

Logic and Metaphysics in Early 20th Century

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October 25, 2024

The traditional interpretation of Carnap's 1932 paper, "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language", is that is a poor reading of Heidegger. However, recent works (Damböck 2022, Stone 2017, and others) have come to reject this reading. Although the paper itself fails on several fronts, it is indicative of the overall character of Carnap's project, and there is good reason to suppose that Carnap would read Heidegger seriously. In fact, the two authors share many of the same predispositions and assumptions. In this paper, I wish to explore these undercurrents, and to expose the origin of the difference between these giants of 20th century philosophy. First I will go over the shared philosophical backgrounds, from the dominant Neo-Kantian philosophy and the influence of Husserl, to the political influences which fuel their projects. Secondly, I will take a deeper dive into how their philosophical projects were fleshed out, focusing particularly on their conceptions of object, science, language, and the role of logic in philosophy. Finally, I will take a look at the famous debate on the nature of "metaphysics," and hopefully draw some insightful conclusions and applications to contemporary approaches to philosophy.

The Origins

Heidegger and Carnap share a cultural background which informs their philosophical insights and methodologies. This background is Weberian. Both thinkers wish to answer the question: What do we do about the incommensurability of facts and meaning?

Both thinkers are reacting to the Neo-Kantianism which was highly prevalent in the late 19th and early 20th century in Germany. Heidegger's teacher and the renowned logician Edmund Husserl had recently published his books *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas*, which were designed to put formal logic on new grounds. These grounds were phenomenological in nature; that is, in order to ground logic, Husserl believed we needed a strong understanding of our intuitive capacity to reason. In Kantian terms,

Husserl was responding to the sentiment that the intuitions of reason espoused in the first critique were in need of a grounding. Husserl's solution was to create an idealist structure of phenomena: abstract, absolute ideas of experience. These were to structure and govern our rational thinking in all realms of life.

Carnap, as a founding member of logical positivism and a follower of Russell and Wittgenstein, was keen to find a logical structure by which to understand the world. He did so in his book, *The Logical Structure of the World*. His project was constructivist. He would proceed from the atomic structures of our reason - the phenomenological basis, akin to Husserl's phenomenology, though far simpler. Instead of proposing a realm of abstract entities, Carnap would propose a single phenomenal structure, that of [FIXME]. His aim is to show the unified basis of all the sciences, that is, to show that there is only one proper science, and that the separation of the sciences into epistemologically and ontologically distinct subfields is a mistake. Additionally, his emphasis is on the prior ontological status of structure.

The Projects

First, some definitions. I will define the concepts of object, science, language, and logic as both thinkers see it. We will need these definitions to work out just what they mean when they speak of metaphysics.

Heidegger and Carnap share the same conception of an object. In Carnap:

The word "object" is here always used in its widest sense, namely, for anything about which a statement can be made. Thus, among objects we count not only things, but also properties and classes, relations in extension and intentions, states and events, what is actual as well as what is not. (Carnap 2003, 5)

And in Heidegger:

Whenever one cognizes anything or makes an assertion, whenever one comports oneself towards entities, even towards oneself, some use is made of "Being"; and this expression is held to be intelligible "without further ado", just as everyone understands "The sky *is* blue", "I *am* merry," and the like. (Heidegger 2008a, 5)

So in both thinkers the concept of "being" or "object" is applied to both substantives ("what is actual;" "whenever one comports oneself towards entities"), and the objects of predication ("properties and classes, [etc.]", "whenever one cognizes anything or makes an assertion").¹

Both authors wish to understand what *is*, in the widest sense. Both authors have an interest in science and logic, though they take differing stances on its priority, and both authors have an interest in understanding the way we speak about beings. Both Heidegger and Carnap believe in a unified science. For Carnap, this takes the form of a constructional system. His emphasis is on the structure of language and its relation to things in the world, later turning to semantics to understand how the formal syntax we use relates us to the things we observe. Carnap's project is "an attempt to *apply the theory of relations to the task of analyzing reality*." (Carnap 2003, 7) Although he uses this phrase to characterize the project of the *Aufbau*, there is no reason to suppose his general project changed over the course of his career.

The Conflict

For Heidegger, "metaphysics" is characterized by a misuse of language, that is, it is the linguistic fallacy of speaking of Being as *a* being. Where we need to speak of the characteristic essence of beings as a whole, we are instead speaking of essential beings. For Carnap, it's quite similar. Metaphysics is the misuse of language to speak of things which cannot be structurally analyzed, that is, properly thought.

Carnap characterizes Heidegger's misuse of language in "The Elimination" as an attempt to substantiate something which cannot be substantiated. That is, Heidegger attempts to speak of "the Nothing" as if it is in fact a something, a substantial thing. However, this clearly is nonsense under the guise of first-order predicate logic. There is

1. I take this reading from "Heidegger and the grammar of being" in Priest 2002, chap. 15

no way to adequately capture “the Nothing nothings” with the existential quantifier. Carnap outlines a transition from ordinary language to formal language. He characterizes the transition first by creating an object, which we call “nothing” (*no*). We then construct various predicates about “the nothing” by instantiating them with the pseudo-object. However, Carnap argues that what we mean by “nothing” cannot be instantiated, as it is represented by a quantifier ($\neg\exists x.Px$ for some property P). So he argues that we ought to dismiss Heidegger’s talk as nonsense.

It is fairly apparent to anyone with an understanding of higher-level logics that, in fact, we *can* predicate over quantifiers. We could write “the Nothing nothings” as something like the following: $N(\neg\exists x.Px)$, and then express properties of this nothing-ing predicate as appropriate. So even on his own terms, given the advances in logic since the article was written, Carnap’s argument fails. He acknowledges as much in later writings (SOURCE), but still maintains that his interpretation of Heidegger is correct. How does he claim this?

Even if we are to predicate over nothing, this form is highly unwieldy, and does little to explain exactly what Heidegger is trying to do by substantiating nothing.

The Conclusion

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