

Carnap and Frege on ontology

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Carnap and Frege
on ontology

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Outline

Carnap's attack on
ontology

Pre-war: Formal versus
material

Post-war: Internal versus
external

Motivation

Frege's context
principle

Formulation

Referential links

Carnap versus
Frege

Perfect harmony?

First interpretation

Second interpretation

Conclusion

Introduction

- ▶ The **idea** of this talk: To establish the relation between Frege's context principle and Carnap's approach to ontology.
- ▶ The **historical** issue: The structure of Carnap's argument.
- ▶ The **theoretical** issue: The significance of conventionalism.

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Pre-war: Two kinds of sentences

- ▶ Suppose we have a theory T .
- ▶ T is about the world.
- ▶ Sentences of T are 'object-sentences'.
- ▶ Any genuine object-sentence is subject to verification.
- ▶ One may enquire about the grammatical and logical form of T .
- ▶ Hence we get 'syntactic sentences'.

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Pre-war: Parmenidean claims

- ▶ Paradigmatic claims of ontology are in pre-Socratics and in German idealists. ('Parmenidean' claims)
- ▶ They fail to respect the verification criterion.
- ▶ They illicitly pretend to be genuine object-sentences.
- ▶ They have no assertoric content.
- ▶ Parmenidean metaphysics is akin to poetry.

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Pre-war: Pseudo-object-sentences

- ▶ Some philosophical doctrines arise out of reflection over concrete disciplines.
- ▶ They are ‘pseudo-object-sentences’.
- ▶ They are **not** unverifiable and **not** meaningless.
- ▶ But they fail to assert anything about the world.

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Pre-war: The status of 'There is America'

Example

Jones the ontologist utters, 'There is America'.

- ▶ On the lips of an ontologist, here is a pseudo-object-sentence.
- ▶ In order to get to its real content, we must paraphrase it.
- ▶ It is really about the syntactic structure of the geographical discourse.
- ▶ It is to be paraphrased as: 'Geographical books contain the name "America"'

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Post-war: Modifications

- ▶ Parmenidean claims are not in the picture.
- ▶ All focus is on pseudo-object-sentences.
- ▶ The token utterance 'There is America' is ambiguous.
- ▶ It may express a claim about what there is in the world, irrespective of any discourse about America.
- ▶ Then it is **external** and truth-valueless.
- ▶ Or it may express a claim about a particular geographical discourse.
- ▶ Then it is **internal** and trivially (analytically) true or false.
- ▶ (There is more to be said about the ambiguity of existential statements. . .)

Three Carnapian worries

1. There is no good way of deciding an ontological debate one way or another.
2. There is no scientific substance in ontological debates.
3. The issues at stake in those debates are irrelevant to scientific enquiry.

Frege's context principle apparently answers all three worries without leading to anti-metaphysical conclusions. I'll focus on the first (the last two involve too much rhetoric).

The context principle

- ▶ We interpret it as a claim about reference.
- ▶ If the sense is established for every sentence in which a singular term occurs and some sentences of appropriate syntactic structure are true, nothing else is required for conferring the reference on that term.
- ▶ Therefore, if one regards X as an object, one has to show that one refers to X with a singular term.
- ▶ The test of objecthood is based on **syntactic** considerations.
- ▶ Digression: Horne Tooke's *Diversions of Purley*.

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Reference on to the context principle

Problem

Is the referring relation, as established by the context principle, between X and its name a **genuine** one?

- ▶ This is an objection both from a nominalist and a conservative realist.
- ▶ Bottom-up approach: from the existence of entities to the truth of sentences.
- ▶ Top-down approach: from the truth of sentences to the existence of entities.
- ▶ **Frege**: arithmetic admits only of the top-down approach.
- ▶ Precisely because the traditional metaphysical debates are futile we adopt a uniform linguistic criterion of objecthood.

Carnap and Frege: perfect harmony?

- ▶ The context principle seems congenial to Carnap's approach.
- ▶ Ontological questions are easy.
- ▶ Although *mathematical* questions are still difficult.
- ▶ Both Frege and Carnap should concur.
- ▶ Still, according to Carnap, the context principle makes no advance in ontology.
- ▶ But why?

Is this an issue about past metaphysicians?

1. Metaphysics asks external questions.
2. **Metaphysics is not interested in internal questions.**
3. External questions cannot legitimately be asked.
4. Therefore, metaphysics poses no legitimate questions.
 - ▶ Frege had simply abandoned the traditional metaphysical project.
 - ▶ This interpretation has some textual support.
 - ▶ But it disregards the role of conventionalism.

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Conventionalism kicks in

- ▶ The choice of theories is not decided by their correlation with reality.
- ▶ The choice is 'practical'.
- ▶ That is, based on simplicity, fruitfulness, generality.

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Conventionalism in full swing

- ▶ The ontological question admits an answer of the form 'According to T , X exists'.
- ▶ Generally, such prefixing is bad for ontology. (Prior)
- ▶ But it is OK if T is the **true** theory.
- ▶ 'According to the true theory of the world, atoms exist' is a kosher, traditional ontological claim.
- ▶ But there is no one true T , truer than any other theory.

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Conventionalism destroys metaphysics

- ▶ The claim that T is true is not an assertion.
- ▶ It is to be understood as a claim about the pragmatic virtues of T .
- ▶ Those virtues govern us in our *decision* to use T , rather than some other theory.
- ▶ ‘According to the simplest, most fruitful, most general theory of the world, atoms exist’ is not a satisfying ontological claim.

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Conclusion: Carnap's two steps

Syntactic constraint

One's ontological commitment to X is to be understood via the syntactic structure of one's theory of X .

Principle of Tolerance

The choice of one's theory is governed by pragmatic considerations.

- ▶ The Principle of Tolerance is the real destroyer of traditional ontology.
- ▶ It is the one unpalatable to Frege.