Q&A: CRITIQUES OF METAPHYSICS

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On Philosophy as Therapy

In this specific chapter right of the bat I felt intellectually unsatisfied by the introduction of Ludwig Weittgemsten's idea that instead of asking for the answers of metaphysical claims, we need to get therapy to get ourselves to stop asking those questions. While it may be a matter of perspective, I quickly asked myself, Is that even possible? to stop get individuals to stop asking such questions? and is there really anyone out there that goes about their life oblivious and blind just ignoring these questions about the real and the abstract? I personally don't think I've ever met anyone who hasn't questioned what's real and what's not at least once after all it is innate for our minds to wonder and question. —Chelsea

I think Wittgenstein's point was not to stop people asking questions altogether. Rather, he wanted to steer them away from fruitless questions that don't have answers (which is what he thought a lot of philosophy was about) and toward meaningful questions that do have answers. Imagine that someone asks you, "Who decided to paint the sky blue, and why did they do that?" The right way to respond would not be to give them an answer, but to point out that their question is confused because it presupposes things that are false (i.e., that the sky is painted blue, and that someone decided to paint it). The right response is to dissolve the question by pointing out its flaws, not to take it at face value. Wittgenstein thought that a lot of philosophical questions are like this, but he didn't think that all of the questions that humans wonder about are. So it would be better to spend our time on the meaningful, sensible questions that we have a chance of answering.

A Historical Question

Q: Is it correct that Vienna Circle is a part of the logical positivism movement? I.e., some members of the logical positivism movement are members of Vienna Circle? So, if we draw a Venn diagram, P is a bigger circle and V is a smaller one inside the P? =>Because it looks like logical positivism' claim and what Vienna Circle claims are slightly different, more precisely, Vienna Circle's one is more limited/narrow. The former is (if my understanding is correct) that claims are verified by analytic or synthetic, whereas the latter seems like that the meaning of any statement is its method of verification; to show that it is true is to verify a statement; the only way to show that a statement is true is by making a sensory observation. —Chateldon

I think the right way to put it would be to say that the Vienna Circle was the most prominent group of logical positivists, but that they weren't the only ones. There were also some positivists in Berlin (the Berlin Circle), prominent groups in Poland and the Czech republic, and a few major figures in England (such as A. J. Ayer and Susan Stebbing). Later many of the logical positivists, including Carnap, fled to America to escape Hitler, and became prominent figures in American philosophy.

There's a good history in Richard Creath's Stanford Encyclopedia Article on Logical Empiricism (link here).

On the idea of verification

Q: I feel that what it says, "This can be directly verified by hearing the sound of a bell. Still, other statements may be verified indirectly" (121), is a little uncomfortable. Isn't it? =>Since I believe that this is the combination of sensory confirmation (observation) + induction. Induction is inference so not verification. Therefore, the diagram on page 122 is showing seems to me a little weird in terms of "the arrows." The connection between sensory experience and induction is indicated as if the same. —Chateldon

By "verify", what they mean is any activity by which one provides justification for a claim. So inductive arguments definitely count.

The Analytic–Synthetic Distinction

I understand Carnarp's claim that there are two kinds of theories of evaluating true statements such as, The Verification Theory of Meaning and Verification Theory of Truth. My issues is the distinction between synthetic and analytical statement and how he uses the verification theories to categorize if they are meaningless or not-- mainly analytical statements. The example Ney uses (All triangles have three sides) is considered to be an analytical statement which can be verified by the theory truth, however I would argue that this statement is synthetic in a sense that you must be able to use empirical evidence; which is the use of the senses (sight) to apply logic or mathematics. Why is this not the case? Why is this statement only considered to be analytical when senses and logic can verify its truth? —Sheana

I think the best way to understand the analytic–synthetic distinction is not by saying that our actual evidence for the truth of any given analytic statement can't involve sense experience. Rather, an analytic statement is one that could, in principle, be verified independently of sense experience by anyone who possesses the relevant concepts. So, for example, I have never actually worked through Andrew Wiles' proof of Fermat's last theorem (it is 129 pages long, and full of extremely complicated math!), but I have very good evidence that it is a good proof: all kinds of amazing mathematicians say so! So I have definitely used sensory evidence to verify the theorem for myself. Does that make it synthetic for me? No, I don't think so. Statements aren't analytic or synthetic *for* anyone, they are just either analytic or synthetic. What makes Fermat's last theorem analytic, according to someone like Carnap, is the fact that it *can* be verified by a logical proof. The fact that Andrew Wiles did this shows that it *can* be done, but the theorem was already analytic even before that, we just didn't know that for sure.

I am wondering if the theory distinguishes between known verifications and unknown verifications. For example, Fermant's Last Theorem was unverified for many years; there was no known way to verify it or not. Does that mean that it is not considered in a verificationist's theory? Or can we simply say that there are some statements that we do not yet know if they are

meaningful because we do not yet know if they are verifiable. (This is to be contrasted with something like the Contiuum hypothesis, for which it is known to not be verifiable.) I think D in exercise 4.1 is another such exampl. I don't know how to verify it, but that doesn't mean it can't be verified. —Miriam

Sophisticated verificationists do make this distinction. They tend to say that for a statement to be verifiable is for it to be verifiable *in principle* and *to some degree*. This means that although we may not have *already* verified it, and even though we maybe can't *in practice* verify it, we could *in principle* gather some evidence that would count in favor or against it. And we needn't be able to find sensory evidence that would conclusively verify the claim; we only need to be able (again, in principle) to find evidence that would move the needle for or against to some extent.

Carnap thought that claims about supernatural gods failed this test, but that claims about, for example, how many atoms of hydrogen were present in stars that had faded out a long time ago did not. But it's definitely true that there are some problem cases here. Main claims about the future don't seem to be currently verifiable, at least at present. Does that mean that they aren't yet meaningful? What about modal or counterfactual claims about what would or could have happened if things had been different than they are? How can we get good evidence about those? Gödel's incompleteness theorem pose another challenge: he seemingly showed that there are mathematical truths that cannot be proven. Isn't that a straightforward counterexample?

Carnap supports the verificationist theory of meaning, which holds that a sentence is true only if it can be verified. Carnap's critique of metaphysics could harm scientific experimentation and theories because not all scientific theories could be verified but are true. For instance, string theory might be true but can not be proven true now due to limitations in human innovation and technology. Also, most scientific theories have some elements of truth in all of them, so that doesn't mean that all theories that can not be proven true now are meaningless. —Aanisah

I'm not sure that string theory works in favor of your point. A lot of scientists have critiqued string theory specifically on the grounds that it seems to be too far removed from empirical evidence!

I think that what Carnap would say about your second point is that verification comes in degrees, and that when we're evaluating competing theories, what we do is choose the *most* verified one. But that doesn't make the competing theories meaningless. In order to be meaningful, they just have to be verifi**able**, not verifi**ed**. To be verifiable, a theory needs to be such that we know what would count as empirical evidence for or against it, not that we actually have conclusive evidence for it.

The section on "methods of verification" discusses two kinds of verification: analytic and synthetic. It does not discuss whether a verification can contain elements of both. Can it? Consider the statement "1+1=2 and it is raining"; I think that would require such a hybrid proof were it to be proven at all. —Miriam

Right, this would count as synthetic I think, but it would have a single analytic conjunct. I believe a statement counts as synthetic if any empirical evidence is needed to verify it, whereas it is analytic if none is required.

Verificationism

I agree with Carnap in that metaphysics is flawed in its method of delivery - language. However, his verificationist theory of meaning is hard to accept: "If a claim cannot be proven either using logic (or mathematics) alone or empirical observation, then it is unverifiable and hence meaningless" (121). He contradicts himself. He criticizes language yet fails to give a distinct definition on what 'meaningless' means. Personally, I can think of plenty of things that illogically have meaning for me! Many pseudo-sciences, in this case, can be seen as 'meaningless' to Carnap. For example, astrology: many, many, many people believe in it, finding it meaningful, yet there is no true mathematical proof to support it as a credible belief system/science... Perhaps what Carnap's theory proposes isn't necessarily wrong, but it's the use of 'meaningless' that throws me off. I think humans can ascribe 'meaning' to nearly anything, we're subjective creatures! —Ksenia

I also had some concerns with this theory as a whole. For one thing, not all sentences that have meaning have truth values. For example, commands have meaning but no truth value. —Miriam

These are both great questions, and I think they expose a flaw with both some early versions of verificationism and with Ney's description of Carnap's views.

As both Miriam and Ksenia point out in different ways, there are lots of sentences that are perfectly meaningful but that aren't true or false, that don't have truth conditions, and that can't be verified. Here are some uncontroversial examples:

> "Buy me a drink."
> This is an imperative sentence, so it's used to make requests or commands, not to make true or false statements
>
> "What was Carnap thinking?"
> This is an interrogative sentence, which is used to ask a question rather than to make a true or false claim.
>
> "Ouch!"
> This is an exclamative, which is used to express a state of mind, not to make a true or false claim.
>
> "Would that we could all see each other in person!"
> This is an optative sentence, which is used to express wishes rather than make claims.

What all of these examples have in common is that they are kinds of sentences that aren't in the business of being true or false. But they're still perfectly meaningful: we use them to communicate in very specific ways.

This is a point that some early verificationists really did seem not to understand, even though it seems pretty obvious. The reason, I think, is that they were extremely focused on the use of language in logic, science, and mathematics, and in those contexts we mostly only ever encounter declarative sentences being used to make true or false claims.

As the 20th Century wore on, people figured this out. One person who figured it out early was Ludwig Wittgenstein, who spends the first section of Philosophical Investigations pointing out that language has many uses other than making true or false statements. And here is a famous passage from J. L. Austin's lecture, "Performative Utterances", in which he recounts relevant history:

> We have not got to go very far back in the history of philosophy to find philosophers assuming more or less as a matter of course that the sole business, the sole interesting business, of any utterance—that is, of anything we say—is to be true or at least false. Of course they had always known that there are other kinds of things which· we say—things like imperatives, the expressions of wishes, and exclamations—some of which had even been classified by grammarians, though it wasn't perhaps too easy to tell always which was which. But still philosophers have assumed that the only things that they are interested in are utterances which report facts or which describe situations truly or falsely. In recent times this kind of approach has been questioned—in two stages, I think. First of all people began to say: "Well, if these things are true or false it ought to be possible to decide which they are, and if we can't decide which they are they aren't any good but are, in short, nonsense." And this new approach did a great deal of good; a great many things which probably are nonsense were found to be such. It is not the case, I think, that all kinds of nonsense have been adequately classified yet, and perhaps some things have been dismissed as nonsense which really are not; but still this movement, the verification movement, was, in its way, excellent.
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> However, we then come to the second stage. After all, we set some limits to the amount of nonsense that we talk, or at least the amount of nonsense that we are prepared to admit we talk; and so people began to ask whether after all some of those things which, treated as statements, were in danger of being dismissed as nonsense did after all really set out to be statements at all. Mightn't they perhaps be intended not to report facts but to influence people in this way or that, or to let off steam in this way or that? Or perhaps at any rate some elements in these utterances performed such functions, or, for example, drew attention in some way (without actually reporting it) to some important feature of the circumstances in which the utterance was being made. On these lines people have now adopted a new slogan, the slogan of the "different uses of language." The old approach, the old statemental approach, is sometimes called even a fallacy, the descriptive fallacy.

This is part of the history of the downfall of verificationism that Ney elides. And as Austin points out, once we decide that "buy me a drink" is meaningful but not in the statement business, we might wonder if the same is true of some declarative sentences as well. So, for example, Carnap and A. J. Ayer liked to argue that ethical, religious, and some metaphysical sentences were not verifiable. But maybe they're not usually used to make statements? Metaethical expressivists have argued that this is true of ethical sentences: we don't use them to say true or false claims, but to influence people and/or express our emotions, preferences, or plans.

So, one last question: where does Carnap fit in this history? Some of what Ney says makes it sound like he was one of the old-school verificationists who thought that any sentences that wasn't verifiable was meaningless, and so completely pointless. But this just isn't right. Carnap made a distinction between sentences that are "cognitively meaningful" and those that are "non-cognitive" but that still may be meaningful in some other way. Ney talks about this just a bit when she says that, for Carnap, metaphysics is really better understood as being akin to art rather than science. He fleshes this out in the last section of his paper, "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through the Logical Analysis of Language" (which you can read here, by the way). I'm going to excerpt all of section 7 here, because I think it is quite fascinating, and gives a different picture of Carnap's ideas than what Ney seems to suggest:

> Our claim that the statements of metaphysics are entirely meaningless, that they do not assert anything, will leave even those who agree intellectually with our results with a painful feeling of strangeness: how could it be explained that so many men in all ages and nations, among them eminent minds, spent so much energy, nay veritable fervor, on metaphysics if the latter consisted of nothing but mere words, nonsensically juxtaposed?

And how could one account for the fact that metaphysical books have exerted such a strong influence on readers up to the present day, if they contained not even errors, but nothing at all? These doubts are justified since metaphysics does indeed have a content; only it is not theoretical content. The (pseudo) statements of metaphysics do not serve for the description of states of affairs, neither existing ones (in that case they would be true statements) nor non-existing ones (in that case they would be at least false statements). They serve for the *expression of the general attitude of a person towards life* ("Lebenseinstellung, Lebensgefühl").

Perhaps we may assume that metaphysics originated from mythology. The child is angry at the "wicked table" which hurt him. Primitive man endeavors to conciliate the threatening demon of earthquakes, or he worships the deity of the fertile rains in gratitude. Here we confront personifications of natural phenomena, which are the quasi-poetic expression of man's emotional relationship to his environment. The heritage of mythology is bequeathed on the one hand to poetry, which produces and intensifies the effects of mythology on life in a deliberate way; on the other hand, it is handed down to theology, which develops mythology into a system. Which, now, is the historical role of metaphysics? Perhaps we may regard it as a substitute for theology on the level of systematic, conceptual thinking. The (supposedly) transcendent sources of knowledge of theology are here replaced by natural, yet supposedly trans-empirical sources of knowledge. On closer inspection the same content as that of mythology is here still recognizable behind the repeatedly varied dressing: we find that metaphysics also arises from the need to give expression to a man's attitude in life, his emotional and volitional reaction to the environment, to society, to the tasks to which he devotes himself, to the misfortunes that befall him. This attitude manifests itself, unconsciously as a rule, in everything a man does or says. It also impresses itself on his facial features, perhaps even on the character of his gait. Many people, now, feel a desire to create over and above these manifestations a special expression of their attitude, through which it might become visible in a more succinct and penetrating way. If they have artistic talent they are* able to express themselves by producing a work of art. Many writers have already clarified the way in which the basic attitude is manifested through the style and manner of a work of art (e.g. Dilthey and his students). [In this connection the term "world view" ("Weltanschauung") is often used; we prefer to avoid it because of its ambiguity, which blurs the difference between attitude and theory, a difference which is of decisive importance for our analysis.] What is here essential for our considerations is only the fact that art is an adequate, metaphysics an inadequate means for the expression of the basic attitude. Of course, there need be no intrinsic objection to one's using any means of expression one likes. But in the case of metaphysics we find this situation: through the form of its works it pretends to be something that it is not. The form in question is that of a system of statements which are apparently related as premises and conclusions, that is, the form of a theory. In this way the fiction of theoretical content is generated, whereas, as we have seen, there is no such content. It is not only the reader, but the metaphysician himself who suffers from the illusion that the metaphysical statements say something, describe states of affairs. The metaphysician believes that he travels in territory in which truth and falsehood are at stake. In reality, however, he has not asserted anything, but only expressed something, like an artist. That the metaphysician is thus deluding himself cannot be inferred from the fact that he selects language as the medium of expression and declarative sentences as the form of expression; for lyrical poets do the same without succumbing to self-delusion. But the metaphysician supports his statements by arguments, he claims assent to their content, he polemicizes against metaphysicians of divergent persuasion by attempting to refute their assertions in his treatise. Lyrical poets, on the other hand, do not try to refute in their poem the statements in a poem by some other lyrical poet; for they know they are in the domain of art and not in the domain of theory.

Perhaps music is the purest means of expression of the basic attitude because it is entirely free from any reference to objects. The harmonious feeling or attitude, which the metaphysician tries to express in a monistic system, is more clearly expressed in the music of Mozart. And when a metaphysician gives verbal expression to his dualistic-heroic attitude towards life in a dualistic system, is it not perhaps because he lacks the ability of a Beethoven to express this attitude in an adequate medium? Metaphysicians are musicians without musical ability. Instead they have a strong inclination to work within the medium of the theoretical, to connect concepts and thoughts. Now, instead of activating, on the one hand, this inclination in the domain of science, and satisfying, on the other hand, the need for expression in art, the metaphysician confuses the two and produces a structure which achieves nothing for knowledge and something inadequate for the expression of attitude.

Our conjecture that metaphysics is a substitute, albeit an inadequate one, for art, seems to be further confirmed by the fact that the metaphysician who perhaps had artistic talent to the highest degree, viz.

> Nietzsche, almost entirely avoided the error of that confusion. A large part of his work has predominantly empirical content. We find there, for instance, historical analyses of specific artistic phenomena, or an historical-psychological analysis of morals. In the work, however, in which he expresses most strongly that which others express through metaphysics or ethics, in Thus Spake Zarathustra, he does not choose the misleading theoretical form, but openly the form of art, of poetry.

As you can see, when Carnap says that metaphysics, or music, or art (etc) is "meaningless", he is not expressing disrespect for it, or saying that it is pointless. On the contrary, he seems to have a great deal of respect for art, music, and so on, and thinks that they are very important. He is merely saying that they are not in the same business as theoretical science. They should not be understood as having the goal of saying true things about the world.

His complaint about metaphysics is that although what's really going on when someone is doing metaphysics is that they are expressing their attitudes, as they would be if they were playing music or writing poetry, they seem to be confused about this fact, and they take themselves to be trying to make true claims about the world using methods that resemble those of the scientists. So although there is nothing inherently wrong about what metaphysicians are doing, there is something disingenuous and confused about the way that they are going about it.

Regarding the 3 reformulations on the bottom of page 120, I was wondering what a "condition" is. Does it mean something like "what is the correct description of reality for which S is true/ false?" If not, what does it mean? —Miriam

This is a good question. For the logical positivists, the answer was something like a sensory experience, or a collection of sensory experiences, which they sometimes called "sense data". It is whatever is described by protocol sentences (see Box 4.1, on p.121).

In thinking about verification as a pivitol condition of truth, I am also wondering how the verificationsit theorist would regard the truth of a claim about the position and velocity of small particals a la the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. A claim such as "particle x has position a and velocity b", cannot be verified due to the uncertainty principle. So according to the verificationist theory it should be meaningless. However, it is merely the conjunction of two sentences that can be verified, so that seems weird. Perhaps it is only weird to me due to my lack of knowledge about physics, and a verificationsit theorist would be fine with calling this claim meaningless. —Miriam

This is something that Carnap thought a lot about. He was a physicist in addition to being a philosopher (his first dissertation was rejected by the philosophy department in Jena for having too much physics, and it was rejected by the physics department for being too philosophical). Later in his career, Carnap wrote several books and papers in which he developed inductive logics that could help to make sense of what verification means in contexts where certainty is not possible, such as quantum mechanics. But the basic point is simple: what matters is that we can use evidence to raise or lower our degree of belief in a claim.

I like Carnap's way of looking at the world regarding abstractions. However I find it more difficult when it comes to concretes. Say I were to come up with a theory of reality, T in which more or less the things that exist correspond to what I experience in perception as well as the

experiences of others including scientific experimentation. T is designed to more or less correspond to how the average person does see reality. But in addition to that, my theory has the claim c = the desk in front of me when I was doing the reading was pink. Without this claim, we would have concluded it was brown. Some might say T is a bad theory of the universe, because under this theory I can derive a contradiction: using the core rules of T I can conclude that the desk was not pink, but with the added claim c, I can conclude that it is pink. But perhaps I can avoid this contradiction by carving out exceptions in all the other rules to allow for the desk to have been pink. Some might still consider it an unappealing theory. It is more complicated than T without c and without all the exceptions. But "unappealing" or "a theory that one might choose not to adopt" doesn't seem to cut it. I want to say that this theory is flat out wrong. The fact that Carnap allows me to take that theory feels like a lack in his philosophy. But I don't know, as I think about it there is something cool about allowing T to be true. —Miriam

This is a great question, and it is a problem for both Carnap and Quine, since they are both ultimately pragmatists: whether we adopt a given theory, according to both of them, is ultimately a matter of what our goals are and which one best serves our goals. So, if your main goal is to hang onto the belief that your desk is pink, the theory you're describing will turn out to be a better goal for you than the alternative would be.

Let me say two things in favor of this view.

First, Carnap and Quine would say that if your goal is to come up with a theory that describes the world well enough that it allows you to make accurate predictions about the future, that allows you to develop useful technology, and so on, then you won't adopt theories like T. And this seems right: most scientists have shared goals that keep them all using closely related linguistic frameworks and that seem to keep them in touch with a shared reality. Their shared goals of making accurate predictions and developing useful technology are what keep them on the same page.

Second, Carnap's and Quine's theories really do seem to describe how we often do, actually reason. Think about the adjustments that conspiracy theorists, creationists, vaccination skeptics, and cult members have to make to their overall theories of the world in order to continue clinging to their favorite beliefs. But they do continue doing it. Carnap and Quine might say that this is because their goals are very strange: their primary goal in deciding what to believe is to hang onto certain ideas at any cost, and they're willing to believe anything else in order to make it happen. That really is an accurate description of what people do.

But then, you might respond that we weren't looking for a theory of the psychology of cult members here, we were looking for a theory of truth and meaning! And surely it is not a good theory of truth if it vindicates cult members! The fact that they have weird goals can't make their beliefs justified! And this is basically the objection to Carnap and Quine that most people now accept.

How does verificationism consider the existence of consciousness or qualia? Neither seems empirically verifiable, so it seems to follow that consciousness (and q) is meaningless, which is difficult to believe. —Shah

This is an interesting, and sort of ironic question! The idea of qualia actually comes from logical positivists (though it goes back through them to Bertrand Russell, Ernst Mach, and John Locke).

According to all of these philosophers, the most basic empirical truths that we could know about were truths about the contents of our own sensory experiences (a.k.a. sense data, or sense contents). Everything else had to be verified in terms of what we know about our sense experiences. So, for example, I take myself to know that I am using my laptop right now. How do I know this? Well, first and foremost, it is because I have certain shapes and colors in my field of view, certain feelings in my fingertips, and certain clacking sounds in my ears, and I believe that these sounds are indicative of my laptop. These sense data—the colors, shapes, sounds, and feelings—*are* what philosophers now often refer to as qualia. So at least a lot of logical positivists (namely, the phenomenalists, which included early Carnap, as well as Ayer and some stages of Bertrand Russell) would have said that sense data (a.k.a. qualia) are the *only* things that we have direct sensory evidence of. Everything else is indirect.

Carnap's Criticism of Heidegger

Q: I did not follow "The nothing nothings." Is the word nothing has a verb form? What does "The nothing nothings" mean? —Chateldon

Carnap's point, at least in part, is that Heidegger is just making up words without telling us what they mean. The neologism, "to nothing", is a case in point.

A Logic Question

"The logical form of "Nothing is free" is ¬∃xFx" (123).
=>For me, it seems ∃x¬Fx. Is that somehow incorrect though I would like to have that? Also, related to that, when the concept of P arises, automatically the concept of ¬P emerges. —Chateldon

Ney is right that "−∃xFx" means "nothing is free". (A more direct translation would be "it is not the case that there exists at least one thing, x, such that x is free".)

By contrast, "∃x−Fx" means "There is at least one thing, x, such that it is not the case that x is free". Or, more naturally, "Something is not free" or "something is unfree".

Carnap's logicism

Carnap's analytic method, using math (and also reducing math, in principle, to logicism), bothered me quite a bit. If the existence of mathematics is a question of metaphysics, how is it legitimate to use math/logic as a means of verification, if math/logic is the metaphysical subject in question? —Cynthia

Carnap's idea, which he got from Frege and Russell, is that the truths of logic are analytic—they are true by virtue of the meanings of the expressions being used, as embodied in the axioms and logical rules used to prove them. So if you can show that all of math follows from logic, then you show that math is likewise analytic. Since analytic truths are true independently of any worldly subject matter

(they are true in virtue of their own meanings alone), a lot of philosophers interpreted this to mean that logic and mathematics doesn't need to have their own distinctive subject matter. They don't need to be about anything out there in the world. They are in this sense completely general. (At least, this is one way to go.)

Linguistic Frameworks

So is Carnap saying a metaphysical question like "do numbers exist?" is pointless/trivial because the answer, whether true or false, will never pertain to the actual make up of an existence in our "reality" as we know it? That metaphysicians will act like these questions hold weight in the realm of what's true and false in reality when in actuality these questions do not? To further explain, my interpretation of his critique is that he is making a distinction between things that can actually exist/be proven independently and things who's existence is dependent upon some other system or framework. And if something(a)'s nature of being is dependent on some sort of framework, then the thing(a) doesn't truly exist or it's existence is pointless because it's dependent on something that isn't truly grounded in reality.

For example the question of "do numbers exist?" is pointless because even if we can prove that they do, the decision of their existence being true is more about determining/accepting the existence of a numerical language that can be made and used. But this numerical language is one of many languages that can be invented and used, so because of this, it isn't actually real like a physical object, it's more of an idea/thought — which has no tangible grounding in reality.

This would be opposed to an actual legitimate question such as "is oxygen real?" (i could be wrong, again, this is based off of my understanding of the reading). We can actually analyze our environment, take samples, research molecules and atoms, and through tangible work come up with the verdict that oxygen is in fact real, and affects our reality as we now it. figuring out the existence of numbers on the other hand is different from this because the approach isn't as grounded in tangible reality/evidence. We can determine numbers exist, but that's only because we acknowledge the existence of some numerical system that has been put in place, and such an acknowledgement is a dead end. Systems and frameworks can be put in place at any time, they aren't truly "real" I can make up a word "yfui" and say it's part of a language I invented called "yuits", if I somehow get enough people to support and use this language, then down the line someone can ask the ontological question does "yfui" (a word) exist? and if the language has been used and accepted, one can say yes, "yfui" does exist. But the conclusion that such a word exists is more about the acceptance/usage of the language itself rather than figuring out if something truly exists in our world or not. And because of that, one could logically say, such a question is pointless/ trivial within the bounds of logic.

Is this what Carnap is arguing? —Brendan

When referring to frameworks, Ney states that "It is always from within a framework that meaningful questions may be asked. It is from within a framework that statements may be evaluated for truth or falsity (p.124)." Even if the term framework is being used in this case as a

linguistic system of rules, it doesn't quite appeal to me that only the meaningful or that what may be evaluated can only come from a framework. What about that that doesn't? Does everything meaningful or worth evaluation has to come from a set framework? —Chelsea

And why do we have to be confined to this specific system of linguistics to know when a question is meaningless? For all we know, the system which was probably created by humans could be flawed and keeping us from obtaining knowledge of our universe. This is probably a challenge faced by logicians, as logic seems to be the best pathway to a better linguistic system. —Ariel

Pg 123 – Ney says, "we must conclude then, Carnap says that Heidegger's sentence [The nothing nothings] is meaningless.... Such distortions yield sentences incapable of verification." So, it is meaningless because it is unverifiable. So, I understood that external questions or statements are meaningless because they are unverifiable. Pg 127- Responses to Carnap's argument we see distortion of Carnap's use of the word "meaningless." So, I am confused if in responses to Carnap's argument, his framework was disregarded or Carnap himself did not provide a framework and failed to clearly state what he means when he uses the word 'meaningless'. Please elaborate further on Carnap's internal & external distinction. —Syeda

I think Brendan has basically got it, but let me try to put it in another way.

Like a lot of analytic philosophers, Carnap thought that the first step to understanding any topic is first to understand the rules for saying things about that topic. If we don't do that, we're liable to wind up talking nonsense because we're misusing words. He thought that philosophers (and particularly metaphysicians) are particularly prone to this pitfall. And I think that's a reasonable worry: part of a philosopher's job is to push the boundaries of what we can intelligibly talk and think about, and to come up with new concepts and perspectives with which to understand the world and our place in it. But surely if we aren't very careful when we're doing this, we will cross the line and start saying things that are *beyond* the limits of intelligible thought. And there are definitely some philosophers out there who spend almost all of their time on the wrong side of that line, seemingly without realizing. Perhaps you've encountered some of them in your other classes! So the question is how to avoid being like them. And Carnap thought that maybe we can protect ourselves against falling for bullshit if we just pay very close attention to the rules governing the meaningful expression of ideas.

But then Carnap realized that it's not like there's one single set of rules for how to use language in a meaningful way that applies in all circumstances. Rather, there are lots of different sets of rules. There's one way that you have to use language in order to do math, another way in order to do physics, another way if you want to do literary criticism, and so on. This should sound familiar to you: when you take a class in a new discipline, part of what makes it so difficult is that you just haven't learned the rules about how you're supposed to talk about things yet. And so your professor is likely to harshly grade you for something that it would have been fine for you to say in another class. Part of what's going on here is that different disciplines have different linguistic frameworks: they have their own technical vocabulary, and they have their own rules for how you're supposed to establish the truth of the things that you say. In a math class you need to give a step-by-step proof that is written in a special notation. In a chemistry class you might have to draw a diagram and then

write down some equations next to it. In a biology class maybe you have to dissect a small animal. And so on. Part of learning a new discipline is learning the new vocabulary and verification rules of its linguistic framework.

But then you might also want to ask, "how should we go about choosing which linguistic frameworks to learn the rules of?" Carnap's point is that this choice is not like the choices that are made within a linguistic framework. For example, within the framework of chemistry, there is a question of whether all proteins are polymers. To answer that, you have to know how to use all of the vocabulary involved, and then you need to know the rules that chemists follow in order to find evidence for or against claims. But Carnap thinks that when we choose which linguistic frameworks to adopt, it isn't a matter of going out and looking for evidence about which frameworks are "true"; that is a confused idea. Instead, what we do is we try to figure out which frameworks are better for achieving our goals, which we have independently of the frameworks. So it's more like deciding which subway to take to get somewhere. It's a question of which frameworks best serve our practical interests. This is what makes Carnap a pragmatist: it's that he thinks that a lot of big metaphysical and epistemological questions ultimately rest on practical issues about how we can best advance our goals.

Okay, so once all of that theory is in place, we can see why Carnap thinks that a lot of metaphysical questions are silly. Each one is either a framework-internal question or a framework-external question (as all questions are). So if you're asking "do material objects exist" as a framework internal question, you just have to consult your framework's rules. The answer will normally be trivial. For example, this is a very boring question to ask within the framework of physics, since the answer is trivially true. But then suppose that what you reply that what you really wanted to ask was the framework-external question—something like, "should we adopt a framework in which material objects exist?" And Carnap says, "it depends on whether that framework is a good way of accomplishing your goals. Just don't get fooled into thinking that this is a factual question; it is a merely practical one."

Criticisms of Carnap

My main critique of him is that he seeks to shut down metaphysical questions as meaningless in terms of the system of linguistics, but he provides no alternative to figuring out or discovering such knowledge, despite claiming that he is not endorsing nominalism or nihilism. It seems a little odd that he just needs to take down metaphysics altogether but still be open to the existence of immaterial objects and other metaphysical theories. —Ariel

I think he would say that what you're calling "knowledge" just isn't knowledge at all. It's more like something that we have to make a decision about for reasons other than that we have evidence. To seek this knowledge is a bit like trying to find the real, deep truth about whether chocolate or vanilla ice cream is better. The idea that there is a deep answer to this question is just confused. You should just pick whichever ice cream you like more! (See my last answer for more details about this.)

Defenses of Carnap

I get what they mean by having two contradicting statements not be meaningless, but you could also say "Te flob schwubs jip" and "Not Te flob schwubs jip" and have those two statements contradict and still be meaningless. I think the idea of meaningless that Carnap is going for is different than the kind of meaningless that comes from pure gibberish, which is ironic given his argument against metaphysics. I also feel that there it is not just a matter that there are things that cannot be verified, but also that there are things that can be verified but once an individual verifies it, there's no possible way for them to share it. Once example would be "is there life after death?", you could verify it by dying and observing what happens after life, but you wouldn't be able to bring that knowledge back. —Ariel

I think you're quite right that "the idea of meaningless that Carnap is going for is different than the kind of meaningless that comes from pure gibberish". What he means is something like "devoid of cognitive content", or "not in the business of accurately describing the world". This is something that Ney isn't fully clear about, I think. I discussed it a bit in my answer on pp.4–7, above.

Questions about Quine's Alternative

I like the way Quine took to fighting Carnap's view, but I'm not sure if I should interpret this as taking down the verificationist view, or taking in a view that all claims, including scientific ones have issues in meaning. I know that Quine believes that science should trump all, which is why his intention was solely to say that ontological questions can not be meaningless, but is there something out there that will be able to be meaningful under the verificationist model? —Ariel

There is still a hint of verificationism in Quine, but it works very differently. For Carnap and other early verificationists, to say that a sentence is verifiable is to say that we can specify which sensory experiences would count as verifying just that sentence. What Quine pointed out is that it doesn't make sense to think of any one sentence being verified in isolation. Only entire belief systems can be verified, an experience counts as evidence for a given sentence only against the background of a whole belief system. This is usually called the "Quine-Duhem Thesis", because Quine and Pierre Duhem formulated the point independently.

Given this thesis, it becomes strange for a verificationist to talk about "the meaning of a sentence". Quine's solution to this problem was to think of the meaning of a sentence as its overall position, or role, in the web of belief. Any one sentence has a meaning because of all of its logical connections to all of the other meaningful sentences in the web. So the fact that I would lower my confidence in p if I stopped believing q is one aspect of p's meaning. This idea has developed into a theory called "conceptual role semantics", which you can read about here.

It looks like [Quine's] epistemology is a mix of coherentism and foundationalism. Is there any difference, in terms of the degree of or type of beliefs, between those one "lies closer to the outside of the web" and one "lies closer to the center" according to him? —Chateldon

I think most people would classify Quine as a coherentist, though you're right that he is a bit difficult to classify. I would recommend reading §1 of *Word and Object* (link) to get a feel for how his coherentist reasoning goes. (It's also a very beautiful piece of writing.)

Questions about Ladyman and Ross

The Principle of Naturalistic Closure does not seem to be a solution to metaphysics, it just seems to condense everything to scientific arguments and not metaphysical arguments. I do think that metaphysics and science have similar goals and methodology, but just because science has brought the most success so far does not mean that all other ways of achieving knowledge of the world around us should conform to it. —Ariel

I think you just disagree with Ladyman and Ross here. They think that metaphysics, on its own, has never given us anything of value, and that we should supplicate ourselves to science as much as possible. The word "scientism" is a derisive term that a lot of people would use for this idea. But I do recommend their book. It's extremely interesting!

I found the discussion of the principle of naturalistic closure confusing, as explained on pg.133. I'm not quite understanding Ney's explanation of the principle of naturalistic closure. I'm not sure what it means by a "metaphysical claim should be motivated, by and only by, the service it would perform," if true, in showing two or more specific scientific hypothesis" (133). I know Ney is critical of the rule and brings up biology and psychology the point she is making, but I have no idea what she's trying to get at by bringing up the two scientific subjects. I'm also not understanding why the principle would limit metaphysicians claims about the universe. —Aanisah

Can you elaborate on how Ladyman and Ross Metaphysics naturalized is even metaphysics, and not linking various things together? i don't feel like there's a real satisfying explanation in the book. Also, what sort of achievements have naturalistic metaphysicians made using this principle of naturalist closure, that previous metaphysicians haven't? —Robert Huffman

I think the idea behind naturalistic closure is that we want an idea of how the different sciences are supposed to fit together. There seems to be a sense in which the different sciences are often describing the same phenomenon, but they seem to be doing so in very different ways. For example, I am typing a response to you right now, and this activity could be described in very different ways, using very different vocabularies, by an economist, a psychologist, a neuroscientist, a chemist, and a physicist. There is some sense in which they're all talking about the same thing, and presumably it would be good if we could show that their descriptions are in some sense compatible, but it's not obvious how.

One job that metaphysicians have sometimes done has been to try to get clearer on the relationship between the different sciences in this way. Often, this has taken the form of formulating "bridge principles" that link the vocabulary of different scientific theories. So, for example, we might like to know how to translate psychological claims about people's beliefs and emotions into neuroscientific claims about what the neurons in various parts of their brain are doing. (One success story in this genre was the reduction of thermodynamics to statistical mechanics, which philosophers of science became obsessed with for a while.)

This is definitely a legitimate kind of metaphysical project, and it would be a valuable service to the sciences to carry it out. A lot of my own research is about showing how to link up linguistics to

various parts of psychology and the cognitive sciences in this way, for example. But it's definitely true that a lot of metaphysicians would balk at the idea that this is the *only* legitimate thing that they could be doing. The majority of metaphysics certainly doesn't look like this kind of job. But then, Ladyman and Ross's book is called "Every Thing Must Go"! (I do recommend checking it out.

Questions about Laurie Paul

While I find myself sympathetic to Laurie Paul's view of metaphysics and science as being more methodologically similar than not, through the use of models and thought experiments there does seem to be a difference in how much each relies on these tools. While thought experiments are well documented as having been useful in science they don't seem to be as fundamental as they are in metaphysics while for science experimentation seems most essential. How significant is this difference in emphasis? —Matt

I think a lot of critics of Paul would agree with you here, Matt. They would say that the fact that we rely *so* heavily on thought experiments when doing metaphysics is a bad sign, because it shows that metaphysics is less grounded in real evidence than ordinary science is. Although thought experiments may have helped Newton to think up or explain his theory, for example, they are not what convinced everyone else of its accuracy; it was the vast quantity of empirical evidence that did that. And so when people criticize metaphysics that isn't sufficiently rooted in science, I think they're worried that we're helping ourselves to some parts of the scientific method while leaving out the parts that are, at the end of the day, most important if we want to get to the truth.