

PHIL 4603: Metaphysics

Prof. Funkhouser

Carnap, "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology"

1.

- Empiricists traditionally take a nominalistic stand on abstract entities. But theories of meaning and truth (semantics) may force us to let in some such abstract entities. Carnap will defend the traditional Empiricist's position.

2.

- Carnap famously distinguishes *internal* and *external* (existence) questions:

internal question: existence questions within a linguistic framework (either of a factual or logical nature)

external question: existence questions concerning the framework as a whole

- Carnap argues that external questions are meaningless — they are *pseudo-questions*.

- Carnap provides examples from various frameworks: the "thing" language, numbers, propositions, etc. The Realism vs. Idealism dispute, for example, does not have a theoretical, but only a pragmatic, answer.

To accept the thing world means nothing more than to accept a certain form of language, in other words, to accept rules for forming statements and for testing, accepting, or rejecting them.

(14)

- Here's another example: "Are there numbers?" This can be heard in either an internal or external sense. Suppose one hears it internally: "Sure, 5 is a number. 1, 2, 3, and 4 are numbers too." But if this was intended externally, the following response might be given: "No, you misunderstood me. I know that *if* there are numbers, then 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 are numbers. I wanted to know if numbers *really* exist in the first place." Compare this with Carnap's discussion of the reality of space-time points, p. 17.

3.

- When is a new framework introduced?

First, the introduction of a general term, a predicate of higher level, for the new kind of entities, permitting us to say of 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. (17)

- Carnap reiterates that external questions cannot be answered. Specifically, there need be no ontological justification before a framework is accepted and its internal questions are answered. Accepting a framework is a matter of practical choice; it is not an endorsement of an ontology. (18)

- Carnap then notes the influence of the Vienna Circle on this point.

4.

- Some might think that, just as ‘Fido’ refers to Fido the dog, ‘red’ must refer to the property red (in order to be meaningful). So, abstract entities must be admitted to make sentences involving general terms meaningful.

- Carnap holds that the property red exists in answer to the internal question. But the external (ontological) question, whether this property *really* exists is meaningless. Those who debate its existence are operating under a shared assumption that this is a meaningful theoretical dispute.

... John Stuart Mill, Frege, and Russell. If these philosophers regarded the acceptance of a system of entities as a theory, an assertion, they were victims of the same old, metaphysical confusion. But it is certainly wrong to regard *my* semantical method as involving a belief in the reality of abstract entities, since I reject a thesis of this kind as a metaphysical pseudo-statement. (19)

- Carnap denies that there is evidence that could resolve an external question. (20)

5.

- Carnap concludes with a cautionary paragraph, which includes the following claim:

To decree dogmatic prohibitions of certain linguistic forms instead of testing them by their success or failure in practical use, is worse than futile; it is positively harmful because it may obstruct scientific progress. (21)