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The Clarification of Philosophical Inquiry: In Defense of Metaphysics, Ethics, and Aesthetics

Michael Hyde

Central Michigan University

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I aim to demonstrate the usefulness of retaining metaphysics within the context of analytic philosophy. Utilizing the work of such thinkers as Carnap and Wittgenstein, I make the case that metaphysics (as well as aesthetics and ethics) is a legitimate component of philosophical discourse. In addition to refuting Carnap's case against metaphysics through the use of his own proposed linguistic framework, I acknowledge the reasons that Carnap wishes to reject metaphysics, and reframe the discussion in a manner that attempts to address those concerns while showing that metaphysics are useful even to an Empiricist.

KEYWORDS

Metaphysics, Carnap, Wittgenstein, Analytic Philosophy, Nietzsche, Taoism

The nature of this paper is twofold; firstly, I aim to briefly¹ defend the inclusion of metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics in the study of philosophy.² This is in response to Carnap's (2003) *The Elimination of Metaphysics Through the Logical Analysis of Language (Elimination)*. I will contrast it with his work "*Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology*" (*Empiricism*), working to demonstrate the tension between the two³ (Carnap 2003). I will defend a specific interpretation of the latter and reject the former, utilizing various philosophers from both the analytic and Continental traditions to do so. Secondly, I shall then assert that the task of philosophical inquiry needs clarification. Rather than emphasizing the divide between the analytic and Continental traditions, I maintain that we must transcend the artificial divide between the two and return to the work that analytic philosophy understood itself to be doing in the 20th century; chiefly, being clear about not only what we are doing in our work, but also elucidating the motivation behind the undertaking of the work itself.

I begin with discussion about Carnap's (2003) paper *Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology*. Here, Carnap presents the concept that we accept and utilize various linguistic frameworks based on pragmatic considerations. Questions are either internal or external to the framework, and it is only within the context of such frameworks (internal questions) that statements can be determined as either true or false. Instead of concerning ourselves with whether a framework is right, we must determine if it is useful. While this presents a surface challenge to such areas of thought as metaphysics, this is not as problematic as it may appear.

Epistemology suffers from such a view in the same way that metaphysics and ethics do. In it, statements about the nature of existence or other knowledge claims cannot be posited as absolutes, they can only be evaluated within the context of the framework that the speaker is using. One cannot claim to know anything universally, such claims are also limited to the speaker's framework. However, there is utility in the concept of pragmatic considerations. One can

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1. The purpose of this paper is to offer a brief overview of such a defense. Some parts of this paper could easily be turned into papers of their own, and as such, I may only briefly mention some relevant considerations and wholly ignore others.
 2. This paper is largely a response to Carnap's "*Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language*." Familiarity with it and "*Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology*" are recommended.
 3. Some may consider *Empiricism* as a step back from the position outlined in the *Elimination*. While this is likely, my argument still stands regarding the inclusion of metaphysics in linguist frameworks.

imagine with relative ease a framework in which the pragmatic consideration would indicate that treating a particular claim x as being always and everywhere true in context of y would be the optimal treatment of x .

It is of note that the pragmatic adoption of a framework is contingent upon not only the ends with which an agent is pursuing but also the motivation behind the pursuit of such ends. That is, two agents with the same end e may diverge on the framework adopted because of motivation f compelling one and not the other. This comes into play when considering the inclusion of aesthetics or ethics into philosophical discourse. For some, the motivation of their framework would pragmatically stipulate that such things be rejected, while the others may necessitate their inclusion.

For example, an agent who was concerned with ontological commitments that mirror the aspects of the world that can be validated via sensory experience or empirical validation would have no use for any prescriptive discourse. As such, eliminating metaphysics or ethics (branches of philosophy that are excluded by the empirical stipulation) could be argued as useful or necessary. However, within a linguistic framework, if an object x is contained within the scope of an adopted framework, then x exists. As such, metaphysical objects are not barred from the philosophical discourse within the context of linguistic frameworks that include them. While Carnap believes that utilizing such frameworks will lead us away from metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics, I aim to demonstrate the opposite.

Having demonstrated that Carnap's view outlined in *Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology* (Carnap 2003) is not necessarily dismissive of metaphysics, aesthetics, and ethics, I next turn my attention to an earlier paper of his entitled *The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language* (Carnap 2003). In this work, Carnap attempts to reduce "real" philosophy to epistemology and logic, discarding all other philosophical projects as either misguided art or nonsense.⁴ He claims that any statements that are not able to be empirically validated are meaningless. This is not to say that Carnap believes any statements failing to meet such criteria are not of value, just that they are reduced to mere expressions. (Consider the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive statements, this is of importance and I will return to it at a later point in the paper). Metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics are some such meaningless expressions. While

4. Carnap does more in this paper than what I describe. For sake of simplicity, I ignore the work he does on meaningless statements that do not pertain to my purposes directly.

these expressions can be useful in several ways, they do not tell one anything about the world, but rather about the agent making them. Carnap writes that all metaphysics⁵, “do not serve for the descriptions of states of affairs, neither existing ones... or non-existing ones...They serve for the expression of the general attitude of a person towards life” (*Elimination*) (Carnap 2003, 196).

I argue that Carnap is mistaken to reject metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics. Furthermore, I suggest that he becomes at odds with himself in taking such a stance. In *Empiricism* (Carnap 2003), he allows the acceptance of some “meaningless” metaphysical concepts such as numbers as they are “internal” to the adopted framework. Within this context these concepts can be assigned a truth value. In *Elimination* (Carnap 2003), he insists that we reject all metaphysical, aesthetic, and ethical concepts on the grounds that they are meaningless and unable to be empirically verified. These two views are incompatible.

By eliminating metaphysics, Carnap is successful in preventing such abstract things as a God existing outside of space and time to be included in his ontology. However, he is also necessitating the elimination of frameworks that could prove useful, even to an Empiricist. While some examples include numbers or time, I aim to demonstrate larger and more nuanced instances in this paper.

A possible reason to retain metaphysics (beyond inclusion by default within a particular linguistic framework) is that an agent may conclude that their ontological framework is flawed or incomplete without it. Similarly, one may desire to utilize an old ontological or linguistic framework toward a new end, and as such must adjust or pragmatically posit new or amended metaphysical principles toward the advancement of the desired end.

These reasons demonstrate the sense in which discussion of ethics or aesthetics could be understood as attempts to build supporting structures within the context of a framework. They could also be outcomes resulting from the proper functioning of it.⁶ In either case, they would be the result of pragmatic selection.

We see Carnap’s process of pragmatic selection demonstrated throughout philosophy. One such area is that of logic. As Tennant (1981) points out in *From Logic to Philosophies*, how we choose our logic is contingent upon what we

5. He includes aesthetics and ethics in this description as well.

6. It is prudent to mention here that some would choose to suggest that we pursue ontological investigation separate from metaphysics, but that is something I must set aside for the time being.

wish to do with it, as well as what we take the logic itself to be doing. These considerations must be considered when choosing a framework. Am I seeking new truths about the world? Am I looking to solve a problem? Am I seeking to articulate and define a problem that I have noticed exists?

Here we must return to the prescriptive/descriptive statement distinction as previously promised. With a commitment to truth such as Carnap and others seem to possess, they are prohibited from making various prescriptive claims that one without such a commitment is free to. For many in this camp, it seems that they are okay with this. Their primary concern is that their adopted framework safeguards against various things, including what they would consider to be metaphysical nonsense. Carnap limits himself to descriptive statements only when he rejects metaphysics. This becomes problematic when considering the prescriptive nature of his work in *Empiricism* (Carnap 2003).

I sympathize with Carnap's concern about metaphysics in a particular sense. Consider something like Leibniz's famous system of monads. It is convoluted and esoteric. As Carnap and the logical positivists would point out, it is lacking any sense of verification conditions. One must either take it or leave it, with very little sense of why they should accept it. To treat monads as descriptive of the world seems far-fetched. Even embracing them as a "useful fiction" to understand the nature of reality seems questionable. How is this understanding of reality pragmatically useful? It is almost easier in such cases to take Carnap's view that such systems express a person's view of the world than to consider it a legitimate linguistic framework.

It becomes apparent that there exists some necessary sifting between what ends justify a useful fiction and what ends do not. As a believer that not all metaphysics are nonsensical, I need to produce some mechanism to differentiate those of value from those that are not, such as the monad. At this time, I have no such equipment and must fall back on Carnap's concept of utility within linguistic frameworks.

Before continuing, I must make an argument for prescriptive statements. The argument that we should select linguistic frameworks with consideration to utility is itself a prescriptive statement. It does not have a truth value and is a statement of judgment rather than a reflection of the world. As such, it seems that if Carnap and his ilk wish to take themselves seriously, it is necessary to accept some prescriptive statements that themselves are not "meaningful" by Carnap's

criteria. If we ignore Carnap's qualms and allow such statements, what criteria would he use to differentiate between acceptable ones and ones he wishes to eliminate, such as ethical ones?

I now offer two examples to demonstrate the usefulness of metaphysics. Firstly, I put forward the concept of the Tao in the Tao Te Ching. In Taoist thought, no effort is made to put forth verification conditions for the Tao. It explicitly states that anything that can be experienced, named, or demonstrated is not the Tao (Lao Tzu 1988, 1.1). And yet, the entirety of the teaching is an attempt to reveal what things can be revealed about the Tao, as well as instruction of how to live based on these revelations. The inability to verify the Tao does not seem to inhibit its ability to give meaning.

The meaning that Taoism provides does not present itself as someone's expression of a view toward life. Rather, it is the foundation for a prescriptive view of the world and a normative basis of behavior. In fact, there is a sense in which it takes itself to be describing that nature of the world, and providing prescriptive statements based on this description. This provides a tension with Carnap's view of metaphysics.

Carnap might argue that the Tao proves his view of metaphysics correct, that it is nothing more than a "personification of natural phenomena... {a} quasi-poetic expression of man's emotional relationship to his environment" (*Elimination*) (Carnap 2003, 169). Yet, Carnap himself provides the equipment to refute this. In the *Elimination*, Carnap notes that he avoids using the term worldview to describe a metaphysic because it blurs the "difference between attitude and theory", a difference that is "of decisive importance" (*Elimination*) (Carnap 2003, 170). The Tao is not an attitude, it is a theory of existence that prescribes a certain attitude toward life. As such, I maintain that it is problematic for Carnap.

Carnap may at this junction return to my admission concerning monads, asking me to demonstrate how the Tao and the world of monads differ. I would argue that they differ in their levels of verification. Neither monads nor the Tao can be experientially or logically verified. Yet, the balance and harmony that the Tao speaks can be experienced and perceived in particular ways. Beyond this, the positive results in the lives of those who follow the Tao are more evident still. What evidence do we have for monads? What reason do we have that would compel us to believe (or necessitate belief in) such an idea? There is none. I argue that

within the realm of things that are not themselves verifiable, there are levels of verifiability. These levels are what differentiates the Tao from the monad.

Even if I accept Carnap's (2003) assertion that the Tao is a mere "quasi-poetic expression" it still seems to be a fine example of my position. Accepting the existence of the Tao for a particular pragmatic purpose, such as living the best life possible, is accepting a linguistic framework for a practical end. The linguistic framework necessitates the positing of a metaphysic. If one wants to live well, and the Tao helps them do that, then their end has been achieved regardless of whether the Tao is "real."

I present my second example in a similar manner. Consider the metaphysical concepts found in existential literature such as the Absurd, Despair, or Will to Power.⁷ These, I argue, are metaphysical concepts that were put forth to describe a perception of a sensation that is common among humanity. Wittgenstein takes on the question of senses and sensations in the *Philosophical Investigations* via the concept of pain (Wittgenstein 2003). He argues that no pain is not unique to an individual and that the illusion that there is a pain that is "my" pain stems from a word trick, "the substitution of 'identical' for 'the same'" (Wittgenstein 2003, PI 253-254). Pain cannot be pointed out in the world, Wittgenstein admits. We do not have a picture of pain. However, we have the image of pain portrayed by the grimace, the outcry of the individual experiencing it. And, when this is present, we have something in the world that we can experience and verify.⁸ As Wittgenstein points out, "An image is not a picture, but a picture can correspond to it" (Wittgenstein 2003, PI 301).

Taking Wittgenstein's arguments about sensations (and language) seriously, we can reasonably extrapolate that argument to include sensations that are not a result of our five senses and that transcend the ability to express within linguistic confines. Some such sensations or ideas include the Absurd and Despair. These concepts demonstrate the existence of such shared non-private sensations. If this is the case, we have a picture of metaphysical concepts that do reflect the world. Additionally, we may have understood verification conditions for such sensations, that being their quality of being commonly perceived sensations among persons.

7. See Camus, Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Nietzsche for more on these ideas.

8. For more on sensation, pain, and private languages, read Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Particularly around 243-315. For sake of space, I must keep this discussion brief.

While the exact conditions under which one can be said to be experiencing Despair or the Absurd are not clearly laid out here, this is an undertaking for a different paper. The thinkers who put forth such concepts often dedicate their work to exploring and defining this question. For sake of this paper, I find it sufficient to argue that identifying such a state is possible in the very way that it is with pain.

Switching our attention to the next (and perhaps weaker) defense of the inclusion of metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics in philosophical discourse, let us consider an appeal made by Grice & Strawson in "In Defense of Dogma." In their refutation of Quine, one of the remarks they make is that Quine is, "certainly at odds with a philosophical tradition that is long and not wholly disreputable" (Grice & Strawson 2003, 291). "But there is no need to appeal only to tradition; for there is also present practice," they write (Grice & Strawson 2003, 291). At risk of stealing their argument, I contend that the same argument applies to the present discussion. From the conception of Western philosophy, ethical and metaphysical reflections have been included in the discourse. This has not changed. What purpose would it serve to discard them now? While Carnap and company may feel that it would help clarify philosophical discussion, it seems that all it would do is reduce the number of possibly useful linguistic frameworks to consider.

Additionally, there is the deeper point that these topics already largely exist in the overarching philosophical linguistic frameworks. On Carnap's assertion, he and the logical positivist can choose a linguistic framework that eliminates such things, but in the larger context of philosophy they are already established. Thus, a charitable interpretation of Carnap would have us interpret him as urging us to consider a framework lacking metaphysics, aesthetics, or ethics. However, this is not consistent with what Carnap (2003) does in the *Elimination*.

Thus far, I have argued for the inclusion of metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics in philosophy from an argument from inclusion in linguistic frameworks, from an argument from pragmatic use, from an argument differentiating prescriptive and descriptive statements, and from an argument from tradition.

I understand that Carnap believes that by removing metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics from philosophical discourse, we will clarify what we are doing in philosophy. It will serve to remove those that rely on word games from philosophy. While I am sympathetic to this desire, I do not believe that removing those things is the way to achieve this. Instead, I argue that we must clarify what we are working towards and why we are doing our work.

How we do this is through identifying not only our linguistic framework but also our motivation for selecting it. This will address Carnap's concerns in two ways. Firstly, it will help us better identify what work we should concern ourselves with. If someone claiming to be a philosopher is utilizing a linguistic framework that is not useful to us or is at odds with our own ends, we can reject that framework and that person's work within it. This allows us to filter the positions we consider in pursuing our own work. Secondly, it will minimize the amount of interpretation that goes awry when reading other's work. Time spent formulating a rebuttal to a piece of work that one misunderstood could be put to better use undertaking some other philosophical endeavor. The number of schools of thought based on such misunderstandings that clutter the discourse will be reduced. This will be accomplished without having to sacrifice already established philosophical discourses such as metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics for those who wish to retain them.

I wish to deviate for a moment from the discussion at hand to provide an example of the pragmatic framework selection and clarification of purpose outlined in this paper. I do this so that the reader may have a clear understanding of my view.

In Nietzsche's work *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes that "metaphysics, theology, psychology, epistemology — or formal science, a doctrine of signs, such as logic and that applied logic which is called mathematics. In them reality is not encountered at all, not even as a problem — no more than the question of the value of such a sign-convention as logic" (Nietzsche 2020) (Reason in Philosophy, section 3). His concern is that those who commit themselves to particular logical and epistemological viewpoints in pursuit of the "real" world are missing the reality that they are pursuing. This is a concern of mine as well. In Carnap's case I am concerned that he is actively rejecting aspects of the world.

In that same work, Nietzsche also states that "One chooses logical argument only when one has no other means... Nothing is easier to nullify than a logical argument: the tedium of long speeches proves this. It is a kind of self-defense for those who no longer have other weapons" (Nietzsche 2020) (Reason in Philosophy, section 6). He previously proclaimed in that work that "I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them..." (Nietzsche 2020) (Maxims and Arrows, section 26). Nietzsche has a disdain for those who commit themselves to logical systems and arguments to understand reality. His position seems to reflect that of Wittgenstein in the PI

when he argues that philosophy should “neither explain nor deduce anything” (Wittgenstein 2003, PI 126).

Like Carnap, Nietzsche puts much weight on the verification of the senses. Carnap himself mentioned Nietzsche’s work rather favorably in the *Elimination*⁹ (Carnap 2003). Yet, the framework the two select seem at odds in several respects. However, this strengthens my position, demonstrating how two may have similar ends and select different or opposing frameworks towards those ends.

Many compelling arguments and nuances to consider can be drawn on this conversation from *Twilight of the Idols*, as well as much of the body of Nietzsche’s work.¹⁰ The point is that while Carnap makes a case for the removal of metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics, there is a sense in which one could understand Nietzsche to be piecing together a framework in which logic and emphasis on reason are rejected while aesthetics is retained. Furthermore, Nietzsche illustrates well the existence of an in-between area. He neither rejects or embraces ethical judgements, but rather redefines it, or rather, places the dichotomy of life affirming and life denying in the role that conceptions of right and wrong would traditionally fulfill. He performs a similar move in exchanging the free will versus determinism for weak versus strong will.

While I am not claiming that Nietzsche was a pragmatist, I submit that one way of envisioning much of his work, including the recurring theme of transvaluation of values, is as being a pragmatic selection of values towards a desired end (life affirmation). Metaphysical ideas reflecting the world are posited in the framework constructed from these values.

Returning to the discussion around the task of clarifying our intent in philosophy, I wish to offer one more example of why I insist on keeping metaphysical, aesthetic, and ethical discourse as a part of philosophy. Consider a coherentist, Quinean web of belief epistemic framework.¹¹ The beliefs we hold at the center of the web

9. The author suspects this affirmation was largely due to misinterpretation of Nietzsche’s work, but will for now charitably assume that this is not the case.

10. I do not have the space here to explore these here, let alone introduce or unpack the relevant (and often controversial) Nietzschean conceptions of truth, morality and aesthetic value. For further reading on the transvaluation of values, see *The Genealogy of Morals*, the *Gay Science*, and *Beyond Good and Evil*. For more on the will, see the *Twilight of the Idols* and the *Will to Power*.

11. I mean only to consider the general idea of a web of belief presented by Quine. The arguments I present regarding metaphysics would be repulsive to Quine, as demonstrated by such things

are the driving force behind much of our conclusions about the world. We protect these core beliefs at all costs. Not only do they inform the ways that we navigate the world, but also the way that we interpret our experiences. Our beliefs shape our experiences, and we affirm our beliefs through the interpretation of those experiences.

However, sometimes strands in our web are damaged or go missing. While learning new information and amending the conceptions that make out the outer web is necessary, damage done to the more essential beliefs near the conceptual center can be harmful to the individual. Accepted metaphysical or moral principles can act as "secondary" or removed core beliefs, allowing the deconstruction of that web to only occur up to a certain point and preventing it from reaching innermost core beliefs.

These principles that are built upon in our webs are not problematic and are even good, so long as the agent is aware of these assumptions and works to address them accordingly. It is the same approach that we use in symbolic logic; we can assume whatever we please so long as we can keep track of our assumptions and discharge them appropriately. If one is working towards a specific end, (contingent upon the agent's ability to exchange a preconception of truth for a useful fiction), incorporating such assumptions can allow them to maintain their web and build on it in ways that can help them achieve that end.

In this paper, I have demonstrated the tension that Carnap creates between two of his works; *Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology* (Carnap 2003) and "*The Elimination of Metaphysics Through the Logical Analysis of Language*" (Carnap 2003). I have defended the former and rejected the latter. Utilizing arguments and examples from both analytic and Continental traditions, I have sought to demonstrate the strength of the position I have advanced in this paper. Specifically, I contend that in rejecting all of metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics, Carnap needlessly eliminates useful philosophical linguistic frameworks. I have claimed that to rectify the problem with philosophy,¹² we need to not only clarify

as his contempt for the idea that "there are other kinds of knowledge unfathomable by our cognition, other ways of knowing beyond the limits of our logic, which are deserving of our serious attention." He mocks this quote, calling it "incoherent." However, that is a topic for another paper.

12. This is in reference to the belief that contentions within philosophy are primarily due to misuse of language. While I can agree that some issues stem from this, I believe that many of the disputes within philosophy are caused by either one not having a clear handle on what he is doing, or

what we are doing but the motivation behind what we do. This clarification will then pragmatically dictate the linguistic frame we accept. I then demonstrated that this endeavor is compatible with assuming and accepting metaphysical and ethical principles so long as we are aware of these assumptions and account for them accordingly.

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by misattributing motive or goals to the works of others. Having an incomplete view of others' motives or goals can cause similar issues as well.