Carnap's Response to the Charge that Verificationism is Self-Undermining

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1   Introduction

The verificationist criterion of meaning was one of the logical empiricist's primary tools in their attempts to eliminate metaphysics. The criterion holds that a sentence is cognitively meaningful, or truth-apt, only if it is either empirically confirmable, analytic, or contradictory. Carnap, who was perhaps the most influential verificationist, believed that, while some traditional philosophical doctrines could be salvaged through reconstruction in an "empiricist language" in which they would typically be analytic, the criterion exposed as nonsense the most objectionable metaphysical claims, such as Heidegger's discussions of "the nothing" (Carnap, 1931, 229)

A classic objection argues that the statement of the verificationist criterion does not itself meet the criterion; since verificationism is neither empirically confirmable, analytic, nor contradictory, verificationism implies its own meaninglessness. The criterion is thus as metaphysical as the sentences about "the Absolute" that it was intended to eliminate.

This essay reconstructs Carnap's response to this *self-undermining objection* to verificationism. I begin in §1 by presenting work on this topic by Putnam and Ricketts. On Putnam's interpretation, Carnap draws on his principle of tolerance to construe verificationism as a non-cognitive proposal. Putnam argues that, since tol-

erance presupposes verificationism, this response involves Carnap in a vicious circle. Ricketts (1994) responds to Putnam on behalf of Carnap by denying that tolerance presupposes verificationism; according to Ricketts, Carnap does not argue for tolerance, and his response to the self-undermining objection is therefore not circular.

I argue in §2.1 that both Putnam and Ricketts overlook Carnap's basic move in response to the self-undermining objection, i.e., his construal of verificationism as an analytic sentence that is meaningful by its own lights. In §2.2, I consider what kind of a definition verificationism provides and how to motivate it. I argue, against Reichenbach, Ayer, and Hempel, that it is not an analysis of the everyday concept of meaning. Instead, I claim, verificationism *replaces* the ordinary conception of meaning with one that purports to capture all and only the expressions that are pragmatically useful to the scientist. On my response to Putnam, then, in contrast to Ricketts', Carnap argues for verificationism on the basis of his pragmatism. In §3.1, I consider whether pragmatism faces an analogue to the self-undermining objection to verificationism. I argue that pragmatism is a preference concerning formal languages, and that, since preferences need not apply to themselves, pragmatism is not self-undermining.

2 Putnam and Ricketts on The Self-Undermining Objection

2.1 Putnam on the Self-Undermining Objection

In his "Philosophers and Human Understanding", Hilary Putnam presses the self-undermning objection to verificationism, then presents a response that he attributes to Carnap. Carnap, on Putnam's reading, grants, in response to the objection, that verificationism is cognitively meaningless, but emphasizes that it is a practically oriented proposal, *viz.* the proposal to restrict the choice of a language for science

to languages every sentence of which meets the verificationist criterion; I will call languages in the latter category *empiricist languages*.

Since verificationism is a proposal or recommendation, it is not self-applicable. Verificationism is not a declarative sentence stating a general claim about cognitively meaningful sentences that could be self-applied through universal instantiation. Rather, it can be expressed as a suggestion like, 'Let's use an empiricist language'. Carnap explicitly claims that these kinds of linguistic proposals can be both cognitively meaningless and "important" (Carnap, 1956a, 214). In this way, Carnap grants the cognitive meaninglessness of verificationism, but denies that it is a problem.

Putnam sees a vicious circularity in this defense of verificationism. As reconstructed by Putnam, Carnap's response to the self-undermining objection turns on the thesis that advocacy of a language is non-cognitive. And Putnam takes this latter thesis to be Carnap's principle of tolerance. Putnam's thought is that the claim that the verificationist decision to adopt an empiricist language is non-cognitive is a special case of tolerance's more general thesis that language choice is non-cognitive. Putnam contends that tolerance in turn rests on, or is to be understood as, the thesis that there are no facts that could render a language more correct than its rivals; tolerance holds that language choice is non-cognitive because in choosing a language for science, there are no facts that I risk leaving out or contradicting. Various significantly different languages are equally good, in so far as their postulates cannot be said to contradict the facts. But, according to Putnam, Carnap's only reason for holding that there are no facts that could decide between rival languages is his verificationism. We have thus come full circle from verificationism, through tolerance, back to verificationism.

Putnam does not spell out the argument from verificationism to tolerance, nor does he defend his assumption that this argument, whatever it is, is the only argument for tolerance; he simply writes: "the doctrine that no rational reconstruction

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is uniquely *correct* or corresponds to the way things 'really are', the doctrine that all 'external questions' are without cognitive sense, *is* just the verification principle" (1983, 191). Putnam's thought, I take it, is that, for Carnap, the notion of fact that could render one language more correct than another—the notion that is in play when I ask, "There are numbers' is a theorem of my language, but are there *really* numbers?'— is an obscure pseudo-concept because it does not meet the verificationist criterion.

2.2   Ricketts' Response to Putnam

Ricketts (1994) responds to Putnam's argument by denying that Carnap would have grounded tolerance on verificationism. According to Ricketts, Putnam wrongly

> supposes that Carnap, in adopting the principle of tolerance, assumes an explanatory burden of excluding the general question of the representational adequacy of a language, and of discrediting the general notion of fact, of the way the world is, that ineliminably figures in the formulation of the question. It is the explanatory or justificatory character of the burden that makes appeal to the principle of tolerance in defense of empiricism viciously circular. (Ricketts, 1994, 178)

Putnam supposes that Carnap accepts the challenge of demonstrating the non-existence of facts that could make some languages more correct than others. Having accepted such a challenge, Carnap would have to provide an argument that would demonstrate the non-existence of such facts, i.e., the truth of tolerance. The argument for tolerance that Putnam anticipates on behalf of Carnap draws on verificationism; thus, the attempt to justify tolerance puts Carnap on the circular path described by Putnam.

Ricketts accepts Putnam's characterization of tolerance as the rejection of any notion of fact capable of grounding a notion of language correctness. Thus, Carnap does not reject the "explanatory burden" of "discrediting the general notion of fact"

because he accepts the notion, but rather because he rejects the explanatory burden. According to Ricketts, Carnap would have to accept such a burden of proof only if the general notion of fact met two conditions. First, the notion would have to be "sufficiently clear" (Ricketts, 1994, p. 196). I take it that, if a notion is unclear from some perspective, then an advocate of the perspective is not obliged to give arguments against the unclear notion, beyond pointing out its unclarity.[1]

Second, an acceptable notion of fact would have to be able to "bear the weight of Putnam's challenge" (Ricketts, 1994, 196), i.e., to figure in a non-question-begging argument against tolerance. A clarified notion of fact that grounds only circular arguments against tolerance would not put any pressure on Carnap to justify tolerance. As an example of an account of 'fact' that meets the first but not the second condition, Ricketts considers the following: it is a fact that p just in case the sentence q is analytic or sufficiently empirically confirmed in my language, and q translates 'p'. We can use this notion of fact to define "correctness" with regard to the choice of a language: "a language is correct just in case it includes a sublanguage that translates my language" (Ricketts, 1994, 196). This account of fact, and of correctness, though it would be suitably clear to Carnap, does not meet the second condition (bearing the weight of Putnam's challenge) because it

> does not supply a reason for rejecting the principle of tolerance; rather it reflects a refusal on my part to countenance any language that is not a notional [*sic*] variant on my own, and so an outright rejection of Carnap's logical pluralism. (Ricketts, 1994, 196)

Ricketts anticipates an objection to his use of the clarity requirement on notions of fact in his response to Putnam. Putnam (1983) argues that verificationism undermines itself because it is a "criterial conceptions of rationality", where the latter

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[1] I believe that the notion of clarity invoked here is to be understood intuitively. Carnap sometimes talks about concepts being unclear in virtue of being untranslatable into scientific language. However, as I discuss further below, for Ricketts, untranslatability into an empiricist language is necessary but not sufficient for unclarity.

is any conception according to which some preferred "institutionalized norms... define what is and is not rationally acceptable" (Putnam, 1983, 188). But as Ricketts notes, the notion of clarity figuring in his first condition on notions of fact might be thought to rely on a criterial conception of rationality, *viz.* verificationism: "Putnam is objecting to Carnap's conception of clarification, to the position that the clarification of a thesis requires the statement of the thesis in an verificationist language" (Ricketts, 1994, 196).

The core of Ricketts' response is contained in the following passage:

> Carnap's requests for clarification do not draw on some theory, some constrictive view, of what clarification must amount to. He is open to considering whatever is offered by way of clarification. He, however, advocates that when we find ourselves puzzled by some claim, we should formalize the claim in a syntactically described language. It is not part of his view that clarification is *constituted* by formalization (Ricketts, 1994, 196–97).

Ricketts takes translatability into an empiricist language to be sufficient but not necessary for clarity; Ricketts denies that "the clarification of a thesis requires the statement of the thesis in a verificationist language".

It seems doubtful to me that Carnap doesn't take translatability into an empiricist language to constitute clarification. But what Ricketts might argue instead is that Carnap can, in order to avoid begging the question, appeal to a shared conception of clarification. I will set aside the question of whether his argument will work on any such shared conception of clarification.

3 Verificationism

3.1 Verificationism: Internal and External

Both Putnam and Ricketts overlook the central move in Carnap's response to the self-undermining problem, *viz.*, his construal of verificationism as an internal, ana-

lytic statement. Carnap (1987, 48) explicitly responds this way. He discusses the metaphysicians who press the self-undermining objection, and the anti-metaphysical philosophers, like Wittgenstein, who bite the objection's bullet. Carnap then responds,

> [a]gainst all of them we shall here take the view that *the sentences of the logic of science* [including statements of the verificationist criterion] *are sentences of the logical syntax of language*. These sentences therefore lie inside the boundary drawn by Hume [i.e., the boundary between meaningful and meaningless sentences]; for logical syntax is—as we shall see—nothing but the mathematics of language. (48)

Verificationism, like other philosophical doctrines, can be meant in either an internal or an external sense, i.e., as a truth-apt statement of an empiricist language or as the non-cognitive proposal of such a language. Verificationism, like other questions about meaning,

> involves reference to a certain language. Such a reference once made, we must above all distinguish between two main kinds of questions about meaningfulness; to the first kind belong the questions referring to a historically given language-system, to the second kind those referring to a language-system which is yet to be constructed. A question of the first kind is a theoretical one; it asks, what is the actual state of affairs; and the answer is either true or false. The second question is a practical one; it asks, how shall we proceed; and the answer is not an assertion but a proposal or decision. (Carnap, 1936, 3)

The internal, theoretical statement of verificationism refers to a historically given language-system. In such language-systems, the question of the meaningfulness of a sentence can be answered by the rules of the language, and is therefore analytic. The external version of verificationism is the non-cognitive proposal to use a language whose rules admit as meaningful only empirical or analytic sentences.

The verificationist thesis that all and only empirical or analytic sentences are meaningful in an empiricist language L, on this approach, is not a substantive philo-

sophical doctrine, but is rather a consequence of L's vocabulary including only logical or empirical terms. It is therefore wrong to assume, as Putnam does, that verificationism is external and practical, and that it can for this reason have no entailments. Moreover, the internal version of verificationism does not fall afoul of its own standard of meaningfulness.

3.2 Verificationism and Definitions of Meaning

Construing the verificationist criterion as analytic invites the question: why treat analyticity or empirical significance as necessary for meaningfulness? Reichenbach sees the verificationist criterion as a definition of the everyday notion of meaningfulness. Thus, Reichenbach held that the verificationist criterion is an adequate definition of meaningfulness because it captures all differences in usage that are relevant to behavior. But as Putnam points out, verificationism does not meet this standard:

> Against [the] objection... that the non-empirical belief in a divinity... could alter behavior) Reichenbach replied by proposing to translate 'Cats are divine animals' as 'Cats inspire feelings of awe in cat worshippers'. Clearly the acceptance of this substitute would *not* leave behavior unchanged in the case of the cat worshipper! (Putnam, 1983, 190-91 n. †)

Ayer maintains that the verificationist criterion is a "convention", i.e.

> a definition of meaning which accorded with common usage in the sense that it set out the conditions that are in fact satisfied by statements which are regarded as empirically informative. [The verificationists'] treatment of *a priori* statements was also intended to provide an account of the way in which such statements actually function. (Ayer, 1959, 15)

For Ayer, like Reichenbach, then, the adequacy of the verificationist criterion is dependent on the empirical claim that it captures certain desired elements of the ordinary concept. However, where Reichenbach proposes the criterion as an analysis of the ordinary concept of meaning, Ayer, by contrast, takes common usage to rec-

ognize several senses of meaning and to hold that the empiricist criterion captures two such senses: that of empirical informativeness and that of *a priority*. Ayer's account is subject to two objections. First, Ayer's account relies on analyticity to capture the ordinary notion of meaning that pertains to *a priori* statements. But this account succumbs to the same counterexamples as did Reichenbach's. As most logical empiricists recognized, many metaphysical statements will be untranslatable into any empiricisit language. However, such statements are meaningful by ordinary usage. Second, Ayer's account simply pushes back the questions of motivation and adequacy invited by the construal of the verificationist criterion as analytic. Ayer's account provides criteria for assessing the verificationist criterion, but the criteria stand in equal need of justification. Ayer must offer some reason why we should restrict our conception of meaning to a fragment of the ordinary conception.

Hempel (1950), like Reichenbach and Ayer, believes that the criterion aims to capture the ordinary concept of meaning. However, he takes the criterion to be an *explication* of the ordinary concept. As such, the criterion may "go beyond the limitations, ambiguities, and inconsistencies of common usage" if doing so would contribute to "a consistent and comprehensive theory of knowledge" (Hempel, 1950, 59). Thus, the verificationist criterion's deviations from ordinary usage might be outweighed by its contributions to the "comprehensiveness" of our theory of knowledge. Thus, whereas the deviations between the verificationist criterion and ordinary usage refute the criterion on Reichenbach's construal, Hempel can respond that the deviations are outweighed by the systematic advantages.

Hempel does not identify specific systematic benefits that might outweigh the criterion's mismatch with ordinary usage. I propose to approach this issue from the perspective of what I call 'Carnap's pragmatism'. This doctrine has two components. First,

> [T]he choice of a certain language structure... is a practical decision like the choice of an instrument; it depends chiefly upon the purposes for which the instrument—here the language—is intended to be used and upon the properties of the instrument. (Carnap, 1956b, 43)

Second, the purpose of scientific language is the description and accurate prediction of observable events. A language for science is more choice worthy the more efficiently it performs this function.

Empiricist languages are to be preferred from this perspective because the addition of descriptive, non-empirical vocabulary—non-observational vocabulary that makes no "difference for the prediction of an observable event" (Carnap, 1956c, 49)—would not improve the language *qua* deductive instrument for science. As Goldfarb and Ricketts put it, the addition of such vocabulary "doesn't add to explanatory scope" (Goldfarb and Ricketts, 1992, 75). It would, however, increase the language's complexity unnecessarily. The advantage of the criterion is the greater efficacy of the languages that conform to it.

Since explication aims to both preserve and improve upon ordinary meaning, the verificationist criterion's possession of the advantage just discussed is not sufficient to recommend the criterion as a successful explication. For as Putnam's objection to Reichenbach shows, the criterion deviates substantially from ordinary usage. And I see no way of determining whether the advantage outweighs the deviation. The criterion's advocates and detractors are in a stalemate.

The verificationist would therefore strengthen her position by abandoning her aim of capturing or explicating ordinary usage. She can then take the criterion to introduce a novel concept, that of "*logical*" (Carnap, 1987, 48) meaning, that is unconnected to the ordinary or psychological notions of meaning. Such an account seems to me closer to Carnap's understanding of the criterion. I know of no passage where Carnap describes the criterion as an explicatum, nor where he suggests

that it captures ordinary usage. On the other hand, in the course of discussing verificationism in "Testability and Meaning", Carnap maintains that

> [i]t would be advisable to avoid the terms 'meaningful' and 'meaningless' in this and in similar discussions—because these expressions involve so many rather vague philosophical associations—and to replace them with an expression of the form "a . . . sentence of L"; expressions of this form will then refer to a specified language and will contain at the place '. . .' an adjective which indicates the methodological character of the sentence, e.g. whether or not the sentence (and its negation) is verifiable or completely or incompletely confirmable or completely or incompletely testable and the like, according to what is intended by 'meaningful'. (Carnap, 1936, 3)

In this passage, Carnap expresses no intention to capture the ordinary notion of meaning with his criteria of empirical significance; indeed, he proposes to *replace* the term 'meaningful' with methodological terms, without consideration for the extent to which uses of the latter coincide with the former.

The self-undermining objection presupposes that the verificationist criterion, if intended as an internal claim, would be meaningless by its own lights. If, as has been argued in this section, the verificationist criterion may be an analytic definition, then the self-undermining objection's presupposition is false, and the objection does not go through.

The response to the self-undermining objection that Putnam anticipates on behalf of Carnap grants that verificationism is cognitively meaningless, but situates this concession within Carnap's tolerant conception of language, according to which all linguistic decisions are non-cognitive. In this way, verificationism is said to presuppose tolerance; this is the first step in the circle. Putnam then argues that, tolerance, in turn, presupposes verificationism; this second step completes the circle. The response to the self-undermining objection developed in this section avoids the first step of the circularity; on my account, verificationism does not presuppose tolerance. It is true that, for Carnap, linguistic choices, including the decision to

restrict oneself to empiricist languages, is non-cognitive. Moreover, Carnap regards the pragmatist considerations with which I motivated the criterion as practical and non-cognitive. Nonetheless, my response does not *presuppose* tolerance. One could, consistently with the rest of the argument of this section, regard the systematic advantages motivating the verificationist criterion as theoretical; one could hold that the simplicity that distinguishes empiricist languages is a cognitive advantage. Tolerance shapes Carnap's understanding of verificationism, but he does not give any argument for verificationism in which tolerance is a premise.

Ricketts denies the second step of Putnam's circle. According to Ricketts, Carnap does not argue from verificationism to tolerance and, indeed, does not argue for tolerance at all—Carnap rejects such an "explanatory or justificatory... burden" (Ricketts, 1994, 178). Ricketts maintains that, since the notion of fact that tolerance rejects is neither sufficiently clear nor part of a non-circular objection to tolerance, Carnap does not owe us a non-question-begging objection against the notion. I agree with Ricketts that Carnap does not *owe* us an argument for tolerance; Carnap's view would be at least coherent even if lacked the means to give such an argument. However, it would be preferable to have a non-question-begging argument for tolerance—so long as the argument does not incur Putnam's circle. My response is agnostic concerning whether Carnap has such an argument.[2]

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[2]My own view is that Carnap's tolerance derives from his pragmatism. But the issue is beyond the scope of this essay.

4 The Self-Undermining Objection and the Status of Pragmatism

4.1 Is Pragmatism Self-Undermining?

In §1.2, I discussed Putnam's contention that all criterial conceptions of rationality are self-undermining, or at least, cannot be non-circularly demonstrated. I have given the argument from pragmatism to verificationism that, I claim, underlies Carnap's verificationism. If the argument succeeds, then Carnap has a non-circular argument for verificationism. However, the argument does not fully address Putnam's objection, but merely shifts the target of the objection from verificationism to pragmatism. On my reconstruction of Carnap's view, Putnam might say, verificationism is no longer a criterial conception of rationality, but pragmatism is, because it sets out the norms that purport to be, or to contain, rationality. But, according to Putnam, all criterial conceptions of rationality are vulnerable to their own version of the self-undermining objection that has been directed at verificationism.

The self-undermining objection to Carnap's pragmatism that I have in mind runs as follows. According to pragmatism, it is either useful for predictive purposes to include a thesis as a meaningful sentence of our language, or else we should not do so. But pragmatism is not useful for the description or prediction of observation reports, nor is any set of postulates that entail it. So we should not include pragmatism as a sentence of our language. Pragmatism is therefore self-undermining: it cannot be formulated within any language that is admissible by its own lights.

The objection wrongly assumes that pragmatism must be expressible within one of the languages towards which it is directed. But pragmatism is a set of preferences, of what Ricketts calls "values and desiderata" (Ricketts, 2009, 225), that some bring to the choice of language. There is no reason to think that the legitimacy of such a

preference depends on its formalizability in one of the languages that it recommends. Analogously, a preference for vanilla ice cream is not illegitimate because it (the preference) is not itself a scoops of vanilla ice cream.

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