

# Carnap's Metaontology

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[Published in *Noûs* 47 (2013)]

## 1. Introduction: the contemporary debate

The contemporary metaontological debate mainly concerns the question of whether ontological questions, questions about what there is, are genuine questions deep enough to be worthy of philosophical attention, or whether rather some skeptical or deflationary view on ontology which takes ontological questions somehow to be not genuine or else somehow shallow is correct. Carnap is often hailed as the hero of the skeptics; Quine is often hailed as the hero of those who take ontology seriously. Let me start by illustrating how Carnap and Quine, respectively, are read. Later I will problematize this.

First, on Carnap's influence on contemporary skepticism about ontology. Eli Hirsch, in recent years the most prominent proponent of a skeptical view, has defended the claim that "many familiar questions about the ontology of physical objects are merely verbal. Nothing is substantively at stake in these questions beyond the correct use of language" and the claim that "quantifier expressions can have different meaning in different languages".<sup>1</sup> He characterizes his view as related to Carnap's.<sup>2</sup> Ted Sider, while critical of the type of view Hirsch defends, has in many places prominently singled it out for critical discussion. In his (2001), he discusses critically the view that "different frameworks employ different semantic rules for the quantifiers", and says that a theorist in favor of the view he criticizes would say that the stuff-ontologist and the thing-ontologist have different "frameworks" and that "[W]ithin these frameworks there are answers to questions about what there is, but any question about which framework is *the* right framework is metaphysical in the pejorative sense of being a pseudo-question".<sup>3</sup> In his (2005), Cian Dorr critically discusses "the idea that there are many different possible languages which differ systematically in the truth-values they

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<sup>1</sup> Hirsch (2005), p. 67, and (2007), p. 368.

<sup>2</sup> Hirsch (2005), p. 67. Here and elsewhere, Hirsch stresses that, as opposed to Carnap, he does not intend his remarks to apply to the platonism/nominalism dispute.

<sup>3</sup> Sider (2001), pp. xx, xix.

assign to general ontological claims”.<sup>4</sup> Sider and Dorr likewise call the view under discussion Carnapian or neo-Carnapian.<sup>5</sup>

In his (2009) overview of metaontological positions, David Chalmers says, “Ontological anti-realism is often traced to Carnap (1950), who held that there are many different ontological frameworks, holding that different sorts of entities exist, and that while some frameworks may be more useful for some purposes, there is no fact of the matter as to which framework is correct”.<sup>6</sup>

Turn next to how Quine is regarded. First, consider Hilary Putnam (2004):

“How come,” the reader may wonder, “it is precisely in analytic philosophy—a kind of philosophy that, for many years, was hostile to the very word ‘ontology’—that Ontology flourishes?”

If we ask when Ontology became a respectable subject for an analytic philosopher to pursue, the mystery disappears. It became respectable in 1948, when Quine published a famous paper titled “On What There Is.” It was Quine who single-handedly made Ontology a respectable subject.<sup>7</sup>

And consider too Chalmers’ assessment of Quine’s role:

Ontological realism is often traced to Quine (1948), who held that we can determine what exists by seeing which entities are endorsed by our best scientific theory of the world. In recent years, the practice of ontology has often presupposed an ever-stronger ontological realism, and strong versions of ontological realism have received explicit statements by Fine (2009), Sider (2001; 2009), van Inwagen (1998; 2009), and others.<sup>8</sup>

Not only are Carnap and Quine described as champions of the two opposing positions: the Carnap-Quine exchange is itself held to be of importance. Stephen Yablo reports, surely correctly, that Carnap “is widely seen to have *lost*” the debate with Quine, and that the “quizzical camp” regarding ontology has never recovered, for Quine “destroyed the only available model of how quizzicalism might be philosophically justified”.<sup>9</sup> Marc Alspector-Kelly says that on the standard story, the

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<sup>4</sup> Dorr (2005), p. 235. In the quoted sentence, Dorr speaks of *claims* having different truth-values in different *languages*. This is a mistake but not one which affects the rest of Dorr’s article. The mistake does however relate to some of the confusion surrounding Carnap that I will discuss.

<sup>5</sup> Sider (2001), p. xix; Dorr (2005), p. 235.

<sup>6</sup> Chalmers (2009), p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> Putnam (2004), pp. 78-9.

<sup>8</sup> Chalmers (2009), p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> Yablo (1998), p. 232.

positivist “disdain for the metaphysical...was finally put to rest when W. V. Quine demonstrated that Carnap’s last attempt to dodge metaphysical issues fails, and then showed that metaphysics has a legitimate place within a generally naturalistic framework”.<sup>10</sup>

What I will discuss here is what Carnap’s skeptical or deflationary attitude toward ontology really amounted to, and, later and more briefly, what the supposed differences between him and Quine – regarded as the rescuer of ontology – really amounted to. Many of my points will be negative. I will outline the different interpretations of Carnap’s views on ontology. Then I will point to the problems with each, both as interpretation of Carnap and in itself. Then, lastly, I will argue that under each of them it is hard to see just how Carnap and Quine disagreed about ontology. (Carnap and Quine had real disagreements, for example about analyticity. But disagreements about analyticity do not immediately map on to conflicting views about the possibility of the enterprise of ontology.)

While my main concern will be what Carnap’s views were, I will only occasionally pay close attention to actual texts by Carnap, and when I do pay attention to Carnap’s texts my main focus will be Carnap (1950) and not other material, such as the published correspondence with Quine. There is a reason for this. It is that already quite general features of Carnap’s discussion limits range of possible interpretations, and much of my discussion will then be a philosophically substantive discussion of the prospects of these interpretations.

Part of the reason for taking an interest in Carnap’s metaontological views is that they still serve as a kind of paradigm for skepticism about ontology, as illustrated above. It is then important to demonstrate how unclear it is what Carnap’s views amount to, and how much is swept under the rug in general claims about framework-relativity and the rejection of external questions.<sup>11</sup>

## **2. Interpreting Carnap: language pluralism vs. relativism**

Here are some claims about Carnap which should be uncontroversial. First, it is undeniable that Carnap’s view on ontology is somehow skeptical or deflationary: in some sense or other, the questions which philosophers concerned with ontology have been concerned with are *non-questions*.<sup>12</sup> Second, Carnap does not merely dismiss ontological questions, but also presents a positive view of

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<sup>10</sup> Alspector-Kelly (2001), p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> I have discussed some of the issues I here bring up in (2009). But there are important differences between that earlier work and the present manuscript. In my (2009), I fairly quickly zoomed in on language pluralism and the thesis of quantifier variance and discussed substantive problems faced by those theses. Here I discuss Carnap interpretation more broadly.

Carnap’s views on logic, presented most prominently in his (1934/7), are in important respects analogous to his views on ontology. It is a pity that the literatures on Carnap on logic and on Carnap on ontology are as disconnected as they are. Unfortunately, I will here have to follow suit and only focus on one issue, that of Carnap on ontology. In (forthcoming) I discuss Carnap on logic.

<sup>12</sup> Carnap (1950), e.g. p. 207.

some sort. Central to the positive view is a distinction between *internal* and *external* questions, and the notion of *frameworks*.<sup>13</sup> Internal questions – questions internal to frameworks – including questions raised using the same forms of words as philosophers use to raise the ontological questions they are concerned with, are perfectly straightforward and non-problematic. External questions – questions external to frameworks – are problematic and should be rejected, insofar as they are conceived of as genuinely *factual*. These questions can be taken to be all right, but only when they are taken as *pragmatic* questions. Exactly what internal and external questions are, and what frameworks are supposed to be, is an issue that will occupy us for some time. Third, one of Carnap’s underlying aims in laying out his view on ontology is to defend reference to, and quantification over, abstract entities in semantics and mathematics in face of empiricist criticism. Among the frameworks mentioned are the system of numbers and the system of propositions. But Carnap is not only concerned with the ontology of abstracta. Among other frameworks he mentions are the world of things and the system of space-time points.

Before saying more about what Carnap’s own exact view might have been, let me lay out two views which on the face of it promise to respect the facts about Carnap’s view as so far presented. As we will later see, it is not clear that either of these two interpretations of Carnap works. But they provide a useful starting point.

First, there is the *language pluralist* view. The language pluralist emphasizes that there are many different possible languages and that one and the same sentence (non-semantically individuated) can have different meanings and different truth-values in the different languages. The language pluralist further emphasizes that the language we happen to speak is just one among these possible languages. Having emphasized that there are many possible languages, the language pluralist can go on to say, with respect to such a sentence as “there are numbers”, that this sentence will come out true in some possible language, and that the decision to affirm this sentence can be bound up with the decision to use this possible language. The language pluralist may then for example further insist that participants in ontological debates often speak past each other. She may say that when one theorist says “there are numbers” and another says “there are no numbers” they do not actually contradict each other. They use different languages, and they do not in fact express incompatible propositions. In *some* sense – it can be suggested – there are, e.g., platonist and nominalist languages. I say ‘in some sense’: it is not as if platonism – the *proposition* that there are abstract entities – comes out true in some languages and untrue in others: the truth-value of a proposition, as opposed to a sentence, does not vary from language to language. Of course it can be doubted whether there then is any reasonable sense in which languages can be platonist and nominalist.

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<sup>13</sup> Carnap (1950), pp. 206ff.

On the language pluralist understanding of Carnap's view, the 'frameworks' are simply languages, or, better, fragments of languages. The distinction between internal and pragmatic external questions amounts to a distinction between questions raised using a particular language and questions about what language to employ. The sentence "there are numbers", non-semantically individuated, is part of many different possible languages and its truth-value is relative to the language employed. We can also ask which language is the most useful to employ: this is the pragmatic external question. But it is clear how there can be no such thing as a factual external question. When the language pluralist insists that external questions understood as factual questions are non-questions, the language pluralist insists that whenever we ask questions like "are there numbers?", we do that using some language or other. And reference to abstract entities is defended by appeal to how we can simply decide to employ a language where, e.g., "there are numbers" comes out true.

To stress, language pluralism, as characterized, introduces only a trivial kind of framework-relativity. It only emphasizes that there are different possible languages, and that the truth-values of sentences (non-semantically individuated) are relative to languages. For example, "there are numbers" can be true in some language by virtue of its there meaning something like *everything is self-identical*. One immediate question is then how language pluralism could be relevant to skepticism about ontology. The point about the multitude of languages clearly does not by itself have any anti-ontological implications. It must be supplemented by independent considerations.

I will later discuss at some more length what some such independent considerations might be. But here, for now, is one suggestion. Perhaps, given the language pluralist interpretation, Carnap's criticism of ontology can be understood as follows: While 'there are'-questions can be sensibly raised, and answered, within various languages, the way ontologists approach their questions, they are raising external questions and treating them as factual. Here is a quick illustration. Suppose one of us speaks a language where "there are numbers" is true and one of us speaks a language where "there are numbers" comes out false. Suppose we come to find out that it is so. But then I go on to say "OK, 'there are numbers' comes out true in my language and false in yours. But, *language-independently*, are there numbers?". This would be confused. What could this supposed *further* question amount to? Of course, if F-discourse is about something language-independent, and "there are Fs" comes out true in my language, then so does "language-independently, there are Fs". Imagining that there is a *further* question there, not trivially answered by what has already been established, would be confused; and it is the supposed further question I am labeling confused.

Carnap's charge could be that ontologists are trying to ask this confused question. The *only* 'further' question there is, is a pragmatic one: which language is it, for certain practical purposes, best

to use?<sup>14</sup> For future reference, call questions like our further question *confused questions*. Of course, for the envisaged criticism of ontology to be effective it would have to be argued that the questions ontologists ask really are confused questions in the sense characterized, and convincingly arguing for this may be difficult indeed.

To briefly sum up this preliminary discussion of language pluralism: On the language pluralist interpretation of Carnap, Carnap's 'frameworks' are language-fragments. Moreover, on the language pluralist view, as I will discuss it, the framework-relativity (i.e. ordinary language-relativity) of ontological sentences is, somehow, *central* to a critique of the ontological enterprise. I have further presented one critique of ontology – the critique that ontological questions are confused questions – for which the framework-relativity of ontological sentences is thus central. I will later return to such matters. I don't take language pluralism per se to be committed to this particular way of criticizing the enterprise of ontology.

On a second, *relativist*, understanding, Carnap's 'frameworks' are not mere language-fragments; instead, frameworks are like perspectives or outlooks. On the relativist view, framework-relativity is not the trivial dependence of meaning upon language, but the sentences ontologists are concerned with are framework-dependent in some more radical sense: the *propositions* the sentences express are not true or false absolutely but only relative to frameworks. An internal question is a question of what is true relative to some framework in this demanding sense of 'framework'. An external question is a question of what framework is the correct one. It is worth comparing more familiar versions of relativism, like moral relativism. A paradigmatic moral relativist holds that moral assertions are true or false not absolutely but relative to standards, cultures,.... If a particular standard or culture were the absolute right one, absolute moral truth could be recovered: those moral assertions are true which are true relative to the right standard or culture. So the moral relativist will deny that a particular standard or culture is in this way privileged. In this sense of 'framework', there can genuinely be both platonist and nominalist frameworks.

I will not have much to say here about the philosophical merits or otherwise of the relativist view. Proper evaluation of it would centrally involve general considerations concerning the idea of propositional truth being relative in the indicated sense. The one thing I wish to stress regarding relativism is that the relativist obviously makes radical claims about the nature of proposition-truth.

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<sup>14</sup> In the text I speak of questions over which *sentences* are true. One may then want to object that when we are concerned with the existence of numbers, we are concerned with the proposition that there are numbers. However, focusing on propositions changes nothing essential. Corresponding to the different languages there are the different propositions expressed by the different sentences. Saying "OK, we know that the proposition expressed by 'there are numbers' of one language is true and the proposition expressed by 'there are numbers' of the other language is false – but is it really the case that there are numbers?" does not sound too good either.

Having laid out the language pluralist and relativist interpretations, I will now argue that if language pluralism and relativism are the alternatives, then it is clear that Carnap is a language pluralist. The reason for the cautious formulation is that I will soon turn to features of Carnap's presentation that appear to present problems for both these interpretations.

Carnap calls the frameworks *linguistic frameworks* (when the article was first published he used the label *frameworks of entities*, but this was changed for when the article was reprinted in *Meaning and Necessity*).<sup>15</sup> Where Carnap introduces the notion of a framework, he says, "If someone wishes to speak in his language about a new kind of entities, 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".<sup>16</sup> In other words: to speak in one's language about some entities one needs to introduce the expressions by means of which to do so. Later, Carnap uses "thing language" to denote a framework.<sup>17</sup> This is clear evidence that for Carnap, frameworks are fragments of languages. Moreover, if Carnap were a relativist, one would expect him to emphasize that truths of the relevant kind are true *only relative to some framework*, but such formulations are entirely absent from his article; generally, Carnap treats frameworks as something straightforward.

Despite what seems to me to be the clear textual evidence in favor of a language pluralist interpretation of Carnap over a relativist interpretation, some authors seem to simply presuppose that Carnap was a relativist. André Gallois (1998) takes for granted that for Carnap, sentences of any "ontologically committing discourse" will be true only in a "framework relative sense".<sup>18</sup> But if frameworks are just language fragments, then the only framework-relativity of truth that is at issue is the familiar dependence of sentence-truth upon language. Chalmers (2009) characterizes the ontological anti-realist as someone who denies objective truth-values to ontological claims and characterizes Carnap as an ontological anti-realist.<sup>19</sup> This is consistent with the understanding of Carnap as a language pluralist if by 'ontological claims' Chalmers means external claims. But if Chalmers means to suggest that Carnap denies that any 'there are'-sentences are objectively true, then what he is saying is at odds with the language pluralist interpretation. Later, Chalmers indicates that Carnap's idea of frameworks is controversial and that one might simply reject the idea of a framework.<sup>20</sup> But if frameworks are simply language-fragments, what could be so controversial about the idea of frameworks?

<sup>15</sup> Carnap (1950), p. 205n.

<sup>16</sup> Carnap (1950), p. 206.

<sup>17</sup> Carnap (1950), p. 206f.

<sup>18</sup> Gallois (1998), p. 273.

<sup>19</sup> Chalmers (2009), p. 77f.

<sup>20</sup> Chalmers (2009), p. 80.

Sider (2001) wavers. In the introduction to his book, Sider discusses a purported consequence of Carnap's view, saying "The nihilist and I think we disagree. I affirm while the nihilist denies the sentence 'keyboards exist'. But our claims are not contradictory, for we mean different things by this sentence. The meaning of this sentence is only determined relative to a linguistic framework, that is, a set of linguistic rules; and the nihilist and I employ different linguistic rules".<sup>21</sup> This is pretty explicitly an interpretation of Carnap as a language pluralist. Frameworks are identified as sets of linguistic rules. Those employing different frameworks are using sentences with different meanings, and are speaking past each other. But then Sider also says, to repeat the passage quoted early on, "[W]ithin these frameworks there are answers to what there is, but any question about which framework is *the* right framework is metaphysical in the pejorative sense of being a pseudo-question". But on the language pluralist view, the 'frameworks' do not provide answers to one and the same question of what there is. Instead, 'is' means different things in different frameworks, aka languages.<sup>22</sup> What is more, later in the book, Sider indicates that on the Carnapian view, what there is depends on human activity.<sup>23</sup> While this may be understood in such a way that it is true on the relativist interpretation of Carnap, it is false on the language pluralist interpretation.

The discussion in Soames (2009) is problematic in a similar way. Soames says, "[Carnap's] key thesis is that ontological questions are intelligible only within a scientific framework for describing the world. Such a framework is a formalized (or formalizable) language, with semantic rules interpreting its expressions, and assigning truth conditions to its sentences".<sup>24</sup> In the second sentence Soames makes explicit in the second sentence that frameworks are languages. So the thesis described in the first sentence is that ontological questions are intelligible only within a scientific language. But what does this mean? One way to approach this issue is by asking what "ontological questions" are. If they are *sentences*, then the Carnapian thesis described by Soames threatens to be true but trivial: all it stresses is that a sentence only has a meaning in a language. It is, however, more natural to understand "ontological questions" as something at the level of propositions. Then the claim is that some proposition-like entities are intelligible only "within" a language. How does this even make sense? Propositions are not language-relative.<sup>25</sup> It may be that one needs a language with the resources to express a given proposition in order for this proposition to be intelligible to one. This claim, although perhaps not entirely trivial, seems to be far removed from questions about the nature of ontology. If instead frameworks were not identified as languages, the first sentence would

<sup>21</sup> Sider (2001), p. xix.

<sup>22</sup> Sider (2001), p. xix.

<sup>23</sup> Sider (2001), p. 157.

<sup>24</sup> Soames (2009), p. 428.

<sup>25</sup> Nor, I should add, is there any independent indication that Soames interprets Carnap as seriously holding that propositions are somehow language-relative.



make better sense. It is possible that some propositions are intelligible only against the background of certain *theories*.

Now, it is not necessarily a problem for Soames' interpretation of Carnap as described by Soames appears to make little sense. It can be that Carnap simply is incoherent. But what is unsatisfactory about Soames' description is that Soames, although critical of Carnap, does not appear to recognize the unintelligibility of the position he ascribes to him.<sup>26</sup>

### III. A different kind of interpretation?

If Carnap is either a language pluralist or a relativist, then he is a language pluralist rather than a relativist. But should we conclude that he was a language pluralist?

One argument for resisting that conclusion would proceed via insistence that Carnap simply didn't distinguish clearly between the alternatives, and the claim that the distinction between them thereby is bound to do violence to Carnap. Another argument for resisting the conclusion that Carnap is a language pluralist might be a sense that Carnap for positive theoretical reasons did not draw the sharp distinction between relativity of sentence-truth and relativity of proposition-truth that is natural from a contemporary perspective. I will set aside both considerations, relevant though they may be. If Carnap was just confused, it is still philosophically more interesting to consider the views we arrive at when the confusions are disentangled. And as for the possibility that Carnap may have had positive theoretical reasons for not drawing the distinction drawn here, there is no way I can sensibly discuss that without there being on the table a specific suggestion as to what those theoretical reasons might be. (Though the 'creationist' interpretation, introduced later, can perhaps be held to be a suggestion of this kind.)

Another kind of reason for resisting the conclusion that Carnap is a language pluralist I will discuss at more length. There are features of Carnap's presentation which suggest that something important is missing from the two interpretations presented thus far.

First, Quine famously argued, and Carnap apparently *agreed*, that Carnap's external/internal distinction is bound up with adherence to the analytic/synthetic distinction. But, as I will show, on neither interpretation discussed is it clear why there should be this relation between the two distinctions.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The same question of language pluralism versus relativism arises in the context of discussions of Carnap on logic. See my (forthcoming).

<sup>27</sup> See Quine (1951), and Carnap (1950), p. 215fn5. Carnap says, "Quine does not acknowledge the distinction which I emphasize above, because according to his general conception there are no sharp boundary lines between logical and factual truth, between questions of meaning and questions of fact, between the acceptance of a language structure and the acceptance of an assertion formulated in the language." In other words, Carnap says that Quine does not accept the external/internal distinction for he does not accept the analytic/synthetic distinction.

Second, the only F-frameworks Carnap discusses (for F = material things, numbers, properties, propositions,...) are frameworks such that the counterpart of “there are Fs” comes out true.<sup>28</sup> But then what about, e.g., the nominalist who says “there are no numbers”? Has not this nominalist too adopted a language within which it is possible to talk of numbers? Are there not F-frameworks with the linguistic materials to, in some sense, speak of Fs (or ‘Fs’ – recall the cautionary remarks above) but such that “Fs do not exist” comes out true?<sup>29</sup>

Start with the issue of analyticity. If Carnap is a relativist, then clearly his view hinges on whether some propositions can be true only in a relative sense. Analyticity need not come into it at all. So if Carnap is a relativist, criticism of the analytic/synthetic distinction need not impugn his view on ontology. It can more naturally be suspected that on the language pluralist interpretation, Carnap relies on an analytic/synthetic distinction. But this too would be mistaken. One can believe that one and the same string of symbols can have different meanings in different languages while thinking that there can be no analytic truths, so this string is not analytically true in any language, and while thinking that an expression’s meaning is not determined by a set of analytic rules. Carnap, of course, thought that there were analyticities. The point is just that this view of Carnap’s is separable from his external/internal distinction, on either of the interpretations mentioned.

Of course, the language pluralist relies upon there being a distinction between thinkers using different languages and thinkers having different beliefs: and it is natural to suspect that even this distinction is antithetical to Quine, and problematically bound up with the analytic/synthetic distinction. But first, even if this sort of distinction is antithetical to Quine it is not bound up with the far more questionable idea of truth in virtue of meaning. Even if the latter idea must be abandoned, this distinction need not be. Second, one may think that *obviously* there *is* a difference between using different languages and having different beliefs, so *if* indeed Quine’s philosophy is in conflict with this fact, then so much the worse for Quine’s philosophy. I can certainly decide to use ‘red’ in such a way that when I utter ‘grass is red’ I say something true, what you would say by uttering ‘grass is green’, and our difference is solely a difference in what language we use and not a difference in beliefs. If someone’s philosophy rules that out, so much the worse for that philosophy. Importantly, the claim that I insist is unassailable is *separable* from other ideas associated with the traditional conception of analyticity, for example the idea that any sentence of any language is ‘true in virtue of meaning’, or, for that matter, is something speakers are required to believe true in virtue of their competence. Even so, however, some will surely think that in making the point I just made I am

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<sup>28</sup> Sentences like “there are no even prime numbers greater than 2” can come out true. But that is different. No completely framework-general negative existentials seem to come out true.

<sup>29</sup> Carnap does speak of frameworks that are nominalist, in the sense that their number-words don’t really purport to refer at all but has a different semantic function. What I am stressing in the text is that he doesn’t speak of frameworks with number-words which purport to refer but do not in fact do so.

simply refusing to engage with Quine. But that just brings me to my third point: Quine is in fact *not* rejecting the distinction that I have urged obviously can be drawn. For example in his (1960), Quine urged that if someone appears to be denying an obvious logical truth, she cannot mean by her logical expressions what we mean by them. But for Quine to urge this, he must draw the distinction under consideration.<sup>30</sup> Fourth, relatedly, someone might think language pluralism requires the analytic-synthetic distinction for it requires a notion of meaning, and there are well-known arguments to the effect that if the analytic-synthetic distinction goes by the board then so does the notion of meaning. (Non-factualism about analyticity entails non-factualism about synonymy, that is, non-factualism about sameness of meaning. But sameness of meaning is a non-factual matter only if meaning generally is so.)<sup>31</sup> But by the previous point, Quine himself is committed to theses most naturally understood as theses about what does and does not have the same meaning. This means – assuming that the argument just mentioned is sound – that either central theses of Quine’s are mutually inconsistent or there is a way of making points such as Quine’s about translation without involving a notion of meaning. If the latter route is successful then one could equally well capture the spirit of language pluralism without invoking the notion of meaning: one could state the thesis in terms of possible acceptable translations instead.

A fifth consideration, in some ways the most important one, is this. Carnap is actually drawing a *tripartite* distinction: between questions internal to a framework, questions about which framework we should choose to employ, and the pseudo-questions: the supposed theoretical external questions. What Quinean criticism of the analytic/synthetic distinction threatens is the distinction between *the first two* categories: change in theory and change in language cannot be separated in the way Carnap assumes. But even if this distinction collapses, Carnap’s critique of ontology still stands. For the *third* category, that of the supposed pseudo-questions, can remain untouched.

Turn now to the fact that it appears that Carnap does not discuss nominalist frameworks of the kind earlier described, or generally F-frameworks within which the counterpart of “there are no Fs” comes out true. Like the point about analyticity, this fact about Carnap’s discussion is a potential embarrassment for both of the interpretations so far discussed. If Carnap were a language pluralist, he should be expected to hold that there are languages (‘frameworks’) within which the counterpart of “there are no numbers” comes out true. If he were a relativist, he should be expected to hold that there are perspectives (‘frameworks’) from which it is true that there are no numbers.

One might try to accommodate the fact that Carnap does not describe nominalist frameworks by appealing to the fact that Carnap is not engaged in the enterprise of describing

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<sup>30</sup> Quine (1960), p. 58f. See too his (1964) and (1970).

<sup>31</sup> See Boghossian (1996) for this kind of argument. Obviously, and as Boghossian makes clear, the argument trades on a particular understanding of what the rejection of analyticity amounts to.

actually used languages, but in the prescriptive enterprise of describing useful languages: and he might just not see much point in a ‘nominalist number framework’, and hence does not bring it up for consideration.<sup>32</sup> I think this might be a sufficient response. But it may still be hard to shake the sense that an F-framework within whose counterpart of “there are Fs” fails to be true is something Carnap wants to rule out. So let us explore the possibility that we should take seriously the fact that he omits mention of nominalist number frameworks – that is, let us assume that this indicates that there are no nominalist number frameworks. Then it appears we shall have to say that on Carnap’s view the only way to avoid reckoning numbers or properties or propositions among the values of one’s bound variables is to employ a suitably expressively *restricted* language. But if this is Carnap’s view, then it seems the most accurate way for us to describe Carnap is to say that he *actually believes* in the existence of the entities concerned: for the only question he raises, when asking whether a certain framework should be adopted, is whether it is *worth our while* to speak about some entities. On this interpretation, the importance of the distinction between external and internal questions must be downplayed. Some languages have the resources to speak of arithmetic; others do not. That is all there is to it.

I do not think this interpretation of Carnap should be dismissed. But it is *prima facie* problematic, precisely for the reason that it downplays the importance of appeal to framework-relativity. It is perhaps not a *standard* platonist view, because of Carnap’s belief that it is an *analytic* truth that numbers exist, and because of his view on what the analyticity of these truths entails as far as their metaphysical status goes. (Call the view just described as *analytic platonism*.) But what appears special about the platonism has to do with analyticity and not with framework-relativity.<sup>33</sup>

Someone defending the interpretation of Carnap as an analytic platonist might say that the distinction between internal and external questions still has a role to play. An immediate objection to analytic platonism might be that ontological questions appear to be difficult in a way they would not be if their answers were simply analytic. A response to this objection is that ontologists sometimes seek to raise external questions – confused questions – and these questions appear difficult. Once we focus firmly on the main genuine questions in the vicinity, the internal questions, we shall find that their answers are analytic. This may be an attractive response, in some ways; and it could be that what I have just described is, overall, the best way to understand Carnap. But it is still natural to be

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<sup>32</sup> Compare Yablo (1998) expounding what he takes to be Carnap’s stance: “...one *could* ask in an internal vein about the Xs generally: are there these entities or not? The question is an unlikely one because for any framework *of interest*, the answer is certain to be ‘yes’” (p. 234; my emphasis).

<sup>33</sup> Analytic platonism is similar to language pluralism in that the ‘frameworks’ are languages also on the analytic platonist interpretation. But language pluralism, as I wish to discuss it, involves centrally emphasizing that there are many possible languages, and here analytic platonism differs.

troubled by the fact that in (1950) there is so much emphasis on the external/internal distinction and so little emphasis on analyticity.

One important complication is presented by the possibility that Carnap understands the question to which platonism and nominalism are answers as a confused question, in the sense introduced above. Even if it simply is the case that some languages have the resources to speak of numbers and some do not, and it is natural *for us* simply to describe Carnap as a platonist, *Carnap himself*, identifying platonism as a purported answer to a confused question, can insist that he is not a platonist.

There is yet another possible interpretation on Carnap, on which his view is one we may call *creationism*. On this interpretation, analytic truths – truths by convention – are such that the conventions in some substantive sense *create* the truths expressed. This incorporates elements of each of the three interpretations we have so far seen. The frameworks can be seen as languages. Analyticity plays a role. Yet, along the lines of relativism, truth is up to us. When we lay down new conventions we do not simply put ourselves in a position to express truths we could not express before but we create the truths themselves; when we decide whether or not to adopt a framework we do not simply decide whether or not to give expression to such-and-such truths but we decide whether or not to create the truths. Ontology is deflated, the creationist might argue, for if ontological truths are analytic, and analytic truths are created, then ontological truths are not properly objective.

This interpretation is *philosophically* problematic. There is a relatively unproblematic sense in which conventions can create truths: conventions can determine the meanings of sentences and so determine whether utterances we make are true or false. But to say that conventions help create truth in the sense that they help determine what we say when we make an utterance and to say that conventions help determine that the things which we say are themselves true are quite different things, and Carnap, under the creationist interpretation, needs the latter. The latter claim lacks intrinsic plausibility.

That the creationist interpretation is philosophically problematic need not mean that it is mistaken as interpretation. Paul Boghossian (1996) has argued, in the case of logic, that Carnap held that since logical expressions have their meanings determined by implicit definitions, the truths of logic are somehow less than objectively true. If that is the right way to view Carnap on logic, then it is tempting to hold that Carnap's view on ontology was analogous. But I doubt this is the right way to view Carnap's philosophy of logic. Boghossian makes much of the use of slogans such as "true by virtue of meaning" and "true by convention". He notes that when taken in one straightforward way, the use of the slogans appears to founder on the truism that sentences are made true by virtue of what they mean plus the world: for every sentence S, S is true iff there is a proposition p such that S

means that  $p$ , and  $p$ .<sup>34</sup> All that meaning can determine is what proposition the sentence  $S$  expresses. Meaning cannot help with  $p$ 's being the case. Boghossian takes the friend of the slogans to have a certain kind of comeback: to insist that “in some appropriate sense, our meaning  $p$  by  $S$  *makes it the case that  $p$* ”.<sup>35</sup> This is the line Boghossian says Carnap is committed to in the philosophy of logic, and he rightly claims that it is mysterious. If Boghossian is right about how to understand Carnap on logic, then an analogous view can be argued to be right about Carnap on ontology.

However, there were also somewhat different slogans that the positivists used to explain their notion of analyticity. One was that analyticities are *vacuously* true: they demand nothing of the world. This talk carries no implication that we create truths in any philosophically weighty sense. What is more, emphasis on the idea of vacuous truth helps make sense of the talk of truth in virtue of meaning in a way that avoids the difficulties Boghossian focuses on: if for some proposition  $p$ ,  $p$  is vacuously true, then a sentence which means that  $p$  can be true in virtue of meaning. Such a sentence is true iff for some  $p$ , the sentence means that  $p$  and  $p$ , but since the sentence means a proposition which is vacuously true, we can accurately describe the sentence as true in virtue of meaning alone. It should be emphasized here that in for example his (1956), Carnap identified analyticity as truth in all possible worlds (or all ‘state descriptions’), which suggests that he thought of analyticity as *vacuous* truth rather than as *created* truth. I don’t mean to suggest that the idea of vacuous truth is not philosophically problematic. Of course it is. All I am emphasizing is that it does not by any means commit its proponent to compromising with the idea of truth as objective.<sup>36</sup>

#### **IV. Language pluralism and the enterprise of ontology**

A brief recapitulation may be in order. I started by considering two interpretations of Carnap which take framework-relativity and the external/internal distinction very seriously: language pluralism and relativism. Of these two interpretations, language pluralism seems the most faithful to Carnap. But there are features of Carnap’s discussion that do not fit well with either interpretation. Accordingly, I discussed two other interpretations of Carnap, analytic platonism and creationism. But these interpretations too were found to be problematic.

In this section, I return to language pluralism. When characterizing language pluralism, I emphasized that the mere point that sentences (non-semantically individuated) can have different meanings and truth-values in different languages is completely trivial. There may be a criticism of the enterprise of ontology based on the claim that there are many possible languages, but it is not immediately obvious how it could be so. In this section I turn to that matter.

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<sup>34</sup> Boghossian (1996), p. 364.

<sup>35</sup> Boghossian (1996), p. 365.

<sup>36</sup> My criticism of what Boghossian says about truth in virtue of meaning echoes points made by Glüer (2003).

If Carnap's "frameworks" are just languages, then, as noted, the only framework-relativity introduced is trivial. And an obvious question is to what philosophical use the idea may be put. I made one suggestion above, when introducing the notion of a confused question. According to this suggestion, the point of emphasizing the languages would be to criticize ontologists for, as it were, trying to step outside of language. Metaphysicians are envisaged as asking questions like: "I know that 'S' is a true sentence of my language, but – language-independently – is it really the case that S?". If this is a correct diagnosis of what metaphysicians are doing, certainly metaphysicians are confused. But the diagnosis would have to be defended. Of course metaphysicians would strenuously resist this description of what they are concerned with. In this section I will look at some other ways in which language pluralism might form the basis for certain criticisms of the enterprise of ontology. Some contemporary metaphysicians skeptical of this certainly centrally emphasize that there is a plurality of languages. Most prominent here is Eli Hirsch.<sup>37</sup> One of Hirsch's ideas is that ontological disputes are *purely verbal*. Ontologists are just speaking different languages, speaking past each other. Another idea is that of quantifier variance: there are many different possible concepts of existence such that none is objectively better than the other – and when, say, 'exists' is used to express one concept 'numbers exist' comes out true, and when it is used to express another concept, 'numbers exist' comes out untrue. I will not here try to evaluate either of these Hirschean ideas. All I want to do here is to relate them to what Carnap is doing.

Hirsch argues for the first idea by appeal to specific ideas in philosophy of language, specifically concerning what correct interpretation involves. Carnap's discussion in (1950) are decidedly not of that kind, so if Carnap's claim is that ontological disputes are verbal in this sense, his discussion is oddly incomplete. For to argue that ontological debates as actually prosecuted are verbal, it is not enough to insist that the different possible languages do exist: it must in addition be shown to be plausible that the disputants employ different languages.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See e.g. Hirsch (2002), (2005), (2007) and (2009). Hilary Putnam has prominently put forward similar ideas, but in Putnam's work they are bound up with realism/antirealism issues.

<sup>38</sup> At one point in his (1950), Carnap does say the following about an envisaged platonist and an envisaged nominalist:

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....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 the possible evidence regarded as relevant by both sides. (p. 219)

In the first quoted sentence Carnap brings attention to the sort of the thing that the friend of the claim that ontological disputes are verbal would call attention to. But rather than simply concluding, as would be natural, that the disputants are really concerned with *different* questions, he appears to conclude that they are both concerned with one and the same *external pseudo-question*.

As for the quantifier variance idea, note a significant unclarity in the idea as stated. What is it to say that there are different ‘concepts of existence’? Not merely that there are different things that ‘exists’ (or ‘there are’, etc.), non-semantically individuated, could mean. That would be trivial. Hardly that there are different things that ‘exists’ could mean compatibly with meaning what it actually does. That threatens to make little sense.

One way to get around this dilemma would involve arguing that ‘exists’ could mean different things compatibly with its actual meaning, if as actually used it is somehow semantically indeterminate or context-sensitive. The different meanings would then correspond to different precisifications, or to what ‘exists’ expresses in different contexts. Another way to get around it is to give an account of what it is for an expression to have a meaning suitably like the actual meaning of ‘exists’. Hirsch takes the latter route, appealing specifically to similarities in inferential behavior.<sup>39</sup> If Carnap’s idea is that of quantifier variance, he is to be criticized for not paying attention to problems such as these.

Suppose, however, that we can somehow make adequate sense of the idea of, e.g., platonist and nominalist languages, despite these problems. That is, suppose that there are variants of English, Platonist English and Nominalist English, like English except that in the former the counterparts of the sentences of English which express platonism come out true and in the latter the counterparts of the sentences of English which express nominalism come out true. There is still another important problem concerning how to evaluate the significance of language pluralism. Dorr (2005) brings up the possibility of an “astronomically impoverished language”: a language like an ordinary language except that due to certain prohibitions nothing farther than a certain distance from earth can be referred to or quantified over in this language. Compare English with astronomically impoverished English, and consider the choice as to which of these languages to speak. For some purposes, the choice between English and astronomically impoverished English can be regarded as merely pragmatic. For some purposes, it could be more convenient to speak astronomically impoverished English. But importantly, there is also a way in which English is non-pragmatically – *factually* – better than astronomically impoverished English. There is, so to speak, lots of world that can be expressed in English but not astronomically impoverished English. A fully adequate theory of the world would have to amount to the whole story about the world. Such a theory couldn’t be stated in astronomically impoverished English. Astronomically impoverished English is, precisely, *impoverished*.

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In his earlier (1935), Carnap does appear to say that proponents of what appear to be different views tend to speak different languages; see pp. 75-8.

<sup>39</sup> Hirsch (2002), p. 55. There are problems with such appeal, due to the fact that it appears provable that if two expressions satisfy the standard introduction and elimination rules for the existential quantifier, then they are provably equivalent. See Williamson (1987-8) for relevant discussion.



Now, if there are, somehow, such languages as Platonist English and Nominalist English but these languages are related to each other as English and astronomically impoverished English are, then, one may worry, Carnap's pointing to a multitude of languages does not show anything of ontological or metaontological interest. For it appears the platonist simply wins. (Compare: the believer in other galaxies needn't be worried by the possibility of astronomically impoverished English.) Platonism is simply true, even if for some purposes we can restrict ourselves to speaking of the concrete. I essentially made this point above, in connection with the analytic platonist interpretation of Carnap. But the point is relevant even if we set analytic platonism to the side. Generally, even if there are, in some sense, platonist languages and nominalist languages, but only a platonist language is adequate for expressing all the world there is, then there is a clear sense in which the platonist objectively wins. So for language pluralism to be at all interesting, all of the languages discussed would have to be equally adequate for giving expression to all the world there is; or else it will have to be maintained that such comparisons of expressive adequacy are impossible (perhaps it can be maintained that the languages we are dealing with cannot be compared in this respect).

When I say that there is a clear sense in which the platonist wins if a nominalist language is expressively impoverished, that claim must, in light of some of the distinctions made, be interpreted with some care. It is not to say that there is an answer to the confused question. It is rather to say that this is a possible objective measure by means of which to adjudicate the platonism/nominalism dispute even if language pluralism is true, even if the quantifier variance thesis can be made sense of, and even if confused questions do not make any sense.

Again this is a complication that is not discussed by Carnap. If anything, his discussion in (1950) suggests precisely that platonist languages are more expressively powerful. For the way he sets things up, we get a platonist language by adding another fragment to a language. Two remarks on this.

First, if Carnap identifies the metaphysicians' question as the external, confused question, he can *in principle* take the comparison with the astronomically impoverished language in his stride. He can say that even if a nominalist language is impoverished in this respect, that does not mean that there is an answer to the external, confused question. For his point is not that of quantifier variance. But this may sound a bit hollow. For if the comparison with the astronomically impoverished language is apt, there is still – even if the so-called confused questions really are confused – a fine objective measure by means of which to adjudicate a dispute recognizably like the platonist/nominalist dispute.

Second, Carnap's inattention to the question of expressive equivalence can be thought to have an obvious explanation. Carnap can hold that two languages are expressively equivalent in the sense that matters if they each can express all the *synthetic* truths there are, and that adding, say, the

‘framework of numbers’ only means adding analytic truths. Analyticity would then be relevant after all, not for language pluralism in itself but for one kind of application. Consider a point Carnap makes in a different context.

From the sentences thus laid down the scientist now tries to derive other synthetic sentences, e.g. to make predictions about the future. The analytic sentences serve as auxiliaries for these inferential operations. Considered from the point of view of the total language, the whole logic, including mathematics, is nothing else but an auxiliary calculus for handling synthetic sentences. Formal science has no independent meaning.<sup>40</sup>

If this is a reason for not being concerned about comparisons of expressive resourcefulness, then the analytic/synthetic distinction is relevant after all. But what it is relevant for is not internal/external distinction itself, but a claim about the relations between the different possible languages being postulated.

Even if the analytic/synthetic distinction can be maintained, and even if it can be appealed to here, it does not immediately help ward off all expressive impoverishment worries. Carnap wants to apply the same diagnosis to the dispute between the phenomenalist and the believer in material objects as to the dispute between platonists and nominalists. And for the analytic/synthetic distinction to be of help with respect to this other dispute, it would have to be maintained that a ‘thing language’ can be obtained by appending analytic rules to a phenomenalist language. This is of course a highly controversial idea, even though Carnap certainly was inclined to subscribe to it.<sup>41</sup>

## V. Carnap versus Quine

We have distinguished between four views that can, in principle, be ascribed to Carnap: relativism, language pluralism, analytic platonism and creationism. Each view can only problematically be ascribed to Carnap. But it may still be important to note that on neither of these views is it quite clear just what the supposed Carnap-Quine dispute over the enterprise of ontology might come to.

Let me first briefly review some facts about Quine’s views on ontology. Quine thinks that it is existential quantification which carries ontological commitment. Appealing to confirmational holism and to the claim that the appeal to theoretical virtues which help decide between scientific theories (simplicity, explanatoriness,...) is relevant and helpful also when it comes to deciding between metaphysical views. Appeal to these criteria helps decide what to quantify over. Mathematical objects and material objects alike are ‘posits’, not in the sense that they are myths, but

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<sup>40</sup> Carnap (1935/1953), p. 127. See too Carnap (1934/1937), §14, p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> Carnap (1935), p. 81.

in the sense that the reasons for believing in them have to do with explanatory usefulness. Rejecting the analytic/synthetic distinction, Quine would reject the idea that ontological claims are sometimes analytically true.

On the face of it, this is all relatively straightforward. Although one can problematize the question of how Quine is best understood, I think this brief review will do for present purposes. My question is: how is any of this supposed to be related to Carnap's views? While there are undeniable differences between Quine and Carnap, are any of them properly viewed as different views on the general question of the subject of ontology?

Since Quine is not a relativist, there would clearly be an important difference between Quine and Carnap if Carnap were a relativist. But I criticized this reading of Carnap as implausible. And anyway, the criticisms Quine levels at Carnap don't seem relevant to the issue of relativism.<sup>42</sup>

It is more plausible to ascribe to Carnap a language pluralist view. But as noted above, it appears that the considerations Quine marshals against Carnap do not tell against such a view. Moreover, does Quine even have reason to reject language pluralism? The sorts of things Quine wants to emphasize – there not being an analytic/synthetic distinction, confirmation holism, and that theory choice in metaphysics can be made on, in principle, the same grounds as theory choice in science – do not speak against the claim the language pluralist makes. For example, even if Quine's claims are all true there are different possible languages one could use; and even if Quine's claims are all true, it could be that ontologists have attempted to ask external pseudo-questions. And recall further that Quine's remarks on the philosophy of logic – that when it seems people adopt different logics they merely speak past each other – suggest language pluralism.

Language pluralism is not merely the idea that there is a multitude of different languages, but it adds that this holds the key to a dismissive stance toward ontology. Perhaps Quine's work helps cast doubt on this further step? There is relevance to the issue of quantifier variance. Quine's criticism of the analytic/synthetic distinction blocks one possible route to maintaining that two languages are expressively equivalent. Given Quine's rejection of that distinction it can no longer be maintained that two languages are expressively equivalent if they can express the same synthetic truths. But at the same time, the overall import of this criticism is hard to gauge. For without the analytic/synthetic distinction we have also lost one relatively straightforward means to judge claims about expressive equivalence and inequivalence. Suppose that – along the lines of the relevant way of building on language pluralism – we take there to be a tie between platonism and nominalism if

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<sup>42</sup> Sometimes it is said that Quine's thesis of ontological relativity amounts to a form of relativism. First, if this were true it would simply amount to another problem for the view of Quine as the champion of ontological realism in a debate with Carnap. Second, more importantly, the claim rather clearly is not true. Quine has made clear that the thesis of ontological relativity just is the claim of inscrutability of reference. The latter is an indeterminacy thesis, and indeterminacy is distinct from any form of relativism.

platonist and nominalist languages are expressively equivalent but that one of these –isms wins if one type of language is expressively impoverished. Then the point that claims about expressive equivalence and inequivalence of languages cannot be evaluated does not immediately help either the friend of the claim that there is a tie or the friend of the claim that there is a winner.

Quine's critique of analyticity is of course relevant to the creationist interpretation of Carnap. If there aren't any analytic truths, then there aren't any *created* analytic truths. But the critique is overkill: for on this interpretation of Carnap, Carnap not only believes in analytic truth, but holds a far more problematic specific view on what analytic truth amounts to.

Turn lastly to analytic platonism. Of course Quine and Carnap differ on whether some claims, including the claim we express by "there are numbers", are *analytically* true. Carnap believes this; Quine denies it. Undeniably this is a difference. But it is hardly enough of a difference to make Carnap the champion of ontological deflationists and Quine the champion of serious ontologists. Suppose a particular theorist holds that it is analytic that atoms have mass. Presumably she is wrong. But does she take inquiry into atoms less seriously because she believes this? Hardly. Or suppose she believes that it is analytic that all bachelors are unmarried. That hardly makes her take inquiry concerning bachelors less seriously. Of course it is *less common* to believe, with Carnap, that some claims to the effect that such-and-such exists – positive existence claims – can be analytic. It is held that something about existence prevents this from being the case. But what does all this have to do with taking ontology seriously? Of course, if analytic truths are somehow trivial, then the specific truths that are claimed to be analytic are perhaps not to be taken to be ontologically serious. But unless all existence claims are taken to be analytic, we do not thereby get a general verdict on ontology.

Suppose then that a theorist subscribes to the following global claim: that *all* true ontological claims are held to be analytically true. Then it is more plausible that she does not take ontology seriously. But it is correspondingly less plausible that she holds a position anyone has ever held. What about, e.g., claims to the effect that there are chairs? It is much less strange to hold, say, that all true existence claims to the effect that some pure abstract object exists are analytic. Maybe someone who holds this is taking the *ontology of pure abstracta* less than fully seriously. But what she is less serious about are *pure abstracta*; she is not less serious about *ontology*. (While one of Carnap's main aims in (1950) was to defend talk about abstracta, the discussion is clearly not supposed to be confined to that case.)

A more reasonable claim in the vicinity is that all fully general true ontological claims – to the effect that there are abstracta, that there are material objects, etc. – are analytically true. (Making the condition of full generality precise would be difficult, to say the least.) But this is not plausible

either. Can it be taken as analytic – even given a general outlook such as Carnap’s – that material objects exist? Or that there are experiences?<sup>43</sup>

A more reasonable claim still is that all properly ontological disputes turn on analytic claims. Even if it is not analytic that material objects exist, it can be suggested that it is analytic that given certain base truths (say, about experiences), then material objects exist. I doubt that many would find that plausible today, but Carnap can well be ascribed such a view. Generalizing, the dispute between Carnap and Quine can be held to concern whether ontological disputes always turn on analytic truths. This is the most promising suggestion for someone who wants to maintain that there is a deep difference between the views of Carnap and Quine. But recall a point made in connection with the above discussion of analytic platonism: if the main difference concerns analyticity, why the focus on the external/internal distinction?

## VI. Carnap on Quine

Another possibility – one apparently embraced by Carnap himself – is that it is just wrong to take there to be a significant difference between Carnap’s and Quine’s views on ontology. Carnap himself says in a footnote in his (1950),

When Quine in the article “On What There Is” classifies my logistic conception of mathematics (derived from Frege and Russell) as “platonic realism”....this is meant (according to a personal communication from him) not as ascribing to me agreement with Plato’s metaphysical doctrine of universals, but merely as referring to the fact that I accept a language of mathematics containing variables of higher levels. With respect to the basic attitude to take in choosing a language form (an “ontology” in Quine’s terminology, which seems to me misleading), there appears now to be agreement between us: “the obvious counsel is tolerance and an experimental spirit”.<sup>44</sup>

This passage suggests that Carnap doesn’t think that there is a substantive difference between him and Quine on the issue of ontology. Might Carnap and Quine, when they appear to disagree, simply be focusing on different things? Here is one model for how things could be so. The language pluralist interpretation of Carnap is correct. Carnap takes ontology to be concerned with what I have called confused questions, and hence criticizes ontology; Quine rather emphasizes how internal

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<sup>43</sup> Compare Yablo (1998): “Quine apparently considers it a foregone conclusion that experience should take a course given which ‘there are material objects’ is assertible in the thing framework. How could it be? It is not analytic that experience even occurs” (p. 236).

<sup>44</sup> Carnap (1950), fn. 5.

“there are...” -questions are answerable by the same methods that generally are employed in science. Carnap condemns one project; Quine defends another. There is then no real conflict.<sup>45</sup>

## VII. Concluding remarks

In this discussion, I have sought to problematize both what Carnap’s dismissive view on ontology really amounted to, and what the differences between Carnap and Quine over the legitimacy of ontology as an enterprise really were.

I believe these points are important for the contemporary debate over ontology. Participants in the contemporary debate over ontology take themselves to be continuing the Carnap-Quine debate. If there is no genuine Carnap-Quine debate, then the contemporary debate has somewhat questionable roots. As has been brought up, contemporary views dismissive of ontology, appealing to the idea of verbal disputes and the idea of quantifier variance, are hardly exactly Carnap’s. So skepticism about the ‘Carnap-Quine’ dispute doesn’t *directly* translate into skepticism about the contemporary metaontological debate. But there’s still indirect relevance. A dismissive attitude about ontology is typically bound up with the idea of different languages or frameworks, and the idea that what the disputants say comes out correct in their respective languages or frameworks. This general idea is recognizably Carnapian.

I am skeptical of whether this is the most reasonable way to go for someone inclined to be dismissive of ontology. But of course the present remarks on Carnap are not sufficient to warrant such skepticism.

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<sup>45</sup> Compare too what Carnap says in his Autobiography in the Schilpp volume (1963):

I have the impression that among empiricists today there is no longer strong opposition to abstract entities, either in semantics or in any field of mathematics or empirical science. In particular, Quine has recently taken a tolerant, pragmatic attitude which seems close to my position. (p. 67)

and what he said in a 1949 letter to Quine, printed in Creath (1990):

I read with great interest your paper “On What There Is”. I was very glad to find at the end your plea for “tolerance and experimental spirit”. This is exactly the same attitude for which I plead in my paper (and which I expressed in almost the same terms, even before having read yours). (p. 415)

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