

THE SEMANTICAL UNTENABILITY OF THE CARNAPIAN DOCTRINE OF QUESTIONS*

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Probably one of the most notable elements in the entire philosophical legacy of Rudolf Carnap will prove to have been his systematic insistence upon the distinction between «external questions» and «internal questions», as he called them. Not that he was responsible for the underlying idea of drawing a distinction between, on the one hand, the calling into question of a whole *Weltanschauung*, a whole comprehensive frame-of-reference with criteria provided within itself for the acceptance or rejection of any specific assertions answering particular queries; and alternatively, on the other hand, simply presupposing such a frame-of-reference and strictly «within it» posing some particular query with a view to an answer on the basis of the framework's constituent criteria. *That* distinction among questioners' motives is familiar enough, and noncontentious. More controversial, but still not original with Carnap, is the philosophical doctrine that only questions posed in the latter spirit can be objectively answerable. The doctrine exists, at least as an inarticulate suspicion, or prejudice, in the minds of many modern intellectuals and reaches a level of semi-articulation in the writings of some specialists in history, anthropology, and existential phenomenology, for example.

The specific contribution of Rudolf Carnap to this doctrine of «philosophical agnosticism», as we may call it, was not of course to invent it, but simply to rationalize it by linguisticizing it and incorporating it systematically into a global view of language, thought and objectivity. ⁽¹⁾ Carnap's standpoint was that a *Weltanschauung* simply *is* a language, and its constituent criteria of warranted assertibility are to be found among its constituent linguistic rules, syntactical and

* This is a modified version of a paper presented at a session of the Canadian Philosophical Association in Edmonton, Alberta, 6 June, 1975.

⁽¹⁾ An exposition and critique of Carnap's linguisticized «philosophical agnosticism» from another angle will be found in my article, «The Tolerance of Rudolf Carnap», in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 49, No. 3, December, 1971.

semantical. In place of talk about the acceptance of a *belief* in material things, Carnap advocated talk of acceptance of «the thing world», i.e., «the thing language».

«To accept the thing world means nothing more than to accept a certain form of language, in other words, to accept rules for forming statements and for testing, accepting, or rejecting them. The acceptance of the thing language leads, on the basis of observations made, also to the acceptance, belief, and assertion of certain statements. But the thesis of the reality of the thing world cannot be among these statements, because it cannot be formulated in the thing language or, it seems, in any other theoretical language.»

This quotation comes from Carnap's 1950 article, «Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology»⁽²⁾ which forms the basis of the present discussion and criticism of his position here. Carnap's reason for so firmly denying the thesis of the existence of material things to be something truth-valuable (something «formulable in a theoretical language») was the failure of this thesis to pass the test of the logical positivist criterion of cognitive meaningfulness, as he saw it.⁽³⁾ Carnap's strategy was to replace the supposed *theoretical* question whether or not material objects exist, which Carnap rejected as being «metaphysical», with the non-theoretical *practical* question whether or not to speak «the thing language». And the cognitivity of this practical question, as of all other practical questions—including even moral questions—Carnap had no hesitation at all in denying as a convinced logical positivist.

«Once we have accepted the thing language with its framework

⁽²⁾ Reprinted as Supplement A to the Second Edition of Carnap's *Meaning and Necessity* (Chicago, 1956), page 208.

⁽³⁾ This criterion, as espoused by Carnap, had varying formulations, with varying degrees of stringency, at different stages in Carnap's career. For the final formulation, weakest of all, see «The Methodological Character of Theoretical Concepts» in *The Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis*, edited by H. Feigl and M. Scriven (Vol. 1 of the Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Minneapolis, 1956).

for things, we can raise and answer internal questions, e.g., 'Is there a white piece of paper on my desk?', 'Did King Arthur actually live?', 'Are unicorns and centaurs real or merely imaginary?', and the like. These questions are to be answered by empirical investigations. Results of observations are evaluated according to certain rules as confirming or disconfirming evidence for possible answers...

«From these questions we must distinguish the external question of the reality of the thing world itself. In contrast to the former questions, this question is raised neither by the man in the street nor by scientists, but only by philosophers. Realists give an affirmative answer, subjective idealists a negative one, and the controversy goes on for centuries without ever being solved. And it cannot be solved because it is framed in a wrong way. To be real in the scientific sense means to be an element of the system; hence this concept cannot be meaningfully applied to the system itself. Those who raise the question of the reality of the thing world itself have perhaps in mind not a theoretical question as their formulation seems to suggest, but rather a practical question, a matter of practical decision concerning the structure of our language.»⁽⁴⁾

«The decision of accepting the thing language, although itself not of a cognitive nature, will nevertheless usually be influenced by theoretical knowledge, just like any other deliberate decision concerning the acceptance of linguistic or other rules. The purposes for which the language is intended to be used, for instance, the purpose of communicating factual knowledge, will determine which factors are relevant for the decision. The efficiency, fruitfulness, and simplicity of the use of the thing language may be among the decisive factors. And the questions concerning these qualities are indeed of a theoretical nature. But these questions cannot be identified with the question of realism. They are not yes-no questions but questions of degree.»⁽⁵⁾

⁽⁴⁾ Quoted from «Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology», op. cit., page 207.

⁽⁵⁾ Ibid., page 208.

Thus Carnap's viewpoint resembles W. V. Quine's in identifying the «ontological question» with a question of language forms, but he stops short of Quine's view that the question can be answered cognitively by reference to purely pragmatic considerations.

Carnap's general approach is (1) to identify as a non-truth-valuable *Weltanschauung* any comprehensive ism which fails to pass the test of the logical positivist criterion of cognitive meaningfulness, and (2) to identify the question at issue in the debate over that ism with a non-theoretical practical question of what language to employ.

«What is now the nature of the philosophical question concerning the existence or reality of numbers? To begin with, there is the internal question which, together with the affirmative answer, can be formulated..., say, by 'There are numbers'... This statement follows from the analytic statement 'five is a number' and is therefore itself analytic. Moreover, it is rather trivial... Therefore nobody who meant the question 'Are there numbers?' in the internal sense would either assert or even seriously consider a negative answer. This makes it plausible to assume that those philosophers who treat the question of the existence of numbers as a serious philosophical problem and offer lengthy arguments on either side, do not have in mind the internal question... Unless and until they supply a clear cognitive interpretation, we are justified in our suspicion that their question is a pseudo-question, that is, one disguised in the form of a theoretical question while in fact it is non-theoretical; in the present case it is the practical problem whether or not to incorporate into the language the... linguistic forms which constitute the framework of numbers.»⁽⁶⁾

A cardinal feature of this approach is the systematic ambiguity of any sentence capable of expressing an affirmation of reality that is crucial to a *Weltanschauung*. The utterance of the sentence, according to this approach, may be meant as the answer to an internal question, in which event its truth is trivial, whether analytic or empirical, or it may be meant as the answer to an external question, in which event it is not

⁽⁶⁾ Ibid., page 209.

truth-valuable at all, and really only says what to do rather than saying what is the case.⁽⁷⁾

The breadth of this approach's ramifications in modern philosophy ought not to require here any extensive rehearsing. Two examples should suffice. The common dissatisfaction with G.E. Moore's famous «Proof of an External World» as failing to come to grips somehow with the real issue can best be interpreted as a charge against Moore of having mistaken for the answer to an external question («Are there things outside us?») the trivial empirical truth which follows logically from the answer to a childish easy internal question («Is this a hand?»).⁽⁸⁾ On the other hand, John Searle in his celebrated article, «How to Derive 'Ought' from 'Is'», is not really calling inconsistent every ethic which fails to acknowledge any moral obligation to keep promises, but rather is essentially just criticizing the ethical anti-naturalists for (in Searle's view) overlooking the empirical verifiability of «Jones ought to pay Smith five dollars» interpreted as an «internal remark» within the framework of the «constitutive rules» of the social institutions of promising.⁽⁹⁾

My object here is to advance an argument in opposition to Carnap's linguistic version of «philosophical agnosticism» based upon his distinction between theoretical «internal questions» and non-theoretical «external questions». I want to deny that any comprehensive ism which fails to pass the logical positivist test for cognitive meaningfulness must really be a truthvalueless ensemble of linguistic forms and rules. I want to adduce a case where it would manifestly be incorrect semantics to interpret the affirmations of reality which such an ism leads its adherents to make as being either «internal» or «external» in the ways allowed by Carnap's doctrine. The sphere of religious faith is of course, *par excellence*, the realm wherein it is possible to find

(7) It also may, according to Carnap, be meant as the answer (improperly expressed) to the empirical question whether certain linguistic forms are expedient. (Ibid., page 213).

(8) Cf. Morris Lazerowitz's 1958 paper, «Moore and Philosophical Analysis», reprinted in his collection, *Studies in Metaphilosophy* (London, 1964), pages 212-213; A.J. Ayer's title essay in his collection, *Metaphysics and Common Sense* (London, 1969), pages 71-72.

(9) *The Philosophical Review* Vol. LXXIII, No. 1, January 1964; see especially footnote 8, page 57.

comprehensive isms which fail to pass the test of the logical positivist criterion of cognitive meaningfulness. It is not necessary to claim that all religious isms have this feature. It is enough that the isms instanced below have it.

I define a *fundamentalist Christian* as someone who is prepared, on principle, to accept at face value anything which is said in the Christian Bible, exclusive of the Apocrypha (he is *not*, of course, obliged to take literally passages that do not purport to be literal, such as «The Lord is my shepherd», etc.). A *fideist fundamentalist Christian* is someone who deliberately adheres to Christian fundamentalism as a conscious article of faith rather than on the basis of any grounds whatsoever. Now, some of the tenets of the fideist fundamentalist Christian may still be empirical by Carnapian criteria, on account of being «translatable into an empiricist language». ⁽¹⁰⁾ But at any rate the fideist's sense that he is fully justified in accepting all the tenets of Christian fundamentalism will not pass the Carnapian test of cognitive meaningfulness. (By «justified» here, of course, is *not* meant «rationally justified» or «morally justified». ⁽¹¹⁾) Accordingly the fideist fundamentalist Christian's acceptance of *this* must, on Carnapian principles, be construed as really the acceptance of «a certain form of language, in other words» the acceptance of «rules for

⁽¹⁰⁾ See Carnap's reply to Karl Popper in *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap*, edited by P. A. Schilpp (La Salle, Illinois, 1963), pages 877-881.

⁽¹¹⁾ Nor does calling a belief «justified» in this sense imply that it has undergone any particular process of justification. In my view, regarding a belief as being «justified» in this sense is merely regarding it as being *the belief to hold* in the circumstances insofar as truth is the end in view. In this sense it is analytic that whatever belief one holds he regards as «justified» (even though «justified belief» ≠ «true belief»). See my discussion in «Methodological Conservatism» (*American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 2, April, 1971, page 186). (The conception here of a tenet one is «justified» in holding is wider than the conception of a proposition that is «probable» in the «rational credibility» sense of «probable» which is discussed by Carnap as part of normative decision theory in Chapter 1 of *Studies in Inductive Logic and Probability*, Volume I, edited by Rudolf Carnap and Richard C. Jeffrey (Berkeley, 1971). For it would indeed be inconsistent to call a doctrine «probable» in that sense while simultaneously rejecting the characterization of belief in it as being «justified», but it would *not* be inconsistent to call the acceptance of a tenet «justified» while simultaneously rejecting the characterization of what is accepted as being something that is «probable» in the «rational credibility» sense. An extreme fideist like Kierkegaard certainly considered his faith to be «justified» even though failing to satisfy criteria of rationality.)

forming statements» or «for testing, accepting, or rejecting them». Clearly, one of the rules constitutive of fideist fundamentalist Christianity, on this interpretation, will be the rule of accepting all claims made in the Christian Bible, exclusive of the Apocrypha, and rejecting all claims contradicted there, and employing as an absolute test of all claims—at least amongst other tests—the test of seeing if they are affirmed or contradicted there. It is, of course, a straightforwardly empirical question what is claimed in the Christian Bible.⁽¹²⁾ And so, the Carnapian must say that the fideist fundamentalist Christian has as empirical a test for his claims as any scientist has.

Suppose that our fideist fundamentalist Christian affirms (e.g., in his diary), «The virgin birth of Jesus was most assuredly real.» (When a person affirms that something is *most assuredly* so he is calling the claim that it actually is the case a wellnigh maximally well-justified claim.) According then to the Carnapian doctrine, this affirmation of his admits of two interpretations. (1) He may be asserting the answer to an internal question, posed within the fideist-fundamentalist-Christian linguistic framework, a question answered conclusively by reference to the empirical fact that the Christian Bible says Jesus was born of a virgin. (2) He may be answering the external question whether or not to accept the fideist-fundamentalist-Christian linguistic framework, i.e. whether or not to adopt that particular faith⁽¹³⁾ and

⁽¹²⁾ This claim is not significantly counterevidenced by the historical persistence of unresolved disagreements on Biblical interpretation. Quite apart from any *logically* conceivable future access of evidence (such as heretofore undisclosed tape recordings from the Biblical period), there are plenty of sociological explanations for failure to reach a consensus which do not involve the presence of any special difficulty in the question at issue, let alone its «irresolvability in principle». Contemporary theorists, like H.-G. Gadamer and W.V. Quine, who deny in principle that questions of interpretation can ever be factual empirical questions, are thereby contradicting not only common sense but Rudolf Carnap as well, and so, for purposes of the present argument against him, their views may be disregarded here.

⁽¹³⁾ Ernest R. Sandeen in his recent history, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Chicago, 1970), tracing back the origin of the so-called «Fundamentalist» movement in early twentieth-century American Protestantism, expressly contradicts the common view that the Virgin Birth and four other Christian tenets were recognized generally at any time during the period as together constituting «the Five Points of Fundamentalism», and indeed Sandeen insists that no single creedal declaration ever did enjoy pre-eminent favour in the movement (see especially pages xiv-xv). But presumably even he would not wish to deny that the Virgin Birth of Jesus actually was, at the time, generally counted as one touchstone of Fundamentalist belief or persuasion.

the pious readiness in consequence to go along with every claim which is made in the Christian Bible.⁽¹⁴⁾

Let us suppose that among the audience for our fideist fundamentalist Christian's affirmation (whether he realizes it or not) are some fideist fundamentalist Muslims and some naturalist atheists. At this point it is necessary to intrude the empirical fact that the Koran, like the Christian Bible, makes the claim that Jesus was born of a virgin. According to common sense, therefore, «The virgin birth of Jesus was most assuredly real» would express something with which the fideist fundamentalist Muslims would agree while the naturalist atheists would for their part disagree with it. But on Carnapian principles this result cannot be reached. If the affirmation in question is to be interpreted as the answer to an internal question, it expresses a straightforwardly empirical truth, one to which Muslims and atheists alike need have no hesitation in assenting. If the affirmation is to be interpreted as the answer to an external question, then it would be impossible to agree with it without agreeing to accept the Christian religion.

It would appear thus that if common sense is right here, then the Carnapian doctrine of «internal questions» and «external questions» is wrong, and if the Carnapian doctrine is right, then it is common sense that is wrong here. But who would agree to consider common sense wrong on something as clear and distinct as this?

More than one student of Carnap's thought who read this argument in a previous draft of the present paper have objected to it that what I overlook is the way in which, for Carnap, the same question can be an internal question in each of two different linguistic frameworks. But the English interrogative sentence,

«Is it or is it not most assuredly the case that the virgin birth of Jesus was real?»,

can express an «internal question» within the fideist fundamentalist Christian framework only by expressing a question which, on Carnapian

⁽¹⁴⁾ I think we can exclude in this case the third possibility Carnap suggests, the possibility that the fideist fundamentalist Christian in making his affirmation is really reporting (or alternatively, falsely alleging) the pragmatic expediency of fideist fundamentalist Christianity as a matter of empirical fact.

pian principles, demands to be answered by reference to altogether different empirical evidence than would the question expressed in these words if it were an «internal question» within a fideist fundamentalist Muslim linguistic framework. Surely nothing could ever, on Carnapian principles, count as the *same* «internal question» within two different linguistic frameworks unless the ways in which it were meant to be empirically answered in each framework were the same. The (true) proposition which was empirically established by consulting the Christian Bible as the ultimate authority just could not, on Carnapian principles, be the same proposition as one conclusively established empirically by consulting the Koran instead, even if the two propositions did chance to be expressed in the very same English words,

«The virgin birth of Jesus was most assuredly real».

On the other hand, the proposition (expressible in these words) which the fideist fundamentalist Christian really could conclusively establish empirically, on Carnapian principles, simply by reference to the text of the Christian Bible, would be a proposition that no anti-Christian reasonably acquainted with the contents of that book would need to hesitate for one moment to accept unreservedly. One wants to say, however, that Carnapian principles notwithstanding, any Christian affirming, «The virgin birth of Jesus was most assuredly real,» on whatever basis, would *of course* be asserting something with which some anti-Christians (such as Muslims) would agree whilst others, however well-informed as to the contents of the Christian Gospels, would not. The Carnapian interpretation, in other words, must needs conflict with the plain empirical facts about what Christians really do mean in making such affirmations.

I can imagine an objection at this point to the effect that my argument misses its mark because it bases itself upon considerations of empirical semantics whereas Carnapian «semantics» is not concerned with what people mean by the things they say but rather with logical relationships. However, as Carnap understands «pure semantics», it is indeed logical, but that with which it is concerned is just, what it is *logically possible* for people to mean by the things they say. The present argument has been aimed at reducing the plausibility of

the Carnapian position in philosophy by establishing the derivability from it of something preposterous: in particular, the argument has been that if his doctrine of «internal» and «external» questions really were to hold good, it would have to be *logically impossible* for a fideist fundamentalist Christian, in affirming the Biblical doctrine that the virgin birth of Jesus was most assuredly real, to mean anything by the affirmation with which fideist fundamentalist Muslims would agree while naturalist atheists for their part disagreed.

A final objection raised against the present argument is that it underestimates the *room* Carnap's philosophy really does afford for the classification of a sentence like

«The virgin birth of Jesus was most assuredly real».

According to this line of objection, such a sentence need not be classified, on Carnapian principles, as being *either* the answer to an internal question or the answer to an external question, but rather as being a *recommendation of belief* in the (empirically meaningful) historical proposition that Jesus was born of a virgin, a recommendation with which fideist fundamentalist Christians and Muslims, though for different reasons, will both agree while naturalist atheists, on the other hand, will disagree with it. According to this interpretation of the sentence, it differs from an answer to an internal question in that its semantic force is to make a recommendation rather than a statement-or-misstatement of fact; and it differs from an answer to an external question in that the recommendation which it makes does not involve any global endorsement of an entire «framework», but only the adoption or retention of a particular *derivative* article of belief. Carnap's doctrine regarding ethical and other value-judgements certainly does allow some of them to be derivative; and surely it would not be any of those ones which answered genuine «external questions», in Carnap's sense. Where *that which is recommended* is the same, why might not a sentence which expresses the recommendation be rightly held to retain *the same meaning* notwithstanding the varying *grounds* upon which the recommendation may be (from different quarters) urged?

Waiving the historical consideration that Christian fundamentalists did characteristically regard the Virgin Birth doctrine as a *touchstone*

of their faith, we might well find considerable plausibility in construing

«The virgin birth of Jesus was most assuredly real»

to express a *derivative* value-judgement of some kind. But how available is non-cognitive construal along such lines to a Carnapian? The problem manifests itself when we ask what *kind* of value-judgement the sentence is going to be construed as expressing. It clearly could not be a moral, nor yet an aesthetic and/or hedonic value-judgement which is expressed here when the speaker recommends belief in Jesus' virgin birth (as being *justified*, in the relevant sense). Nor could the recommendation that is made here be strictly classified as a prudential one either (since there is no *inconsistency* in someone's considering a belief to be *justified*, in the present sense, while simultaneously thinking he would be better off if he did not have it). Rather, the recommendation must be an *instrumental* one. Instead of belief in Jesus' virgin birth being recommended here unconditionally, all that is recommended is: belief in Jesus' virgin birth if the end in view be true belief. The only kind of imperative involved here is a *hypothetical* imperative of the same general sort as

«If you want to go to the biggest department store in Toronto, go to Eaton's»

or

«If you want to get to Toronto as fast as possible, take the Gardiner Expressway».

My point is that, as far as such instrumental or *pragmatic* value-judgements and imperatives go, it is an essential (and highly plausible!) feature of the Carnapian philosophy to insist on their cognitivity.⁽¹⁵⁾ Pragmatic questions («metaphysical» pseudo-questions apart) have a definitely cognitive character, Carnap insisted, being answer-

⁽¹⁵⁾ As Carnap in effect notes, e.g., in «The Philosopher Replies», in *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap*, op. cit., page 999.

ble either logically or empirically. But a cognitive question, on his view, can only be an internal question. Accordingly, the present attempted defence of the Carnapian philosophy by means of the claim that it could construe

«The virgin birth of Jesus was most assuredly real»

as the answer neither to an internal nor to an external question, is a defence that must fail.

The Carnapian is left, then, with the dilemma that if this sentence, as affirmed by a fideist fundamentalist Christian, is to be interpreted as an answer to an internal question, then it will just be noncontroversially true; while, if it is to be interpreted as an answer to an external question, it must mean something with which *no* non-Christian could ever agree. But that is contrary to what we all know about what such a sentence really does mean.

Carnap's doctrine of «internal questions» and «external questions» must accordingly be wrong.

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