Realism and Idealism
Ontology

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The story so far

- So far, we’ve considered *realism* (understood as external realism or semantic realism) and antirealism (understood in Dummett’s way).
- In the final two lectures, we’ll consider attempts to tread a line between the two.
- In particular, we’ll consider the views of Carnap, Quine, Davidson and the *internal* realism of Putnam.
- This week, we’ll consider Carnap and Quine, in the context of their writing on ontology.
The Quinean approach to ontology has become standard. He introduced the approach in ‘On what there is’ (1948).

Stephen Yablo summarises the paper’s importance:

Ontology the progressive research program (not to be confused with ontology the swapping of hunches about what exists) is usually traced back to Quine’s 1948 paper ‘On What There Is’. According to Quine in that paper, the ontological problem can be stated in three words – ‘what is there?’ – and answered in one: ‘everything’. (‘Does ontology rest on a mistake?’, p. 229)

The central question of ontology is: what exists?

Quine provides a framework for answering this question.
Let’s begin with the *descriptive* part of Quine’s project.

If we want to know the ontological commitments of a given theory $T$, we do the following:

1. Formalise $T$ in the language of first-order logic.
2. Paraphrase away any singular terms in the usual Russellian way.
3. Observe the entities over which the result existentially quantifies.
To be is to be the value of a variable

- The theory is committed to exactly those entities over which it existentially quantifies: the entities that are required to satisfy the theory.

  A theory is committed to those and only those entities to which the bound variables of the theory must be capable of referring in order that the affirmations made in the theory be true. (Quine 1948, p. 33)

- Hence Quine’s famous slogan ‘to be is to be the value of a variable’.
Then comes the prescriptive part of Quine’s project: we must decide of competing scientific theories which is the best. The criteria here are controversial but will include: predictive power, explanatory strength, simplicity, elegance, fruitfulness etc.

The entities that exist are those existentially quantified over in this best theory.

This is Quine’s metaontology: he doesn’t tell us what exists, but provides a method for deciding this question.

Quine views this approach as continuous with science.
Problems for Quine

- He limits his attention to first-order logic, but why must this be the case? If he allowed second- or higher-order logics, might he not allow in some of the abstract entities, e.g. properties, that he rejects?
- By using Russell’s theory of definite descriptions, he inherits all of the well-known problems associated with that view.
Can we be sure that our best scientific theory will guide existence questions? Yablo believes that, if we value simplicity – as Quine does – our best science may well include ineliminable use of metaphor. But metaphorical language is clearly not a guide to existence.

Generally, we may worry about circularity. We don’t want ontological criteria to enter into our account of ‘bestness’ but can we spell out e.g. simplicity, elegance, and can we motivate first-order logic and Russell’s theory without it?
Quine’s most well-known critic, however, is Rudolf Carnap.

In his paper ‘Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology’ (1950), he discusses Quinean approaches to ontology.

His view is that ontological questions have a feeling of pointlessness to them. It can feel futile to ask a question like ‘do numbers exist?’ or ‘should we be realists about moral facts?’.

Carnap offers an explanation for this feeling: such questions are either trivially true, when asked within a theory, or meaningless, when asked outside of a theory.

Let’s consider what this means.
A crucial notion to Carnap’s view is that of a *linguistic framework*.

A linguistic framework is a systematic way of speaking about entities of a given kind; a set of ‘rules for forming statements and for testing, accepting, or rejecting them’ (1956, p. 208).

When doing arithmetic, say, the linguistic framework would include syntactic rules for building up sentences about the positive integers, and arithmetic rules that describe the behaviour of the positive integers.
Let’s focus on the arithmetic example.

I may ask the following question: is there a positive integer whose square is exactly twice that of another?

The answer to this question is ‘no’. For Carnap, this is an analytic truth, since it follows from the rules of the linguistic framework, and doesn’t rely on any sensory experience.

If our linguistic theory is a scientific one, then there will be truths that are synthetic, since we need to observe the world to determine their truth-value.

In both cases, however, we are asking internal questions.
Existence questions

- If we ask the question ‘Do numbers exist?’, this could be heard as an internal question.
- If so, it has a boring answer: do the rules of the linguistic framework authorize you to say that numbers exist or not? If they do, then the answer is ‘yes’; if not, ‘no’. And there’s nothing more to be said.
- In the arithmetic framework, the answer to the question ‘Do numbers exist?’ is clearly, and uninterestingly, ‘yes’.
- This is obviously not the existence question that most philosophers take themselves to be asking in the realism debate, however.
- If existence questions only receive trivial answers within a framework, the philosopher intends to ask their question externally.
Now, Carnap says, the philosopher faces a problem: external questions are incoherent.

If you are asking an existence question to which you want a non-trivial answer, then your question is meaningless.

Why? Well, imagine asking ‘are there numbers?’. If your word ‘number’ refers to numbers, according to the linguistic framework, then it receives the trivial answer: yes. So you can’t be using ‘number’ in that way. But then what on Earth does your word mean?

This is why external existence questions are meaningless.
Pragmatic questions

- There are meaningful questions in the vicinity, Carnap believes, but these will *mention* the relevant expressions, rather than use them.
- ‘Are there numbers?’, asked within the framework, delivers the trivial answer. ‘Are there numbers?’, asked externally, is meaningless. But you can coherently ask ‘Should I use a framework that assigns a reference to “number”?’.  
- This is a *pragmatic* question about which framework we should adopt, and that is entirely coherent.
- The most charitable thing to say about an attempt at an external existence question, then, is that it should be interpreted as pragmatic.
Carnap in summary

Carnap, then, subscribes to the following:

1. A linguistic framework consists of rules for speaking about various kinds of entities.
2. Within the framework, there are truths and falsehoods. Some of these – those following from the framework itself – are analytic. Others – those relying on experience – are synthetic.
3. Existence questions can be asked internally or externally to a framework.
4. From within, their answers are trivial: we’ve either assigned a reference to the term in question, or not.
5. From without, they are meaningless. They are not using the words as the framework demands, so how could they have any significance?
6. Such external questions are best heard as pragmatic, in which case the key terms are mentioned, not used.
What are the repercussions of Carnap’s discussion for Quine?

Quine, recall, interprets the question

\[ N \quad \text{Do numbers exist?} \]

in something like the following way:

\[ N' \quad \text{Would numbers be the values of bound variables in a first-order formalisation of our best scientific theory?} \]

The problem now is that \( N' \), intended as Quine does, is \textit{exactly} the sort of question that Carnap would call an external existence question.

The best we can say about \( N' \) is that it is a pragmatic question about the sorts of frameworks we should adopt.
In his paper ‘On Carnap’s views on ontology’ (1951), Quine replies.

His criticism is that the internal/external distinction is incoherent, since it presupposes the analytic/synthetic distinction, which we know Quine rejects from ‘Two dogmas of empiricism’.

It is not obvious, though, that the analytic/synthetic distinction is intimately involved in Carnap’s account. Carnap certainly does use the terms ‘analytic’ and ‘synthetic’ when explaining linguistic frameworks, but it is not clear that he relies on them.
Certainly, neo-Carnapians attempt to define linguistic frameworks in such a way that they make no mention of analytic/synthetic.

The most obvious route here is to define linguistic frameworks as languages or language fragments.

See Eklund’s ‘Carnap’s metaontology’ (2013).
What are the upshots of our discussion for the realism/antirealism debate more generally?

Recall our characterisation of external realism from weeks 1–2 in terms of Independence, Correspondence and Cartesianism.

Let’s focus first on Independence in the following form:

S If all minds disappeared from the universe, the stars would still exist.

Using Carnap’s distinction, we could read S internally or externally.
Read *internally*, we would regard it as a sentence of our best empirical theory, and we would say that it is *true*.

After all, it seems that all human life on Earth could in principle be wiped out, and the stars would continue to exist. The two seem totally unconnected.

And similar could be said of Correspondence.
Now let’s consider *antirealism* again, from weeks 3–4, and in particular Michael Dummett.

Read *internally*, it seems he too would accept S.

After all, if we regard it as part of our best empirical theory, then it seems like a verified, and so true, sentence.

Indeed, Dummett would have much sympathy with the verificationist strand of Carnap’s thinking.

And similar could be said of Correspondence.
But of course we could read $S$ externally.

Read this way, we might take $S$ to represent more of a *philosophical* claim: of course, $S$ doesn’t mean exactly the same in the mouth of the realist and the antirealist.

The realist asserts $S$ in the spirit of putting forward a robust philosophical position about our relationship to the world.

The antirealist similarly agrees with $S$ as part of empirical theory, but also disagrees that the world is *wholly* independent of human minds and theorising.
But, if we follow Carnap, we know that these philosophically-intended *external* interpretations of S are meaningless.

So it seems that S can only be used internally and, to that end, the realist and antirealist can both cheerfully endorse it.

But now the distinction appears to have collapsed. We can no longer account for the disagreement between the two parties. The debate has evaporated.
This Carnapian method of undermining metaphysical debates is very tempting.

There is much work done in contemporary metaphysics on so-called *easy arguments*. These are ways of easily showing a metaphysical debate to be shallow.

And it’s very tempting to endorse such arguments when you see the work being done in first-order metaphysics (trust me: I spent last year in Oxford).

But we need to be careful, and not be *entirely* seduced by these arguments.

Next week, we’ll consider the limitations of such arguments. These will present themselves when we turn from the Independence and Correspondence principles to Cartesianism.