

## Carnap, Explication, and Social History

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**Abstract:** A. W. Carus champions Rudolf Carnap's ideal of explication as a model for liberal political deliberation. Constructing a linguistic framework for discussing social problems, he argues, promotes the resolution of our disputes. To flesh out and assess this proposal, I examine debate about the social institutions of marriage and adoption. Against Carus, I argue that not all citizens would accept the pragmatic principles underlying Carnap's ideal. Nevertheless, explication may facilitate inquiry in the social sciences and be used to create models that help us to understand past disputes. This latter application reveals explication's potential for refining the social histories that inform contemporary political discourse.

**Keywords:** Rudolf Carnap, A. W. Carus, explication, conceptual engineering, social epistemology, political deliberation, liberalism, marriage, adoption

Recent historians of early analytic philosophy have dispelled the once-popular image of logical positivism as an apolitical and ahistorical movement.<sup>1</sup> Members of the so-called left wing of the Vienna Circle, including Otto Neurath, Hans Hahn, Rudolf Carnap, and Philipp Frank, viewed (in Thomas Uebel's words) "philosophy to be of critical relevance to the ongoing socio-historical change toward socialism."<sup>2</sup> Far from an isolated and insular program, logical positivism "arose and developed as a powerful revolutionary force," as Michael Friedman puts it, "deeply intertwined with the other revolutionary trends (in the sciences, in the arts, in politics, and in society) that made up what we now know as Weimar culture."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, according to A. W. Carus, although Carnap—the most important philosopher in the Circle—focused on issues arising within the philosophy of mathematics and science, his reshaping of the Enlightenment vision around the ideal of explication is applicable to the "new politics of knowledge" that characterize our own moment.<sup>4</sup> The Car-

1. Two influential sources of this misconception are A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* and Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Ayer's own interest in the verification principle led to a distorted impression of its centrality to all of the logical positivists, and Kuhn's reductive critique presented logical positivism as a purely technical program. For more, see Thomas Uebel, "Early Logical Positivism and Its Reception," and Gürol Irzik, "Kuhn and Logical Positivism."
2. Uebel, "Carnap, the Left Vienna Circle, and Neopositivist Antimetaphysics," 250.
3. Friedman, *Logical Positivism Reconsidered*, xiii.
4. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 294. Carus takes this phrase from Larry

napian framework, Carus believes, yields “guiding principles for institution-building” that show how citizens in liberal democracies might reconcile the values of pluralism and reason; how to justify, in other words, our ability to evaluate some epistemic positions as superior to others while simultaneously recognizing a multiplicity of values and viewpoints.<sup>5</sup> To flesh out and assess Carus’s provocative claim, in this paper I use a Carnapian lens to examine debate about the social institutions of marriage and adoption. I shall argue that aspiring to Carnap’s ideal of explication is of limited use for those seeking to resolve ongoing disputes about social institutions, but that doing so can improve our understanding of past debates about them. The proper domains in which to aim for Carnap’s ideal, I believe, are the social sciences that study the institutions we inherit. Explication matters for our political deliberations not in the direct way Carus envisages, but indirectly via the social sciences that inform those deliberations.

After presenting Carus’s interpretation in section one, I use the case of recent debate about marriage to argue in section two that not all citizens would accept the Carnapian ideal. In section three I defend using explication to refine inquiry in the social sciences and, in particular, sketch how social historians may appeal to constructed ideal languages to clarify accounts of early twentieth century views about adoption.

## I. The Ideal of Explication

Carnap presents an array of formally constructed systems over his career, including the autopsychological constitutional system in *Der logische Aufbau der Welt* (1928), the logical languages I and II in *Logische Syntax der Sprache* (1934), and the semantical systems of *Foundations of Logic and Mathematics* (1939) and *Introduction to Semantics* (1942). He views these systems as auxiliaries for inquiry, and takes their value to be bound up, in some sense, with their application. Carus develops a teleological interpretation of Carnap’s philosophical trajectory in order to clarify the relationship Carnap sees between constructed systems and languages in use. The “ideal of explication” is Carus’s phrase for the methodological program Carnap strove towards but “never fully enunciated,” a program that, according to Carus, is implicit in the way explications feature in his work.<sup>6</sup>

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Sanger (“The New Politics of Knowledge”), a co-founder of Wikipedia who, alarmed by the widespread “democratic” endorsement of unrefereed and potentially inaccurate articles as authoritative, eventually launched Citizendium as a competitor.

5. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 302.

6. Ibid, 38. Some critics have questioned the historical fidelity of Carus’s Carnap (see, e.g., Alan Richardson, “Carnap’s Place in Analytic Philosophy and Philosophy of Science,” and Thomas Mormann, “Carnap’s *Boundless Ocean of Unlimited Possibilities*”). I do not have

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To explicate an unclear concept (the *explicandum*) is to construct a replacement for it (the *explicatum*) that may be neatly integrated into extant theory. Carnap gives the replacement of “fish” (ordinarily applicable to all manner of aquatic creatures) with “piscis” (referring exclusively to cold-blooded aquatic animals with gills) as a zoological example.<sup>7</sup> In the latter half of the twentieth century, explication came to be associated with W.V. Quine, who, citing Carnap with approval, claims that it is what philosophers are “most typically up to” when they offer an analysis.<sup>8</sup> However, Quine and Carnap understand explication quite differently. Contrasting their conceptions is instructive.

In Quine’s view, explication is a tool for refining scientific theories. Having identified the features of the explicandum that make it useful, constructing an explicatum sharing those features in the canonical language for science (which for Quine, a self-avowed “confirmed extensionalist,” is first-order predicate logic plus identity) facilitates the regimentation of our theories, which allows us to determine (and ultimately reduce) our ontological commitments.<sup>9</sup> For Quine, the value of explication is showing an unclear expression in use eliminable. Since we could employ a theory that makes no use of the explicandum, we are relieved of our *prima facie* obligation in using it to believe that it refers to a distinct (and possibly mysterious) entity.<sup>10</sup>

Carnap, in contrast, has a far broader understanding of the application and significance of explication. He begins using the term “explication” in 1945 as a successor to his earlier use of “rational reconstruction.”<sup>11</sup> Whereas Carnap’s rational reconstructions—like Quine’s explications—had privileged a *single* formal language as the correct vehicle for rigorously constructed concepts, Carnap’s explications should be understood in the context of his adoption of the celebrated Principle of Tolerance: “*In logic there are no morals*. Everyone is at liberty to build up his own logic, i.e., his own form of language, as he

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space to evaluate this issue here, but agree with Pierre Wagner’s assessment that, whatever the historical Carnap thought, Carnap presents a program worth engaging that is recognizably “Carnapian in spirit” (“Natural Languages, Formal Languages, and Explication,” 182).

7. Carnap, *Logical Foundations of Probability*, 5–6.

8. Quine, *Word and Object*, 258; 259n4.

9. Quine, “Confessions of a Confirmed Extensionalist,” 498. Quine counts ontological perspicuity a particular advantage of his language, since once a theory has been regimented in it the existential quantifier gives a precise criterion for what, according to the theory, exists: to be is to be the value of one of the theory’s bound variables.

10. Quine uses mathematicians’ treatment of ordered pairs as an example (*Word and Object*, 258). Explicating ordered pairs in set-theoretic terms demonstrates that unordered sets provide a sufficient basis for mathematicians’ “ordered pair” talk, discharging our obligation to admit *pairs* into mathematical ontology.

11. Carnap, “The Two Concepts of Probability.” In his 1961 preface to the second edition of the *Aufbau*, Carnap writes that its rational reconstructions are clarifications of the sort “nowadays frequently called ‘explications’” (v).

wishes.”<sup>12</sup> Carnap believes that concepts may be explicated using any of this plurality of languages, to improve mutual understanding.<sup>13</sup>

Armed with his new tolerant attitude, Carnap distinguishes the standards of evaluation applicable to “internal” questions (phrased within a linguistic framework) from those applicable to “external” questions (phrased outside a linguistic framework).<sup>14</sup> It is possible to evaluate answers to internal questions as true or false by appealing to the foundational rules that govern the framework. But since there is no corresponding framework against which to evaluate answers to external questions, they cannot be judged true or false. According to Carnap, it is most charitable to interpret discussion about external questions in pragmatic terms.<sup>15</sup> And crucially, to debate whether a particular linguistic framework is correct is to debate an external question. The “correctness” of a linguistic framework is not a factual matter of its truth, but a practical matter of its expediency. Tolerance is the appropriate attitude to adopt toward inquirers who weigh such practical considerations differently, and so who choose a different linguistic framework.

According to Carus, the pragmatic considerations introduced by Carnap’s logical pluralism afford him with the resources for a fundamentally new, “dialectical” ideal of explication. Articulating it requires emphasizing the “often misunderstood” point that Carnap viewed explication itself as an external operation.<sup>16</sup> Carnap had offered rational reconstructions within Russellian type theory, believing that there is (and hoping this was) a permanent logical framework in which to clarify knowledge. He thus viewed a rationally reconstructed conceptual framework as truth-evaluable. But since the informally characterized explicandum for which an explicatum in some formal language is proposed cannot itself be expressed within that formal language, any question about an explication’s adequacy must only be a pragmatically assessable

12. Carnap, *Syntax*, 52, original emphasis.

13. “Whenever greater precision in communication is desired, it will be advisable to use the explicatum instead of the explicandum . . . the explicatum may belong to ordinary language, although perhaps to a more exact part of it” (Carnap, “P. F. Strawson on Linguistic Naturalism,” 935–36).

14. Carnap, “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology,” 23.

15. For instance, the question “Does the number 5 exist?” phrased internally to a linguistic framework in which the Peano axioms are used to define the natural numbers has a single correct answer (yes!), but phrased externally, as a traditional metaphysician might (“Does the number 5 exist *simpliciter*?”), has no correct answer. According to Carnap, such a metaphysician should be charitably interpreted as exploring the practical question of which linguistic framework for number (if any) we should adopt for a particular inquiry. This methodological aspiration of appealing to explication as a way to overcome recalcitrant metaphysical disputes is absent in Quine. For more, see Martin Gustafsson, “Quine’s Conception of Explication—and Why It Isn’t Carnap’s.”

16. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 279. Cf. Howard Stein, “Was Carnap Entirely Wrong, After All?,” 280.

external question. “If a solution for a problem of explication is proposed,” as Carnap writes, “we cannot decide in an exact way whether it is right or wrong . . . the question should rather be whether the proposed solution is satisfactory, whether it is more satisfactory than others, and the like.”<sup>17</sup>

The ideal of explication Carus finds implicit in Carnap’s mature work is a model for communal conceptual engineering. A group of scientific inquirers can be thought of as speaking a “professional dialect” that is regulated by a tentatively agreed upon (and sometimes tacit) body of rules.<sup>18</sup> We may roughly characterize three zones in such a dialect. The first zone contains the framework rules governing accepted inferences, and any concepts well integrated with these rules in the sense that speakers find their meaning and role in investigations uncontroversial. The third zone overlaps significantly with ordinary language, and contains folk concepts that speakers of the dialect use in different and possibly incompatible ways. Between these extremes is a zone of informal conventions and partial constructions that the group employs to relate the well-defined language of the first zone to problems of interest. This, Carus claims, is a fertile zone of potential explicanda. Under the ideal of explication, members of the group may facilitate their inquiries by suggesting ways of shoring up second-zone concepts and principles in a constructed language system meant to characterize the group’s first-zone framework. The group then judges whether proposed explications are useful, a process that requires evaluating the extent to which the second-zone explicanda have been sufficiently captured in the proffered explicata, and that may result in a reexamination of the first-zone framework rules judged to govern their dialect, or a modification of their inferential practice. A feedback loop results, as, informed by the group’s assessment, members propose further explications to clarify their ongoing investigations.

Using a broad classification of Enlightenment thinkers as those who tie knowledge to liberation, Carus proposes Carnap’s ideal of explication as a means to twenty-first-century Enlightenment. Human inquirers may no longer be subjugated by God or King, but too often remain under the yoke of their linguistic inheritance, employing the “tangled, confused, half-articulate but deeply rooted conceptual systems inherited from [their] ancestors.”<sup>19</sup> Carnap teaches us, rather, that languages are subject to their users, and provides us with a model for refining them that accords with his socialist ambitions. Whereas rational reconstruction had pictured the philosopher of science as arbiter of conceptual rigor in the sole correct language, with explication “the practical

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17. Carnap, *Logical Foundations of Probability*, 4.

18. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 280.

19. *Ibid.*, 1.

realm kicks back.”<sup>20</sup> There is no presumption that any technical construction offered by the explicator will ipso facto be an improvement; instead, each construction is treated as a proposal to be questioned, tested, discussed, and, ultimately, either adopted as useful or rejected as unhelpful by those employing the language.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, committing to the ideal of explication—to taking control of one’s language by gradually explicating it—is laudable. For a group that undergoes the work of self-consciously reflecting on the adequacy of proposed explicata and the principles governing their ongoing inquiry is engaging in “the social learning process whereby vague concepts become clearer.”<sup>22</sup> In Carus’s view, Carnap issues a call to “raise the degree of construction (or ‘constructedness’) in human languages” used for inquiry, and thereby achieve “the liberation of human thought from passive complacency.”<sup>23</sup>

Carus concludes his book by sketching an argument that the fundamentally pluralistic reshaping of the Enlightenment evident in Carnap’s ideal of explication has no inherent limits, and that, in particular, it applies to “the realm of political interaction in democratic societies.”<sup>24</sup> He acknowledges that defending Enlightenment values in the political realm may seem quaint. Combining greater quantities of knowledge with a social pluralism that refuses to endorse *one* ranking of knowledge or “republic of letters” as authoritative has led not to liberation, but rather acquiescence to the “wisdom of crowds.”<sup>25</sup> Left to fend for ourselves without a culturally endorsed route through the sheer quantity of information easily available online, for instance, many of us crowd-source our knowledge by browsing to Wikipedia rather than taking on the responsibility of identifying, verifying, and consulting those we judge to have relevant expertise. Nevertheless, Carus contends that Carnap’s ideal generates an appealing theory of liberalism.

Extant models of liberalism, Carus alleges, fail to reconcile the values of pluralism and reason. He takes John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas as exemplars of this fundamental trade-off.<sup>26</sup> Liberals hope to secure a framework for social interaction in which all citizens respect each other’s autonomy, including

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20. Ibid., 21.

21. Dispensing with the “cognitive authoritarianism” of the Enlightenment, under which the new knowledge replacing folk knowledge is automatically *better* knowledge, is, according to Carus, a central advantage of Carnap’s ideal of explication (Carus, “Carnapian Rationality,” 174).

22. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 284n18.

23. Ibid., 276.

24. Ibid., 273.

25. Carus credits Robert Musil with insights into the problem of how social pluralism and knowledge proliferation are in tension with the Enlightenment (Musil, *The Man without Qualities*).

26. Carus’s main texts are Habermas, “Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason,” and Rawls, “Political Liberalism.”



others' diverse moral and epistemic "content" values. But in Rawls's theory of justice, citizens' diverse conceptions of the good must be hidden behind a "veil of ignorance" in order for them to agree upon framework principles for governing society. Once the veil is lifted, citizens may no longer endorse those framework principles. (Rawls claims only that citizens whose conceptions of the good are "reasonable," in the sense that they *do* continue to accept the framework principles they agreed to when veiled, may achieve a consensus about a just society.) In contrast, Habermas's theory of communicative rationality imagines an ideal discourse among wholly disinterested citizens, who, on the basis of a refined version of our own epistemic standards, achieve a consensus about social framework principles. But there is no guarantee that the Habermasian conversation will result in principles that protect a diversity of values. As Carus sums matters up: "Rawls focuses on pluralism and tries to finesse reason; Habermas focuses on reason and lets pluralism fall where it may."<sup>27</sup>

Rawls and Habermas suffer, Carus claims, from their shared assumption that, if all members of society are to be bound by framework principles, those principles must be established using common reason in unadulterated ordinary language. Their models are accordingly open to the charge that *their articulation* of the framework principles for social interaction yielded from "common reason" tacitly presume the content values of one particular group. Carnap teaches us, instead, that inquirers may creatively engineer the language that they have evolved to use. The common reason a group of inquirers share is not a fixed, natural fact, but a function of the language they currently employ.<sup>28</sup> Political interaction should thus be modeled as a linguistic convention, a gathering at which vocabulary and inference patterns to which all citizens agree ought to be explicitly constructed, resulting in a new language within which productive deliberation can occur.

The benefit of this Carnapian approach is not merely that, in explicitly working to construct a language for political discourse, all citizens have a voice in—and become responsible for—what will count as "reason." The "essential advantage" of the approach is its recognition that the language in which citizens negotiate the public values grounding the framework principles that will come to govern their interactions (such as, for instance, impartial contract enforcement) is different from, and exists alongside, the multiplicity of languages in which citizens employ their personal content values (such as their

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27. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 300.

28. Not all thoughts may be expressible within the strictures of a given language's formation rules, and the contours of a language allow some thoughts and inferences to be grasped more easily than others.

particular religious preferences).<sup>29</sup> Vocabulary in the language a citizen uses with likeminded members of her community (a language I shall refer to as her “idiolect”) may underwrite different inferences and be used differently—or even abjured altogether—in languages employed by other communities.<sup>30</sup> In this way, the value of pluralism is recognized in citizens’ rights to their diverse idiolects for everyday activity and communication. The value of reason is acknowledged in venerating a separate language for political discourse constructed by and accessible to all citizens, in which they decide upon the nature of the institutions that will govern them.

We can model the process of constructing a political language, according to Carus, upon the way Carnap’s ideal of explication governs the improvement of a professional dialect:

How do we get from individual (content-value-specific) languages to a common language for civic interaction? We proceed just as scientists do when setting up a language for some specific cognitive purpose. We bootstrap: we make ourselves understood to each other however we can, and from those tentative footholds we agree on rules of communicative interaction so that we can make ourselves *better* and more clearly understood for the purpose agreed on.<sup>31</sup>

The construction of a single language for the resolution of all sociopolitical problems is a distant goal. More modestly, a group of citizens who agree to discuss a particular problem (analogously to a group of scientists who converge upon a cognitive purpose) should proceed as follows. First, in an initial stage of clarification, they should use their content-value-laden idiolects to try to explain the scope and significance of the problem to one another, a step that may involve working “to clarify what [any] abstract concepts in question actually *mean* (in practice)” to them.<sup>32</sup> Second, on the basis of their emerging mutual understanding, in the spirit of compromise they should “negotiate *explicata* (establish meanings)” of key concepts, procedural principles, public values, and inference patterns in their new political language, thereby establishing the framework for their debate.<sup>33</sup> Finally, they may use their new political language to discuss and evaluate proposed solutions to their problem.

Carus admits that in its attention to formal language construction the Carnapian model “does nothing to mitigate the lofty abstractness of the Rawlsian or Habermasian meta-perspective on social life,” but is nonetheless optimistic

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29. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 297; 303.

30. In reality, most citizens are part of multiple communities and thus at different times may speak in a variety of different, and even incompatible, ways. This complicates a formal definition of “idiolect,” but makes no difference to the present argument.

31. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 303, original emphasis.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*



about its applicability because throughout it requires conceiving of citizens only as they are—not initially veiled like those in Rawls’s original position, nor capable of perfect disinterest like participants in Habermas’s ideal discourse.<sup>34</sup> Whereas the general rules in Rawls’s and Habermas’s frameworks are “difficult to recognize in particular pieces of legislation or judicial decisions,” the dialectical structure of Carnap’s framework stays closer to lived experience, since explicated principles arise through social interaction rather than being derived from a theory.<sup>35</sup> In Carus’s view, recently built institutions, such as the international financial systems and rule of law among members of the European Union, are the result of cross-cultural collaboration and conceptual innovation rather than flat-footed appeals to shared reason or common sense. Guided by the ideal of explication, liberals should recognize that achieving consensus in a pluralist society “will increasingly be *preceded* by an at least implicit agreement about which language to use, and by a more self-conscious *shaping* of such languages.”<sup>36</sup>

The prospect of balancing the values of pluralism and reason in an applicable theory of liberalism is both provocative and enticing, but, unfortunately, Carus does not provide detailed examples of how the Carnapian model is supposed to work in practice.<sup>37</sup> And beyond its role in the creation of *new* social institutions, a striking application of the model is its promise of a principled way for citizens to resolve their disagreements about *inherited* institutions. As Carus tells us, in aspiring for the ideal of explication we need not abstract “from the actual practice in which the concepts to be clarified and explicated have meanings,” and the shared conception of reason we devise for political deliberation about a particular problem “can be conceived as a continuous, dialectical process, in which a language is built piece by piece over a long period.”<sup>38</sup> In the next section, I shall assess the value of applying Carus’s model to recent disagreement about an inherited institution: how might the ideal of explication inform debate about marriage?

## II. The Case of Marriage

Over the last few decades, Western democracies have paid increasing attention to the institution of marriage. Perhaps the highest profile issue has been access to marriage, with the US Supreme Court’s decision to strike down the Defense

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34. *Ibid.*, 305.

35. *Ibid.*, 301.

36. *Ibid.*, 306, original emphasis.

37. As Alan Richardson complains, “Carus’s book leaves . . . more to be done to specify and implement the project he announces” (“Review of *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*”). The present paper may be viewed as a contribution to this project.

38. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 304.

of Marriage Act that had prevented federal recognition of same-sex marriages being swiftly followed by *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), a ruling condemning state-level bans on same-sex marriages as unconstitutional. The significance of the wedding ritual has also been questioned. In 2014, the British government cited the need to “prevent . . . the commercialization of marriage solemnization” in its decision to refuse to amend the 1949 Marriage Act, an amendment that would have allowed a broader range of ceremonies, including humanist weddings, to be legally binding.<sup>39</sup> How should citizens decide which relationships warrant legal recognition, how entering such relationships should be ritualized, and what rights, obligations, and benefits participation in them ought to confer? After illustrating the promising answer Carus’s Carnapian model seems to offer this question, in this section I argue that applying it to deliberation about marriage, or other contemporary political disagreements, is ultimately unappealing.

A range of argumentative strategies and murkily understood values have peppered recent discussion about marriage, including competing interpretations of historical and cross-cultural research on differing marriage traditions, debate about how to evaluate such interpretations, polling data and disagreement about the reliability and relative weight of such data against the demands of social justice, deeply-held views about how and whether to properly fall in with the global community or the “right side of history,” and much else besides. A Rawlsian might weigh in on such debates by offering interpretations of the principle of liberty agreed to by citizens in the original position; if the freedom to marry is a basic liberty, for instance, then it is only just to deny it to same-sex couples if it can be established that doing so preserves another basic liberty.<sup>40</sup> A Habermasian might instead appeal to the democratic principle in ideal discourse theory (that to be legitimate laws must be capable of securing universal agreement through a legally constituted discursive process) to trace the history of the different levels of practical discourse about the institution of marriage, making explicit the discursive tests that marriage laws must pass if they are to be valid.<sup>41</sup> But in a pluralist society, as Carus insists, there may be citizens who reject one or both of these approaches as already biased in favor of certain epistemic content values. For instance, Rawls’s list of potential conceptions of justice deliberated upon by citizens in the original position may be judged incomplete; and Habermas’s appeal to the history of rationality in Western societies in expounding the democratic principle may be judged prob-

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39. Catherine Fairbairn, “Humanist Marriage Ceremonies.”

40. James Nickel suggests a Rawlsian should categorize the freedom to marry as a liberty of the person (“Rethinking Rawls’s Theory of Liberty and Rights,” 772).

41. See Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 110.

lematically Eurocentric. The result is that Rawlsian and Habermasian voices do not cut through, but add to, the extant clamor.

In contrast, Carnap's model provides deliberators with a method for negotiating and improving this argumentative milieu. Rather than assuming, with Rawls and Habermas, that citizens share a conceptual framework with which to contemplate marriage, Carnap's ideal of explication enjoins them to construct a new political language for their discussion. This language must be constructed before any substantive arguments—or views of liberal theorists about the requirements of justice or which arguments are discursively sanctioned—can be evaluated. Its procedural rules are not gleaned in part by reflection on ideal discourse, as in Habermas's theory, but negotiated by the participants themselves, making the group's emerging conception of what will constitute rational debate about their problem wholly their own. And, in perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Carnap's approach, it is to be hoped that the precise, mutually understood concepts deliberators explicate in creating their political language will improve the quality of their eventual debate.

In the initial clarification stage of their linguistic convention, participants must use their content-value-laden idiolects (in which various pertinent concepts—most obviously “marriage,” but also “husband,” “wife,” “sacrament,” “family,” “equality,” etc.—will have different and possibly incompatible connotations) to try to arrive at a mutual understanding of the boundaries of the issue. Liberal participants—those who agree that citizens should be free to decide upon and pursue their own content values consistently with the minimal framework needed to govern society—may disagree with each other about the nature of the institution and the scope of the problem in various ways. (As Carus notes, the boundary between content and framework values is “always under negotiation.”<sup>42</sup>) There may also be *illiberal* participants in this debate, who believe that the content values informing their idiolects are correct and ought to be universally adopted.

The group's aim in this first stage is to secure tentative footholds for their subsequent explication of the framework principles that will ultimately govern their deliberation.<sup>43</sup> Yet as Carus emphasizes, the ideal of explication is extremely modest. Not only does it not yield particular framework principles (insisting rather that participants must construct them for themselves), it “does not claim to know even what procedural norms should govern the process of building a language for the articulation of framework values.”<sup>44</sup> Given the

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42. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 308.

43. In Carnap's terminology, citizens are working towards a “descriptive pragmatics” of the institution (a mutual understanding of how various participants understand the institution to work), which will culminate in a rough “descriptive semantics,” a way of talking about the institution in the least controversial terms possible.

44. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 306. This marks a further point of contrast

range of possible participants, must we despair of drawing conclusions about applications of the model at any level of generality (i.e., concerning more than what *these* participants agree to in *this* discussion)?

I think that this would be too quick. For one thing, since the model presupposes a mutual recognition of the need to discuss a particular issue, many such groups would agree to informally regulate members in the clarification stage so that discussion remains focused upon that issue (with the important caveat that an ancillary consideration in one person's idiolect may be central in another's).<sup>45</sup> Participants may tolerate the religious vocabulary a theist employs in using her content-value-laden idiolect to clarify what the institution of marriage means to her, for instance, and yet balk if she turns to detailing finer points of scripture.

More robustly, where groups have congregated to discuss an inherited institution that has been shaped through earlier periods of political deliberation, participants may agree to use partially constructed languages to make themselves better understood. As Carus writes:

[T]he language used in actual political debate *has* traditionally been . . . a partly constructed language; it has been structurally shaped by the more obviously constructed (or partly constructed) language of the law, which in turn becomes increasingly precise as it takes statistical, biological, economic, and other specialized languages on board.<sup>46</sup>

The laws that currently govern the institution of marriage, for instance, are expressed in a framework to which participants may agree to appeal as needed, not only to better understand the current form of the social institution, but also to improve their grasp of the scope of their ensuing discussion. Participants in the clarification stage may, for instance, appeal to this language to draw attention to relevant policies (such as official procedure for reforming marriage law) and the extant set-up of related social institutions (taxation ordinances, immigration regulations, hospital visitation rights, divorce laws, etc.). It is worth emphasizing that the normative significance (if any) of this information for the group's upcoming deliberations has yet to be decided.<sup>47</sup> Rather,

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with Habermas, for whom ideal discourse yields standards by which participants in any actual discourse may rule certain procedures unreasonable (Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 108).

45. Of course, there may be obstinate participants who refuse such informal regulation, insisting that others have failed to grasp the proper scope of the problem. I shall return to this point below.

46. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 307, original emphasis.

47. Citizens may be surprised or even horrified by the details of the laws and social institutions constructed by their ancestors. Education about society's legal framework may itself engender demand for reform. Where one group may choose to discuss proposals within their society's legal boundaries, another might choose to discuss proposals more abstractly ("In a society *S*, citizens should be entitled to marry iff . . ."). But these decisions are delayed

the point of appealing to this partially constructed language is that its clarity affords participants a way to improve their mutual understanding.

Participants may also take advantage of the legal framework to sketch proposals for the institution, thereby clarifying the terrain of disagreement—and so, the potential common ground—between them. Depending on their views, one proposal might be that only couples of the opposite sex may *marry*, while couples of the same sex may enter state-sanctioned, and legally equivalent, *civil unions*. (Variations on this proposal might award different legal recognitions to the institutions by, for instance, only allowing spouses to sponsor immigration petitions.) Another proposal might be that the State may marry couples regardless of their sex, perhaps with a variant that additionally calls for the institution to be separated from welfare distribution.<sup>48</sup> A third might be that, as Claudia Card argues, the State should cease to recognize marriages altogether, “leveling down” to civil unions available to all.<sup>49</sup> Turning to weddings, proposals might include “commercializing” marriage by allowing citizens to freely organize extravagant legally binding ceremonies, or instead fostering a greater degree of gravitas to proceedings by stipulating that legally binding weddings may only take place indoors, or in civil or religious buildings.

On the basis of their shared understanding of the issue, some groups may now be able to separate out factual and normative considerations among participants’ concerns. Assessment of considerations that the group agrees to be purely factual—say, the anticipated economic effects on the event planning industry were the number of outdoor wedding ceremonies to dramatically increase, or demographic data regarding the number of couples who would have chosen to marry outdoors if the option had been available—may be apportioned out to the relevant sciences, leaving the less tractable considerations to be worked out by the group. Participants now enter the second stage of their convention: constructing their political language by explicating the framework principles that will govern their ensuing debate. Carus emphasizes that, in contrast to Rawls’s and Habermas’s idealizations, citizens engaging in this project are aware of their own partiality.<sup>50</sup> But despite their various and pos-

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until the group enters the second stage and explicates the framework principles for its political language.

48. According to Stephanie Cootz, “In the 1950s, using the marriage license as a shorthand way to distribute benefits and legal privileges made some sense because almost all adults were married. Cohabitation and single parenthood by choice were very rare” (“Taking Marriage Private”). Some participants may reason that since “marriage” is no longer a convenient shorthand for “adulthood,” it is preferable to legally isolate the institution to eliminate potential sources of disagreement.

49. Card, “Against Marriage.”

50. “The Carnapian [model] does not require us to be disinterested – to abstract from our concrete interests and values” (Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 305).

sibly incompatible positions, they have pragmatic reason to propose explicata with which they think *all* participants can be brought to agree, on the basis of the ways participants have described the scope of the issue in their various idiolects.

We may expect the explication of procedural rules to be relatively uncontroversial (and indeed, some procedural rules may have tacitly or explicitly informed the clarification stage). For instance, an early goal will be to explicate standards for debate, such as maximum time limits for individual speakers, when a vote may be called, the number of votes required to pass resolutions (such as whether to adopt an explication), etc.<sup>51</sup> The group may also decide to establish rules governing the limits of their discussion, such as whether debate will be broken up into periods to allow evidence gathering, whether the debate must be concluded by a certain date, whether it will conclude in an official recommendation or policy alteration, and so on.

Having explicated their procedure, the group now proceeds to the more difficult task of forging agreement about the standards they will use to evaluate proposals about how to set up the institution of marriage. (Homogenous groups—such as those comprised largely of liberal participants—will doubtless find this easier than heterogeneous ones.<sup>52</sup>) These standards form a spectrum ranging from generic principles about productive political discussion to local principles that focus on this particular case. An example of the former might be a decision to award our inherited legal framework normative force over all proposals, requiring that proposals be expressed in legal vocabulary or even integrated as far as possible with extant laws, on the grounds that the legal framework is clear and that extant laws capture shared values of our society (such as citizens' rights to legal aid).<sup>53</sup>

Local principles pertaining specifically to marriage will require more careful engineering labor, since they may involve constructing new concepts, and compromising on new definitions of familiar concepts, which participants find acceptable but not wholly natural.<sup>54</sup> If it emerges in the clarification stage that numerous participants believe that the State should incentivize marriage,

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51. Participants may decide upon these standards piecemeal, or else elect to integrate a constructed language for debate, such as Robert's Rules of Order, into their new language.
  52. Indeed, staunchly illiberal participants may refuse to compromise on the explication of *any* framework principles, or even points of procedural order that would allow them to be outvoted.
  53. Some care is required here: proposals requiring new vocabulary may be allowed providing that that vocabulary is explicated coherently with the legal framework, and *any* decision to reform an institution will require *some* laws to be modified.
  54. "At least some parties to [an agreement about which meanings and inference roles to adopt], and perhaps all of them, have—for that context and purpose—adopted meanings and inference rules that are "artificial" for them, i.e., that differ from the ones they began with" (Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 305).



for instance, explicators might construct a principle with which to determine whether proposals provide adequate incentives. This amounts to an inference rule of the language that allows the group to conclude that a proposal with inadequate incentives should not be adopted (or should not be preferred to one that does), and requires stipulating the *boundaries* of “legitimate incentives”—such as tax credits, legal protections, fewer bureaucratic labor costs in negotiating other social institutions, etc. Or again, were it to emerge in the clarification phase that numerous participants believe that their State’s marriage institution should dovetail with others in the global community, explicators might construct a principle for assessing proposals that will have to stipulate the meaning of the “global community” (liberal democracies? All nations?) and “dovetail” (recognizing foreign marriages domestically? Differing only in minor details?). The group as a whole then follow their procedural rules to determine whether or not to accept proffered explicata. Once the group has completed this process and can survey their explicated principles, they may also agree to explicate a procedure for ranking them (such as giving more weight to those considerations the group found least controversial).

In this second stage, participants may also design wholly new concepts with which to think about the issue. For instance, some might propose developing a quantitative “familiarity index” to classify participants according to the number of same-sex couples they report knowing. Being able to coordinate participants’ score on the familiarity index with their assessment of various proposals, they perhaps reason, might expose patterns of evaluation that would suggest future consensus-building practices.<sup>55</sup> If persuaded, the group may collaboratively refine and formally explicate the familiarity index (by determining how fine-grained it will be, what constitutes “knowing” a same-sex couple, etc.). Such novel concepts may also prove useful in unanticipated ways (for example, the group might decide that assigning *proposals* familiarity ratings based on the familiarity scores of their supporters will facilitate the group’s understanding of each other’s views).

It is only once they have completed explicating their political language that citizens may proceed to the third stage and debate proposed reformations to the institution. Citizens who found it useful to sketch proposals in the clarification stage may now fill in their details and try to convince others that they meet the agreed upon criteria. Figuring out ways of compromising with each

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55. Confronting others with the data yielded by the familiarity index may be thought more persuasive than merely alleging correlations. If, for instance, a group who explicated a principle designed to favor proposals that only recognized durable relationships as marriages were to discover that those among them with a low familiarity score consistently appealed to it to reject a proposal allowing same-sex marriage, the entire group might be convinced of the need to solicit and listen to testimonies from same-sex couples.



other may lead to the development of new proposals. If a consensus is ultimately negotiated, “marriage” itself will have been explicated.

One might doubt that many groups will be able to converge on explications that extend much beyond procedural norms. Specifications of exactly *how* the State’s institution of marriage should “dovetail” with the “global community,” for instance, may simply fail to secure widespread agreement in the group, despite what shared ground there seemed to be. Yet a virtue of Carnap’s approach is that the stages I have sketched may be iterated. After a period of substantive discussion, participants may elect to return to the second stage to explicate additional principles on the basis of their developing understanding. Likewise, a group facing deadlock may decide it necessary to compromise on *some* way of explicating a principle about which they had earlier been unable to agree. Aspiring to the ideal of explication is committing to a continual program of improving and refining the political language in use.

For example, Margaret Somerville argues that restricting marriage to members of opposite sexes allows the institution to symbolize the State’s support of procreation.<sup>56</sup> Supposing such a point raised in the third stage of substantive debate, citizens might tease out Somerville’s thought by questioning her notion of “symbolism.” Is “symbolism” necessary to support an activity, or merely useful for doing so? How can “symbolic” meaning be circumscribed? To what extent must what an institution “symbolizes” be instantiated by its participants for its symbolic meaning to persist? Somerville’s responses to such questions allow others to better grasp her argument. Once clarified, some of the claims on which she relies may be revealed as empirically assessable (for instance, by reviewing statistics about the number of conceptions in different adult couplings). Moreover, this work allows participants to accessibly group competing considerations. Andrew Stivers and Andrew Valls argue that just as the EU’s division between “genetically modified (GM)-food” and “food” frames non-GM food as the norm, and as superior (in contrast to the US’s division between “non-GM food” and “food,” which has the opposite effect), instituting heterosexual “marriage” but homosexual “civil partnership” implies a preference for heterosexual relationships.<sup>57</sup> Stivers and Valls’s argument may be paraphrased as a competitor to Somerville’s: restricting the institution of marriage to heterosexuals would rather—or perhaps additionally—“symbolize” State support for heterosexual relationships. By standardizing different lines of rhetoric, participants clear the way for an emerging consensus about whether to return the second stage and explicate a new framework principle in the political language *stipulating* a meaning for “symbolism.”<sup>58</sup>

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56. Somerville, “The Case Against ‘Same-Sex Marriage.’”

57. Stivers and Valls, “Same-Sex Marriage and the Regulation of Language.”

58. Some groups may favor a quantitative explication of symbolism to a qualitative one, if

The Carnapian model also yields a straightforward explanation of why definitional objections to social reform are wrongheaded. One-time head of the National Organization for Marriage Maggie Gallagher, for instance, views the “deepest reason” for opposing marriage equality to be that calling same-sex unions marriages “is not true.”<sup>59</sup> Understood as a claim about the meaning of “marriage” in Gallagher’s idiolect, this might be so. But the question of how citizens wish to explicate “marriage” in their political language—which proposal about how to organize the institution they wish to adopt—is the ultimate *goal* of their convention. Like other definitional objections, Gallagher’s claim is only a position statement. Her view may be brought to the negotiation table, but does not constitute an argumentative move made upon it.

A related advantage is the model’s empowering reminder that, despite their apparent stability, social institutions are dynamic, altering over time and among different groups of citizens.<sup>60</sup> Citizens need not be passive observers of such transformations. Rather, within the shifting sociocultural context, they have the power—and the responsibility—to mold their institutions, and the cultural cache with which they are associated, by explicating the political language in which they are evaluated. Since reshaping our language in turn produces further sociocultural change, possibly leading citizens to refine or even abandon the content values to which they were once wholly committed, social reform is a feedback loop. A recent example of this process can be seen in the wave of critical responses to Chief Justice Kennedy’s majority opinion in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that “no union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family . . . [same-sex couples’] hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness.”<sup>61</sup> Winning the fight for marriage equality in the US has kindled debate about whether marriage exclusively embodies these values, whether the alternative to marriage must be a lonely life, and whether it is appropriate for governments to single out and privilege this particular form of adult relationship over others, such as polygamous romantic couplings or committed platonic friendships.<sup>62</sup> On the basis of such considerations, citizens who once agreed to incentivize marriage might come to withdraw their support of such a framework principle.

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such a choice enables what an institution “symbolizes” to be empirically, and more easily, ascertained. Yet even a qualitative explication that defines “symbolism” in terms that participants mutually understand will sharpen their debate.

59. Corvino and Gallagher, *Debating Same-Sex Marriage*, 100.

60. For recent accounts of sociocultural changes to the institution of marriage, for instance, see Andrew Cherlin, “The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage,” and Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*.

61. *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

62. See *Daily Nous*, “Philosophers on the Supreme Court’s Gay Marriage Ruling,” and Stephen Macedo, *Just Married*.

Of course, the Carnapian model cannot, and does not, offer guarantees. Resolving disagreements in a pluralist society demands a good deal of compromise. But since we have reason to hope that all but the most illiberal of participants may be brought to accept the explication of at least *some* framework principles and thus join us in organized, substantive debate, Carnap provides liberals with a way to incorporate both pluralism and reason into their theory.

However, despite these various advantages, I am not convinced that the benefits of Carnap's model outweigh its costs. In the remainder of this section, I shall present four objections in increasing order of severity. I shall argue that although Carus has the resources to meet the first two, the final two expose weaknesses that should give liberals pause.

The first objection is that, despite Carus's hope about the model's direct applicability, citizens do not enjoy equal political voices, and thus do not have the same power to shape our political language. Once we descend from an abstract account of how groups might compromise upon framework principles for their inquiries and attempt to apply the model, we must confront the question of who gets to participate in political conversations. Until the sociopolitical problems that disenfranchise marginalized groups are addressed, one might insist, applying the Carnapian framework to specific disputes tacitly endorses the status quo, since it presupposes an engaged group already willing and able to discuss that issue.

Such caution about the emancipatory potential of Carnap's approach is well-taken, but suggests that the ideal of explication be pursued in tandem with other programs of social reform rather than abandoned. The Carnapian should welcome initiatives aiming to raise the number of politically engaged citizens. Indeed, she may claim as an advantage of her model that groups of citizens sensitive to such problems might adopt procedural framework rules that combat exclusion, such as requiring comments from a diverse group before voting on proposals, or insisting that contributions made by members of underrepresented groups are not misattributed to members of dominant groups. Insofar as the process of proposing and evaluating explications rather than assuming a shared conceptual framework facilitates social progress, it is one method for moving toward the distant goal of a political language constructed evenhandedly by all, in which informed, invested citizens engage each other in rational debate.

However, might the differing idiolects of citizens preclude reconciliation through explication? This second objection is not that citizens may fail to either reach a consensus or to compromise about which explications to adopt; Carnap does not provide a panacea for recalcitrant disputes. Rather, the worry is that citizens may fail to reach a genuine consensus *despite* agreeing to an explication, for in creating their shared political language each citizen must

bootstrap from, and so, rely upon, their own content-value laden idiolect as the basis for their understanding.

For instance, suppose that a group of citizens in the clarification stage of a debate about marriage informally agree that marital property should be fairly divided in cases of divorce. The group contemplates adopting a framework principle to capture this point of agreement in the second stage, and after considering various proposed explicata of “fair division,” it so happens that the group endorses a principle that requires proposals to elaborate a system by which marital property will be divided in proportion to each spouse’s labor. However, unbeknownst to all, some members of the group understand “labor” to include domestic labor while others do not, as a result of how they employ the word “labor” in their idiolects. Accordingly, when citizens try to appeal to the explicated principle in the third stage of their discussion—for instance, in criticizing a proposal that awards divorcees a proportion of their mutual assets based upon their salaries—disagreement erupts. In this case, once the underlying confusion has been exposed, it is straightforward for the group to return to the second stage and try to explicate a new principle governing “fair division” (which may demand compromising upon an explication of “labor”).<sup>63</sup> But since it is never possible to ensure mutual understanding, and since such disagreements may linger unnoticed beneath the surface, a critic may object that the ideal of explication merely offers a veneer of social progress.

However, the Carnapian counts refusing to be stalled by this possibility a virtue.<sup>64</sup> It is certainly desirable for the concepts in proffered explicata to be clarified as far as possible in terms that all citizens understand. But adopting an explication in a political language, just as in a professional dialect, is neither to eternally fix the meaning of a principle or a concept, nor to prevent debate recurring. It is rather a pragmatic, revisable decision to use language together in a way that participants find sufficiently clear for now, in order to facilitate the crafting and implementation of new policies.

Yet this focus on progress suggests a third, more serious, objection: explication aims to promote communication about social institutions in a shared

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63. Supposing such disagreements so fundamental that they could *never* be brought to light is to fall into an objectionable scheme/content dualism. See Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme.”

64. Carnap is unfazed by a related objection from E.W. Beth, who charges that only people who already share an interpretation of a language can use the method laid out in Carnap’s *Syntax*: “I always presupposed . . . that a fixed interpretation of [the metalanguage], which is shared by all participants, is given” (Carnap, “E. W. Beth on Constructed Languages,” 929). Carnap’s presupposition would beg the question were the goal of constructing languages to be providing speakers with a *guarantee* of mutual understanding. He believes, rather, that explicitly constructed languages are generally *clearer* than colloquial ones, and thus better suited for rational inquiry.

political language *despite* what individuals think, and may continue to think, in their diverse idiolects.<sup>65</sup> It allows, in other words, citizens to freely employ their own idiolects, using words to mean whatever they want those words to mean. This is how pluralism is valued in Carus's model:

For everything other than politics we are free to adopt whatever language we like. At the content level, we can invent our own language, or our own dialect of some language (e.g., of the universal vernacular), suited to the particular concerns we want to articulate.<sup>66</sup>

But not only is this form of semantic internalism questionable, social reform often requires exposing and critiquing the *unintended* meaning that our words may have, even when they are spoken "in private." A racist epithet or a homophobic slur, for instance, has its meaning even if its speaker claims she didn't mean it in that way.<sup>67</sup> By insisting that meaning is "not specifiable language-independently," and granting speakers free reign to construct their own language, Carus misses the need to expose what is objectionable about certain idiolects *to* their speakers (and so, to change their speakers' minds).<sup>68</sup> The conversations we have with others about how best to arrange the social institutions that shall govern us all are an opportunity to learn from and teach each other about our different experiences, and if the confrontations that sometimes result slow down the creation of policy, they also contribute to our social education. There is value in reflecting upon the depth of our recalcitrant disagreements, rather than striving to set them aside as features of competing idiolects and forging on to the creation of a new language.

Finally, one seeking to apply Carus's suggestion to a particular case must consider whether all citizens will or could be brought to accept the ideal of explication *as* an ideal for liberal political deliberation. This last objection is the most serious, for citizens with principled objections to the ideal who refuse to engage in the Carnapian linguistic convention will thereby be disenfranchised from political debate. I shall close this section by considering three groups of citizens who may reject the ideal of explication: conservative liberals, pessimistic deliberators, and those with a transcendent conception of justice.

In common with other models of liberalism, the Carnapian approach seeks to establish a minimal framework that all members of society can accept, within which citizens are free to pursue their diverse content values (so long as those values do not violate the framework).<sup>69</sup> As I noted above, if a group

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65. Self-reflective citizens may be inspired to alter their content-value-laden idiolects as a result of open-mindedly engaging with others in the explicative project and grasping different points of view, but Carus's model portrays such alterations as supererogatory.

66. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 308.

67. See Christopher Hom, "The Semantics of Racial Epithets."

68. Carus, "More on Ontological Pluralism."

69. In recent work, Carus argues that Carnap viewed "ultimate values"—such as those funding

contains *illiberal* citizens, compromise regarding framework principles may not extend far beyond the procedural level. Yet since the problem of the appropriate attitude for liberals to adopt toward illiberals is not unique to Carnap's model, and since the ideal of explication at least promotes limited discussion with illiberals, it may be thought an advance over alternative models.

However, a subtler assumption in Carnap's approach is that the group's *current members* should be empowered to construct their political language, and thereby delimit "reason." This assumption is innocent in professional dialects, since inquirers adopt whichever means they judge best to investigate the problem before them.<sup>70</sup> But in the realm of politics, it privileges progressive over conservative liberalism. Conservative liberals (who accept the need for a social framework within which a plurality of content values may flourish) believe that there is a rational presumption in favor of traditional formulations of social institutions, and of the extant framework for political debate, on the grounds that experience has shown that these systems have worked to keep civilization going. They may accordingly balk at the suggestion that we may choose to adopt whichever framework principles the current group happens to endorse. Counting ourselves free to determine what "reason" shall mean at a Carnapian linguistic convention, they may protest, is reckless.

The Carnapian may respond that conservative liberals are free to propose explications for the framework principles that they judge important, such as honoring constitutional law by, for example, demanding a higher proportion of votes to carry motions that seek to amend it. In this way, conservative liberals have a voice together with progressive liberals in constructing their political language. However, the conservative liberal may object that the Carnapian model dulls her voice by making her position look fundamentally retrograde. By picturing political deliberation as a conversation in which *current* citizens congregate to address their social problems, appeals to tradition or the judgments of *previous* citizens looks like risk aversion or paternalism, instead of insistence that we learn lessons from history. Carus closes his book by issuing a challenge:

Sixty years after [Carnap] first set his sights on the open sea of free possibilities, it still lies before us, all but unexplored. We have been extremely timid, clinging to the shoreline, hardly daring to venture out of sight of land. The warm, familiar, safe harbor of habit and tradition appeals

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liberalism—to be rationally assessable ("Carnapian Rationality," 175). Liberals who aspire to the ideal of explication will be "influenced by roughly the same facts and theories" as they contemplate the boundary between content and framework values, and so will tend to converge on the principles of their political language (178).

70. The history of how earlier members of the profession approached their problems is generally taken to be a wholly separate field. Scientists, for instance, need never take a course in the history of science.



## James Pearson

to us as it ever did to our ancestors. It is time we ventured forth again in the pioneering spirit of the original Enlightenment, emboldened by Carnap's example.<sup>71</sup>

But this Enlightenment vision is not universally shared. Conservative liberals may cautiously refuse Carus's invitation to view reason as something that it is in our power, or best interests, to define.

A second group of citizens who may refuse to aspire to the ideal of explication are those pessimistic about its successful application. Embarking upon Carnap's multi-stage process of constructing a political language with possibly recalcitrant, resolutely non-ideal citizens may strike such participants as a distracting waste of energy. Rather than struggling to formalize framework principles for a new language, such pessimists may allege, our time is better spent studying our social practices together and democratically assessing proposals for improving them.

Carus urges that pursuing the ideal is the best way for liberals to secure social progress consistent with the values of pluralism and reason. The Carnapian might thus encourage pessimistic deliberators to first try constructing a new language together before deciding at the outset that the project is futile, or else insist that the onus is upon them to present a better model of liberalism for the group to adopt. But the pessimist need not be persuaded by such entreaties, remaining skeptical of the practical applicability of *any* liberal theory; and to insist that their pessimism is unwarranted or their skeptical stance unreasonable would open the Carnapian to the charge she pressed against the Rawlsian and Habermasian, namely, that the epistemic content values underlying her approach are correct.

Finally, some citizens may refuse Carus's invitation to substitute the immanent ideal of explication for their transcendent ideal of justice. Just as Iris Murdoch drew attention to the importance of "goodness" as a transcendent, "magnetic" ideal for moral improvement that sustains, unifies, and challenges us in part by being forever out of reach, we might view "justice" as a transcendent aim that those seeking social improvement forever strive toward.<sup>72</sup> In contrast, the ideal of explication is immanent in the sense that pursuing it is to focus on the construction and refinement of our political language, not something nebulous beyond it.

The Carnapian may retort that there is no tension between the ideals of explication and justice, since citizens may view themselves as striving toward a transcendent aim even while explicating the principles of their political language. Yet aspiring to the ideal of explication promotes compromising upon specific principles of rationality to which all disputants can agree, at the ex-

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71. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought*, 309.

72. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 73.



pense of broader or more holistic appeals. Liberals who believe in striving for a transcendent social ideal of justice may thus be dissatisfied, worrying that, in effect, the ideal of explication changes the subject from the question “what is right?” to the question “what is expedient?” For example, Richard Posner argues that to determine whether or not to extend the various material benefits associated with marriages to other forms of relationship, those benefits should be isolated and considered separately.<sup>73</sup> M.D.A. Freeman objects that Posner’s proposal is “[too] pragmatic,” since the “question [of marriage equality] is not one of consequences, but of what is right.”<sup>74</sup> The Carnapian model stands behind Posner on this issue, favoring precise piecemeal evaluation to hazy holistic appeals. Yet those sympathetic to Freeman may insist that getting to the heart of debate about marriage equality requires an appeal to moral consciousness.<sup>75</sup>

Carus might attempt to defuse this objection by reminding us that, unlike rational reconstruction, there is no presumption in favor of explication. It is thus always open to citizens pursuing a transcendent ideal of justice to make the case for refusing to adopt piecemeal explications, on the grounds that were the group to do so they would be in danger of missing a higher-order consideration that cannot be precisely stated, or whose significance exceeds the proposed explication of its components. Yet this response is unsatisfactory, since although particular explications may be refused Carnap’s model demands that we sign on to the explicative ideal *as* an ideal. Once they appreciate that refusing to adopt proffered explications will eventually look like obscurantism, citizens with a transcendent conception of justice may refuse to participate in the Carnapian linguistic convention at the outset.

Despite Carus’s hopes, if the case can be made that these or other groups have reason to refuse the ideal of explication for political deliberation, then the Carnapian model effectively privileges a particular conception of reason over pluralism after all. Sensitive to those critics of the traditional Enlightenment who saw a dangerous authoritarianism nestled within its acquiescence to the results of scientific inquiry, Carus attempts a pluralist spin that would see all citizens constructing a political language, and so, having a say in what will count as their “common reason.” But by tacitly endorsing progressive engineering values, I suspect that this pluralist Enlightenment only ends up exchanging traditional Enlightenment scientism for a contemporary “engineeringism.”

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73. Posner, *Sex and Reason*.

74. Freeman, “Not Such a Queer Idea,” 7.

75. Debate about environmental justice is another example. Electing to apply pragmatic standards to debate about sustainability issues is tied to an anthropocentric value system, as opposed to the ecocentric values that an increasing number of environmental philosophers think necessary to enact environmental reform. For the classic statement of the anthropocentric/ecocentric divide, see Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*.

### III. The Case of Adoption

Although I have raised objections to the claim that Carnap's ideal of explication should govern political deliberation, I share Carus's view that the importance of Carnap's program of conceptual engineering extends beyond the fields of mathematics and the physical sciences with which it has most often been associated, and that, in particular, explication is relevant for those of us wishing to address sociopolitical problems. The reason is that Carnap gives us a method for refining the professional dialects used to gain insight into our social problems, such as the interpretive sciences of sociology, anthropology, and history. The values written into the ideal of explication are to be welcomed by participants in these professional communities (unlike all members of the polis), since all inquirers have reason to reflect upon and engineer improvements for their investigations. Pursuing the ideal of explication is to improve communication among and between such groups, and to facilitate the dissemination of their results to the wider population.

For instance, by using the method of explication to refine historical inquiry—and in particular, historical investigations of social institutions—we deepen our understanding of the social problems we have inherited, and how they are bound up with different ways of thinking. It is by now widely agreed that narrativist approaches to philosophy of history which emphasize the subjective, interpretive work of historians better describe historical practice than earlier positivist approaches which treated its writing on the model of objective science.<sup>76</sup> Historiographers chronicle the standards that different schools of historians employ to construct and evaluate their historical writings, which may variably emphasize utility, scope, originality, plausibility, fecundity, and verifiability, in various degrees. Viewed from a Carnapian perspective, against a background of framework principles (some of which may be tacit) to which all historians—or to which all those in a particular school—agree, histories are assessed using various measures that are more or less widely understood.<sup>77</sup> Explicators may facilitate historical inquiry by prompting clarifications of disputed terms in proffered histories, and in the strategies historians use to evaluate them. Various extant projects in the philosophy of history, such as analyses of key terms in particular histories (e.g., “class consciousness”) or ones commonly used to structure histories (e.g., the notion of a historical “event”),

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76. The *locus classicus* for this rejection of positivism is Hayden White, *Metahistory*. See also Ankersmit and Kellner (eds.), *A New Philosophy of History*.

77. Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen argues, for instance, that all historians agree to be bound by the inferential practice of justifying their theses to one another, making rationality a “normative transcendental limit” of history, a “choice and commitment that one must make in order to be a historian in the scholarly sense” (“Why We Need to Move from Truth-Functionality to Performativity in Historiography,” 239).

could be pursued in this spirit.<sup>78</sup> Proposed clarifications are not edicts issued from a formal high ground, but invitations issued from the same vantage point as historiographers, to be endorsed or rejected by those employing a particular professional historical dialect.

Another way to answer Carnap's call to increase the constructedness of a professional historical dialect is to create precise, new concepts for historians to use. In recent work with Sheilagh Ogilvie, Carus sketches a method for doing so that involves constructing quantitative concepts.<sup>79</sup> But I think that Max Weber's method for constructing ideal types—concepts, such as “pilgrim” or “the Reformation,” that artificially emphasize certain features of interest, and which are not intended to faithfully represent historical reality but rather to be clear, mutually understood touchstones against which to tell particular histories—may also be thought of in this light.<sup>80</sup> For the rest of this section, I want to describe a kind of ideal type for which Carnapian explication is peculiarly suited, namely, the construction of *ideal languages*, which are grounded in the precise definitions of clusters of key concepts. Social historians may appeal to ideal languages when writing histories about the changing nature of and, especially, attitudes towards social institutions, not by attributing them to historical agents (for, as ideal types, they are not intended to represent reality), but by using them as benchmarks against which to explain and interpret historical discourse. I close with a sketch of how the method of constructing ideal languages might work in the emerging field of adoption history.

To write a history that purports to describe how past thinkers reasoned about their world is to undertake an ethnographic endeavor on the basis of incomplete records. Such histories not only strive to give an account of what happened, but what events meant to the people who lived through them.<sup>81</sup> While they promise insights into various questions we may have about the past, as

78. See Sewell, *Logics of History*; Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

79. Carus and Ogilvie, “Turning Qualitative into Quantitative Evidence.” Carus and Ogilvie praise a method that they dub the “micro-exemplary” approach, in which our qualitative understanding of the past (based on, e.g., immersing ourselves in testimonial accounts) and the quantitative evidence we may generate about the past (by, e.g., reviewing census data) are “iteratively confronted with each other” (901). The feedback loop that results between our quantitative and qualitative evidence is recognizably Carnapian, since quantitative tests may demand revisions to our qualitative understanding, and our evolving understanding may suggest further quantitative tests. They argue that explicitly constructed quantitative concepts may supplement our qualitative histories, giving as an example Keith Wrightson's call for an “illegitimacy ratio” (between illegitimate and legitimate births) to assess testimonial reports from seventeenth-century moralists about the prevalence of illegitimacy (900). Such concepts act as “islands of precision” in the “vast sea of intuition,” and by gradually replacing our “vague intimations” with “better defined and more precise or explicit concepts,” they believe we achieve a better understanding of the past (905).

80. See Weber, “The Objectivity of the Sociological and Social-Political Knowledge.”

81. See, for example, Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*.

with any interpretive project, they risk imputing too much of the interpreter's conceptual framework to her subjects.<sup>82</sup> Historians disagree about the extent to which an account of others' lived experience can be justified. In addition to disputes about the quality, quantity, and nature of evidence needed to attribute viewpoints, feelings, and desires to historical agents, some insist that experience always exceeds language, and so, historical experiences always exceed the histories that can be written about them.<sup>83</sup> Some historians maintain that their contaminating influence can be controlled for and minimized by adopting an appropriately detached approach, while others embrace it as a condition of meaningful engagement with other cultures.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, some criticize the "universal" standards of rationality employed to organize past conceptual frameworks as revealing Western ethnocentrism, while others see the structure of charitable interpretation for which such standards allow as a weapon for opposing the imperialist tendency to rule different cultures as primitive.<sup>85</sup>

Appealing to ideal languages may help historians to clarify and even overcome these disputes. Taking their cue from implicit or explicit suggestions in different historical accounts, explicators first isolate a set of key terms about a period or institution of interest, and proceed to stipulate one or more ways of fixing the meaning of and relation between those terms that artificially exaggerate ways they were used. Each resulting network is the basis of an ideal language, which historians may build or make as explicit as needed for particular inquiries (by, for instance, defining further vocabulary or elaborating the framework rules of the language in which the terms have been explicated). Studying and contrasting these ideal languages, and assessing the ways in which they could be integrated, expanded, or refined, reveals distinctive argumentative strategies and conceptual connections that certain ways of talking make available. Valid inferences about a topic in one ideal language, for instance, may be invalid or scarcely intelligible in another. Since ideal languages are not attributed to past speakers, no interpretive violence is done if they contain redundancy or are even formally inconsistent. As mutually understood constructs in the "metalanguage" historians of lived experience use

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82. On the other hand, the interpreter cannot help but use her conceptual framework. As Carus and Ogilvie rightly insist, historians must reject as a "mirage" the view that it is possible to "see directly, without verbal or conceptual mediation, into the subjective consciousness, the qualitative texture of past lives" ("The Poverty of Historical Idealism," 277).

83. See Simon, "The Expression of Historical Experience."

84. Whereas aspiring to Bronislaw Malinowski's participant-observation ethnographic method would call for the historian to bracket herself from the history she tells, Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic method views meaning as emerging from the interplay between the interpreter and interpreted, encouraging the historian to adopt a more engaged authorial voice. For more, see Clifford, "Partial Truths."

85. See Kei Yoshida, "Rationality and Other Cultures."

for thinking and writing about the “object languages” of the historical agents they study, ideal languages are a tool for historians to talk clearly with each other about the experiences of historical agents, while losing sight of neither their own interpretive framework nor the target of their analyses.<sup>86</sup> Historians may find it useful to refer to them when formulating their interpretive theses (for instance, in arguing that the patterns of argument characteristic of a particular ideal language declined over a given period). Exploring the contours of an ideal language may also suggest new avenues of historical research (for instance, by surfacing the need to explain why a certain community that otherwise appears to employ a fairly standard version of an ideal language did not recognize a certain conceptual relationship, or by highlighting a source in which traces of two often-opposed ideal languages are discernible as exceptional and worthy of study).

In addition, social historians may gain purchase on otherwise puzzling disputes about institutions by imagining how speakers of ideal languages would debate an issue and reflecting upon the sorts of misunderstanding and confusions that might emerge. To illustrate this, I shall consider the history of changes to the social institution of adoption. I shall restrict my focus to early twentieth century America, a period that saw a dramatic increase in the governmental regulation of adoption practices. Why did the institution change when it did, and how did citizens living through these changes understand them? By constructing ideal languages based upon suggestive arguments and practices found in available sources and displaying how different conceptions of parenting engender different criteria for adoption practices, explicators can assist historians’ explorations of these questions. Using Ellen Herman’s historical research into the commercial, sentimental, and professional ways adoption agencies were set up in this period, I shall sketch different explications of *parent* and *child* that form the basis of three corresponding ideal languages, which I label “economic,” “compassionate,” and “clinical.”<sup>87</sup>

In the first ideal language, “child” is explicated within an economic framework as a commodity that is owned by its “parents.” Children are expected to contribute their labor to the family household, and to provide material support for parents when in their dotage. Conceiving of children as resources renders intelligible various ways of talking about them—such as the possibility of having a “surplus” of children—and invites employing economic principles to as-

86. Cf. Carus and Ogilvie, “The Poverty of Historical Idealism,” 278.

87. Herman, “The Paradoxical Rationalization of Modern Adoption.” A fuller treatment than I have space to provide here might additionally explicate related terms (such as *spouse* and *family*), and give a formal presentation of the framework principles in each of the three ideal languages. Providing such detail would aid inquirers interested in evaluating how different thinkers might assess the strength and cogency of particular arguments about adoption practices.

sess their value, such as cost-benefit analyses. This ideal language is suggested by various practices at the turn of the century, such as the use of deeds and indentures to exchange children in adoptive transactions.<sup>88</sup> Some birth mothers sold their children to adoption agencies, and even when public sentiment was turning against this practice during the 1930s and 1940s—fueled by sensationalized media reports of “baby farms”—the money offered by private adoption outfits remained a significant incentive for women who would otherwise have difficulty surviving their pregnancies.<sup>89</sup>

In the second ideal language, “child” and “parent” are explicated within a moral framework as the relata of an intrinsically, rather than fiscally, valuable personal relationship. Participation in the parent-child relationship provides exclusive access to distinctive virtues and so constitutes part of living a good life. Those citizens who occupy the parent position in this framework are thereby defined as empowered to (and thus, become assessable in terms of their capacity to) “cherish” and “care” for corresponding occupants of the child position. In return, children are defined as capable of “admiring” and “honoring” their parents. This ideal language is suggested by non-profit adoption agencies run by well-meaning private citizens, often but not always with religious associations, who sought to provide upstanding members of society access to their natural maternal and paternal instincts.<sup>90</sup>

The third ideal language is suggested by the influence of burgeoning psychological and sociological theories on the nature of parenthood. “Parents” are explicated within a biological framework as procreators of corresponding “children.” In the early twentieth century, social scientists thought biological kinship bonds both ideal and necessary for children’s (and adult’s) normal development. Deviations from this norm of human maturation were viewed with suspicion, as potentially dangerous sources of personal and social unrest. Adoption was viewed not just as second-rate, but also as a last resort, to be undertaken only when a birth mother could not be impressed upon to care for her child. (On the Freudian view, women fell pregnant on purpose, even if they were not conscious of doing so.<sup>91</sup>) The clinical ideal language emphasizes the need for adopters and adoptees to be protected against the various risks, seen and unseen, of their unusual situation. Early professional adoption agencies strove to emulate natural kinship by placing children with families they “matched,” on religious, racial, socio-economic, and intellectual grounds, determined by empirical assessment (such as IQ tests).<sup>92</sup>

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88. *Ibid.*, 339.

89. *Ibid.*, 357.

90. *Ibid.*, 344.

91. *Ibid.*, 359.

92. *Ibid.*, 350.



These ideal languages variously present parents as owners, caregivers, or progenitors, and children as property, darlings, or offspring. In the economic ideal language, the parent-child relationship is transferable and unexceptional (since servants, for instance, could perform the typical duties of “children”). In the compassionate ideal language, it is transferable but exceptional (since only “children” can be cherished, for example, in the morally relevant way). In the clinical ideal language, it is non-transferable and exceptional (since “children” are irrevocably tied to their parents). Thinking through these overlaps and clashes exposes key points of conflict in how speakers of such languages would favor organizing the institution of adoption. For instance, should adopters be allowed to select which child to adopt? Viewed economically, adopters have rights as buyers to inspect the property they are considering purchasing. Indeed, many adoptive agencies at the beginning of the twentieth century would allow children to be returned if they failed to meet adoptive parents’ expectations. In the compassionate ideal language, adoptive parents should be encouraged to choose children to whom they feel a connection. In contrast, the clinical view rules laypeople unqualified to judge the children with whom they could best approximate the “kinship” relation. An independent scientifically-informed matching system is required to promote successful adoption.

To take another example, should adoptees have the right to find their birth parents? Using the clinical ideal language, except in the case where birth parents wish to be reunited with their child—a situation it characterizes as preferable to any adoptive ersatz relationship—the threat of jeopardizing the already tenuous relations adoptees may have developed with their adoptive family is too great. In the economic ideal language, although adopters may permit adoptees to find their birth parents it is not a right that they can claim. A speaker of the compassionate ideal language might favor helping adoptees learn about their biological roots, as many charitable agencies attempted to do in the early twentieth century. However, other non-profit private agencies relied on donations from birth parents predicated upon a condition of confidentiality, and so refused such requests by adoptees.<sup>93</sup>

These ideal languages provide insight into the development of our own framework for thinking about children. After World War II, amidst the horror of eugenics, professional agencies relaxed their earlier demand that successful adoption required racial and socioeconomic matching, but insisted upon the need to “certify” prospective adoptive parents in the name of protection. Scientific and bureaucratic forces became natural allies in popularizing the need to standardize and regulate the adoption process, now broadened to include transracial and transnational adoption. To the extent that we continue to view adoption as a risky business requiring careful monitoring, our language

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93. *Ibid.*, 349.



cleaves closely to the clinical ideal language.<sup>94</sup> The ideal languages also clarify otherwise obscure debates about revisions to the institution of adoption. For instance, the surprising ongoing resistance among healthcare workers to attempts to bring clinical standards to bear upon adoption practices through the 1960s was not only due to fear of professional encroachment by a new class of social workers or to anxiety based upon conceptions of gender (i.e., that “masculine” sciences would distort the “feminine” domain of child-raising), but also to a deeply held view that parenting is a personal, moral matter rather than an impersonal, unemotional one, a view brought out by contemplating the compassionate ideal language.<sup>95</sup>

In some cases, reflecting upon ideal languages may enrich social philosophers’ perspective on our own social problems. Consider, for instance, debate regarding designer babies. Parents put a great deal of time and energy into raising their children, so ought they be permitted to choose ones that are resistant to disease, or who are pretty, smart, and well-behaved? We glimpse the differing conceptual frameworks that lead citizens to answer such questions differently by thinking about the different explications of “child” and “parent,” and the related dispute about adopters’ rights to choose their adoptees. Moreover, by demonstrating affinities between our interlocutors’ argumentative patterns and those made available in particular ideal languages, we may alert them to unattractive features of their position. Just as early twentieth-century activists drew out the unsavory connections between treating children as possessions and slavery, for instance, current lobbyists might emphasize that treating a baby as something that may be designed is to treat it as an object over which one has teleological power, rather than as an autonomous being to whom one is a temporary custodian.

One might have misgivings about the make-believe of constructing ideal languages, wondering if it might not be better to settle for actual social history.<sup>96</sup> But endorsing a role for ideal languages is neither to warp social history by rationalizing it, nor to deny the need to engage with the messy details if one wishes to attain a richer account of the past. In my view, pursuing the ideal of explication in a Carnapian spirit is to have the modest goal of creating useful tools for (historical) inquiry—of refining it, not supplanting it.<sup>97</sup> The success of this laudable program cannot be determined in advance, but will emerge

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94. Perhaps our continued association of adoption with risk goes some way toward explaining the prevalence of the adoption motif as a source of dramatic tension in twentieth century narrative fiction, despite a steady decrease in US adoption rates from the 1970s.

95. Herman, “The Paradoxical Rationalization of Modern Adoption,” 350.

96. This is the analogue of Quine’s famous lampooning of the philosophical “make-believe” of rational reconstruction in epistemology (“Two Dogmas of Empiricism”). Quine preferred his naturalized alternative that settled for the science of psychology.

97. Cf. Carus and Ogilvie, “Turning Qualitative into Quantitative Evidence,” 906.

in the extent to which inquirers find explicators' proposals, such as the ideal languages I have sketched in this paper, useful.<sup>98</sup>

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