

BOOK REVIEWS

Ontology after Carnap

Edited by STEPHAN BLATTI AND SANDRA LAPOINTE

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‘Carnap is not completely unknown to us’ comments Richard Creath in his contribution to this book. ‘We often know just enough to be baffled’ (193). It will be no surprise to anyone when I say that this book will not unbaffle us. But it does give us a collection of rewarding papers that each wrestle with the legacy Carnap has left us. The introduction contains a helpful summary of each paper, so rather than giving my own, I will trace one thread of argument that runs through a few of the papers.

Perhaps the only feature of Carnap’s views that can be found throughout the book is his distinction between internal and external questions, according to which internal questions are good, external questions are bad and metaphysical questions are external. But the degree to which this distinction can be separated from Carnap’s verificationism and the extent to which it can be co-opted by contemporary philosophers remain sources of disagreement. Some offer a revisionary account of this distinction. For example, Kraut, in his contribution, suggests that the internal/external distinction should be understood as the distinction between descriptive and expressivist language. And Hofweber suggests that the internal/external distinction should be understood in terms of two different functions of the quantifier – an inferential role function which merely relates quantified statements to other sentences in one’s language, and a domain conditions reading which can be used to make claims about objects.

But Thomasson (2015: Ch. 9), in the book from which her contribution is adapted, points out that Hofweber doesn’t give us much reason to deny that inferential role uses of the quantifier also have ontological commitments. This raises a recurring theme in discussions of Carnap – how do we move from claims about language to claims about metaphysics?

This question comes to the fore in Eli Hirsch’s work. In his contribution, Hirsch develops and defends his view that contemporary ontological debates are, in Carnap’s words, ‘merely a matter of choosing a language’ (Hirsch: 105). Specifically, he argues that many ontological debates satisfy his *Equivalence Condition*, which is sufficient for a controversy to be merely a matter of choosing a language. Very approximately,¹ a controversy satisfies the Equivalence Condition when (i) for any controversial sentence C, there are two noncontroversial sentences N1 and N2 such that one side claims that C is equivalent to N1 and the other side claims that C is equivalent to N2 and (ii) each side ought to agree that there is a possible language in which the noncontroversial sentences are true and the other side’s equivalences hold. So, for example, Hirsch thinks the following debate satisfies the Equivalence Condition: the controversial sentence is (C) ‘tables exist’, one side says C is equivalent to (N1)

1 There is a third condition regarding inference that won’t play a role here.

‘molecules arranged table-wise exist’ and the other side says C is equivalent to (N2) ‘fusions constituting tables exist’.

Hirsch discusses Hawthorne’s (2009) objection that pairs of scientific theories satisfy the Equivalence Condition, thus giving the wrong verdict that choosing between such scientific theories is merely a matter of choosing a language. Hirsch responds that Hawthorne’s examples fail to satisfy the Equivalence Condition. But surely there are possible scientific examples that do satisfy the Equivalence Condition. For example, suppose that special relativity and a neo-Lorentzian view satisfy the Equivalence Condition.² Would Hirsch conclude that choosing between them is merely a matter of choosing a language? If not, Hirsch’s position seems to rest on there being a significant distinction between science and philosophy, a point raised by Eklund (176–7).

But setting that aside, notice that Hirsch’s claim is just that there are such *possible languages*. It requires further premises to move from this claim about languages to a metaphysical conclusion. One way to get an interesting metaphysical conclusion, is to add the claim of *quantifier variance* that ‘there are different concepts of existence which are all equally good – there is no metaphysically privileged concept of existence’ (Eklund: 183). This would imply that N1 and N2 are equally good descriptions of the world.

But Eklund’s contribution (among other things) develops his (2009: 145) argument against quantifier variance³. The problem is that given quantifier variance, nominalists have to agree that when the Platonist says ‘2 is prime’ the Platonist speaks the truth. Assuming that the truth of any sentence of the form ‘a is F’ requires the existence of a, the nominalist must concede that ‘2’ refers. This seems to refute the nominalist, contradicting the Carnapian’s motivating thought that the nominalist/Platonist controversy is merely a matter of choosing a language.

Creath’s contribution defends quantifier variantism.⁴ Eklund (185–6) thinks Creath’s comments miss the point, so let me give a spin on them that seems to hit the target. Let’s make explicit that we are talking the Platonist’s language by adding the prefix P. The nominalist agrees that ‘P-2-is-prime’. And they can agree that when we speak the Platonist’s *metalinguage*: ‘P-2-refers’ and ‘P-2-refers’ is true’. And this is compatible with nominalism. The nominalist can agree that, speaking the Platonist’s language, 2 refers; they remain nominalists in virtue of preferring the nominalist language. Remember, neither side is an old-fashioned Platonist or nominalist because those sides are talking nonsense according to Carnap – we can only make sense of internal Platonists and internal nominalists.

But what is the difference between internal Platonism and external Platonism? Both admit the truth of ‘numbers exist’, giving a different interpretation of the sentence. But what exactly is this difference?

One answer, suggested by a rejection of quantifier variance, is that only the external theorist admits a metaphysically privileged concept of existence. But the identification of such a concept remains mysterious.

2 See Rinard (2013).

3 See also Schaffer (2009).

4 Creath is really concerned with Carnap’s view rather than quantifier variance. This raises another controversy – whether Carnap was, or should have been, committed to quantifier variance. Those confused by Creath’s contribution might benefit from Creath (1980).

Thomasson suggests a different answer in her contribution. ‘What is significant about the easy [internal] approach is that existence questions are treated as ‘easy’ – and non-mysterious – methodologically’ (138). The method of discovering if tables exists for Thomasson is to find out if the application conditions for the concept of table are satisfied; this in turn requires knowledge of analytic truths about the concept of table plus empirical truths about whether they are satisfied. And these are both non-mysterious. Here she draws a contrast with Ted Sider’s position that some questions are ‘epistemically metaphysical’ in the sense that they ‘resist direct empirical methods but are nevertheless not answerable by conceptual analysis’ (Sider 2011: 187). Thomasson’s approach promises to de-mystify metaphysics.

This cannot be the whole story however (not that Thomasson suggests that it is). For presumably the disagreement about methodology is not brute – it must itself be explained by disagreement about the nature of the underlying content, i.e. the content of ‘numbers exist’.

Setting that aside, Thomasson faces the same challenge Hirsch did regarding scientific theories that are empirically equivalent, e.g. relativity *versus* neo-Lorentzian theories. This scientific debate resists direct empirical methods and is nevertheless not answerable by conceptual analysis. Should the question be treated as easy?

The actual response of scientists seems to have been that we should prefer relativity because it is simpler, or more elegant. This raises the possibility that when we are faced with debates that cannot be resolved by empirical methods or conceptual analysis, we should appeal to the theoretical virtues.

This is developed by Biggs and Wilson in their contribution. They note that one of Carnap’s desiderata for a concept is that it be simple (Carnap 1950: 5). Thus, Carnap has opened the door to making choices based on theoretical virtues like simplicity. And if the theoretical virtues are relevant to theory choice, then theoretical virtues can be applied to metaphysical debates. For example, nominalism might be favoured over Platonism in virtue of its parsimony.

But any appeal to the theoretical virtues is controversial. Thomasson points out that ‘it is hard to see the remaining theoretical virtues as giving us more than a parochial, pragmatic reason for preferring one theory to another’ (138). This returns us to Carnap’s (1950) claim that we should understand metaphysical debates as debates about which language is most useful – a pragmatic issue.

There are many other interesting papers and themes in this book that I haven’t touched upon. One issue that gets an airing here is the extent to which the dialectic about ontology extends to other issues such as mind-dependence (Sidelle) and fundamentality (Koslicki). Relatedly, Lavers argues that Carnap makes a mistake in treating questions about concrete objects differently from questions about abstract objects.⁵ No un bafflement, but plenty of interesting material for anyone with an interest in ontology, metaontology or Carnap.⁶

5 See Psillos 1999 (56–9) for a related discussion of Carnap’s struggles with the definition of ‘instrumentalism’.

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Experiencing Time

By SIMON PROSSER

Oxford University Press, 2016. xvi + 222 £40.00

Experiencing Time addresses an exciting topic: what bearing the phenomenology of our experience of time might have on some key disputes over the nature of temporal reality, centrally whether the character of that phenomenology favours an 'A-theory' of time, which holds that there is temporal passage, over a 'B-theory' or 'static block' view. Prosser defends the 'B-theory', arguing not only that experience does not favour 'A-theory', but also that it *could not* do so: 'The passage of time is just the wrong kind of phenomenon to have a selective influence on or connection to a specific mental state, and therefore is not the kind of phenomenon that could be the object of an experience' (46). He argues further that this makes 'A-theory' unintelligible (54–60).