Would Carnap Have Tolerated Modern Metaphysics?

Wouter A. Cohen* and Benjamin Marschall*

ABSTRACT

It is well known that Carnap, early in his philosophical career, took most of metaphysics to consist of meaningless pseudostatements. In contrast to this meaning-theoretic critique of metaphysics, we develop what we take to be Carnap's later value-based critique. We argue that this later critique is forceful against several central contemporary metaphysical debates, its origin in the principle of tolerance notwithstanding.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rudolf Carnap did not hide his dislike for metaphysics. In "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language" ("Elimination"), he notoriously called metaphysicians "musicians without musical ability" (1959 [1932], 80).[1] The antimetaphysical writings of Carnap and other logical positivists were influential and, for several decades, metaphysics was frowned upon in the leading circles of analytic philosophy. But times have changed. Today, metaphysics is considered one of the core areas of theoretical philosophy and self-consciously metaphysical papers fill the pages of the most highly respected journals.

What would Carnap have thought of this development?[2] Despite his uncompromising opposition to metaphysics in his own time, the answer is not straightforward. Metaphysics, after all, is done in many ways. What Carnap initially criticised in the 1920s and 1930s was the philosophy of German obscurantists like Martin Heidegger, who opposed formal logic and a scientific worldview. In contrast, many contemporary metaphysicians embrace formal methods and consider their methodology to be continuous with that of science. There is thus room for a conciliatory reading according to which the metaphysics of today is not threatened by Carnap's critique of the metaphysics of his own time.[3]

We, however, will develop and defend a robustly antimetaphysical interpretation of Carnap according to which he would have been critical of key parts of contemporary metaphysics. We do not pretend to cover all of Carnap's many and sometimes subtle antimetaphysical arguments here. Our aim is rather to contrast his early *meaning-theoretic* critique—which aims to show that metaphysics is meaningless—with his later *value-based* critique—which aims to show that even

*University of Cambridge, UK

when metaphysics is meaningful, it is, in many cases, not a worthwhile enterprise. We emphasise the latter strategy not only because it is not as well known as, yet arguably more compelling than, the meaning-theoretic strategy, but also because it is forceful against parts of modern metaphysics in a way that the meaning-theoretic critique is not.

In §2, we critically discuss Carnap's early meaning-theoretic strategy against metaphysics, mainly by drawing on "Elimination." In §3, we then introduce two core elements of his later philosophy, namely the principle of tolerance and the distinction between internal and external questions. Since these undermine parts of the early meaning-theoretic strategy, his rejection of metaphysics must now take a different shape.[4] In §4, we introduce his value-based critique of metaphysics by applying it to contemporary philosophical mereology. Drawing on this example, we argue that, from a Carnapian perspective, metaphysical projects motivated by *ontological anxiety*—the desire to avoid commitment to certain entities even though they have proved useful—are not worth engaging in. Finally, §5 situates our interpretation of Carnap in the current meta-metaphysical landscape. We briefly consider how Carnap might have reacted to Theodore Sider's *Writing the Book of the World* (2011) and the so-called *neo*-Carnapians Eli Hirsch and Amie Thomasson.

2.   THE EARLY MEANING-THEORETIC CRITIQUE

Carnap's early meaning-theoretic critique of metaphysics, exemplified by "Elimination," is formulated in a pleasingly lively and polemical style, and perhaps for that reason is much better known than his later value-based approach.[5] In "Elimination," he aims to show that many metaphysical statements are *meaningless pseudostatements* and distinguishes between two main sources of meaninglessness. First, a metaphysical statement may be meaningless because some of its constituent phrases have no meaning. Second, it may be meaningless because meaningful expressions are "put together in a counter-syntactical way" (1959 [1932], 61). We will introduce the early strategy by considering two examples that, according to Carnap, suffer from the second kind of defect. Our discussion will then emphasise the more contentious assumptions Carnap relies on—ones that he later gave up.[6]

A famous target in "Elimination" is a sentence taken from Heidegger's lecture "What is Metaphysics?":

(N) The nothing nothings. (*Das Nichts nichtet.*)

Grammatically, (N) is analogous to meaningful sentences of English (German), such as

(C) The conductor conducts. (*Die Dirigentin dirigiert.*)

It may thus seem that (N) should, like (C), be meaningful. But Carnap argues that (N) is in fact a pseudostatement.[7] One of the two reasons he provides is that it is a mistake to use 'nothing' as a singular term that purports to refer to an object.[8] In natural language, 'nothing' is an indefinite pronoun, and so, in many sentences, it can be replaced by a name without the sentence becoming ungrammatical. This may tempt us to treat 'nothing' as essentially a name and so as a referring expression. But Carnap stresses that in a "correct language [it is] a certain *logical form* [that] serves" to express negative existential statements (1959 [1932], 70). Whereas, in such a language (and simplifying slightly), 'Benjamin is in my room' can be symbolised as

$R(b)$,

the logical form of 'nothing is in my room' is not

$$R(n)$$

but rather

$$\neg \exists x R(x).$$

In ordinary English or German, this difference in *logical* form is hidden because the sentences have the same *grammatical* form.

There is thus an important difference between (N) and (C). It makes sense to put 'the' in front of 'conductor' because 'conductor' corresponds logically to a predicate and 'the conductor' therefore is a referring expression. But it is a mistake to put 'the' in front of 'nothing' because 'nothing' does not correspond logically to a predicate, but rather to a form involving the negated existential quantifier. A similar mistake, Carnap claims, is made in existential usages of the verb 'to be', as in Descartes's "I am." Since existence is expressed by the existential quantifier, it "cannot, like a predicate, be applied to signs of objects, but only to predicates" (1959 [1932], 74). Just as the verb 'to be' sometimes "feigns a predicate where there is none" (1959 [1932], 74), so Heidegger's 'the nothing' feigns a referring expression where really there is none.

Another statement Carnap discusses in "Elimination" is:

(P) Caesar is a prime number.

He thinks (P) too is meaningless, even though the individual expressions that compose it are clearly meaningful. In this case the problem is a "mixing of spheres" (*Sphärenvermengung*). Carnap thinks that (P), like (N), cannot be expressed in a logically correct language because a logically correct language that can talk about both physical objects (like Caesar) and mathematical objects (like prime numbers) has to be *typed*: not every predicate can meaningfully be applied to every term (or variable).[9] In such a language, names of people and names of mathematical objects belong to different logical types, and mathematical predicates such as 'is a prime number' can only be applied to names (and variables) that belong to the right mathematical type. The mismatch of types in (P) makes it a meaningless pseudostatement, even though it is a perfectly grammatical sentence in English. Now, unlike (N), (P) is not seriously asserted in a metaphysics text. But according to Carnap, the example is indicative of a common kind of pseudostatement that is "encountered in especially large quantity [...] in the writings of Hegel and Heidegger" (1959 [1932], 75).

A general lesson Carnap draws from these examples is that natural language can easily deceive us:

> The fact that natural languages allow the formation of meaningless sequences of words without violating the rules of grammar, indicates that grammatical syntax is, from a logical point of view, inadequate. If grammatical syntax corresponded exactly to logical syntax, pseudo-statements could not arise. (1952 [1932], 67)

A "logically correct language" is desirable because, in it, "meaningful and meaningless word sequences" do not share the same grammatical form (1959 [1932], 69). Grammatical form would coincide with logical form and so illogical sentences, like (N) and (P), would be ungrammatical and therefore obviously meaningless.

Implicit in Carnap's arguments is the following assumption:

> Whether a grammatically well-formed sentence of natural language is meaningful depends on whether it can be expressed in a logically correct language.

This assumption raises various difficult questions. Given a sentence of natural language and a logically correct language, what is the translation function that determines (or tracks) the logical form of the sentence? And why should we think that logically correct languages (a) cannot contain a singular term that corresponds to 'the nothing' and (b) are typed in Carnap's sense? Oliver and Smiley (2013) have developed a formal system in which (N) finds a natural translation, with 'the nothing' interpreted as an empty name.[10] Quine (1951; 1953, 499; 1960, 229; see also Magidor [2013]) argues that category mistakes such as 'Caesar is a prime number' should be treated as *false* rather than meaningless. Are the formal languages these philosophers rely on, unlike the ones Carnap envisages, logically *in*correct? Given the (few) things Carnap says about correctness, it is hard to see why they would be. But if there are logically correct languages that do not meet (a) and (b) above, then his arguments are in jeopardy.

Perhaps these critical questions for the meaning-theoretic strategy can be answered, although we are sceptical.[11] Soon after the publication of "Elimination," however, Carnap's metaphilosophy, and therefore his critical strategy, changes significantly. With this change comes a new value-based objection to metaphysics which not only avoids the potential problems above but which is also, we think, more compelling, especially when applied to contemporary metaphysics.

3. TOLERANCE AND FRAMEWORKS

By the time *The Logical Syntax of Language* is published in 1934, Carnap embraces the *principle of tolerance*. Whereas the meaning-theoretic arguments of "Elimination" relied on the notion of a logically correct language, Carnap now thinks that the very idea that some languages are correct and some not is an impediment to philosophical progress (1937 [1934], xv). He writes that

> *In logic there are no morals*. Everyone is at liberty to build up his own logic, i.e. his own form of language, as he wishes. All that is required of him is that, if he wishes to discuss it, he must state his methods clearly, and give syntactical rules instead of philosophical arguments. (1937 [1934], 52)

Of course he still wants to reject metaphysical "pseudoproblems and wearisome controversies" (1937 [1934], xv), but admits that the old strategy, according to which it was "possible to reject both concepts and sentences if they did not fit into *the* language," is no longer viable (1937 [1934], 322).

To appreciate the impact of the principle of tolerance on Carnap's critique of metaphysics, it is helpful to outline his metaphilosophy based on the landmark 1950 paper "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology" ("ESO"). There Carnap introduces the notion of a *linguistic framework*. Carnapian frameworks consist of expressions which are given suitable syntactic rules, and rules for assessing the claims that can be made with them. A linguistic framework that provides such rules of use for expressions that describe the physical world might for instance contain expressions for the concepts *table* and *building*, and also for the determiner *this* and a two-place relation *is in*. Supposing this framework also to contain negation, conjunction, existential quantification, and an identity relation, we could thus ask 'are there twelve tables in this building?' (where a salient building is pointed out). The rules of the framework will determine what counts as evidence for and against a positive answer to this question, presumably by linking statements about tables and buildings to certain appropriate observations. Since the rules of the framework are presupposed when looking for an answer, Carnap calls this an *internal* question.

Internal to a framework, basic existential questions are typically easily answered. Are there tables? Yes, the evidence is any table that we can find. Do numbers exist? Interpreted internally to a framework for arithmetic, yes, of course. The affirmative answer follows straightforwardly

from the claim that there is a prime number between 110 and 120, which is internally provable. Nevertheless some philosophers seem to think that there is a sense in which such existential questions are deep and difficult.[12] Hence, says Carnap in "ESO," they can't be asking internal questions and instead should be construed as attempting to ask *external* questions that concern the reality of the frameworks: do their entities *really* exist?

Carnap thinks that such external questions are defective. The rules of a linguistic framework provide the standards of assessment for the statements of that framework. To adopt a linguistic framework is (at least in part) to commit oneself to these standards. The question whether to adopt a linguistic framework is thus the question of whether to accept the rules of assessment it provides. There just are no additional absolute or framework-independent standards of assessment. It therefore makes no sense to worry whether a framework might itself be *false* (1956a [1950], 214).

Carnap's rejection of external questions and his principle of tolerance go hand in hand. We are free to adopt whatever linguistic frameworks we want because the acceptance of such a framework cannot be judged to be true or false. The only tractable questions we can ask about the acceptance of linguistic frameworks are pragmatic in nature: is it advisable to accept this-or-that framework *given that we have such-and-such aims*? These pragmatic questions may still be important—Carnap certainly thought they were (1963b, 862)—and in some sense they may have better or worse answers. But there is no need to justify the acceptance of a framework by means of an alleged "ontological insight" into the nature of reality (1956a [1950], 214).

How does metaphysics fare on Carnap's new tolerant attitude? Plausibly Heidegger is still in trouble, for he had no interest in clarifying his language by developing formalised linguistic frameworks with relatively precise rules of assessment. But the situation is more complicated when we consider contemporary metaphysics. On the one hand, Carnap would have had little patience for those who try to justify metaphysical theses by a priori intuitions about, say, which facts are grounded by which other facts. On the other hand, many metaphysicians have embraced Carnap's recommendation to state one's methods clearly. Metaphysical theses about grounding or modality are often presented formally, with precise syntactic rules and a semantics or proof system (for instance, Fine [2012]; Williamson [2013]). Should we therefore construe contemporary metaphysicians as building linguistic frameworks, an activity Carnap approves of? In other words, does his mature critique of metaphysics only target the metaphysics of *his* time but not that of *our* time?

We will argue that this is not so. While it is true that sweeping meaning-theoretic arguments against contemporary metaphysics are unsustainable once the principle of tolerance is accepted, this does not mean that Carnap is left without critical resources. For with tolerance comes choice, and with choice, responsibility. That almost everything is permitted does not entail that all theoretical projects are equally valuable. And Carnap's *value-based* critique of metaphysics revolves around precisely this point: many metaphysical projects are badly motivated and not worth engaging in.[13] We introduce this critique via an example: philosophical mereology. We then briefly explore whether and how it extends to other debates in contemporary metaphysics.

4.   THE VALUE-BASED CRITIQUE

4.1   Mereology

Are there composite objects or only simples? Debates in philosophical mereology revolve around this question. One extreme position is *mereological nihilism*, according to which there are only simples and nothing is a proper part of something else. Nihilists thus claim that there are no tables or buildings. On the opposite end of the spectrum is *mereological universalism*, according to which any collection of objects composes another one. Universalists thus claim that there is

an object composed of Benjamin's nose and Wouter's two hands. (Various intermediate positions are possible, but for ease of exposition we focus on nihilism and universalism.)

In broad brushstrokes, debates in philosophical mereology tend to be conducted in the following way.[14] Nihilists argue that their theory is better than that of the universalists because it is simpler and more economical, at least insofar as they assume fewer (kinds of) entities (no composites, no distinct entities with the same location) and relations (no parthood relation). Of course they cannot deny that we often talk as if there were composite objects. Nihilists thus offer paraphrases of claims about composites that only use the vocabulary of their theory. In response, universalists tend to deny that the paraphrases offered are adequate to account for everything they think one needs to account for. They therefore hold that their theory, which has more (kinds of) entities, is better because the additional entities really are needed.

In many respects this style of doing metaphysics seems unobjectionable from the tolerant Carnapian point of view. We can, after all, construe the nihilist and universalist as putting forward two distinct linguistic frameworks, one which quantifies only over simples, one which also quantifies over composites. And at least some of the arguments in the debate can be interpreted as being pragmatic in nature: a simpler framework is potentially easier to use, a framework that can express things that another framework cannot is potentially more useful.

On the other hand, an important presupposition underlying philosophical mereology clashes with the Carnapian standpoint. Practicing metaphysicians typically assume there to be *matters of fact* concerning the mereological structure of the world. They take theoretical virtues such as simplicity and explanatory power to guide us to a theory that "tracks" this structure or "carves nature at its joints." They think that they are involved in a *disagreement* over the mereological structure of the world. They want their comparative arguments to establish that one framework is better than another in an *objective* sense. If the outcome of the mereological debate is that nihilism is the best theory, then the implication is that one *should* believe nihilism if one wants to have the *correct beliefs* concerning the world's mereological structure. Ultimately, either universalists or nihilists (or perhaps both) are *wrong.*

According to the Carnapian, this way of thinking is badly mistaken. There is no right or wrong, only a choice. And the principles on which to decide are pragmatic: there are better and worse choices only relative to one's aims. If I have no use for a nihilist framework, it simply makes no sense whatsoever for me to adopt it, whatever its theoretical virtues compared to other mereological frameworks.

4.2   Science and Value

It might be argued that this difference of opinion concerning the significance of philosophical mereology is not very important (Flocke forthcoming). After all, answering Carnap's pragmatic questions concerning framework choice will require arguments that, in many cases, closely resemble typical metaphysical arguments. If some framework does much better than another for each of the theoretical virtues, then by and large it will be a more useful framework by Carnapian lights. Hence metaphysicians who compare frameworks with respect to their theoretical virtues might still be doing work that Carnap could approve of, even if they are ultimately mistaken about the significance of their work.

We, however, will argue for the opposite conclusion: the difference of opinion between Carnap and philosophical mereologists about what they are doing *is* important. To see why, it is crucial to keep in mind that a defence of metaphysical theorising should not merely show that it is *possible* to construct and compare different metaphysical theories. In addition, it is also necessary to show that this theory-building and comparing of theories is *worthwhile.* And, as we will show now, it is doubtful whether, from a Carnapian perspective, philosophical mereology is worthwhile.

If, like most metaphysicians, one assumes that there are framework-independent mereological facts out there to be discovered, then it is easy to motivate the developing and comparing of mereological theories. For presumably it is generally valuable to discover what the facts are, and so there is at least some value in discovering mereological facts. It is distinctive of Carnap's tolerant approach, however, that he rejects a framework-independent notion of fact.[15] To convince a Carnapian of the value of philosophical mereology, one thus needs a different argument. Whether one can be given will depend on the answer to a simple question: what, in general, makes a linguistic framework valuable?

To answer this question, we need to briefly consider Carnap's views on values. He accepted a noncognitivism according to which theoretical and practical questions are strictly distinct: no amount of theoretical knowledge can entail an answer to the practical question what one should do (1934). This may appear to downplay the importance of science, which "does not determine any goals, but only the methods to reach goals that have already been decided on" (1934, 259, our translation). In fact, however, Carnap described his position as *scientific humanism*, one central tenet of which is that

> all deliberate action presupposes knowledge of the world, [...] the scientific method is the best method of acquiring knowledge and [...] therefore science must be regarded as one of the most valuable instruments for the improvement of life. (1963a, 83)

In short, science is valuable because it helps us achieve the practical aims that we find ourselves having. The obvious way for frameworks to be valuable is thus for them to further our practical aims by being of use in science.

Throughout his career, Carnap developed frameworks that were supposed to elucidate important scientific concepts, such as *disposition* (1956b) and *evidential support* (1950). These frameworks are parts of so-called *explications* of the relevant concepts and Carnap hoped that they would contribute to the progress of science. In some cases, his frameworks are proposals to introduce new concepts into the language of science (1950, 15). One example is semantics, which he describes as a "logical tool" for "the task of getting and systematizing knowledge" (1943, viii; see also Richardson [2007, 304]). In other cases, the frameworks provide clarifications of concepts that have been in use for a long time. Carnap for instance reads Frege as having given an explication of numerical concepts, and writes that, prior to it, people "were not completely clear about the meaning of numerical words" (1963b, 935).

We can now return to the pragmatic interpretation of external questions. A framework is valuable insofar as it helps us achieve our practical aims. Since science is incredibly useful in accomplishing all sorts of goals, a scientifically useful framework will be worth developing and studying. If a framework is not scientifically useful, then why should anyone care about it? This is not a rhetorical question. It rather amounts to a demand to indicate a framework's possible utility before spending time and effort on it. And, as we will argue next, in the case of philosophical mereology it is not clear what the possible utility of the relevant frameworks is.

4.3   Against ontological anxiety

Is mereology important for science? Does it further our practical aims? In some sense the answer is clearly *yes*. In both ordinary life and the sciences, the ability to talk about composite objects is obviously important. But to assess the fate of philosophical mereology, we need to ask a more specific question, namely whether the development and comparison of different mereological frameworks, such as universalism and nihilism, is likely to be practically helpful. And here there is reason to be sceptical. Remember that the nihilist and the universalist both *agree* that talking about composite objects is very useful. They just want to make sense of this kind of

talk in different ways. The universalist takes it at face value and accepts the ontological commitment to composite entities. The nihilist, on the other hand, shuns the additional ontology and instead offers paraphrases for statements involving composites. Suppose, then, that we already have a framework that serves our practical needs—say a universalist framework. Now imagine that a committed nihilist challenges us to use their preferred nihilist framework instead. How should we react?

From the Carnapian standpoint, it seems best to ignore the nihilist and stick to the framework we already use. There are clear disadvantages to making the switch, whereas the advantages appear illusory. The nihilist is in effect reinventing the wheel and recommending us to use their new tool to do something we can already do, namely talk about physical objects. Unless the new tool comes with some benefits, this will be a waste of time and energy. But the nihilist's sales pitch revolves around reduced ontological commitments, which is unlikely to persuade a Carnapian. If the acceptance of a universalist framework had to be justified by showing that there *really are* composite objects, then the nihilist could argue that their preferred framework is less likely to be *false* simply by avoiding *commitment* to the potentially unreal entities. But, as we saw, Carnap denies that it makes sense to justify a framework *theoretically, framework-independently* in this way. So nihilists need to argue that there is some *practical* disadvantage to being committed to composite objects. But everyone agrees that being able to talk about and quantify over composite objects is useful. For those who embrace Carnapian tolerance there is thus little reason to do philosophical mereology. Once we have a framework that can serve our needs, there is no value in constructing and comparing alternative frameworks that do the same job.

One might object that we have portrayed the mereological nihilist in too unflattering a light. Maybe their real aim is not to abolish talk about composite objects in favour of nihilist paraphrases. We saw that Carnap took Frege's explication of numerical concepts to be valuable even though these concepts had already been used successfully for centuries. Could the nihilist not likewise be understood as explicating composite object talk without wanting to replace it by something else?[16] Potentially, but note that Carnap took Frege's explication of the numerical concepts to have a definite advantage over, for instance, that provided by Peano's axioms for arithmetic: only the former explains how arithmetical concepts can be applied to the empirical world (Carnap 1950, 17f). It is hard to see what comparable definite advantage the nihilist could claim to have over the universalist.[17]

We think that philosophical mereology illustrates a strand of modern metaphysics that is especially sterile from the Carnapian point of view. Many metaphysicians display a curious form of *ontological anxiety*: given a particular framework, they want to develop a framework that has the same expressive power *but fewer (kinds of) entities*. The mathematical nominalist, who wants mathematics without quantification over abstract objects such as numbers or sets, is typically ontologically anxious. So is the fictionalist, who reinterprets some discourse as a fiction in order to avoid ontological commitment to the entities quantified over in that discourse. These metaphysical projects are considered worthwhile because there is supposed to be value in avoiding ontological commitments, especially when the entities in question are abstract. By itself, however, avoiding ontological commitment won't move the Carnapian. If frameworks according to which composite objects or numbers exist have proven to be useful, then we simply should use them. Working with these frameworks causes no harm, so there is no reason for an "uneasy conscience."

This is not to say that Carnap is always in favour of adopting the most maximal ontology. There are cases where, even from a Carnapian perspective, the avoidance of entities is well motivated. It is arguably undesirable to work with *inconsistent* frameworks. When commenting on the choice between classical and intuitionist mathematics, Carnap notes that one advantage of the weaker, intuitionist system is that it is "more safe from surprising occurrences, e.g.,

contradictions" (1939, 51). This type of consideration can also be used to caution against the adoption of, for instance, systems of set theory that assume the existence of certain large cardinals, since in the past surprising contradictions have actually emerged (Kanamori 2003, xx). But can a metaphysical project such as mathematical nominalism be motivated along these lines? We think not, for it does not seem credible that a nominalist theory for, say, arithmetic is safer from hidden contradictions than Peano arithmetic. The latter has been used and studied by mathematicians for many decades, whereas nominalist theories tend not to be used much in practice at all.[18] Some instances of ontological anxiety may thus be grounded in practical considerations, but many cannot.[19]

In summary, Carnap's value-based critique of modern metaphysics has two components. First, many modern metaphysicians mistakenly think they are trying to discover the truth about the structure of reality. According to Carnap, they are merely developing and comparing frameworks that we can decide to adopt. This Carnapian perspective then raises a question: why is developing and comparing frameworks valuable? One obvious way in which these activities may be valuable is by furthering the aims of science, since science has proven to be extremely useful for achieving our practical goals.[20] But if developing and comparing alternatives to some given framework has no prospect of impacting the human endeavour to improve life, then why is it worth doing? We have argued that at least some metaphysical projects—those motivated by ontological anxiety, i.e., the desire to achieve a certain task without the help of entities deemed undesirable—do not seem valuable from the Carnapian perspective.

Carnap's value-based critique is bound to work case-by-case, and so other areas of metaphysics might not be affected in the same way.[21] He always emphasised that his critique of metaphysics does not target "endeavours towards a synthesis and generalization of the results of the various sciences" (1959 [1932], 80) and encouraged an open-minded attitude about the possible benefits new frameworks might bring (1956a, 221). It remains to be seen how much of contemporary metaphysics can withstand the scrutiny of Carnap's mature critique. But, as illustrated by the cases of mereology and mathematical nominalism, we think that Carnap would urge us to give up on projects centred around the avoidance of ontological commitments. The principle of tolerance thus does not lead to an uncritical toleration of modern metaphysical theorising.

5. CARNAP AND CONTEMPORARY META-METAPHYSICS

5.1 Sider and the move to a metaframework

Theodore Sider is one of the leading proponents of a realist attitude towards ontology. Can his meta-metaphysics answer Carnap's value-based challenge to metaphysics? In this section we will discuss what strikes us as the most promising strategy, suggested by his *Writing the Book of the World* (2011): to turn the *external* question of which framework is correct into an *internal* one that is asked relative to a *metaframework* designed for doing ontology. We will argue that this manoeuvre does not by itself rebut Carnap's value-based objections.

As we noted, philosophical mereology is typically motivated by an appeal to the objective mereological structure of the world. In depth comparisons of nihilism and universalism are thought to be worthwhile because the theory that does best in terms of theoretical virtues is taken to "track" this structure, to "carve nature at its mereological joints" and hence to be the best theory *metaphysically speaking*. We have dismissed these motivations because they depend on an external standard of correctness that is unacceptable to Carnapians. But perhaps this dismissal is too quick. Couldn't the "tracking" and "carving" claims be construed as made from *within* a framework, specifically one designed for metaphysics?

Let us take this suggestion seriously by construing talk about "carving nature at its mereological joints" and "tracking the objective mereological structure of the world" as itself part of a framework. This will be a metaframework in the sense that it is able to compare other frameworks. If the move is successful, nihilists and universalists are concerned with truth and falsity after all. They would be debating the *internal* question 'which theory tracks the objective mereological structure of the world?', which, because it is internal, will have a true or false answer (if the framework is constructed well).

A metaframework of the relevant kind would have to introduce terminology for the comparison of mereological frameworks. We will keep the discussion simple and take the metaframework to introduce (i) the names 'NN' for the nihilist's theory and 'UU' for the universalist's, and (ii) an expression for a binary relation '____ carves nature at its mereological joints better than ____'. Suppose that it also comes with the following rule for assessing claims of the form ⌜a carves nature at its mereological joints better than β⌝:

(R) ⌜a carves nature at its mereological joints better than β⌝ is true iff (i) a has the same expressive power as β and (ii) a is committed to fewer entities than β.

Now 'NN carves nature at its joints better than UU' is a statement that is either true of false, depending on the relevant facts about the respective theories. Finally, we suppose the framework to introduce the following definition:

(T) ⌜a tracks the objective mereological structure of the world⌝ is defined as ⌜$\forall x$ (a carves nature at its mereological joints better than x)⌝.

The debate between nihilists and universalists, when conducted within this simple metaframework, is concerned with truth and falsity because the central question—which theory tracks the objective mereological structure of the world?—is internal. We are given precise rules of assessment for this question and these rules capture (in its current form of course only roughly) the ways in which the mereological debate is conducted.[22]

Up until this point, the Carnapian can do nothing but agree. All these moves—creating the metaframework, construing the debate as internal to this metaframework—are in good standing and we must admit that the central questions of philosophical mereology are, when construed in the way indicated, concerned with truth and falsity rather than choice. Part of the sting of Carnap's value-theoretic critique of metaphysics seems to be avoided.

This conclusion, however, is premature. To see why, consider again the situation in which a nihilist tries to convince someone who accepts a universalist framework to change sides. Suppose that, according to the metaframework based on (R), we indeed get the result that the nihilist rather than the universalist framework tracks the mereological structure of the world. Does this give the universalist a reason to give in and abandon her framework? Not unless we make the following assumption:

Universalists should care about the verdicts concerning the mereological structure of the world that the metaframework delivers.

The need for this assumption shows that the move to a metaframework does not really answer the value-based challenge to metaphysics, but merely moves it up a level. For it is completely opaque why we should let our choice of framework be guided by what the metaframework under consideration says about mereological structure.[23]

This gap in the strategy of internalising external questions is especially clear if one keeps in mind that there are different possible metaframeworks. Consider one that, instead of rule (R), includes the following:

(R*) ⌜*a* carves nature at its mereological joints better than *β*⌝ is true iff (i) *a* has the same expressive power as *β* and (ii) *a* is committed to *more* entities than *β*.

Whereas (R) rewards a minimal ontology, (R*) values an expansive ontology. In the dispute between nihilism and universalism, the (R*)-based metaframework will now deliver the verdict that the universalist framework tracks the mereological structure of the world. Which metaframework should guide our choice? It is hard to imagine arguments for the superiority of the (R)-based metaframework that do not rely on external standards of correctness or ontological anxiety.[24]

The introduction of metaframeworks raises deep questions for Carnap's project. Clearly he wants to compare and evaluate frameworks in a systematic way, but it is not obvious what his own metaframework for doing so is. We cannot possibly address this tricky issue here.[25] But it should be clear that the move to a metaframework does not provide an easy way out of Carnap's value-based challenge to metaphysics.

5.2 Hirsch, Thomasson, and tolerance

Another interesting question is how Carnap's own attitude towards metaphysics compares to contemporary positions that have been described as *neo*-Carnapian. The two most prominent examples are Eli Hirsch's *quantifier variance* view and Amie Thomasson's *Easy Ontology*. We will argue that Hirsch's diagnosis and critique of metaphysical debates is closer to Carnap's own than Thomasson's, contrary to Thomasson's verdict in *Ontology Made Easy* (2015, §1.5).

Hirsch holds that there are different possible mereological languages in which the quantifiers have different meanings.[26] He for instance thinks that there is an "antimereological" A-use of the quantifiers, according to which "the mereological sum of my nose and the Eiffel Tower exists" is false, and a "mereological" M-use of the quantifiers according to which this claim is true (2002, 54). Prima facie, Hirsch's possible languages, with their different uses of the quantifiers, correspond to Carnap's frameworks.

In his critique of metaphysics, Hirsch furthermore stresses value-based considerations. In response to Sider's claim that there is one meaning of the quantifier that is distinguished by carving nature at its joints, Hirsch asks why it is *desirable* to describe the world using such a joint-carving quantifier. He suggests that Sider will need to assume the epistemic value of joint-carving as a primitive and flags this move as mysterious (2008, 523; 2010, xiii; 2013, 709). This strategy is analogous to the Carnapian reply to Sider we described above.

Admittedly, Hirsch at times feels the need to distance himself from Carnap and his principle of tolerance:

Carnapian tolerance is appropriate where an existential sentence being disputed by philosophers is actually vague or ambiguous in plain English [...]. But there are other cases—and I think the case of mereology is an example—in which the disputed sentence admits of only one relevant meaning in plain English, and one of the disputants is saying something that—interpreted in plain English—is trivially absurd. (2010, 82f)

But this point seems based on a misunderstanding of the principle of tolerance. The principle is not the obviously false descriptive claim that the way people use ordinary English provides no constraints on what meanings we can ascribe to them. Rather, the principle implies that, *even if*

it happens to be the case that we ordinarily speak like, say, a universalist, there would be nothing wrong with changing our ways of speaking, if that proved desirable.[27]

Thomasson, however, has explicitly denied that Hirsch's quantifier variance view is similar to Carnap's position. In response to the example involving an A-use and an M-use of the quantifiers, she writes the following:

> But [Hirsch's diagnosis] is not Carnap's diagnosis of the situation. First, he would be able to make no sense of the idea that those who employ the A-use would both use the term 'mereological sum' and yet deny that such a sum exists. So he wouldn't say that each of the competitors is saying something true given her own use of the quantifier. Instead, he would deny that the A-speakers are making a coherent object-language (theoretical) claim at all. (2015, 76)

But this must be incorrect. For in a relatively unknown passage, Carnap gives an example that is exactly analogous to Hirsch's. Two logicians argue about the existence of certain classes.[28] Logician *More* accepts language L_M in which one can quantify over individuals, classes of individuals, and classes of classes of individuals, whereas logician *Less* accepts language L_L whose quantifiers range over fewer entities, namely only individuals and classes of those individuals. Carnap uses the example to make the following point:

> I would object [...] if [*Less*] were to say to [*More*]: "In contrast to you, there is no possibility for me to choose between the two languages. On the basis of careful considerations, I have arrived at the following two ontological results:
>   (6) There are classes of objects.
>   (7) There are no classes of classes of objects.
>   What you regard as semantical rules for [L_M] contains the phrase 'classes of classes of objects', which does not refer to anything." (1963b, 873)

While (7) is true in the framework *Less* uses, it is false in the framework of *More*. *Less*'s mistake is to regard the quantifiers of their framework as *absolute*, contrary to the principle of tolerance. And this diagnosis of the case is analogous to Hirsch's of the mereological disagreement.

This may seem like exegetical hair-splitting, but it highlights a larger point. Even though Thomasson stresses the continuity of her position with Carnap's much more than Hirsch, she in fact seems to reject the crucial tenet of Carnap's mature metaphilosophy: the principle of tolerance.[29] Thomasson wants to answer ontological questions by drawing on uncontroversial empirical facts plus conceptual truths that are said to hold in natural languages such as English. Using this method, ontological questions about mereological composition receive determinate answers: *yes*, there are composite objects such as tables. And this verdict, Thomasson stresses, is not relative to something like a linguistic framework (2015, 38).

Now, one can understand Thomasson's project in a way that makes her Easy Ontology *compatible* with Carnap's approach: namely as the descriptive thesis that our actual use of natural language commits us to the acceptance of composite objects.[30] But this is hardly the same type of strategy that can be found in Carnap's "ESO." In this respect Thomasson's emphasis on the Carnapian heritage is thus rather misleading.[31]

6. CONCLUSION

The word 'meaningless' is ambiguous. In one of its senses, the string '#!??//' is meaningless (in English). In another sense, the activity of counting the blades of grass on a football field can be described as meaningless. Carnap's early critique tried to establish that much of metaphysics is

meaningless in the first sense. His value-based critique can still be understood as arguing that metaphysics is meaningless, but now this notion needs to be taken in the second, very different sense.

No one can dictate what people should be interested in. The aim of the value-based criticism of metaphysics is not to set up prohibitions. Rather, the aim is to get metaphysicians to ask themselves a question: why are their projects interesting? Especially metaphysical debates motivated by ontological anxiety, in which one camp develops an ontologically sparse framework and then attempts to show that everything that can be expressed in some more abundant framework can also be expressed in theirs, seem, from a Carnapian standpoint, a questionable use of time. Suppose the attempt is successful. What will we have gained? We will not have improved science because all that can be expressed in the new framework could already be expressed. And it should be even clearer that the practical lives of people who are not already convinced of the interest of the debate remain as they are. All the serious metaphysician will have gained, it seems, is their own satisfaction. They might deploy phrases such as 'objective structure' and 'natural joints' to beguile the metaphysically inclined philosopher into thinking that there is some deep metaphysical insight into the objective, absolute structure of the world to be had. We have argued that this move is misleading: there is no insight, only choice. Carnapians would therefore urge metaphysicians to reflect on their projects, for it seems that their great minds could be put to much better use.[32]

NOTES

1. In references to Carnap's work, the year in square brackets is the original publication year (of the German when this was published before the English).
2. Huw Price (2009) also addresses this question.
3. Vera Flocke (forthcoming) develops an interpretation along these lines.
4. Sean Morris (2018) also stresses the importance of the principle of tolerance for Carnap's mature critique of metaphysics.
5. Other early antimetaphysical works include *Scheinprobleme in der Philosophie* (1928b) and "Von Gott und Seele: Scheinfragen in Metaphysik und Theologie" (2004 [1929]).
6. A full assessment would also have to address the continuities between Carnap's earlier and later argumentative strategies against metaphysics that doubtlessly exist. In the Schilpp volume, for instance, Carnap refers approvingly to the early *Scheinprobleme* several times (1963b, 868; 1963b, 870). He discusses his changing views on metaphysics in a late interview with Willy Hochkeppel (Hochkeppel 1967).
7. Carnap's discussion of this point is somewhat confusing because he claims that 'nothing' (*nichts*) is used as a name for an object (*Gegenstandsname*), whereas one would think that it is 'the nothing' (*das Nichts*) that is so used.
8. The second reason is that 'nothings' is meaningless because the verb 'to nothing' is meaningless.
9. In the *Aufbau* (1928a, §30), Carnap presents his "mixing of spheres" argument as an extension of Russell's theory of types to nonlogical language. We will follow him in talking of spheres and types instead of the more modern 'sorts' and many-sorted languages. Susan Stebbing (1933, 162) also develops Russell's theory of types in this way.
10. Though it is questionable whether their translation can deliver all that Heidegger wanted to do with 'the nothing'.
11. Other meaning-theoretic critiques of metaphysics, such as Daly (2012), of course require separate assessment.
12. Of course there will be internal existence questions that are difficult to answer. Is there a prime number between 10101211106 and 10101211126? Yet even in such more difficult cases, it will always be relatively clear what is to count as evidence.
13. Bradley (2018) combines material from the early *Scheinprobleme* with the later "ESO" to give an *epistemological* reading of Carnap's critique of metaphysics, which strikes us as largely compatible with our own interpretation. Emphasising the role of values will shed light on some of the questions Bradley raises (2018, 2249).

14. See, for instance, Carroll and Markosian (2010, 194), Berto and Plebani (2015, 186) and Cotnoir and Varzi (2021, 15).
15. On the connection between Carnap's principle of tolerance and the notion of language-transcendent facts see Goldfarb and Ricketts (1992, 65), Ricketts (1994), and Eklund (2012).
16. This is roughly how Hellman (1998, 342ff) defends mathematical nominalism against Burgess and Rosen (1997, 210ff).
17. It is worth noting that Carnap himself did not think of nominalist theories as explications of mathematical concepts in the way suggested here. One of his motivations for writing "ESO" was rather to show that, contrary to Goodman and Quine (1947), empiricists neither need to replace nor supplement mathematical theories with nominalist alternatives.
18. Carnap justifies his preference for classical mathematics in the same way, noting that the "majority of mathematicians seem to regard [the relevant degree of safety from contradictions] sufficiently high for all practical purposes and therefore prefer the application of classical mathematics to that of intuitionistic mathematics. The latter has not, so far as I know, been seriously applied in physics by anybody" (1939, 51).
19. Kit Fine, a leading contemporary metaphysician, seems to reach the same conclusion, but takes it to speak against Carnap rather than metaphysics (Fine 2017, 111).
20. On our reading, Carnap's critique of metaphysics is thus similar to that of those who endorse a "science-guided" approach to metaphysics, such as Callender (2011), Ney (2012), and McKenzie (2020).
21. Goldfarb (1997, 61) rightly stresses the ad hoc character of Carnap's later critique of metaphysics. Our discussion leaves it open whether there are any elements of Carnap's own position that deserve to be called metaphysical. See MacBride (2021) for some recent arguments in support of this view.
22. Insofar as the methodology of the debate is agreed upon, it must be possible to extend the rules to capture the methodology more precisely (partly by spelling out the notions *sameness of expressive power* and *ontological commitment*). Insofar as the methodology of the debate is not agreed on, the debate is arguably defective to begin with.
23. This response is similar to what is often described as Hilary Putnam's *just more theory* manoeuvre (Button 2013, §4). See Dasgupta (2018) for a recent critique of Sider in the same spirit.
24. There is one possible argument that might be worth mentioning. The rule (R) is sometimes thought to be justified because scientists use similar rules when comparing scientific frameworks (Sider 2008, 6; Sider 2011, 12). We cannot go into detail here, but at least one of your authors thinks that it is a mistake to assume that such examples drawn from science would indicate that similar comparisons are valuable when the frameworks in question have not themselves proved scientifically or practically interesting.
25. See Steinberger (2016) and Carus (2017) for the beginnings of an answer.
26. This has spawned a lengthy debate on what the *meaning* of a quantifier is. See Hirsch and Warren (2019, 353).
27. In a more recent paper (2016), Hirsch distinguishes between different conceptions of tolerance, and his "second degree" seems closer to what Carnap had in mind.
28. Carnap gives them the unmemorable names 'X1' and 'X2', but to make the case more vivid we have relabelled them.
29. Even though she talks about it approvingly (2015, 144).
30. This makes her vulnerable to various objections, such as those in Eklund (2017) and Button (2020).
31. Thomasson has recently also stressed the importance of *normative* considerations in assessing metaphysical debates (2017), however, a move that is much more in the spirit of Carnapian tolerance.
32. We presented an early version of this paper at the Serious Metaphysics Group at the University of Cambridge in Lent term 2022. We are grateful to Tim Button, Chris Daly, Christian Damböck, Fraser MacBride, Thomas Randriamahazaka, and Timo Schobinger for their feedback on later drafts. We would also like to thank Vera Flocke for sending us a draft of her forthcoming paper on Carnap and modern metaphysics.

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