Carnap’s Radical Way Out

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Philosophers nowadays disagree, or seem to, in every conceivable way. They disagree about what they ought to be doing and on how to do it. They disagree about what they can take for granted and about what sort of results might be expected or hoped for. Does philosophy have its own evidence, and can it find its own facts? And what are its relations to the empirical sciences or other human endeavors? Today there is no consensus on the answers to these metaphilosophical questions. And that lack of consensus is in itself worrisome. If philosophers cannot agree among themselves, why should anyone else take them seriously? Given this, it is hardly surprising that philosophers are reflecting on the character and methods of philosophy itself.

Carnap worked in a time much like ours. There was then no consensus on any of the mentioned issues, and his most important philosophical contribution was a response to that situation. He recognized that some disagreements are only verbal. And he saw that a valuable objectivity can be achieved that what we say is said is said in some particular language and that we are not all using or proposing to use the same language. We might each be right but talking at cross-purposes. Thus, there is a way – a radical way – that might diffuse philosophical disagreement. Indeed, it might avoid fundamental and apparently intractable philosophic disagreement altogether by reconstruing these apparent theoretical disagreements into differences of linguistic strategy. Carnap’s radical proposal was not fully understood in his lifetime. This paper gives some reasons why Carnap’s radical way out is worth our consideration now.

Carnap’s Metaphilosophy

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Carnap’s Metaphilosophy  The elimination of metaphysics was Carnap’s best-known agenda item. But recent decades have seen a strong revival of metaphysics, especially among analytic philosophers. Has the new analytic metaphysics overcome Carnapian scruples or merely ignored them? Did Quine, Putnam, Lewis, Kripke, or someone else show that such scruples were groundless? Or does Carnap’s own principle of tolerance actually require him to countenance our analytic metaphysics, as some think, since it respects the limits imposed by science? These are not purely historical questions but also concern metaphilosophy more generally. A recent example is Timothy Williamson’s defense (in his 2007 book The Philosophy of Philosophy as well as subsequent writings) of a program of metaphysical research, but without considering Carnapian, or logical
empiricist, arguments against all metaphysics in principle. Williamson assumes that his project of “undoing the linguistic turn” undermines all such arguments. However, the “linguistic turn” that Williamson seeks to “undo” (i.e. that he presents arguments against) is the Fregean one promoted by Michael Dummett, and not the specifically Carnapian linguistic turn introduced in Logical Syntax of Language. This paper shows that the Carnapian linguistic turn does not depend on the Fregean one. In fact the Carnapian one, as detailed research over the past fifteen years has established, was developed specifically in opposition to the Fregean form of linguistic turn. And the Carnapian linguistic turn is a much more powerful basis for Carnap’s argument against metaphysics than the Fregean one. However, it appears, as this paper will argue, that the Carnapian form of linguistic turn has been almost entirely ignored by analytic metaphysicians, despite frequent invocation of Carnap in debates about meta-ontology, verbal disputes, and other questions of meta-metaphysics. It would thus appear that analytic metaphysics is no less vulnerable to Carnap’s critique than older kinds of metaphysics.

**Carnap, Cassirer, Schrödinger and the Hypothesis P**

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The starting point of this presentation is Erwin Schrödinger’s and Rudolf Carnap’s debate concerning the reality of other minds and presuppositions of science (Schrödinger, E., “Quelques remarques au sujet des bases de la connaissance scientifique”, 1935; Carnap, R., “Existe-t-il des prémisses de la science qui soient incôntrolables?”, 1936). According to Schrödinger, the postulation that not only I, but also other persons have thoughts and perception, is the precondition of science. He calls this postulate the Hypothesis P (P standing for personality). As the Hypothesis P is a precondition for the possibility of science, it is not empirically testable nor is it based on convention. In his reply to Schrödinger Carnap argued that any presupposition underlying science, must be scientifically, i.e., empirically testable. Statements concerning the reality of other minds are, however, not empirically testable and meaningful. When Schrödinger’s and Carnap’s articles in the mid 1930’s, the debate went largely unnoticed. Ernst Cassirer’s recently published Nachlass (Symbolische Prägnanz, Ausdrucksphänomen und ‘Wiener Kreis’, 2011), sheds a new light on the debate on Hypothesis P and the foundations of science. Cassirer agrees with Schrödinger on the demand of Hypothesis P. Referring to Russell’s type theory, Cassirer argues that Carnap’s main mistake is confusing the object of science with science itself, and failing to see that science is cultural phenomena. Cassirer bases his argument on the analysis of the concept of perception. In this presentation I will explore and evaluate Schrödinger’s, Carnap’s and Cassirer’s views on the problem of other minds and the foundations of science. I will suggest that Cassirer’s argument is further reinforced if we approach the question concerning the Hypothesis P with the semantical tools developed by Jaakko Hintikka (language as calculus vs. language as a universal medium – distinction).
Wittgenstein on the Impossibility of Illogical Thought

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In the Tractatus, Wittgenstein writes that ‘what makes logic a priori is the impossibility of illogical thought’ (TLP 5.4731). Further, according to him, every proposition is legitimately constructed, and whatever is possible in logic is also allowed (TLP 5.4733 & 5.473). This paper gives an interpretation of these remarks from the perspective of the Kantian interpretation of Wittgenstein’s early thought. It will argue that the logic as conceived by the early Wittgenstein is ‘transcendental’ (TLP 6.13) in the full-blown Kantian sense of being (i) about the necessary a priori conditions for the possibility of sense (TLP 2.18, 5.4731); (ii) universal by being the form of thought and of every imaginable world (TLP 2.022); and (iii) tied to the metaphysical subject (TLP 5.61, 5.632). The paper concludes by addressing the question of the possibility of error. If logic is constitutive of thought, as Wittgenstein explicitly claims it to be, i.e., if every meaningful proposition is already legitimately constructed, then what is the point of Wittgenstein’s self-proclaimed and normative enterprise in the Tractatus, namely to ‘draw a limit to thought’ (TLP 4.114 & p. 3). The answer to this question requires once again a revisit to the Kantian background of Wittgenstein’s thought. Or so it will be argued in the paper.