Metaphysics Handouts
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Handout 1

Elimination of metaphysics: Carnap

The thesis. Anti-metaphysics is old news. Greek sceptics, empiricists, Kant himself, all had it. Nowadays debunkers have it too. Their charges were that metaphysics is false, or uncertain because its problems outrun human knowledge, or sterile. Each concedes that something has been said. Carnap's charge is different. 60

Logical analysis shows that the alleged statements of metaphysics aren't statements at all. They are meaningless, and a meaningless sentence can't be false, uncertain or sterile, since only a meaningful sentence divides into true and false, fruitful and barren. That's why we have an elimination, not a refutation. A word-sequence that looks like a statement 61
and isn't one is a 'pseudo-statement'. Metaphysics isn't a fairy tale, because a fairy tale conflicts only with experience 72
and is perfectly meaningful, just false. It isn't superstition either, because one can believe a false proposition but not a meaningless string of words. Nor is it a working hypothesis, since a hypothesis must be deducibly linked to empirical statements, which a pseudo-statement can't be.

Example 1. Consider Carnap's cases. 'In 1910 Vienna had 6 inhabitants' is obviously false. 'Persons A and B are each a 61
year older than the other' is contradictory. Asking the average weight of Viennese whose phone numbers end in '3' is pointless. All three are meaningful, unlike a pseudo-statement.

Remark 2. Two ways to be a pseudo-statement. A language is a vocabulary plus a syntax. So either a word in the sequence 61
only seems to have a meaning (§3: 'principle', 'God'), or every word means something and the syntax forbids the combination (§5: Heidegger). In the second kind, nonsense is a matter of logical form, not of suspect vocabulary.

Question 3. If metaphysical sentences can't even be believed, what are metaphysicians doing when they argue, and take themselves to disagree?

Where meaning comes from. Two things determine the meaning of a word. First, the simplest sentence form in which 62
it can occur, its 'elementary sentence'. For 'stone' that is 'x is a stone'. Second, for that elementary sentence, which sentences it's deducible from and which are deducible from it. Carnap puts this in four ways: deducibility, truth-conditions, verification, meaning, which correspond to metalogic, logic, epistemology and phenomenology. He credits Wittgenstein with the thought that the meaning of a sentence is its truth-condition. Most words are defined by other words, and the 62
chain ends in the words of 'protocol sentences', which record observation. Whether these are about sense-qualities, whole experiences or things Carnap here leaves open. A word has meaning only if the sentences containing it reduce to them. The anti-metaphysical work is done by a 'proviso'. Nothing less than a criterion of application fixes a meaning, 63
and nothing more can be given, because the criterion fixes the meaning completely. Later the doctrine is restated as the 63
verification principle: a statement asserts exactly as much as can be verified of it. 76

Example 4. Someone says that some things are 'teavy' and others aren't, but that there are no empirical signs of teavyness. 64
Then he has said nothing. If he insists he means something, we learn at most that images and feelings go with the word, and those aren't a meaning. Now suppose 'toovy' comes with a criterion: a thing is toovy exactly when it's quadrangular. Then 'toovy' is a synonym of 'quadrangular', and its users may not add that quadrangularity merely manifests a hidden toovyness. Once the criterion is fixed, there's nothing left to intend.

Example 5. Asked what 'x is the principle of y' means, the metaphysician says that y arises out of x, or exists by virtue of 65
x. 'Arises out of' has a clear sense: things of kind y regularly follow things of kind x. But the metaphysician disowns this sense, since it would turn his thesis into a piece of physics, and offers no other criterion. So the metaphysical sense of 'principle' isn't obscure or deep. It doesn't exist. The same goes for 'God'. The word is clear in mythology, where the gods live on Olympus, and metaphysics strips it of that reference without giving it a new one. 66

Question 6. Are truth-conditions and verification-conditions the same thing? And doesn't the rider condemn 'electron' along with 'toovyness'? A theoretical term is meant precisely to outrun its observable criteria.

Grammar against logic. Now the second kind of pseudo-statement, made of meaningful words wrongly combined. 67

(1-1) Caesar is and.

(1-2) Caesar is a prime number.

(1-1) breaks a rule any speaker can state. The third position wants a predicate, not a conjunction. (1-2) breaks none. It has the form of 'Caesar is a general', and that is the point. 'Prime number' is a predicate of numbers, defined by divisibility, and it can be neither affirmed nor denied of a person. Grammatical correctness tempts us to take it for a false 68
statement. It isn't one. Ordinary grammar sorts words into nouns, adjectives and verbs, but not into the finer logical types: thing, property of a thing, number, property of a number. A grammar cut as fine as the types would make (1-2) as visibly ill-formed as (1-1). Natural language's defect is that it gives meaningful and meaningless sequences the same grammatical form. In a logically correct language metaphysics couldn't even be expressed, while nonsense would be 68
excluded in advance.

Example 7. Type confusion in everyday speech is usually harmless. 'This table is larger than that' relates two objects. 75
'The height of this table is larger than the height of that' relates two numbers. 'Larger' does two jobs, but subscripting it and defining the first use by the second repairs that. Hegel's and Heidegger's type confusions, Carnap charges, can't be repaired like this, since there's no correct sentence for them to translate into.

Question 8. Whose grammar? Deciding which combinations are *logically* admissible looks as if it already presupposes the verdicts of meaninglessness the grammar was meant to deliver.

THE NOTHING. Heidegger's *Was ist Metaphysik?* ends with: 69

(1-3) What about this Nothing?—The Nothing itself nothings.

To see the problem, we construct a table. Column I, sense: 'Rain is outside', 'What about this rain?', 'The rain rains'. Column II, the same grammar: 'Nothing is outside', 'What about this Nothing?', 'The Nothing nothings'. In column III, logical notation, the first row of column II becomes $\sim(\exists x)\, Ou(x)$, so that sentence is meaningful despite its surface. For the other rows there's nothing to write, since none of these forms can even be constructed. A negative existential is made 70
not with a name but with a logical form of the whole sentence. Ordinary grammar lets 'nothing' stand where a noun stands, and grammatically faultless steps then carry us from the harmless row to the empty ones. The verb adds a second 69
fault. 'To nothing' is a newly minted word that never had a meaning to lose. Might 'nothing' mean something else 71
in Heidegger, perhaps a mood revealed in anxiety? The passage's opening sentence uses 'nothing else' as an ordinary logical particle, which rules this out.

Example 9. 'Nobody came to the party' is a negative existential, and 'Nobody was late' is another. Take 'nobody' as a name, and it follows that the one guest who came was punctual. That's exploited by Odysseus (and skipped by Nolan!) and by Lewis Carroll. Carnap's claim is that Heidegger's questions are this joke without the fun.

Question 10. Is this a refutation? Heidegger says himself that his question destroys logic, and Carnap takes the admission as a good confirmation of his thesis. But then column III is being used as the standard of intelligibility, and that standard 72
is exactly what Heidegger disputes.

WHY *ALL* OF IT. Carnap argues that the same errors turn up, sometimes word for word, in Hegel, Descartes and in every other system. The commonest source is the verb 'to be'. It's ambiguous between the copula in 'I am hungry' and existence 73
in 'I am', and in the second sense its verbal form pretends that existence is a predicate, which since Kant it's known not to be. But the generalisation isn't inductive. Meaningful metaphysics is impossible, and this follows from its self-appointed 76
task: knowledge that empirical science can't reach. Meaningful statements come in three kinds. Tautologies are true by their form and say nothing about the world. Contradictions are false by their form. Every other statement is decided by protocol sentences and so belongs to empirical science. Anything outside these categories is automatically meaningless. Metaphysics wants to be neither analytic nor empirical, and there's nowhere else to be. The appeal to the limits of human knowledge is closed the same way. Perhaps they are conjectures about what a higher being would answer? But without a 72
criterion no question has been asked, and where there's no question even an omniscient being can't answer. The verdict is wide. It falls on ethics and aesthetics as normative disciplines. Either 'good' has empirical criteria, and a sentence 77
containing it is a factual judgement and not a value judgement, or it has none, and the sentence is a pseudo-statement. And it falls on realism about the external world, so far as that says more than that events show the regularities induction needs, and equally on its opponents: subjective idealism, solipsism, phenomenalism, the older positivism. The dispute isn't settled. It's declared unstateable.

Example 11. Descartes's cogito, on Carnap's reading. Two formal errors. 'I am' predicates existence of a name, but 74
existence attaches only to a predicate: not '*a* exists' but 'there is something of such a kind'. And the inference goes wrong. From 'I am a European' what follows is 'a European exists', not 'I exist'. So from 'I think' what follows is 'there exists something that thinks'.

Question 12. Knowledge not accessible to empirical science is Carnap's definition of metaphysics. Would any metaphysician accept it? If not, the a priori argument has the shape of a stipulation.

WHAT IS LEFT. For philosophy, no statements, no theory and no system, but a method: logical analysis. Its negative use 77
eliminates pseudo-statements. Its positive use, the more fertile in Carnap's view, clarifies the concepts of science and mathematics, and is what 'scientific philosophy' means. Metaphysics has a content after all, only not a theoretical one. Its sentences describe no states of affairs, existing or not, but express an attitude towards life, as art does. 78

Thus Carnap's genealogy runs from mythology, where the child blames the wicked table, through poetry and theology, to metaphysics as theology's replacement on the plane of concepts. Art is an adequate medium for an attitude and metaphysics an inadequate one. The metaphysician believes he travels where truth and falsehood are at stake, but he has asserted nothing, only expressed something, like an artist. The form of a theory, premises and conclusions, generates the 79
fiction of a theoretical content and deludes the author as no lyric poet is deluded. Metaphysicians are musicians without musical ability. Mozart expresses the monist's harmony better than any monist, and a dualistic-heroic system is what 80
someone writes who can't write like Beethoven. Nietzsche, the metaphysician with most artistic talent, largely escaped the confusion by putting his attitude into *Zarathustra*, openly a poem.

Question 13. The sentences of Carnap's paper are neither tautologies nor decided by protocol sentences. Carnap says they're partly analytic and partly empirical, and belong to metalogic. Does the thesis meet its own criterion? 77