this new terminology because Carnap's terms 'external' and 'internal' draw a somewhat different distinction which is derivative from the distinction between category questions and subclass questions." But that doesn't seem to be true.

Analytic/synthetic   Having argued that the category/subclass distinction is not a good distinction, Quine now suggests an interpretation of the internal/external distinction in

terms of the analytic/synthetic distinction: ontology statements are analytic, and disputes about them are (bootless) disputes about linguistic decisions.

I think there are decisive considerations against Quine's interpretation.

Quine thinks Carnap holds that 'There are physical objects' is analytic. Again, Carnap doesn't say that, so we would have to seek textual reason elsewhere for this claim. But on the face of it, we should hope not to find that reason, since 'There are physical objects' is not analytic. Only what Stroud called "heroic idealism" could secure that claim. Carnap would have to hold that there is a trivial answer to that old chestnut "why is there something rather than nothing", and hold, implausibly, that it is analytic that there is something. Carnap would have to hold that the meanings of our words rule out Berkeley's idealism. It would turn out to be a matter of meaning that if I have good reason to think there is a piece of white paper before me, there is a piece of white paper before me. But Carnap did give up on this kind of verificationism, and so there's no good reason to try to impale him on it here. So I think there is no good reason to think that Carnap thought that the mark of an ontology claim is its analyticity: "There are black swans" is just as much ontologically revelatory as "There are prime numbers above a hundred".

My suggestion, then, is that Carnap's criterion for existence is not that some statements are analytic. He should not, and apparently does not, hold that all ontological statements are analytic. He does not say anywhere in this article that the criterion for existence is analytic truth. He *does* say almost exactly what Quine says: if "those who work in any special field of investigation" use a vocabulary seriously, and apparently say true things using that vocabulary, and there is no clear path to reconstructing that vocabulary using something less committing, then we should accept the entities the variables connected with that vocabulary range over.

Internal/External again   Quine's diagnosis of what Carnap really wants is I think best expressed here: "No more than the distinction between analytic and synthetic is needed in support of his doctrine that the statements commonly thought of as ontological are proper matters of contention only in the form of linguistic proposals." I've just argued that Quine's explanation of how Carnap aims to do this is flawed: Carnap doesn't think that analyticity is specially connected with ontology. But what Quine says here seems exactly right: Carnap's view is that when the controversies go on for centuries, they really are about something else, namely linguistic proposals (for example, for how to talk about generality). What the philosophers are saying doesn't mean what they think it means.

So to make this stick, Carnap needs to have a reasonably firm grip on when a philosopher is using her words with their standard meanings, and when she is not. There needs to be a pretty clear answer to the question, which is it, in any particular case.

That, I think, is where Carnap's argument falls apart. Take the "reality of the thing world" case again. The most defensible account of what Carnap says about the meanings of the words for things looks like it leaves that problem on the table. Using our ordinary thing language, we can express the First Meditation arguments and conclude that we have no more reason to believe any statement about the world around us than any other. Carnap's response is, no, you've changed the subject. And the answer is, *that's not obvious*. That's Quine's signature move: in many critical cases, it is simply not determinate whether

we have a difference in factual belief or a difference in what we are saying.[3]

I think the same can be said about the cases of numbers, properties and propositions. Many mathematicians are realists about numbers. Many are not. Many philosophers like a sort of Carnapian tolerance here: when serious mathematicians have variables that range over numbers, who are we philosophers to criticise them? Many philosophers find the considerations against accepting an ontology of numbers compelling enough to seriously consider the arguments. The situation really does not look like some people know what the words mean and some people do not. Instead, the words we use and the beliefs we have together present us with philosophical problems.

7   Conclusion

Carnap thought that the traditional problem of Platonism (transcendent universals) vs. nominalism was a pseudo-problem. The philosopher attempts to ask a question using the words "are universals real?" The "universals" language says that whenever two things are the same in some way, then there is a universal. So the answer is trivial: of course there are many cats, cabbages, kings, so of course there are universals. If the philosopher thinks there is some question that is not thereby answered, she isn't asking a question that gets this trivial answer. But since that answer came from the meanings of her words, it looks like either she is using words without sense, or else she is asking a quite different question (whether there might be a practical choice as between this language and another).

This is clearly a view about the meaning of the language we use to discuss the problems. For this account of the traditional problem to stick, Carnap needs to be able to make stick the charge that the philosopher has changed the meanings of the words she uses. That, I think, is a "heroically" hard task, and one I think we have no reason to think Carnap succeeded in executing.[4]

Appendix: excerpt from "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology

This is the long beginning section of ESO that (Quine, 1951a, 68) quotes from (Carnap, 1950, 21-23); this text is the slightly emended version from (Carnap, 1956, 206-208), with some passages Quine elides:

> If someone wishes to speak in his language about a new kind of entities,

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[3]I am here disagreeing with (Bird, 1995, 57-60). Bird argues that if languages are identifiable, then there is an associated distinction between what is said in them and what is said about them. Bird notes that (Davidson, 1986) appears to deny the antecedent, and suggests that Fodor's work on holism, particularly in (Fodor, 1987), shows what a catastrophically costly view Davidson's would be. The problem I am indicating with Carnap's view is that the languages in which we do philosophy—that is, natural languages like English or Hungarian—are not sufficiently sharply identifiable to make it clear when a philosopher's question leaves her language behind. I don't think Davidson's "semantic nihilism" has the consequences that Bird claims it does. All I need, though, for my response to Carnap is this limited form of that nihilism.

[4]Thanks to Adam Tamas Tuboly and Terry Godlove for helpful comments and criticism.

he has to introduce a system of new ways of speaking, subject to new rules; we shall call this procedure the construction of a linguistic *framework* for the new entities in question. And now we must distinguish two kinds of questions of existence: first, questions of the existence of certain entities of the new kind *within the framework*; we call them *internal questions*; and second, questions concerning the existence or reality *of the system of entities as a whole*, called *external questions*. ... Let us consider as an example the simplest kind of entities dealt with in the everyday language: the spatio-temporally ordered system of observable things and events. Once we have accepted the thing-language with its framework for things, we can raise and answer internal questions, e.g., "Is there a white piece of paper on my desk?", "Did King Arthur actually live?", "Are unicorns and centaurs real or merely imaginary?", and the like. These questions are to be answered by empirical investigations. Results of observations are evaluated according to certain rules as confirming or disconfirming evidence for possible answers. (This evaluation is usually carried out, of course, as a matter of habit rather than a deliberate, rational procedure. But it is possible, in a rational reconstruction, to lay down explicit rules for the evaluation. This is one of the main tasks of a pure, as distinguished from a psychological, epistemology.) The concept of reality occurring in these internal questions is an empirical, scientific, non-metaphysical concept. To recognize something as a real thing or event means to succeed in incorporating it into the system of things at a particular space-time position so that it fits together with the other things recognized as real, according to the rules of the framework.

From these questions we must distinguish the external question of the reality of the thing world itself. In contrast to the former questions, this question is raised neither by the man in the street nor by scientists, but only by philosophers. Realists give an affirmative answer, subjective idealists a negative one, and the controversy goes on for centuries without ever being solved. And it cannot be solved because it is framed in a wrong way. To be real in the scientific sense means to be an element of the system; hence this concept cannot meaningfully be applied to the system itself. Those who raise the question of the reality of the thing world itself have perhaps in mind not a theoretical question as their formulation seems to suggest, but rather a practical question, a matter of a practical decision concerning the structure of our language. We have to make the choice whether or not to accept and use the forms of expression for the framework in question. ... If someone decides to accept the thing language, there is no objection against saying that he has accepted the world of things. But this must not be interpreted as if it meant his acceptance of a belief in the reality of the thing world; there is no such belief or assertion or assumption, because it is not a theoretical question. To accept the thing world means nothing more than to accept a certain form of language ...

Carnap then goes on to develop the same idea for "the system of numbers", of propositions, and "thing properties".

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