From Non-cognitivism to Global Expressivism: Carnap's Unfinished Journey?

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1. Carnap's non-cognitivism

Carnap was one of the first writers to use the term 'non-cognitivism'. He introduces it in his reply to Abraham Kaplan in the Schilpp volume (Kaplan, 1963; Carnap 1963). Carnap wrote this reply in the mid-1950s, though he had endorsed the view itself decades earlier, as Kaplan notes: 'The position to be considered was stated by Carnap some twenty years ago.' (Kaplan 1963, 827) Kaplan quotes the following text from (Carnap 1935, 24):

'The rule, "Do not kill," has grammatically the imperative form and will therefore not be regarded as an assertion. But the value statement, "Killing is evil," although like the rule, it is merely an expression of a certain wish, has the grammatical form of an assertive proposition. Most philosophers have been deceived by this form into thinking that a value statement is really an assertive proposition and must be either true or false. Therefore, they give reasons for their own value statements and try to disprove those of their opponents. But actually a value statement is nothing else than a command in a misleading grammatical form. It may have effects upon the actions of men, and these effects may either be in accordance with our wishes or not; but it is neither true nor false. It does not assert anything and can neither be proved nor disproved.'

Kaplan then offers his own gloss of Carnap's view, saying that '[w]hat is essential is that "true" and "false" are held to be inapplicable to value judgments, a point usually expressed by denying them "cognitive meaning."' (Kaplan 1963, 827) He continues:

'Within logical empiricism and related philosophical standpoints there is general agreement only on this denial. In the positive statement of the content of value judgments there are variants: they express imperatives (Carnap), volitions (Reichenbach), emotions (Ayer), or attitudes (Stevenson); or they are to be explicated in terms of these and a variety of other uses (the Oxford analysts). Following the usage now unfortunately established, we shall designate the general position as emotivist, *recognizing the inappropriateness of so narrow a term; and the contrary position, holding that value judgments may be either true or false, as* cognitivist.' (Kaplan 1963, 827–828)

Responding to Kaplan, Carnap agrees that he is what Kaplan calls an emotivist, but suggests that a more general term would be preferable:

'My own conception of value statements belongs to the general kind which is customarily labeled "emotivism". … However, since the term "emotivism" is sometimes associated by critics with too narrow an interpretation which today is rejected by most of the adherents of this conception …, it is perhaps preferable to use a more general term, e.g., "non-cognitivism (with respect to value statements)".' He goes on to say that this view *'is simply a special case of* <u>the general thesis of logical empiricism that there is no third kind of knowledge besides empirical and logical knowledge.</u>*'* (Carnap, 1963, 999–1000, my emphasis)

In speaking of non-cognitivism (hereafter, NC) 'with respect to value statements', Carnap seems well aware that there might be analogous views of other matters – otherwise the qualification would be unnecessary. Examples were already available: Ramsey (1929) on causation and laws; Ryle (1950) on laws and conditionals; and, arguably (see Beebee 2007, for example), Hume, the great Scottish ancestor of logical empiricism, about causal necessity. Ramsey is an especially interesting case. He argues that lawlike generalisations are not propositions, but nevertheless takes them to be 'cognitive': '[m]any sentences express cognitive attitudes without being propositions; and the difference between saying yes and no to them is not the difference between saying yes or no to a proposition.' (Ramsey 1929, 135) Here Ramsey is wrestling with the inadequacies of the *Tractarian* framework, which had been such an inspiration for the logical empiricists – more on this below.

A generation after the Kaplan–Carnap exchange, I myself came to NC from a non-evaluative direction. In my Cambridge PhD thesis (Price 1981) and an early paper (Price 1983) I defended NC about probability judgements. I considered claims of forms such as 'It is probable that P', where the probabilistic expression is a sentential operator. I argued that the role of such an operator is to modify the *force* of the claim expressed, not its *sense;* these claims are not assertoric, in the normal sense, and not genuinely truth-evaluable. This is comparable to Carnap's view that value judgements are disguised imperatives, rather than assertions.

My interest in the probabilistic case led me to an interest in the nature and grounds of such views in general (Price 1988, 1992), and thence eventually (Price 2011; Price *et al* 2013) to the position I now call *global expressivism.* In the 1990s I discovered Carnap, and came to regard him as a crucial ally (Price 1997). In the present piece, by describing some key landmarks for NC and its progeny in the last forty years, I want to explain why we global expressivists are the natural heirs to Carnap's own NC. However, we are heirs who renounce the above 'general thesis' of our grandfather's own logical empiricism. Abandoning the logical empiricist straightjacket, we are *pluralists* about knowledge, and find inspirations for this pluralism in Carnap's own work.

2. Non-cognitivism in the late 20th Century

By the 1980s, views descended from 1950s NC were coming to be called *projectivism,* and later *expressivism.* The latter term seems to have been introduced by Gibbard (1986, 473), who says of his own view: 'Such an analysis might be called "expressivistic." According to the

analysis, claims about what it makes sense to do express a state of mind: the speaker's acceptance of a system of norms.' Gibbard cites Blackburn's (1984, 167–171) discussion of 'expressive analyses' as a terminological precursor.

Influential works in this period included (Blackburn 1984, 1993) and (Gibbard 1986, 1990). Unlike Gibbard, Blackburn stresses the view's applicability to non-evaluative cases. One of his influential early pieces is 'Morals and modals' (Blackburn 1987), claiming Hume as a precursor in both domains. I want to flag three key lessons of the debates in the 1980s and 1990s.

2.1 Quasi-realism

Carnap was a linguistic reformist, as well as a formalist. In (Carnap 1963) he canvasses the idea of a language of 'pure optatives' (1963, 1001), which would leave behind the features of ethical claims that mislead us about their NC status. Thus he misses, or is simply uninterested in, the question why ordinary evaluative language is *not* like this; why, e.g., we can answer 'That's true' to a moral claim, if it is not truth-apt in the first place.

Blackburn picks up this important question, making it the motivation for the programme he calls *quasi-realism*. He characterises quasi-realism as follows:

'[A] position holding that an expressivist or projectivist account of ethics can explain and make legitimate sense of the realist-sounding discourse within which we promote and debate moral views. This is in opposition to writers who think that if projectivism is correct then our ordinary ways of thinking in terms of a moral truth, or of knowledge, or the independence of ethical facts from our subjective sentiments, must all be in error, reflecting a mistaken realist metaphysics. The quasi-realist seeks to earn our right to talk in these terms on the slender, projective basis.' (Blackburn 1994, 315)

Although Blackburn here describes quasi-realism as a view about ethics, he is elsewhere clear, as I noted, that he takes it to be a more general programme, applicable in some non-evaluative cases. Nevertheless, Blackburn's quasi-realism was still intended as a *local* programme, applicable to a limited range of vocabularies. It took for granted some version of what Kraut (1990) termed the *Bifurcation Thesis* – the view that there is a well-grounded distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive vocabularies (even if this turns out not to be the best terminology in which to mark it). What quasi-realism adds to this thesis, in effect, is the claim that this distinction is not neatly mirrored in linguistic practice. Much that might naively be thought to belong only to the cognitive realm (e.g., as Blackburn puts it above, notions of 'truth, or of knowledge') actually lives on both sides of the line.

In the light of quasi-realism it becomes a subtle question whether, and if so how, such a bifurcation can be drawn at all; and if not, whether that's good news or bad for NC's descendants. Global expressivism argues that there is no such line, but that this is good news for the family business – more in a moment on how this is possible.

2.2 Deflating metaphysics

NC was often interpreted as an *anti-realist* position. In ethics, it was seen as a way of making sense of moral claims, while denying that there are any moral properties, or facts. This was always problematic. If moral language was non-descriptive, how could it be used to make even a negative ontological claim? To paraphrase Ramsey (1929), if you can't say it you can't say it, and you can't deny it, either.

Again, this kind of point has been stressed by Blackburn. Writing in 2005, for example, Blackburn says that '[y]ears ago [he] recognized that the "quasi" in quasi-realism might mislead people', and that he therefore 'took some care to distance [himself] from an "as if" philosophy, holding that we talk "as if" there are (for instance) rights and duties, although there are none really.' (2005, 323) Blackburn then cites the following passage from 'Morals and modals':

'What then is the mistake of describing such a philosophy [quasi-realism] as holding that "we talk as if there are necessities when really there are none"? It is the failure to notice that the quasi-realist need allow no sense to what follows the "as if" except one in which it is true. And conversely he need allow no sense to the contrasting proposition in which it in turn is true. He no more need allow such sense than (say) one holding Locke's theory of colour need accept the view that we talk as if there are colours, when there are actually none. This is doubly incorrect, because nothing in the Lockean view forces us to allow any sense to "there are colours" except one in which it is true; conversely neither need it permit a sense to "there are actually none" in which that *is true.'* (Blackburn 1987, 57)

Blackburn goes on to say that 'if the words retain an uncorrupted, English, sense then the Lockean and similarly the quasi-realist, holds not just that we talk and think as if there are [colours, moral properties, etc] but that there are.' (2005, 323)

Arguably, then, the best way to read quasi-realism is as a view that rejects both kinds of traditional metaphysics, realist *and* anti-realist. This is an attitude to metaphysics that has long been in play in the empiricist tradition, as Carnap himself makes clear. In 'Empiricism, semantic and ontology' he notes that '[i]nfluenced by ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the [Vienna] Circle rejected both the thesis of the reality of the external world and the thesis of its irreality as pseudo-statements; the same was the case for both the thesis of the reality of universals … and the nominalistic thesis that they are not real and that their alleged names are not names of anything but merely *flatus vocis.'* (Carnap 1950, 32–33)

In this context, Carnap describes the kind of external questions that he allows as 'non-cognitive', meaning that they involve practical decisions about whether to adopt a framework, not deliberations about some factual matter. As Flocke (2020) points out, this use of 'non-cognitive' can be brought under the umbrella of NC by imagining a linguistic framework whose function is to express such practical recommendations.

In my view (see, e.g., Price 1997), Carnap's rejection of external metaphysical questions provides just the ammunition that quasi-realists need, to defeat the efforts of their opponents to put substantial metaphysics back on the table. Quasi-realists allow that as users of moral language, we may talk of the existence of values and moral facts, in what Carnap would call an internal sense. What is important is to deny that there is any other sense in which these issues make sense.

2.3 Deflating semantics

In the metaphysical arena, NC thus benefits by keeping a low profile – by following Carnap in dismissing traditional metaphysical debates, in favour of a low-key, speak-with-the-folk realism. But in the semantic arena, similar deflationist tendencies were widely seen as a disaster for NC. If truth is 'thin', in the sense proposed by writers such as Ramsey (1927), Quine (1970), and Horwich (1990), then it seems easy to be truth-apt, and implausible to claim that utterances that *appear* to be truth-apt nevertheless fail to be so. An early version of this thought is that of McDowell (1981). After describing a thin approach to truth based on the equivalence schema, McDowell adds this footnote:

'It is a philosophical issue whether there are respectable purposes for which a stronger notion of truth is required. A familiar sort of non-cognitivist about values, for instance, making play with the idea that real truth is correspondence to objective reality, will not be content with the application of my [disquotational] platitude to, say, ethical assertions. … I am inclined to suppose that this is a matter not so much of an alternative notion of truth as of a characteristically philosophical misconception of the only notion of truth we really have: one which the platitude in fact suffices to determine.' (McDowell 1981, 229, n. 9)

Similar arguments were offered by Boghossian (1990), Humberstone (1991), and Wright (1992), amongst others.

In my view, these arguments get things back to front. Semantic minimalism is good news for NC. The best way to see this is to notice – as indeed Kaplan (1963, 828) already points out, in the passage quoted above – that traditional NC makes two claims: a *negative claim,* that the utterances in question are not truth-apt (or something of that *semantic* kind); and a *positive claim,* that the utterances in question have some other (not semantically-characterised) function. Semantic minimalism undermines the negative claim, which is incompatible with the minimalist's thesis that semantic terms are too thin to do theoretical work. But it leaves the positive claim intact. So long as NC puts all its weight on the positive, functional story, it is completely untouched by the deflation of the negative claim. Some of the ways that NC characterised itself have to be abandoned, but this clarifies and strengthens the view.

The upshot is that semantic minimalism is bad news for NC's opponents. It deprives them of the semantic vocabulary in which they find it natural to state their own view – a vocabulary that puts theoretical weight on notions such as truth and reference. That may be a problem for *local* expressivists, but because it recommends global expressivism, not because it recommends

global cognitivism. In a deflationary sense it does recommend global cognitivism, but this is no help to the opponent who wishes to disagree with NC's claims about the functions of particular vocabularies. Blackburn himself makes points of this kind, especially in passages (Blackburn 1998a, 166–167; 1998b, 77–83) in which he interprets Wittgenstein as a global or near-global quasi-realist, in this spirit; see (Price 2017, 2019, 2022a, 2022b, 2023, ch. 11) for my own most recent accounts of what I take global expressivism to involve.

3. Carnap's internal challenge to logical empiricism

As Carus (2018) notes, Carnap is in many ways a friend to global expressivism. His voluntarism about linguistic frameworks is very congenial for the global expressivist's functional pluralism. But there is an internal tension in Carnap's view. As Carus stresses, Carnap was himself a semantic deflationist:

'Carnap's … treatment of semantics was so "thin" (in Price's terms) that Russell, for instance, completely misunderstood it, even after spending half a year at Chicago talking to Carnap about it in person. … [H]is approach to semantics and modality were as "minimalist" as any of the current authors Price cites. … [H]is syntactic attempts in the early 1930s to do away with reference in the metalanguage are recognized as anticipating the very efforts to "explain reference away" (Brandom 1984) that Price takes as exemplary of the minimalism he seeks to generalize.' (Carus 2018, 445–446)

This means that Carnap is perfectly entitled to construct a formal language of optative speech acts, not treated as apt for truth and falsity. But of *actual* evaluative discourse, or any of the other actual vocabularies for which NC is proposed, he's not entitled to say that the claims of that discourse are not *really* apt for truth, or that there aren't *really* any facts or knowledge of that kind. We certainly *talk* of truth, knowledge, and the like in these cases – that's the quasi-realist's starting point. And a semantic minimalist lacks the theoretical resources to characterise such talk as somehow mistaken or second-rate. That was the point correctly made by McDowell, Humberstone, Boghossian, Wright and others, even if they failed to see that it actually supported global expressivism, not global cognitivism in the old sense.

I noted that Carnap says that NC 'is simply a special case of the general thesis of logical empiricism that there is no third kind of knowledge besides empirical and logical knowledge.' (Carnap 1963, 1000) I have argued that his own semantic minimalism turns out to be deeply in tension with this general thesis. If we bear in mind the *Tractarian* roots of logical empiricism, the source of Carnap's internal difficulty is clear. Unlike Ramsey (1929) – and unlike the later Wittgenstein himself, influenced by Ramsey, as Misak (2016, 2017) makes clear – Carnap is at this point still loyal to these *Tractarian* roots. Accordingly, by my lights, his journey towards global expressivism remains incomplete.

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