

Carnap 1950, Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology

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Carnap's Project

Not an argument against metaphysics or ontology. Rather, he's offering us a story that vindicates us in engaging in certain sorts of explanatory practices without having to first answer the metaphysical questions.

In fact, I'll argue that his project is not even committed to skepticism about these issues.

The moral: metaphysical questions are neither here nor there when we engage in scientific explanation.

A Parable

Observation: Pattern of behavior in a culture:

A group of people cluster together for a set amount of time, kicking a ball around a field, occasionally into a net. At the end of a set time, they stop: some walk away happy, others sad.

Explanation:

We will call this activity a (soccer) *game*. There are two *teams*, with different goals. Whenever someone from one team kicks the ball into the net, that team gets a *point*. At the end of the set time period, the team with the most points gets a *win*.

The Skeptic:

"This is a pseudo-explanation! All you've done is posit mysterious abstract entities which lie behind and have no causal contact with the actions we observe."

- Where/what is the point of positing the "game"? All I see is a pattern of behavior in a group of people (the Observation).
- What is this "team"? – There are just people running in different directions.
- Where do these mysterious "points" come from, and how could hitting a ball into a net bring them into existence?
- Finally, what (in the world) is a "win"? The people who you say get a "win" don't receive anything at all, they just get happy.

The Naturalist:

(Nominalist?)

“The Skeptic is right to have these worries, but we can explain them away. All the terms we introduced are just *a way of talking* – ‘points’ and ‘teams’ don’t *really* exist as separate entities, but are just useful abbreviations for complex patterns of phenomena.”

- The “game” *just is* the pattern-type of behavior from the Observation.
- A “team” *just is* the a group of people running around in certain configurations on the field.
- A “point” *just is* a residual displacement of the net left by the ball.
- A “win” is a pattern in neural-firing that releases dopamine, and which tends to happen after the game for the winning team
 - they’re getting happy *is* they’re getting a win.

The Platonist:

“The Skeptic raises the right worries, but the Naturalist gives the wrong response. Can’t she see that it would be impossible to specify the naturalistic definiens of the terms she is trying to define? They’re all radically disjunctive, *unnatural* properties, so they can’t figure in such an elegant, simple explanation.”

‘Unnatural’ in the Lewisian sense.

“But the explanation is still right. It’s so successful that we have conclusive reason to *posit* the entities that it makes use of in the furniture of the world. Points and teams (etc.) *really do exist*.”

And now that we see this, we have to all sorts of metaphysics to do, e.g. to figure out how the naturalistic process of kicking a ball into a net could ground the fact that a team gets a new point.

The Carnapian:

“You’ve all misunderstood what I’m doing. I’m not defining new terms via old naturalistic ones, nor am I positing special entities. Rather: we wanted to be able to predict and explain the Observation; all I’ve done is given a useful **framework** – a useful way of talking and reasoning – which allows us to do so. For the sake of my project, *that’s all I need to do*.”

That the framework *works* is justification enough for exploring it.

If you ask whether there *really are* teams and points, you might be asking:

- (1) Whether, given that we’ve accepted the explanatory framework from Explanation, it makes sense to say, “There are points.”
- (2) Whether it is a good/useful explanatory framework.

This is a (trivial) **internal question** that is to be answered using the terms and rules of the framework.

This is a **practical question**, not a theoretical one.

Others, such as the Skeptic, Naturalist, and Platonist, try to ask an **external question**: whether, in some metaphysical sense, there *really are* games and teams and wins. Two issues:

- (i) Given the intractable nature of the debate between them (and the [putative] lack of agreed upon criteria for deciding it), I'm inclined to think that this is a pseudo-debate.
- (ii) But, more importantly, *whether or not* it is a legitimate debate, we have seen that for our purposes (of explanation and prediction) *we need not engage with it*.

My claim: Though Carnap was motivated by dissatisfaction with certain metaphysical debates, the view is not inherently anti-metaphysical. It is not a view about ontology or even (primarily) about language, but rather a view about *explanations* and what they (don't!) require. For all it says, there may well be legitimate questions about the ontology and metaphysics of numbers, propositions, and objects (though Carnap himself is skeptical). The point is simply that these are *further* questions, extricable from the project of scientific and philosophical explanations of (non-metaphysical) phenomena.

Just as it makes perfect sense to use points and teams to explain the data from the Observation without offering any metaphysical account of such entities, likewise it makes sense to go about the project of explaining physical or linguistic or economic data – making free use of numbers and sets and functions – without offering any metaphysical account of these latter entities. The explanations are to be judged by their fruits, not their metaphysical foundations.

Further topics...

- 1) Thoughts on (dissatisfaction with?) my proposed interpretation of Carnap? Does it lose some of its defining character by shedding the openly anti-metaphysical skin, or by allowing external questions to be legitimate?
- 2) Is there something cheap about the game example, since the people from the Observation are thinking in terms of 'points' and 'wins' in this way, and *that* explains their behavior?
- 3) Carnap says it's up to us whether or not to adopt the thing language/framework. What should he say to the question of whether this makes it "up to us" whether or not there are things?

I think/hope the soccer example brings out one way in which this might work: a case where we all agree that the metaphysics is beside the point.

Metaphysical questions are often perfectly legitimate (though it depends on *which* question you ask!). There is no distinctive category of illegitimate, "external questions" that they ask – though we may have independent reason to think that they often *aren't* legitimate. But they are not in any important sense *presupposed by or more fundamental than* other theoretical/explanatory questions.

You have some linguistic data you want to explain; you posit a contextually determined ordering source and modal base that predicts it; end of story. You have some economic trend you want to explain; you posit laws of supply and demand that predicts it; end of story. Of course, you *can* go on to ask the metaphysical questions, but you don't *need* to in order to do your job!

Far from obvious to me. It seems the same pattern emerges when Newton posits forces to explain physical interactions.