

Carnap and Ontological Pluralism*

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I. INTRODUCTION

My focus here will be Rudolf Carnap's views on ontology, as these are presented in the seminal "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology" (1950). I will first describe how I think Carnap's distinction between external and internal questions is best understood. Then I will turn to broader issues regarding Carnap's views on ontology. With certain reservations, I will ascribe to Carnap an *ontological pluralist* position roughly similar to the positions of Eli Hirsch and the later Hilary Putnam. Then I turn to some interrelated arguments against the pluralist view. The arguments are not demonstrative. Some possible escape routes for the pluralist are outlined. But I think the arguments constitute a formidable challenge. There should be serious doubt as to whether the pluralist view, as it emerges after discussion of these arguments, will be worth defending. Moreover, there is an alternative ontological view which equally well subserves the motivations underlying ontological pluralism.

The paper will be structured as follows. In sections II through V, I will focus on the interpretation of Carnap. In section VI, I will briefly turn to a different theme from Hirsch's works. Sections VII and VIII will be devoted to problems faced by ontological pluralism. In the concluding section IX, I will briefly describe another view on ontology, which I argue satisfies the main motivations behind ontological pluralism.

II. EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL QUESTIONS

A distinction between *external* and *internal* questions is central to Carnap's views on ontology. Carnap introduces it as follows.

...we must distinguish two kinds of questions of existence: first, questions of the existence of certain entities of the new kind *within the framework*; we call them *internal questions*; and second, questions concerning the existence or reality *of the system of entities as a whole*, called *external questions*.

Internal questions and possible answers to them are formulated with the help of the new forms

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of expressions. The answers may be found either by purely logical methods or by empirical methods, depending upon whether the framework is a logical or a factual one.¹

Carnap describes external questions as “problematic”.² Later he says more about how he conceives of them:

From the internal questions we must clearly distinguish external questions, i.e., philosophical questions concerning the existence or reality of the total system of the new entities. Many philosophers regard a question of this kind as an ontological question which must be raised and answered before the introduction of the new language forms. The latter introduction, they believe, is legitimate only if it can be justified by an ontological insight supplying an affirmative answer to the question of reality. In contrast to this view, we take the position that the introduction of the new ways of speaking does not need any theoretical justification because it does not imply any assertion of reality. We may still speak (and have done so) of “the acceptance of the framework” or “the acceptance of the new entities” since this form of speech is customary; but one must keep in mind that this phrase does not mean for us anything more than acceptance of the new linguistic forms. Above all, they must not be interpreted as referring to an assumption, belief, or assertion of “the reality of the entities”. There is no such assertion. An alleged statement of the reality of the framework of entities is a pseudo-statement without cognitive content.³

For Carnap, then, a question of the form “Are there Fs?” can be understood in a number of different ways. Understood as an *internal* question, as a question raised “within the framework”, it is unproblematic. If it is understood as an *external* question, matters are more complicated. If understood as an external question and as a question about *matters of fact*, it lacks cognitive content. But this does not mean that “Are there Fs?” understood as an external question is always illegitimate or inadvisable. It can be understood as a question about whether we ought to adopt a framework such that (a) we can talk about Fs in this framework, and (b) “there are Fs” comes out true in this framework. (Notice that there are, in principle, two issues here.⁴) Let us say that Carnap distinguishes between *factual-external questions* and *pragmatic-external questions*. He thinks factual-external questions lack cognitive content – we should properly talk about *supposedly* factual-external questions – but pragmatic-external questions may well be important. (This explicit distinction between ‘pragmatic’

¹ Carnap (1950), p. 206.

² Carnap (1950), p. 206.

³ Carnap (1950), p. 214.

⁴ Carnap runs them together, in a way that may be significant. See further the discussion below.

and ‘factual’ external questions is mine not Carnap’s. What Carnap says is that external questions are devoid of ‘cognitive content’. They are still in order, so long as one understands that they are merely pragmatic. But it is a philosophical error to suppose them to be factual. In the terminology introduced here: pragmatic-external questions are fine; to try to ask a factual-external question is just confused.)

This much is relatively unproblematic. The key question to how Carnap is to be understood is how to understand “framework”. There are two main alternatives. The first alternative is that by “framework” Carnap means simply language, or language-fragment. A second alternative is that he means something more relativistically or idealistically loaded; something more along the lines of *perspective*, or *worldview*. On this second, more loaded interpretation of Carnap, Carnap says something analogous to what the relativist says when she says that relative to our culture, infanticide is wrong but relative to some alien framework infanticide is not wrong and the question of whether infanticide is or is not wrong, independently of any framework, cannot even be raised. On the former interpretation, what Carnap says has nothing to do with that form of relativism: the only relativity involved is the relativity of the meaning of a string of symbols to a language.

It seems to me that the first alternative is considerably more plausible. Consider the passage where Carnap introduces the notion of a framework:

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.⁵

This makes perfect sense if by “framework” Carnap means language, or, better, language-fragment. If I want to expand my language to talk about some new kind of entities, then I must introduce new expressions for entities of this kind, and, by the lights of Carnap’s philosophy of language, a set of rules, or meaning postulates, for the new expressions in question. Moreover, when Carnap introduces the notion of a framework he gives no indication that the existence of frameworks, in the given sense, could be up for debate. He assumes that no one can sensibly object to the notion, and to there being framework-dependence. This too argues for taking frameworks to be something straightforward.

Some commentators – one recent example is André Gallois (1998) – take Carnap to hold that existence sentences can only ever be true in a framework relative sense, and take this further to mean that for Carnap, existence statements are always something less than objectively, absolutely

⁵ Carnap (1950), 206.

true.⁶ But if frameworks are just language-fragments, the framework dependence is just the straightforward dependence upon language for sentence truth.

If “framework” means language-fragment, the internal questions are those that concern what comes out true in the language we actually employ; pragmatic-external concern which language it is useful to employ; and factual-external questions are neither and thus by Carnap’s lights make no sense. Here is an analogy. One can imagine three different debates, two of which are in order and one confused, that all can be brought under the heading “Is the tomato a fruit or a vegetable?”. (1) Most straightforwardly, we can conceive of a debate over whether the “the tomato is a fruit” is true as turning on what actually comes out true in our common language, English. When you and I discuss the matter, then you win if you say “the tomato is a fruit” and this sentence actually is what comes out true in our language. Taken thus, it is an internal question. (2) Somewhat less straightforwardly, perhaps, we can imagine a debate where the disputants are less concerned with what comes out true in English as actually spoken, but are concerned with whether it would be more pragmatically useful to speak a version of English just like English except for the possible difference that “the tomato is a fruit” comes out true there. Taken thus, the debate is over a pragmatic-external question. (3) Most obscurely, we can imagine two disputants who announce that they are not concerned with what comes out true in English – perhaps both agree that “the tomato is a fruit” is best English – and who further announce that they are not concerned with a pragmatic question of how we should speak. They announce that what they are concerned with is whether, in some language-independent sense, the tomato really is a fruit. If it is hard to wrap one’s mind around what this would amount to, that is because these disputants would be seriously confused. What on earth could be at issue between them? Well, what *would* be at issue is the “factual-external question” of whether the tomato is a fruit. It is such questions that Carnap wants to set aside as confused, and the example helps show what would be confused about them. What might a question such as the one envisaged amount to?

As I understand the external/internal (E/I) distinction, it is entirely straightforward. The internal questions concern what comes out true in the language we actually use. Pragmatic-external questions are about which language it is useful to use. Such questions too can be meaningfully asked. Factual-external questions are obviously nonsensical.

⁶ Gallois (1998), p. 273; compare too Haack (1976) and Stroud (1984). As we will later see, there may actually be some pressure on Carnap to accept some form of idealism, but that is different. The idealism would be something he is committed to; not something he cheerfully subscribes to.

The references to Carnap in Sider (2001) are worth bringing up here. Sider first (p. xix) clearly defends a view on Carnap on which frameworks are just languages, but later (p. 157), he speaks as if Carnap is a relativist or idealist of some sort.

A worry one might have about the E/I distinction as thus far explained is that disputes have been construed as disputes over *sentences*. One may think that disputes are better understood as disputes over *propositions*, and that this might cause problems for the distinction as explained. But the Carnapian distinctions can be drawn also with respect to propositions.

Think of propositions as structured entities, with concepts as constituents. When you say, in English, “the tomato is a fruit” and I say “no, the tomato is not a fruit”, our dispute is most naturally understood as being about whether the proposition expressed by the sentence “the tomato is a fruit” is the proposition *that the tomato is a fruit* – is true. Thus understood, the dispute is over an internal question. But we can also envisage a dispute in effect about whether we should employ the actual concept *fruit* that we employ or whether we should employ a slight variant of it, *fruit**, such that some propositions *a is a fruit* and *a is a fruit** differ in truth-value. Such a dispute would be a dispute over a pragmatic-external question. Again, a would-be factual-external question would be confused. We are to consider two disputants, agreeing on the truth-value of the proposition expressed by “the tomato is a fruit” of their common language, and not simply engaged in a pragmatic dispute, but still insisting that they are engaged in a real dispute over whether the tomato is really a fruit. (We will see later that putting things in terms of propositions is in certain ways problematic for Carnap. The point here is just that the E/I distinction can still be drawn, even if our concern is with propositions rather than sentences.)

Turn now to ontological questions, which are what Carnap wants to apply his distinction to. Take the dispute between the platonist and the nominalist over whether there are numbers, as we would naively put it. By Carnap’s lights, we must distinguish between different things that can be going on. The dispute can be over the truth of the sentence “there are numbers”, or the proposition expressed by the sentence “there are numbers”, in which case it is over an internal question. It can be about whether we should employ a language like English except slightly different, such that the counterpart of “there are numbers” comes out true there. (Or, in terms of propositions, whether we should employ a system of concepts such that the counterpart of *there are numbers* comes out true there.) Or the dispute can be over a factual-external question, in which case it is confused.

In what follows, I will tend to talk about what language, and what sentences, are being used, thus following Carnap in focusing on language. Nothing will turn on this. Also, when it will be convenient and will not cause any confusion, I will talk about *statements*, letting this be ambiguous as between talking about sentences and talking about propositions.

In the literature, there has been some confusion regarding what Carnap wants to conclude regarding platonism and nominalism given his E/I distinction. John Burgess (2004) takes Carnap to defend platonism; Gallois (1998) takes seriously the possibility that Carnap really is a nominalist (and Marc Alspector-Kelly (2001) argues that this was also Quine’s understanding of Carnap); still others

would see Carnap rather as dissolving the debate than as taking sides. I do not see how there can be any serious discussion about what Carnap's views really were. If the platonism/nominalism dispute is held to be over the supposedly deep factual-external question, then Carnap would – seemingly eminently reasonably – want to reject the debate as meaningless. If the debate is held to be over the pragmatic-external question, Carnap is definitely on platonism's side: we should use a platonist language. Carnap does not address the question of what actually comes out true in ordinary language, finding this question unimportant.

Carnap's E/I distinction is often seen as bound up with the analytic/synthetic (A/S) distinction. This is for instance one of the things Quine holds against it.⁷ However, if Carnap is understood as I have proposed we understand him, the E/I distinction is not bound up with the A/S distinction. Compare again the tomato-case. Taking Carnap's suggestion on board does not seem to amount to anything more controversial than that there are different possible English-like languages, one of which is such that "the tomato is a fruit" there comes out true; the other being such that "the tomato is a fruit" there comes out false. No claim to the effect that this sentence is analytic in either language is needed.⁸

III. THE SHALLOWNESS OF ONTOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

On the present interpretation of Carnap's E/I distinction, the distinction is not bound up with any of those things that have made many theorists regard it as doubtful. Indeed, one might worry that on the present interpretation, Carnap turns out to be saying something completely trivial. No matter which disputed sentence we consider, about any subject matter, we can, trivially, distinguish between the internal question and the external questions. And no matter what disputed sentence we consider, the factual-external question appears confused. Carnap evidently thought that his E/I distinction was of consequence for metaontology – for how to conceive of ontological questions – but how can pointing out something this trivial have any significant consequences for metaontology?

Sometimes pointing out something trivial can be philosophically important. If philosophers concerned with existence questions – say about whether there are abstract objects – neither are concerned with how language is used nor see their claims as proposals for language reform, one might in principle legitimately accuse them of confusion: of attempting to ask factual-external questions. Perhaps, given the methodology of philosophers concerned with ontology, these philosophers are in fact concerned with the factual-external questions, which are mere pseudo-questions.

⁷ See Quine (1951).

⁸ See Bird (2003) for more extended discussion of why the E/I distinction is not bound up with the A/S distinction.

However, Carnap does not solely want to criticize a bad reason for understanding ontological questions to be ‘deep’. He positively wants to dismiss ontological questions as somehow *shallow*. (The only real questions in the vicinity are the internal and pragmatic-external questions and neither type of question has the depth often accorded to ontological questions.) And given the present interpretation of the E/I distinction, one can well accept this distinction without drawing the conclusion that ontological questions are shallow. As I understand the E/I distinction, this distinction can be drawn with respect to all sorts of questions: so if the E/I distinction somehow entailed, by itself, that ontological questions are shallow, all questions would be shallow. This is sufficient to show that the E/I distinction cannot here pull all the weight. One can imagine a certain theorist holding that the E/I distinction together with the observation that internal ontological questions are not empirical entails that ontological questions are shallow: for, the thought would be, the only way a non-empirical question could fail to be shallow is if it is factual-external. But there are good reasons for doubts about the envisaged stance. Why should one agree with the underlying thought, that all non-shallow questions are either empirical or factual-external?

Moreover, we can provide specific models for how ontological questions could fail to be shallow even given the E/I distinction. David Lewis and others have stressed that among all the possible semantic values of expressions that there are, some are intrinsically more natural and more eligible to be meant than others; they are the ones that, so to speak, carve nature at the joints.⁹ An application of this general type of idea to the case of ontology – an application developed by Ted Sider – has it that ontological questions should be conceived as being about what notion of existence carves nature at the joints in this way.¹⁰ This would be one way that ontological questions could be deep even given the E/I distinction. Moreover, Cian Dorr has argued that we should take ontological questions as being asked in a version of natural language – Ontologese – especially well suited to ontological concerns (e.g. where no ontological claims are analytic).¹¹ This is different from a Carnapian emphasis on expediency. Naturally, Carnap did not even think of the issues in the terms that Sider and Dorr think of them. The comparison with Sider and Dorr is meant only to illustrate – should an illustration be needed – how a wedge can be driven between the claim that there is an E/I distinction and the claim that ontological questions are shallow.

I will return below to the relation between the E/I distinction and the Carnapian dismissal of ontological questions as shallow.

IV. ONTOLOGICAL PLURALISM

⁹ See especially Lewis (1983) and (1984).

¹⁰ See e.g. Sider (this volume).

¹¹ See Dorr (2005).

Saying that Carnap somehow wanted to dismiss ontological questions as shallow is not to say anything very definite about exactly what Carnap's positive view on ontological questions was. But it is common to take Carnap to be what I will call an *ontological pluralist*: to hold a view not unlike that today defended by Eli Hirsch (under the name *quantifier variance*) and Hilary Putnam (under the name *conceptual relativity*).¹² (Sometimes Hirsch and Putnam are even described as 'neo-Carnapians'.¹³) What any ontological pluralist view involves is – *roughly*, see immediately below – the following: There are a number of different languages we could speak, such that (a) different existence sentences come out true in these languages, due to the fact that the ontological expressions (counterparts of 'there is', 'exists', etc.) in these languages express different concepts of existence, and (b) these languages can somehow describe the world's facts equally well and fully (maybe some of these languages are more convenient to use than others but that is a different matter). Both Hirsch and Putnam take their ontological pluralism to entail that ontological questions are shallow. Hirsch says for instance that the proponent of quantifier variance "will address a typical question of ontology either by shrugging it off with Carnapian tolerance for many different answers, or by insisting with Austinian glee that the answer is laughably trivial".¹⁴

This brief characterization of ontological pluralism is problematic. The *idea* is that there are languages where nominalism comes out true ("abstract objects exist", or its translation, comes out false in those languages) and languages where platonism comes out true ("abstract objects exist", or its translation, comes out true in those languages): and these languages can describe the world's facts equally well and equally fully. But a serious difficulty concerning how to conceive of ontological pluralism is this. There is an utterly trivial claim in the vicinity. It is that the string of symbols "abstract objects exist" comes out true in some languages but false in others. (To see that this is trivial, consider one possible language where "abstract objects exist" means that everything is self-identical and another where it means that something is not self-identical.) Of course, the ontological pluralist does not want simply to put forward a trivial claim like this. But what else might the pluralist thesis amount to? One alternative is to construe it as the thesis that a string of symbols can come out true in some languages but false in others, *while meaning what it actually means*. Embracing this would appear to commit the ontological pluralist to a form of relativism or idealism absent from the pluralist writings. She must find some alternative formulation.¹⁵

¹² See Hirsch, e.g. (2002), (2004), (2005) and (2007) and Putnam, e.g. (1981), (1987), (1987a), (1990), (1994) and (2004).

¹³ See e.g. Sider (this volume). Hirsch (this volume) describes his own position as 'roughly Carnapian' (p. 1 of ms). Fine (this volume), fn. 2, also assimilates Carnap and Hirsch.

¹⁴ Hirsch (2002), p. 67.

¹⁵ The point is simple, but some commentators discussing Carnap miss it. In their (2005), Steve Awodey and A.W. Carus say, "Any sentence whatever, including... 'This table is black', could be made into a constitutive language rule, and thereby deprived of its descriptive capacity within that language" (p. 212f). The claim is on

Impressionistically, I will keep describing the ontological pluralist as holding that the different languages she posits employ different *existence-like* concepts. This is not an attempt to solve the problem of how best to formulate ontological pluralism: it is rather an attempt to sweep the problem under the rug while we look at other issues.

I will also speak of the pluralist as holding, for example, that some languages are platonist and some are nominalist (and I will occasionally employ other careless formulations of the same kind). The formulation is problematic, and importantly so. For even if two English-like languages of the kind the pluralist posits are such that in one “numbers exist” comes out true and in the other “numbers exist” comes out false, it is not the same sentence that comes out true in one language and false in the other: for ‘exist’ means different things in the two languages. Hence, it is strictly false that in one language it comes out true that numbers exist and in the other language this comes out false, and the point is important. Still I will for simplicity continue talking of platonist and nominalist languages, and employ other formulations of the same general kind. I will say that there are languages where the nominalism comes out true and languages where platonism comes out true, while in both languages ‘exists’ expresses an *existence-like concept*.

Turn next to the requirement that the different languages must be able to describe the facts equally well and equally fully – that they must each be equally expressively resourceful, as I will put it. Ontological pluralists tend not to explicitly introduce a condition like this when they describe their doctrine.¹⁶ But it is not hard to see that a condition like this is needed. In his (2005), Dorr considers an “astronomically impoverished” language. He considers a case where, say for religious reasons, the community has decided to adopt a language wherein nothing can be said about what is farther from the center of gravity of the solar system than one light year.¹⁷ If this language is supposed to be anything like natural language as we know it, there are some difficulties regarding how this in practice could work. God could think of things in other solar systems. What should this community then say about, for example, the phrase “what God is thinking about right now”? But suppose that adequate sense can be made of the idea of languages somewhat like ordinary natural languages except in this

the face of it quite confused. It is a truism, once the idea of constitutive language rules is taken on board, that any string of symbols could be taken as one. It is absurdly false that the same sentence, when sentences are individuated by what they mean, should be a language rule of one language and fail to be a language rule in another. There is a similar problem in Richard Creath (2005). Creath says, “When a claim is a logical consequence of the structural rules of a particular language, it is in effect a priori, albeit relativized to the language in question. Carnap calls such claims analytic. This is not only a relativized a priori, it is also a revisable one. We can give up one of these claims by abandoning the whole language in which it is embedded” (p. 286f). Here too we have an expression of the confused view that a sentence (or ‘claim’) can be a priori and analytic in one language but not be so in another language of which it is part. Creath also indicates that an a priori claim is revisable because we can stop speaking the language of which it is part. But a claim does not stop being true because we do not express it.

¹⁶ Although Hirsch in effect imposes a condition like this, through requiring that the languages he describes should be intertranslatable.

¹⁷ Dorr (2005), p. 237f.

way expressively impoverished. Then if all nominalist languages are expressively impoverished but some platonist languages are not, the platonist simply wins. There would not be the kind of tie that the pluralist claims that there is.

V. WAS CARNAP AN ONTOLOGICAL PLURALIST?

I have presented my interpretation of Carnap's E/I distinction, and described the ontological pluralism sometimes ascribed to Carnap. What is the relation between the E/I distinction and ontological pluralism?

Obviously, ontological pluralism is not entailed by the E/I distinction. The E/I distinction can trivially be drawn, and does not entail anything about there being the equally good languages the pluralist takes there to be. If we interpret Carnap as an ontological pluralist, we must take him to tacitly make this further assumption.

Moreover, even if Carnap makes this further assumption, one can wonder how the skeptical or deflationary or dismissive attitude toward ontology that Carnap seems to have can possibly be justified by ontological pluralism. For if there are the different 'equally good' languages postulated by the pluralist, then it will be true with respect to all subject matters that there will be equally good theories formulated in these different possible equally good languages: yet I take it we would not take a dismissive attitude toward all areas of inquiry similar to Carnap's dismissive attitude toward ontology. So while one issue regarding the interpretation of Carnap as an ontological pluralist concerns how the E/I distinction can be sufficient to justify ontological pluralism (and again to stress, clearly it is not), another issue concerns whether ontological pluralism is radical enough to justify a dismissive attitude toward ontology.

In regards to this latter issue, one might however suggest the following. Take some sentence the dispute over which we, or Carnap, would certainly not regard as shallow; some important scientific sentence of the form "there are Fs which are Gs". A pluralist move of insisting that there are other languages where this claim, or its counterparts, is not true and that hence the whole issue is shallow, is strikingly unattractive in this case. Why? Here is one suggestion. The claims of the scientist qua scientist are not *language-sensitive*, as we may put it. If the scientist affirms "there is an F which is G" but learns that there is an 'equally good' language where the counterpart of this sentence is false and instead the sentence "there are things arranged F-wise and they, collectively, are G" is true, this is no cause for worry, as far as her claims qua scientist are concerned. But for the ontologist, who is concerned with precisely the differences between saying that there are Fs and saying that there merely are things arranged F-wise, the claim about 'equally good' languages is

potentially damaging.¹⁸ (I am not saying that, by the end of the day, this is the right way to look at things: only that this must be how an ontological pluralist with a dismissive attitude toward ontology must conceive of things. One important complication is that, as I have stressed, the pluralist cannot actually take the protagonists he discusses to say *that there are Fs* and *that there are merely things arranged F-wise*, respectively, taking them to not in fact contradict each other.)

The question of how radical metaontological conclusions can follow from the E/I distinction as I have understood it is one of the most troubling question regarding my proposed interpretation of Carnap. If my attempts to answer it should prove to be unsuccessful, the following should be noted. As stressed earlier, Carnap's 'frameworks' are either language-fragments or something more theoretically loaded. If they are more loaded, then Carnap has not done nearly enough to explain what frameworks might be, or why we should believe in them. If frameworks are merely language-fragments, then, the worry is, Carnap's E/I distinction cannot serve to undergird a significant metaontological view. One might then further speculate that Carnap failed to notice this dilemma through not being sufficiently careful regarding what the 'frameworks' are.

Let me turn now to a different interpretive issue. I have said that Carnap is often regarded as an ontological pluralist, alongside Hirsch and Putnam. But if the condition of equal expressive resourcefulness is properly imposed, then Carnap, if he is an ontological pluralist at all, is a *blundering* ontological pluralist. When, in (1950), he considers a nominalist language, he conceives of it as lacking even the means to talk about numbers. He certainly gives the impression that as soon as we introduce the means to talk about numbers into a language, that language will be such that the sentence "numbers exist" (or its counterpart) is true there. The concept of number is such that "numbers exist" is analytic in a language where we can talk about numbers.¹⁹ (*Here* analyticity would come in, even if the notion of analyticity is not relevant to the E/I distinction *per se*.) But if so, then Carnap's nominalist language will not be one where "numbers exist" (or its counterpart) comes out false, for it does not even contain a counterpart of this sentence. It is hard not to get the impression that the language of Carnap's nominalist simply is expressively impoverished, in something like the way that Dorr's astronomically impoverished language is. For the language is, so to speak, strictly less

¹⁸ For relevant discussion of our ordinary intentions when making assertions with ontological import, see my (2005).

¹⁹ Carnap (1950) says, "...there is the internal question which together with the affirmative answer, can be formulated in the new terms, say by "There are numbers" or, more explicitly, "There is an n such that n is a number." This statement follows from the analytic statement "five is a number" and is therefore itself analytic. Moreover, it is rather trivial (in contradistinction to a statement like "There is a prime number greater than a million" which is likewise analytic but far from trivial), because it does not say more than that the new system is not empty; but this is immediately seen from the rule which states that words like "five" are substitutable for the new variables. Therefore nobody who meant the question "Are there numbers?" in the internal sense would either assert or even seriously consider a negative answer" (p. 24f).

resourceful than the platonist language Carnap describes. The platonist language is the nominalist language plus the framework of numbers – the ability to speak of numbers – added to it.

We can take the observation just made in one of two ways. We can either conclude that we should think of Carnap as an ontological pluralist guilty of a blunder, or that Carnap probably was not an ontological pluralist after all. I am inclined to embrace the former alternative. For suppose that, on the ground of what has just been noted, we conclude that Carnap was not after all an ontological pluralist. The question then is what instead we should say about Carnap. The most natural suggestion is that we say that he was a special kind of platonist. It is clear that the platonism would have to be of a *special kind*, for otherwise it is hard to see what the point of the metaontological discussion in Carnap's (1950) would be. But what is supposed to be special about it? As noted, Carnap clearly thinks of ontological questions as somehow shallow. But this does not get us far. Ontological pluralism is one view on which ontological questions are shallow, but we are now considering the possibility that Carnap was not an ontological pluralist. Maybe platonism's victory would be shallow because the relevant existence statements on Carnap's view are analytic. But that would be curious. For then what does all the work in Carnap's metaontology is the A/S distinction. The role of the E/I distinction is rather minimal.

VI. SEMANTICISM

In some of the writings of today's most important metaontologist in the broadly Carnapian tradition, Eli Hirsch, the focus is clearly on what I have called ontological pluralism. Hirsch expresses his "doctrine of quantifier variance" as the denial of the claim that there is a "metaphysically privileged sense of the quantifier".²⁰ Elsewhere he says that this view is that there are "many possible perspectives on 'the existence of objects', which all are adequate for describing the same facts, the same 'way the world is'".²¹

However, in some more recent writings, like his (2007), Hirsch's main point is that ontological disputes are "merely verbal" in the sense of "reducing to linguistic choice". He says that a dispute is like this only "when we can plausibly interpret each side as speaking a language in which that side's asserted sentences are true".²²

Following Karen Bennett (this volume), let *semanticism* be the view that ontological disputes are merely verbal when the disputants simply talk past each other, using some of the expressions employed with different meanings. Hirsch's more recent view is semanticism as thus characterized, with the following twist added. Suppose I am a foreigner, and I think, say, that 'monkey' means

²⁰ Hirsch (2002a), p. 61.

²¹ Hirsch (2004), p. 231.

²² Hirsch (this volume), ms, p. 2.

number. Because of deference facts, I still speak the same language as you: ‘monkey’ means monkey even as I use it. Suppose then that we both in fact agree that there are no numbers. I give voice to this by saying “there are no monkeys”. On the given statement of what it is for a dispute to be verbal, our dispute is not verbal. For my sentences do not come out true in the language I speak. Still, our dispute seems intuitively to be no less trivial for that. It comes down to my making a *verbal mistake*. Roughly, I have something correct in mind but due to my using the wrong word to express my thought, I say something which is not correct. Let us say, in effect following Hirsch, that our dispute is verbal if *either* we speak different languages so that we in fact agree on what the other asserts using her language, *or* one of us is making a purely verbal mistake.

What is the relation between ontological pluralism and semanticism? I want to discuss this issue here since Carnap is sometimes taken also to hold that ontological disputes are merely verbal (see e.g. Hirsch (this volume)), and the relation between this idea and ontological pluralism needs to be clarified.

Here, first, is an argument that semanticism does not entail ontological pluralism. Consider again the metaontological view that Sider prefers. There is, on Sider’s view, a ‘privileged sense of the quantifier’. But Sider’s view is compatible with semanticism. For Sider’s view is compatible with the claim that disputants in various ontological disputes are speaking different languages, and that each side’s utterances come out true in the language she actually uses. It may be that although there is a privileged sense of the quantifier, it is not the case that both disputants use the quantifier with this privileged sense.

Nor does ontological pluralism entail semanticism. Compare ontological pluralism with an analogous thesis in the philosophy of logic: the thesis that there are different acceptable possible languages with different logics, and that the question of which logic is the right logic cannot amount to anything deeper than the question of which one of all the different possible languages is the language we speak. Suppose now that you and I have a seeming disagreement about logic. It need not be the case either that we speak different languages, or that the mistake I make is merely verbal. I can have made a logical mistake when thinking about the matter. It can, of course, be held that all mistakes in logic are verbal mistakes in the sense characterized: but nothing forces this (to my mind implausible) view upon us.

The argument that semanticism does not entail ontological pluralism can in principle be challenged. If Sider is right, then, it can be said, at least *some* ontological disputes are non-verbal. A dispute over what “sense of the quantifier” is “privileged” is an ontological dispute, and since on Sider’s view such a dispute is over reality’s joints it does not amount to anything merely verbal. Then Sider’s view is incompatible with semanticism after all. Or so it might be suggested.

What the possibility of this retort shows is that there is an unclarity in the claim that “ontological disputes are merely verbal”. Is the claim meant to be about *all possible* ontological disputes, or only about the disputes *actually found* in the literature? (Let us call semanticism understood the former way *strong semanticism* and semanticism understood the latter way *weak semanticism*.) Strong semanticism may entail ontological pluralism; the above argument shows that weak semanticism certainly does not.

Weak semanticism might be part of a diagnosis of what is going on in actual disputes. It can be salutary to show that certain disputes in the literature can in fact be dissolved. But if weak semanticism is true but ontological pluralism is not, then we can engage in non-verbal and deep ontological disputes. If Sider’s view is correct then even if, say, actual nominalists and actual platonists simply speak past each other, one can easily shift the focus to a substantive dispute: is it nominalism or platonism that comes out true in a language with a quantificational apparatus that carves reality at its joints?

Focus now on strong semanticism. Might we have reason to focus on strong semanticism rather than ontological pluralism? One reason to think not is that strong semanticism seems unnecessarily strong. Ontological pluralism does not entail strong semanticism, for reasons we have already seen. Even though there are different equally good languages of the kind posited by ontological pluralism, a dispute over an ontological sentence need not be verbal. We can certainly speak the same language, and nor need the mistaken party be guilty merely of a verbal mistake, in the sense characterized. Second, setting the previous point aside, strong semanticism would seem to be a thesis about *what is there to be expressed*. There are not, even in principle, any ontological propositions we could have other than verbal disputes about. This is a strong claim about what languages there are. There is no reason not instead to talk directly about ontological pluralism.

I have tentatively suggested that Carnap was an ontological pluralist. I would be more skeptical of the claim that Carnap was a semanticist. His criticism of ontology is not that ontologists with seeming different views are engaged in verbal disputes of the kind characterized – whether that they tend to or that they of necessity do – but that they try to ask factual-external questions.

VII. AGAINST ONTOLOGICAL PLURALISM

In the following sections I will turn to a cluster of arguments against the ontological pluralism that I ñ somewhat tentatively – have ascribed to Carnap.²³ Although Carnap himself apparently held that any language that can talk about numbers is such that “numbers exist” is analytically true in this

²³ The discussion to follow in some respects parallels the discussion in my (2007).

language, I will, for the reason given, take it that one can in some sense talk about numbers also in a nominalist language.

Consider the sentence S_P , “2 is prime”, of the platonist’s language, L_P . This sentence is *true* by the pluralist’s lights. By contrast, (S_N) , “2 is prime”, of the *nominalist’s* language, L_N , is *untrue*.²⁴ But what should the *nominalist* say about the truth-value of the sentence S_P of L_P ? It seems that by the pluralist’s lights she should say it’s *true*. Why shouldn’t she? The nominalist, like everyone else, can recognize the truth of ontological pluralism, and recognize that there are some platonistic languages out there, even if hers is not one of them. But mustn’t the singular term refer for the sentence to be true? But then, so the objection to pluralism that I want to consider goes, the nominalist must concede defeat! For then it can be concluded, in L_N , that ‘2’ refers, and that there are numbers (or, strictly, “‘2’ refers” and “there are numbers”). To arrive at this conclusion, we need only to appeal to the principle

(T) For a sentence of the form ‘F(a)’, of any language, to be true, the singular term ‘a’ must refer.²⁵

Let me call this argument *the semantic argument*.²⁶

No similar problem arises in the “the tomato is a fruit” case. The problem is peculiar to ontological questions. Compare two languages L_F and L_V , both very English-like; in the former, “the tomato is a fruit” is true and in the latter the corresponding sentence “the tomato is a fruit” is false. Consider what things look like from, say, the L_F -er’s standpoint. She must say that ‘fruit’ of the L_V language stands for a different property (or for a different set, or has a different extension...) than does ‘fruit’ of the L_F language. But this is not at all embarrassing: for there’s nothing in the L_F -er’s point of view that’s in tension with there being this other possible referent for ‘fruit’. By contrast, the nominalist is faced with something embarrassing: for her nominalism bars her not only from having referring number terms in her own language but also from saying that any number terms of any language refer.²⁷

²⁴ I will be presupposing that the nominalist’s language can contain a sentence like this, even if the nominalist does not countenance numbers. My language can contain names for gods and for platonic forms, even if I do not believe in either. And recall, we do not want to think of the nominalist’s language as expressively impoverished. (Besides, for most of the discussion, the focus will not be on S_N , but on what the nominalist should say in her language about S_P .)

²⁵ On some views some analytic truths are exceptions. If needed, the formulation can be emended so as to accommodate this. Nothing of substance hinges on this. (Below I will discuss the possibility of more significant exceptions.)

²⁶ Essentially the semantic argument is also discussed in Hawthorne (2006), pp. 59ff.

²⁷ An argument in a similar spirit is actually relevant to how to evaluate the ‘Quinean’ view on ontology, according to which what we should take there to be is what our best theory of the world quantifies over. Those

It may help to compare the following argument, which is based on the same idea. Distinguish between sentences and propositions. With a sentence/proposition distinction in place it would appear that the following is the case. Propositions exist independently of how we choose to speak. So the propositions expressed by the sentences of the L_P exist whether or not anyone ever actually adopts L_P . But one of these propositions is the proposition expressed by “2 is prime” of L_P . Since this sentence is true, the proposition it expresses is true. But the proposition exists, and is true, independently of whether the language is actually used. And for its truth, there must be numbers.

Having introduced the formulation in terms of propositions – call the argument thus presented *the propositional argument* – I will for most of the discussion focus rather on the original formulation of the argument. As stated, the propositional argument can be charged as being question-begging. First, on one popular (“Russellian”) conception of propositions, the object a must exist in order for the proposition that a is F to exist. Given this conception of propositions, it is question-begging against the pluralist to insist that sentences like S_P express propositions. (However it should be noted that this seems to be a conception of propositions that the pluralist anyway ought to find problematic, if, as insisted in the statement of the semantic argument, the pluralist should accept that in L_N sentences like S_P can be said to be true.) Second, even with the Russellian conception of propositions set aside, propositions are abstract entities, and the nominalist will say that propositions do not exist. However, the point of the propositional argument can be made in terms less unfriendly to the nominalist. The point is that what the possible sentence S_P expresses (what S_P , if it existed, would express) is true, regardless of whether this truth is actually expressed. It is natural for those of us without nominalist inclinations to express this in terms of some abstract entities – propositions – being true. But the point should stand without such a gloss.

Here is a third argument against the pluralist; in the same spirit as the other two but distinct. Take the sentences “2 is prime” of the respective languages; S_N and S_P . Since the former is untrue and the latter is true, S_N and S_P must have different truth-conditions. But since they have different truth-conditions they must have different meanings. The point generalizes. The pluralist must say that there are massive meaning differences between L_N and L_P . Call this argument the *sameness argument*.

Although I take the consequence that there are these massive meaning differences to be unattractive, it is worth warning against a misunderstanding which might make this consequence

who subscribe to the Quinean view normally conclude that we should take, e.g., numbers to exist only if numbers exist according to our best theories of natural science or mathematics. But here is another possibility: our best theories of semantics may need to quantify over numbers. For even if we do not need to quantify over numbers when doing mathematics or natural science, the following may be true: (i) there may be some other actual or hypothetical community which quantifies over numbers, and (ii) their relevant utterances are true.

If this is right, then the consequences of adopting a Quinean view on ontology are quite different from what they are normally taken to be.

seem worse than it is. The pluralist is *not* committed to saying that *whenever* one speaker appears to embrace nominalism and another appears to embrace platonism they will be speaking past each other when they try to debate the subject. It can for instance be that both speakers want to speak the truth in ordinary English, and so defer to ordinary English usage. The point about meaning differences concerns only the idealized languages L_N and L_P . This should considerably soften the blow. Indeed, once this clarification has been made, one may wonder how the sameness argument poses a problem for the pluralist at all. But here are the problems it poses. First, the ontological pluralist wants to be, precisely, a pluralist about ontologies. Intuitively, what she wants to say is that there are different languages, with different existence-like concepts, such that (say) numbers exist in one sense of ‘exists’ and not the other. But if ‘number’ automatically means different things in the two languages she does not get to say this. Second, as will be discussed further below, pluralists like to defend their doctrine by emphasizing that what they insist upon regarding the ontological expressions (e.g., in the case of Putnam, that they can be semantically indeterminate) is simply what is clearly true with respect to other expressions. But if meaning differences in the ontological expressions entail a huge number of other meaning differences, ontological expressions are special.

I will now turn to objections and replies. The discussion of objections and replies is also intended to elucidate exactly what the argument against the pluralist view is supposed to be. As the discussion will show, the argument against pluralism is not demonstrative; far from it. But I do think the argument should succeed in making pluralism look unattractive. The discussion will focus primarily on what I have called the semantic argument, but occasionally I shall remark also on the other arguments.

VIII. ON SOME REPLIES TO THE FOREGOING ARGUMENTS

First, a defender of pluralism might attempt the following line. It is one thing for the nominalist to have to conclude in L_N that ‘2’ of L_P refers; it is another for the nominalist to have to conclude, in her language, “there are numbers”. Even if, by the semantic argument, the nominalist must conclude that there is something that ‘2’ of L_P refers to and this something falls under the predicate ‘number’ of L_P , it is not clear that she must conclude, in her language, “there are numbers”. To draw this conclusion, we must assume that ‘number’ of L_P and ‘number’ of L_N mean the same, or at least are guaranteed to be coextensive. But there is no need to accept this assumption.

However, as it stands this response should not be particularly appealing for the pluralist. The response would involve embracing that in L_N and L_P alike, it can be concluded that “number” of L_N is empty but “number” of L_P is not; that the numerical singular terms of L_N are empty but those of L_P not; etc. But they are no longer dealing with two languages with, in some interesting sense, different ontologies: L_N and L_P actually *agree* on what there is. The difference is that while the

mathematical terms of L_P refer, their counterparts in L_N do not. L_N can talk about the referents of the terms of L_P , but only via talking about what the expressions of L_P refer to. This position does not involve embracing any interesting form of ontological pluralism.

Here, *secondly*, is a pluralist response that should seem more in line with the motivation behind pluralism. Since the pluralist already thinks that there is a multitude of existence-like concepts, she has independent reason to think that there is a *multitude of reference-like concepts*; and maybe while the names of L_N refer in the sense of ‘refer’ of L_N , the names of L_P refer not in this sense but in the sense of ‘refer’ of L_P . It is in the spirit of this suggestion to say that a pluralist embracing a multitude of existence-like concepts can also embrace a *multitude of truth-like concepts*. Maybe the nominalist should not say “‘2 is prime’ of L_P is true”, for this sentence does not fall under ‘true’ of L_N .

If there is something to this line of response, it helps with the semantic argument. For the problem was that the nominalist would have to say that S_P is ‘true’.

The response does not, however, help with the sameness argument. The sentences S_P and S_N fall under different truth predicates, and hence they must mean different things.

Moreover, there is a problem with the present response already as a response to the semantic argument. Even if, somehow, different concepts of truth, for whatever reason, are applicable depending on whether we speak L_N or L_P , one may think that there is an important linguistic property that the $truen_N$ sentences of L_N and the $truen_P$ sentences of L_P have in common. They are, as we may put it, *successful*. Assertive utterances of these sentences, in these respective languages, are perfectly fine. There are two distinct ways of thinking about truth. First, especially since Tarski, the notion of truth is seen as closely linked to the notions of reference and satisfaction. Second, truth is seen as having a close tie to assertion. It is common to hold that it is an important claim linking truth and assertion that an assertion is correct exactly when what is asserted is true. (Needless to say, this view on assertion can be criticized.) Ordinarily, one would see no tension between these two thoughts about truth. But given ontological pluralism, there is a tension. For if ontological pluralism has the implication that there is a multitude of reference-like concepts, then if truth is defined in terms of reference, in the style of Tarski, then there is in that sense a multitude of truth-like concepts but it does not follow that there is no one property that is linked to correct assertion along the lines of the second thought. It is this property I characterize as successfulness.

Suppose then that there is such a property as successfulness. How can we theorize about successfulness on the picture that emerges? How can, in L_N , the successfulness of sentences of L_P , be accounted for? The problem is that exactly the same questions that we wanted to ask about truth (e.g. how are the truth conditions of sentences determined from their constituents?), one can ask about successfulness, if L_N can talk about successfulness (how are the ‘successfulness conditions’ of sentences determined from their constituents?). The only workable model we have for how an

answer goes appeals to a referential semantics. And if L_N cannot talk about successfulness, is it not simply expressively impoverished? A fully expressively resourceful language should have sufficient resources for doing linguistic theory, including linguistic theory for other languages. Given the central role of successfulness for linguistic theory, it seems L_N would lack the resources for linguistic theory if it could not talk about successfulness.²⁸

The remarks here do not purport to *demonstrate* that the appeal to how the languages employ different truth predicates is unworkable. Maybe there is a non-referential compositional account of successfulness conditions. But what the remarks show is that the ontological pluralist who seeks to make this response in face of the semantic argument *owes us an explanation of what an alternative semantic theory would be like*. Hirsch gestures toward what he calls “as-if reference” but a rough notion like that cannot play a substantive role in a semantic theory; nor does Hirsch claim anything else.²⁹

The threat is that in an ontologically more restrictive language one cannot provide semantic theories for ontologically more decadent languages, and that hence the ontologically more restrictive language is expressively impoverished. I have mentioned one way to respond to the threat: to provide an alternative linguistic theory. Two other responses to the threat are also worth mentioning. One response is to embrace general skepticism about semantic theory. Another response is to say that the demands here imposed on a semantic theory are too stringent. For instance, it can be suggested that all it takes to have a ‘semantic theory’ for language L^* in L is that in L there can be a (perhaps infinitary) theory which pairs each sentence of L^* with a statement of the coarse-grained truth condition of this sentence.³⁰

Turn next to a *third* pluralist response. The appeal to different truth-like concepts that we have just been discussing does not really amount to *relativism*, in any clear sense. But the pluralist might also try something out that more closely approximates traditional relativism. Focus first on the

²⁸ Similar remarks apply to a pluralist response which rather casts doubt on (T) and suggests that instead only the weaker principle

For a sentence of the form ‘F(a)’, of *this language*, to be true, the singular term ‘a’ must refer.

is true as stated within each language, but it is not claimed that within each language a general claim about all languages, such as (T) is true. This suggestion, whatever may be its attractions in other respects, immediately invites the same response as the previous suggestion. If in L_N a referential semantics cannot be given for true sentences of L_P , then either in L_N no semantics for L_P can be given, or a different type of semantics must be given for L_P . If the former, then L_N is expressively impoverished. If the latter, then, as earlier discussed, the pluralist owes us an account of what form the relevant semantics can take.

²⁹ See e.g. Hirsch (2002), pp. 55-6.

³⁰ This was suggested by Eli Hirsch in correspondence. Hawthorne (2006) discusses a problem closely related to the one I have been concerned with, and concludes that the pluralist will have to say that a semantics for one language given in another cannot employ the concepts of domain, reference, extension, property, etc., “since such mechanisms require characterizing the semantic behavior of alien sentences using one’s home ontology”. This presents the pluralist with a challenge: showing that such descriptions can be provided without using the broadly semantic concepts mentioned.

sameness argument. Here is a quick response to this argument. S_N and S_P need not have different meanings. They can express the same proposition: it is only that this is a proposition that is true relative to the platonist's concept of truth, $truth_P$, but false relative to the nominalist's concept of truth, $truth_N$. Moreover, the pluralist can add, when L_P is employed $truth_P$ is the aim and when L_N is employed $truth_N$ is the aim. (This is what makes the first language platonist and the second nominalist.)

If this works as a reply to the sameness argument, it should also work as a reply to the propositional argument. For from the perspective of this reply propositions are not true or false absolutely but only relative to different concepts of truth. Relativism also suggests a way out of the semantic argument. It suggests that the nominalist might simply reject the first step in this argument, the assumption that the nominalist must accept the truth of S_P .

I agree that relativism, if it can be made to work, presents a way out for the ontological pluralist. But I want to stress that this is a radical way out, and that this is cause for concern.

Often in the writings of ontological pluralists, it is stressed that what pluralism claims about existence is simply what is unproblematically true concerning other things. Eli Hirsch – see especially his (2005) – argues that ontological disputes are very similar in structure to garden-variety verbal disputes, and hence should be regarded as such disputes. But if his ontological pluralism must be coupled with relativism, we have a dramatic difference with ordinary verbal disputes.

As for Putnam, he says for instance in his (2004) that “once we assume that there is, somehow fixed in advance, a single ‘real,’ and single ‘literal’ sense of ‘exist’—and, by the way, a single ‘literal’ sense of ‘identity’—one which is cast in marble, and cannot be either contracted or expanded without defiling the statue of the god, we are already wandering in Cloud Cuckoo Land”.³¹ Here too the idea is clearly that the ontological pluralist only says about ontological expressions what is obviously true about other cases. Other remarks of Putnam's seem to suggest that he thinks certain statements are true only relative to conceptual schemes, and this can be interpreted as friendliness to the kind of relativism sketched here.³² But that does not belie the point about the dialectic that I am concerned to make. The point is that Putnam's considerations in favor of ontological pluralism are still of the form “we are just saying about this what is clearly true elsewhere”, and if ontological pluralism requires relativism that just is not so. For ordinary semantic indeterminacy does not require relativism.

Turning to Carnap himself, Carnap does not really have any arguments for ontological pluralism which would be undermined if ontological pluralism must be coupled with relativism, partly for the reason that Carnap in (1950) merely lays out his view without providing much by way

³¹ Putnam (2004), p. 84f.

³² See especially Putnam (1981), p. 52.

of explicit argument for it. But it is anyway clear that relativism of the kind indicated would be an undesired consequence. Carnap's own discussion hints at nothing as radical as this. (Though as some commentators have stressed, some of Carnap's earlier works were quite neo-Kantian in spirit, and one might think that a neo-Kantian might find the relevant kind of relativism congenial.³³)

A *fourth* response on behalf of the pluralist is the one Sider suggests in his (2007). Sider argues that the pluralist should respond to the semantic argument by saying that when two languages have different quantifiers, in the way that the ontological pluralist thinks suitable platonist and nominalist languages do, then one cannot even say that both languages contain names, predicates, etc. One of the languages contains singular terms₁, predicates₁, etc. The other contains singular terms₂, predicates₂, etc.

However, suppose that there really is good reason to think that the envisaged difference between the quantifiers will be accompanied by a difference in what semantic categories other expressions belong to. Then a different problem crops up. Recall the problem concerning the proper characterization of ontological pluralism, discussed in section IV. The problem was not there resolved, but I have talked about existence-like concepts, in an effort to sweep the problem under the rug. The most promising way to deal with the problem is to appeal to the similarities in inferential role between the existence-like concepts. Thus, Hirsch says:

...the imagined change in the meaning of the expression "there exists something" will leave the expression's general role in the language largely intact. In particular, the purely syntactic and formal logical properties of the expression will not be changed at all (the formal principles of quantificational logic will remain unaltered). It therefore seems natural to follow Putnam in treating relevant variations in the meaning of such expressions as "there exists something" as yielding an altered quantificational apparatus and an altered concept of the existence of something.³⁴

But if the pluralist responds to the semantic argument in the way that Sider envisages, that presents a problem for the appeal to shared inferential role in an explanation of what makes an expression express an existence-like concept. For while one quantifier is linked to singular terms₁, the other is linked to singular terms₂, etc. It will not be the same inference rules that the two quantifiers satisfy.

IX. A DIFFERENT ROUTE?

³³ On the early Carnap as neo-Kantian, see Friedman (1999 and 2000) and Richardson (1997).

³⁴ Hirsch (2002), p. 63. Compare too Sider (this volume), p. 9 of ms, and Sider (forthcoming), fn. 13.

Whatever in the end should be said about the questions left open – about the workability of the more promising of the pluralist responses – I think it is clear that the argument lodged against ontological pluralism cannot very well be regarded as anywhere near conclusive. The pluralist can consistently maintain for example a relativist view, or a non-orthodox view on the aims of semantic theory.

But let me ask another question: why should the would-be pluralist continue defending her ontological pluralism in face of these significant obstacles? What is required of the ontological pluralist is essentially that she either defend a metaphysical thesis seemingly considerably more radical than the one she first committed herself to – relativism – or else find a way to make defensible the claims about language that she seems committed to.

Consider another route open to her: simply embracing maximal ontological promiscuity ('maximalism'). For any kind of object K, where the pluralist says that there is some language such that "Ks exist" comes out true (where 'exists' expresses this language's existence-like concept), the maximalist says that Ks exist.

Much can be said about the tenability of an ontological view of this kind. Let me here just address the question of its availability to a would-be Carnapian. It might be thought that maximalism, whatever in the end its virtues, is not an attractive way for someone sympathetic to something like the pluralist outlook to go: since the ontological pluralism is abandoned, the idea that ontology is shallow is abandoned. Talk of 'shallowness' is of course imprecise and one ought not put too much weight on the notion. But it seems to me that maximalism can be combined with the view that ontology is shallow. First, as I discuss in considerably more detail in my (2006), neo-Fregeans who hold that numbers exist because number terms occur in true sentences, and the relevant sentences are true because they satisfy 'norms of correctness' are committed to maximalism. Moreover, they trivialize ontology, since – to express things in slogan form – there are no independent questions about the ontological structure of the world: it all comes down to claims about assertoric practice.³⁵ Second, the reason why maximalism would not go well with taking ontological questions to be shallow is that for any kind of object K, the existence of Ks is from a non-pluralist perspective by no means trivial but would have to be established by substantive means. But if this entails that maximalism could not be shallow, then pluralism is not shallow either. Focus on one particular kind of purported object, the Ks, and consider whether the question

(Q) Is there some language L where "Ks exist" is true?

³⁵ See especially Wright (1983) and Hale (1988). For further discussion – including defense of this understanding of the neo-Fregean – see further my (2006).

is substantive or non-substantive from the point of view of the ontological pluralist (where ‘exist’ is assumed to express L’s existence-like concept)? If it is *substantive*, the pluralist is in no better position to defend the shallowness of ontology than is the maximalist. The maximalist’s substantive question “Do Ks exist?” is matched by the equally substantive question “Is there some language where ‘Ks exist’ is true?”. Suppose then that it is non-substantive. Then the question is why the maximalist who wants to preserve shallowness cannot simply take over the pluralist’s story. For example, if it is supposed to be non-substantive because of the alleged fact that there can be the right sort of discourse involving reference to Ks, the pluralist’s story is just the neo-Fregean story briefly described. If the non-substantiality is supposed to consist in the supposed analytic truth of the ontologically committing claims, then again one might ask: can one not appeal to analyticity to defend the non-substantiality of the envisaged maximalism? Again, talk about ‘shallowness’ is unclear and cannot bear much theoretical weight. But it seems to me that if one of the two views considered is shallow then so is the other.³⁶

Maximalism faces other problems – some of which are discussed in my (2006) – and it is far from clear whether maximalism can be made defensible. But I bring up maximalism not because I am convinced it is the better view but only to stress that the defense of shallow ontology need not be bound up with anything like ontological pluralism.

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³⁶ The maximalism that I here argue satisfies the Carnapian motivations bears some similarities to the possible non-pluralist interpretation of Carnap discussed and rejected toward the end of section V. To suggest that the maximalist view satisfies the Carnapian motivations is not to say that it holds up as interpretation of Carnap.

Note incidentally that to say that a maximalist ontology can satisfy these Carnapian motivations is not to say that any maximalist ontology must do so. The latter claim would be clearly false.

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