

NONSENSE AND ABSURDITY: CARNAP'S USE OF HUSSERL'S THEORY OF MEANING

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ABSTRACT:

In his *Logical Investigations* (Husserl 2001), Edmund Husserl introduced an innovative view of the theory of meaning, which subsequently influenced the development of Logical Positivism. According to Husserl, non-meaningful expressions may fall under one of two types: they are either absurd or nonsensical. Absurdity [*Widersinn*] is found in expressions which are contradictory, yet whose parts are combined in such a way as not to break the rules of *logical syntax*, as for example in the expression 'a round square'. Nonsense [*Unsinn*], on the contrary, results from a breach of syntactic rules, such as may be found in the expression 'a round or'. According to Husserl, absurdity results from a breach of the conventions that characterise 'the contingent linguistic habits of a community', whereas nonsense takes place when *a priori* universal laws of grammar are not followed.

Following Husserl, Rudolf Carnap makes a distinction between logical and *historico-grammatical* syntax (Carnap 1959). For Carnap, as for Husserl, the breach of the first results in nonsense, whereas not following the second results in mere contradiction. In Carnap's hands, Husserl's distinction takes on radical implications for the practice of philosophy. Whereas, throughout history, contradiction has been a central elenctic principle for philosophical discourse, Carnap claims that nonsense was a common error philosophers had made unbeknownst to themselves. Precisely since nonsense is defined as the breach of logical syntax, our *historico-grammatical* syntactic conventions allow for it to pass unnoticed. It is only with the development of modern logic that nonsensical expressions or, as Carnap puts it, 'pseudo-concepts' and 'pseudo-statements' may be detected by philosophers.

This implies that an immense part of philosophical discourse throughout history has been, unbeknownst to its authors, subject to elementary errors. In a paper titled 'Overcoming Metaphysics through the Logical Analysis of Language', Carnap pinpoints something which he calls 'metaphysics' as a product of these elementary errors: the 'numerous metaphysicians of the past and the present' had not known that many of the concepts and statements they had been producing can be shown to be neither true nor false, and therefore are nonsensical.

Notoriously, Carnap's examples of nonsensical 'pseudo-sentences' are taken from a text written by Husserl's pupil, Martin Heidegger, titled 'What is Metaphysics?'. It is thus puzzling to see that Carnap makes no mention of Husserl in this paper; his radical claims regarding the meaninglessness of metaphysics disguise his own encounter with the phenomenological tradition, including his acquaintance with the work of both Husserl and Heidegger. The reception of Carnap's paper (particularly outside the Germanophone context in which it was produced) has stressed a certain polemical intent on Carnap's behalf. The effect its reception produced was that of enforcing a kind of segregation between those who followed Carnap and those who undertook the task of phenomenology. Although the influence of Husserl on Carnap has been widely explored (e.g. Haddock 2008), scholarship has almost completely ignored the influence of Husserl on Carnap's conception of nonsense, thus also obscuring Carnap's comments on Heidegger.

In this paper I wish to outline Husserl's influence on Carnap's 1932 paper, and to demonstrate the consequent restructuring of the exchange between Carnap and Heidegger, shifting the emphasis away from polemics and towards philosophical dialogue.

It is commonly assumed that Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Carnap were bitter philosophical rivals and upheld polemically antithetical political outlooks. Yet the pair may also, perhaps more aptly, be described as students of Edmund Husserl. By applying this description to both Carnap and Heidegger (rather than, as it is customary, to Heidegger alone), I seek in this paper to demonstrate the necessity of a new approach towards understanding the issues that divide these two thinkers. I shall therefore proceed to examine the ways in which Carnap employs the Husserlian theory of meaning, and in particular Husserl's account of nonsense, against Heidegger's metaphysical expressions. I will then proceed to indicate how establishing a common Husserlian background to Carnap and Heidegger may transform the hitherto assumed polemic nature of Carnap's comments on Heidegger into a dialogic exchange on the nature of philosophy.

In the 1932 paper titled 'Overcoming Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language' [*Überwindung der Metaphysik durch Logische Analyse der Sprache*] (Carnap 1959), Carnap makes the radical assertion that metaphysical concepts and statements are nonsensical. Metaphysics does not produce statements or concepts with any meaningful cognitive content, but rather consists of an array of 'pseudo-statements' and 'pseudo-concepts' which may appear at first to be meaningful, but once approached in the right way are shown to have no meaning at all. The logical analysis of 'pseudo-statements' and 'pseudo-concepts' can show them to be neither true nor false, and therefore can allow for them to be seen as nonsense. Metaphysical sentences are, according to Carnap, analogous to pieces of music, insofar as they express some fundamental attitude towards life [*Lebensgefühl*] – they have the potential to express various emotive states, while bearing no cognitive meaning.¹ But whereas the expression of attitudes towards life may be presented, as Carnap claims, through a medium in which this purely expressive attitude is unmistakably clear (as for example in music), metaphysical statements of such attitudes are also necessarily accompanied by the illusion of meaningfulness. Metaphysicians, according to Carnap, are like failed musicians or bad poets: instead of a musical expression of their fundamental attitudes towards life, they attempt such expression in a theoretical medium, i.e. a medium which is inappropriate for the expression of these attitudes and

¹ Carnap gives the examples of the analogous expression of *Lebensgefühl* in musical terms, e.g. Mozart's harmonious monism, or Beethoven's heroic dualism (Carnap 1959: 80). Neither Mozart nor Beethoven attempt to assert that these feelings are meaningful designations of the way the world is.

feelings. Its inappropriateness is constituted precisely by the fact that, whereas for example in music there is no illusion of meaningfulness, a criterion of meaningfulness is necessary for theoretical work. Metaphysicians, who had previously lacked the logical tools for detecting nonsense, have unknowingly been transforming their meaningless feelings into theoretical entities. Now that logic has shown them their elementary mistakes, they should either take upon themselves the tasks of the new, non-metaphysical philosophy of scientifically-minded logical analysis, or perhaps learn how to play music.

The part of Carnap's account of meaninglessness in metaphysics which is most relevant to our discussion is his account of metaphysical pseudo-statements.² His examples for such pseudo-statements notoriously come from Heidegger's 1929 inaugural lecture at Freiburg, titled 'What is Metaphysics?'. Carnap uses various sentences from Heidegger, such as his enigmatic (1) '*Das Nichts selbst nichtet*' [The Nothing itself nothings], in order to demonstrate the method through which the logical analysis of such a statement reveals its meaninglessness. Once the analyst has applied the tools of modern logic to such seemingly meaningful expressions, it becomes clear that the appearance of meaning they previously offered dissolves, giving way to the revelation of their meaninglessness.

Why is it that sentences have on the one hand the surface semblance of meaningfulness, and on the other hand the nonsensical character which becomes obvious through methodical enquiry into their meaning? What is it that accounts for such a transition? According to Carnap, this is due to a distinction between grammatical and logical syntax. The conventional rules of historico-grammatical syntax, Carnap says, cannot correspond exactly to those of logical syntax. The grammatical syntax of natural languages allows for a number of meaningless 'pseudo-statements' to be expressed in a grammatically well formed manner, thus making their nonsensical character undetectable at the level of historico-grammatical syntax. Certain grammatically well formed expressions may in fact assert nothing, since they can be shown to be neither true nor false. Take Carnap's example of the expression (2) 'Caesar is a prime number'. According to Carnap, this is a grammatically well

² Carnap's account of metaphysical 'pseudo-concepts' (Carnap 1959: 65-67) or 'words without meaning' is not explicitly related by him to his attack on Heidegger, whom he deems guilty of producing metaphysical statements rather than concepts. Yet Carnap may be interpreted as having already both Husserl and Heidegger in mind in this earlier critique, particularly as concerns their insistence on enquiring into *archai* [origins].

formed expression. Yet it means nothing. In contrast with the sentence (3) '1 is a prime number', which can be shown to be true, (2) is neither true, nor false, since the concept of prime number cannot truly or falsely be applied to non-numerical entities. Carnap in turn claims that the meaninglessness of such an expression is only detectable through an understanding of logical syntax, which is made possible by the development of modern logical techniques. Thus, by analysing expressions into their logical constituents, it can be shown whether these expressions are in fact syntactically well formed statements or whether they only appear to be statements, disguising the fact that there is no underlying assertion being made.

According to our account so far, there are two main conceptual forces at work in Carnap's attempt to demonstrate how logical analysis allows us to overcome metaphysics. On the one hand, there is a basic definition of nonsense as a product of statements which can be shown to be neither true nor false. On the other hand, there is a distinction between two levels of syntactic rules, those of grammar and those of logic. Accordingly, nonsense emerges through the difference between the two.

What Carnap fails to mention throughout the presentation of these techniques in his paper are the sources for his development of these two basic conceptual elements (i.e. his account of nonsense and his conception of logical syntax). Although Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is mentioned as a source for Carnap's verificationist theory of meaning, the *Tractatus* does not in fact provide any theoretical development of a definition of nonsense which can be adequately linked to Carnap's account of nonsense.³ The German word for nonsense [*Unsinn*] does appear in particularly central passages of Wittgenstein's text, but it does so only three times (with the closely related terms 'pseudo-concept' and 'pseudo-proposition' making equally sparse appearances). It is to Husserl, who remains unmentioned in Carnap's paper, that we have to turn in order to find the source for Carnap's account of nonsense.

Husserl is of course undoubtedly immensely influential on Carnap's early philosophical writings, a fact which has surfaced only in relatively recent publications

³ The matter of Wittgenstein's influence on Carnap's notion of nonsense in his attack against Heidegger is disputed among various interpreters of Wittgenstein (e.g. Conant 2001, Hacker 2003). Carnap might have been less influenced on this matter by the *Tractatus* than by his discussions with Wittgenstein between 1927 and the beginning of 1929 (Carnap 1963: 25-26). According to Carnap's autobiography, Wittgenstein's view that various sentences of traditional philosophy are pseudo-sentences was one Carnap 'had previously developed under the influence of anti-metaphysical scientists and philosophers' (Carnap 1963: 24).

(Mayer 1991, Rosado Haddock 2008). Carnap discusses at length Husserl's theory of space in his doctoral dissertation *Der Raum*. Furthermore Carnap's *Der logische Aufbau Der Welt* could be said to be an attempt to restate Husserl's phenomenological project in terms of modern logic (Rosado Haddock 2008). Husserl's influence becomes less visible with Carnap's shift away from his early epistemological approach to questions of value during the 20s, to a radical divorcing of philosophy from such questions which begins in the 30s; yet Carnap cites Husserl's work in some of his later publications (e.g. Carnap 1950). This means that little has been written on the Husserlian influence on Carnap's account of nonsense, which was produced at the time when Carnap first expressed this shift in his thinking.⁴

Carnap's conception of nonsense is in fact derived from Husserl's theory of meaning. Husserl is the first Germanophone author to introduce a theory of meaning [*Sinn*] which accords a substantial role to the demarcation between sense [*Sinn*] and nonsense [*Unsinn*]. In the first volume of the *Logische Untersuchungen*, published in 1900, Husserl is very much concerned with providing an account of how one may distinguish between various kinds of senselessness [*Sinnlosigkeit*]. For Husserl, this task is particularly important, since meaninglessness is a method for the detection of differences between categories of meaning; thus this method becomes central to Husserl's development of his system of categories.

According to Husserl there are two types of senselessness [*Sinnlosigkeit*]: nonsense [*Unsinn*] and absurdity [*Widersinn*]. To distinguish between the two, one has to distinguish between two kinds of grammatical rules governing the combination of meanings. On the one hand, there are those grammatical rules which are contingent and which therefore vary historically between different languages. These rules apply only *a posteriori* to particular combinations of meanings and are dependent upon the 'linguistic habits' (Husserl 2001: 193) of a community. Breaking with such contingent rules of grammar may result in what Husserl calls absurdity [*Widersinn*], such as for example in the contradictory expression (4) 'a round square'. On the other hand, there are certain *a priori* and necessary grammatical rules, which are according to Husserl universal and apply to the combination of meanings within any developed language. To break these *a priori* rules would result in nonsense, such as for example in an

⁴ The notable exception here is of a paragraph in Rosado Haddock's book in which it is only very briefly mentioned as an obvious fact that Carnap took his account of nonsense from Husserl (Rosado Haddock 2008: 99-100).

expression like (5) ‘a round if’ or as in Carnap’s example of (3). According to Husserl, although these types of nonsensical expressions ‘give us the indirect idea of *some* unitary meaning they express’ (Husserl 2001: 192), they correspond to no meaning, they express no sense at all. By contrast, absurd sentences express some meaning but, according to Husserl, there is no *object* to which that meaning may correspond.

The degree to which Carnap was influenced by Husserl becomes apparent by the comparison of their accounts of nonsense. Both thinkers propose a distinction between two types of rules which govern meaning, one which is necessary and another which is contingent. For both thinkers, these are types of syntactic rules, i.e. rules which govern the combinations of parts of meaningful sentences, although for Husserl these rules are in both cases divisions of logical grammar, whereas for Carnap there is a distinction to be made between logic and grammar. According to both views, nonsense is a product of the breach of *a priori* logical rules, and this breach involves a kind of deception which does not allow for its straightforward detection.

Carnap takes Husserl’s idea one step further by showing that logical analysis provides us with a technical means through which to detect nonsense. More importantly, Carnap makes it explicit that this deceptive nature of nonsense can lead to elementary logical mistakes in theoretical writing, and most importantly in the practice of philosophy. Carnap takes Wittgenstein’s idea that there are aspects of philosophy that are nonsensical, and brings it together with the Husserlian account of nonsense. As a consequence, he introduces the idea of nonsense as a kind of philosophical error, transforming logical analysis into an elenctic tool in philosophical argumentation. The idea that there is a fundamental logical flaw in all previous metaphysical claims is a technical innovation through which the scope of philosophy may radically be reformed.

This new technology is first applied to the metaphysical ‘pseudo-statements’ of Martin Heidegger, which were subsequently deemed unworthy of philosophical study by those who shared Carnap’s vision of a new philosophy driven by innovations in logic. For a long time, it had been assumed that Carnap simply had not read his Heidegger (e.g. Witherspoon 2003) and had profoundly misunderstood Heidegger’s vision of metaphysics in his criticisms. Countering this view, a number of commentators have tried to show that Carnap was in fact quite close to Heidegger’s philosophical positions, though radically opposed to Heidegger politically. Yet in this

literature there is little mention of the link between Heidegger and Carnap, i.e. the fact that they were both disciples of Edmund Husserl. For example, Michael Friedman mentions that Heidegger had been introduced to Carnap in 1929 at Davos (Friedman 2000: 7-9), whereas in fact it is likely that Heidegger and Carnap had already met at Freiburg in 1920 at one of Husserl's seminars (Rosado Haddock 2008: 3) and perhaps again in 1924-25 when Carnap was studying under Husserl.

By establishing the Husserlian link, new light is shed on the Carnap-Heidegger controversy which may allow us to go beyond its purely polemical nature, towards an understanding of the philosophical issues at stake here. Heidegger's critique of Husserl's phenomenology is put in question by Carnap not from some completely abstract theoretical position foreign to Heidegger's thought, but from within the same philosophical tradition which gave rise to this critique. The primary issue which is raised here is that of evaluating Heidegger's critique of Husserlian phenomenology in light of the Husserlian theory of meaning. Through approaching this question, an exchange between Carnapian and Heideggerian accounts of metaphysics may take place.

Furthermore, Heidegger and Carnap's views should be put together in the wider context of attempting to provide a solution to the crisis which Germanophone philosophy had gone through during the beginning of the twentieth century, the so called *Psychologismus-Streit* [psychologism-dispute]. The dispute over psychologism was a dispute over the division between psychology and philosophy which took place following the creation of psychology departments in Germany at the end of the 19th century. Husserl's criticism of psychologism in the *Logische Untersuchungen* was in fact the text that inaugurated the dispute. Both Heidegger and Carnap's views on metaphysics can be seen as products of the dispute over psychologism. For example, when Carnap says that metaphysical sentences are cognitively nonsensical but expressive of particular emotive states, what this effectively implies is that metaphysical worldviews may be scientifically studied in psychology departments, leaving the task of logical analysis to philosophy departments. By contrast, Heidegger's critique of scientism implies that a particular philosophical research programme into metaphysics is necessary and has priority over empirical scientific investigations.

Carnap and Heidegger's positions, once put together as variations on Husserlian themes, can be seen as taking two divergent paths derived from Husserl's own

philosophy. On the one hand, Carnap takes Husserl to contribute towards a view of modern logic as providing a new scientifically-minded task for philosophy which cannot be undertaken by empirical science. On the other hand, Heidegger takes Husserl to be proposing a new method for philosophy, the method of phenomenology, which once divorced from its Cartesian origins may provide for a way of asserting the priority of philosophy over empirical enquiry. For both, it follows that a new conception of metaphysics is necessary, and in fact they agree on a quasi-anthropologicistic view according to which metaphysics is a necessary task for human beings. Their fundamental philosophical difference regards the proper method of conduct for this humanly necessary study.

Once constructed in this manner, the dialogue between the positions of these two thinkers is already apparent. This dialogue may in turn refer back to its origins in Husserl's thought. Of course Husserl's influence is not the exclusive one here, and a historical approach should also take into account a wider picture of the struggle over psychologism, whose protagonists might include Neo-Kantianism (e.g. Friedman 2000, Gabriel 2003) as well as the emergence of *Lebensphilosophie* (Kusch 1995: 206-218). Nevertheless it is only through an understanding of its Husserlian background that we may come to construct Carnap's criticism of Heidegger no longer as merely polemical and politically antithetical, but rather also as an opening towards dialogue between two philosophers.

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