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Framing the realism question

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Abstract: **This paper begins with a revaluation of Carnap's critique of existence questions, and finds that with modification his argument is successful in giving a prima facie cause for doubt that the ontological question addressed by religious realists and non-realists has content. The second part of the paper argues that these doubts can be met with proper attention to the role of truth in the religious realism debate. The paper concludes by arguing for a close relationship between the semantic and the ontological varieties of religious realism.**

In his article 'Empiricism, semantics and ontology',[1] Carnap considers various existence questions about classes of entities which might form the subject matter of *linguistic frameworks*.[2] Examples include integers, subatomic particles, and physical objects, which are described in the linguistic frameworks of arithmetic, quantum theory, and 'thing' language, respectively. He proposes that existence questions resolve into either *internal questions*, which are posed 'within' the framework and admit positive but trivial answers, or *external questions*, answers to which turn on the practical issue of what recommends the framework. Ontological existence questions about the real existence of entities, typically addressed in metaphysics, are rejected as contentless. Once thought to have been successfully disposed of by Quine,[3] Carnap's argument has recently undergone a revival in its fortunes. Quine argued that the internal/external distinction rests on the discredited analytic/synthetic distinction, but he may have been wrong in this analysis of Carnap's proposals,[4] and even if he was right, it may be possible to reconstruct them without the analytic/synthetic distinction.[5] Moreover, the problems with the analytic/synthetic distinction may not be as damaging as they once seemed.[6] It is of great interest, therefore, whether religious language might be modelled as a linguistic framework, and whether Carnap's argument might be used to show that the debate about whether God really exists is, like other ontological questions, contentless. If so, then much of the contemporary realism/non-realism debate in the philosophy of religion will be shown to lack a raison d'être.

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Robin Le Poidevin, in his recent book *Arguing for Atheism*,[7] defends the view that Carnap's argument applies to religious (theistic) language, although he believes the argument to be defective. In the first section of this paper, I will look at Carnap's proposals for existence questions, and in the second section at Le Poidevin's treatment of them. Unlike Le Poidevin, I believe that, with modifications, Carnap's argument justifes the suspicion that the realist's existence question is contentless. Consequently, I will be concerned with the challenge that I take Carnap's argument to pose to philosophers of religion: what content does the question about whether God really exists have and what evidence is relevant in deciding an answer to it? More generally, on what substantive philosophical issues do religious realists and non-realists disagree? I will set out an answer to these questions in the third section.

Carnap's argument

In Carnap's discussion, existence questions which are internal to a framework may be either particular or general. Particular internal questions concern individuals or some collection of entities, such as: 'Did King Arthur actually live?'; 'How many prime numbers are there between ten and twenty?'. In most cases, the process of resolving a specific internal question will be a matter of following routine procedure. Answers can be given (or sought after) using the methods available in the framework, i.e., for factual questions by empirical investigation, and for mathematical questions by logical proof. It seems clear that particular internal questions are not what is at issue in the realism debate. There may be interesting related issues to do with, for example, which methods and standards of correctness inform a framework, or whether all particular internal questions are in principle decidable. But the concept of reality which arises in particular internal questions is, as Carnap puts it,

> **... an empirical, scientific, non-metaphysical concept. To recognise something as a real thing or event means to succeed in incorporating it into the system of things at a particular space-time position so that it fits together with the other things recognised as real, according to the rules of the framework.** (*ESO*, 207)

The non-realist is not conceding anything to the realist by recognizing that some things are real in this sense.

Internal questions may also ask in general whether a class of objects described in a framework exists, for example, in arithmetic, 'Are there natural numbers?' or in 'thing' language, 'Are there physical objects?'. Unlike particular internal questions, general ones cannot be directly resolved using the procedures of investigation integral to these respective linguistic frameworks. However, answers to them follow from answers to particular internal questions which *can* be settled by investigation. We can show that there are four prime numbers between ten and

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twenty, so it follows that there are numbers. The same conclusion follows from the even simpler claim 'ten is a number', or any similar claim where 'ten' is replaced by a number term. So the statement, 'there are numbers', is trivially entailed from any number of primitive arithmetic truths. It seems therefore, that neither this statement nor the internal question it answers could be germane to the realism debate.

> **… nobody who meant the question 'Are there numbers?' in the internal sense would either assert or even seriously consider a negative answer. This makes it plausible to assume that those philosophers who treat the question of the existence of numbers as a serious philosophical problem and offer lengthy arguments on either side do not have in mind the internal question.** (*ESO*, 209)

The claim that there are numbers gives us only the philosophically uninteresting conclusion that the system of natural numbers is not empty, and we are committed to this simply by virtue of using arithmetic. As Carnap points out, if one adopts a framework, then in most cases one will be bound to admit the existence of entities described within it. The kind of existence question that is typically of concern to realists and non-realists is one that should be raised *prior* to accepting the framework. That is, it is an external question to do with the ontological status of entities described in the framework.

One way of understanding external questions, Carnap suggests, is as raising a practical problem of whether or not a framework should be adopted. It is difficult to see how relevant considerations of usefulness or simplicity could ever tell against the use of everyday empirical or mathematical frameworks. Even so, such considerations will only favour our using or continuing to use any framework as a matter of degree, whereas the realism question is usually taken as demanding a yes or no answer (*ESO*, 208). Moreover, practical considerations will, at most, show that a framework is indispensable; they will not supply evidence for the existence of a world of things or a realm of numbers that is *independent* of a framework, which is what the realism debate (or at least one crucial part of it) is about. Realists and non-realists, it seems, are interested in questions that are not only external but also theoretical rather than practical. But Carnap now raises the question of what framework these questions should be formulated in, since realists and non-realists do not appear to agree on what evidence is relevant in settling the issue one way or the other. The problem is particularly acute for realism/non-realism about physical objects, since it seems that the only framework in which the existence of physical objects could be raised is the 'thing' framework itself. In this case, the existence question will not be asked prior to the adoption of the framework in question. Carnap concludes:

> **Our judgement must be that they have not succeeded in giving to the external question and to the possible answers any cognitive content. Unless and until they supply a clear cognitive interpretation, we are justified in our suspicion that their question is a pseudo-question, that is, one disguised in the form of a theoretical**

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> **question while in fact it is non-theoretical; in the present case it is the practical problem whether or not to incorporate into the language the new linguistic forms which constitute the framework of numbers.** (*ESO*, 209)

Carnap is led to identify the acceptance of the existence of things, numbers, etc., with simply adopting the relevant framework: 'To accept the thing world means nothing more than to accept a certain form of language, in other words, to accept rules for forming statements and for testing, accepting or rejecting them' (*ESO*, 208). The remarkable upshot of Carnap's argument is that the long-standing debate between realists and non-realists about whether physical objects, numbers, etc. really exist, turns out upon analysis to be vacuous. Carnap identifies a question of central importance, but it concerns only the practical benefits of adopting a language of things or of numbers, etc.

In recent discussions on realism, and also religious realism, the rejection of the whole realism/non-realism debate as misguided is particularly associated with Wittgenstein.[8] Notably, Carnap's contentions about the debate lacking content bear comparison with Wittgenstein's own suggestions:

> **One man is a convinced realist, another a convinced idealist and teaches his children accordingly. In such an important matter as the existence or non-existence of the external world they don't want to teach their children anything wrong.**
>
> **What will the children be taught? To include in what they say 'There are physical objects' or the opposite? ….**
>
> **But the idealist will teach his children the word 'chair' after all, for of course he wants to teach them to do this and that, e.g. to fetch a chair. Then where will be the difference between what the idealist educated children say and the realist ones? Won't the difference only be one of a battle cry?**[9]

Wittgenstein's point, I take it, is that while the proponents of either position in the debate may disagree just over the claim 'there are physical objects', insofar as one group asserts it and the other rejects it, this disagreement carries no practical implications whatsoever. Both realists and non-realists accept the use of the 'thing' language game, and largely agree in their judgements and attitudes towards physical objects (or, at least, any disagreement is not due to the realism/non-realism issue). So it is unclear what content can be given to the assertion or rejection of realism. Talk about physical objects, it seems, does not depend on ontological commitments to their existence.

The comparison with Wittgenstein shows that Carnap's central doubt about the content of the realism/non-realism debate can be raised without insisting on a 'framework' apparatus for language. Suppose, for example, that the realist/non-realist dispute concerns the existence of ethical properties. Given that the participants in the debate are themselves ethical beings and make ethical distinctions, even if they disagree in particular cases about what is right and wrong, it may be wondered what substantial point could be at issue. If both realist and non-realist accept, for example, that we have basic human rights, it seems to follow

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that they must accept that human rights exist. The realist and non-realist could argue that they are concerned with a metaphysical question about the existence of ethical properties, which is not settled by merely having ethical beliefs. But the problem with this is that, in the absence of any agreed upon non-ethical criteria for exploring the issue further, we should doubt the propriety of this metaphysical question. Moreover, even if agreement were reached on, say, some broadly scientific criteria for judging the existence of these properties, agreement would still be required on the status of ethical claims, for example, whether they have truth value and what that consists in. Notably, doubts about the metaphysical question in ethics are seen by some as being supported by Wittgenstein's rule following considerations, which are used to show that moral claims cannot even be understood – let alone evaluated – outside ethical practice and discourse.[10] Of course, a familiar argument on these lines is advanced by some Wittgensteinians in philosophy of religion, to which I will return later.

While Carnap's conclusion is similar to Wittgenstein's, he reaches it through an analytically more satisfactory route. Moreover, those aspects of Carnap's argument that I will be considering do not depend on his 'framework' analysis of language.[11] He offers three philosophically uninteresting interpretations of existence questions – particular and general internal questions and practical external questions – and challenges us to explain what the metaphysical question addressed by philosophers could consist in, if not one of these. Of course, the challenge is one that Carnap can be confident that the realist or non-realist is unlikely to be able to meet. Since any formulation of the metaphysical issue requires us to identify or construct a framework in which it could be addressed, the result would inevitably be to construe the problem as an internal question. Consequently, the realist/non-realist is presented with a dilemma. Either the question is particular and resolvable with the procedures of logical or empirical investigation admissible within the framework, or it is general and its answer will trivially follow from more specific claims made about the existence of members of the class of entities in question. So Carnap's account seems to undermine any attempt to make sense of the philosophical existence question, i.e. whether the subject matter of a framework really exists prior to adopting that framework.

Religious realism and non-realism

Can Carnap's argument be applied to religious language, and specifically to the question of whether God really exists? Le Poidevin proposes the following:

> **We can define the *theistic framework* as follows. First, we introduce the term 'God' and associated expressions: 'God is good', 'God is unique', etc. Second, we introduce expressions linking the term 'God' with the physical object framework: 'God created the universe', 'God loves his creation', etc. Third, we introduce methods for deciding the truth of certain propositions. In part this will consist of an authoritative text, such as the Bible, or the Koran.** (*AA*, 128)

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Following through Carnap's argument, the question 'Does God really exist?' could be interpreted in one of two ways. It could be a general internal question, in which case a positive and trivial answer is entailed by particular claims made about God in the theistic framework. Or, the question could be practical, giving rise to a debate about the advantages and disadvantages of adopting the theistic framework. On neither of these ways of construing the existence question does it present a substantial philosophical issue. It follows that the question of God's real existence, as raised by philosophers, must be a pseudo-question, for there is no agreed framework in which it can be posed and argued about.

One salient criticism of the application of Carnap's argument to religious discourse, to which Le Poidevin draws attention, is that the external existence questions which Carnap addresses are general whereas the question of God's existence concerns a particular entity. Le Poidevin proposes that the question 'Does God exist?' can be given the same form as a general question: 'Is there an *x* such that *x* created the universe, is perfectly good, revealed himself to the chosen people of Israel, etc.?'. So the question about God's existence can be considered a special case of a general question, because the class of entities that fall under this description contains only one member. A different way of handling the same criticism would be to widen the range of religious entities described in the theistic framework to include not only God, but also angels, miracles, etc. The relevant general question is then the suitably general 'Do religious entities exist?' (and supposing that the religious framework describes entities is not to assume that they are *physical* entities). Applied to this broader framework, Carnap's argument shows that using a religious framework does not require the assumption that religious entities really exist.[12]

A second problem with extending Carnap's argument to religious discourse is that, unlike frameworks to do with things or numbers, the theistic framework appears to be something that we can opt in or out of. No-one can reasonably avoid using the frameworks of things or numbers, and so the question of whether we should adopt them does not arise; using these frameworks is not in practice conditional on the prior assumption that numbers or things must really exist. The same is not true for the theistic framework: it is possible to reject the theistic framework, or adopt no religious framework at all. Consequently, ontological considerations seem to have an important bearing on whether or not a religious framework should be accepted, which would not arise for thing or number frameworks. For example, a person who has been brought up in a theistic tradition may come to reject religious belief as a result of ceasing to believe in God; analogous doubts do not arise for numbers or physical objects.

Le Poidevin dismisses this objection on the grounds that 'The general acceptability of the framework does not seem to play an important role in [Carnap's] argument' (*AA*, 130). Unless Carnap's argument is at fault for some other reason, Le Poidevin argues, it should apply to frameworks irrespective of

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whether we can refrain from adopting them. Carnap himself extended his argument to frameworks that could be avoided, even if it would be inconvenient and undesirable to do so, such as quantum theory or advanced mathematics. So Le Poidevin is right that the acceptability of the theistic framework should not affect the validity of Carnap's argument. But this leaves the problem of understanding what religious believers mean when they claim that God really exists, and how God's existence could be offered as a reason for being religious. For if Carnap is right, then these claims cannot be taken at face value, as asserting ontological propositions about the existence of God. Rather, they will have to be interpreted as expressing a commitment to the theistic framework.

> **We may still speak (and have done so) of 'the acceptance of new entities' since this form of speech is customary; but one must keep in mind that this phrase does not mean for us anything more than acceptance of the new framework, i.e., of the new linguistic forms. Above all, it must not be interpreted as referring to an assumption, belief, or assertion of 'the reality of the entities'. There is no such assertion. An alleged statement of the reality of the system of entities is a pseudo-statement without cognitive content.** (*ESO*, 214)

Applying this reasoning to the theistic framework, the claim that God really exists cannot stand as a reason in favour of adopting the framework, but expresses an acceptance of the framework. It does not follow that the claim that God really exists is pointless, since it conveys a person's convictions, and might be used in an (admittedly rather feeble) attempt to persuade others to accept the framework. However, the claim will lack cognitive content. All appearances to the contrary, this and other similar external claims are on Carnap's account non-descriptive and do not have a truth value; in short, they are not *truth apt*. So it can be seen that the fact that a framework can be avoided immediately puts pressure on Carnap's position by requiring a special account of external existence claims. This is less of a problem for the unavoidable frameworks of numbers and of things, because existence claims about these entities are not ordinarily made; and when they are made, they are not usually offered as reasons for accepting or rejecting the framework in question.

The peculiar status given to external claims about God's existence by Carnap's argument, when extended to the theistic framework, resembles some Wittgensteinian ideas such as those of Norman Malcolm and D. Z. Phillips. Malcolm rejects the idea that religious life is in any way grounded on a metaphysical commitment to God's existence. Indeed, he finds suspect the idea that people believe *that there is* a God, preferring to characterize religious belief as belief *in* God; elsewhere, he dismisses 'God exists' as a philosophical construction.[13] Phillips compares the question about the existence of God to the question about the reality of physical objects, and characterizes the realist's concern with whether God *really* exists as an attempt to abstract a question from any context of application. He emphasizes that belief in God makes no sense independently of a

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religious life, and that 'I believe in God' is a confession of faith rather than an assertion of a fact.[14] If religious belief is ultimately groundless, the claim that God exists cannot function as a justification for religious belief; it must instead function as an assertion of one's faith, i.e. an endorsement of a religious framework. Wittgenstein himself assesses religious belief as requiring 'a passionate commitment to a system of reference'. However, despite the non-cognitive interpretation of the assertion 'God exists', neither Phillips nor Malcolm sees this as undermining the truth aptness of *other* religious assertions made within the framework (or 'language game'). That is, they do not support religious expressivism of the kind advanced by R. B. Braithwaite, which analyses any religious belief in terms of an expression of attitudes. Phillips, in particular, is careful to reject this theory.[15] Most religious assertions are taken to be uncontroversially truth apt, and their truth a matter of whether or not they satisfy the standards and procedures of correctness that inform the religious discourse. So the fact that religious discourse is not itself grounded in ontological truths in no way compromises the possibility of adjudicating between true and false religious statements. On this account, it is precisely because it is taken as an ontological claim that stands independently from religious discourse in which its truth or falsity might be evaluated, that a statement such as 'God exists' must be given a non-cognitive interpretation.[16]

One way of developing Carnap's account, therefore, is to take the Wittgensteinian route as outlined: give a non-cognitive account of external claims, while allowing that internal claims are truth apt and that their truth is a matter of satisfying conditions internal to the framework. According to Le Poidevin, however, this is not the route that Carnap should take. He proposes that Carnap's non-cognitivist account of external existence claims, which he describes as 'instrumentalist', should extend to apply to *all* existence claims, even everyday and non-philosophical claims about objects. 'Statements supposedly about certain entities are merely devices useful for the purposes of calculation, prediction, or classification; they are not descriptive of the world and so need not be regarded as either true or false.' (*AA*, 127) Putting aside for the moment whether Carnap's account applies to all existence claims, one central issue raised by this is whether Carnap is an instrumentalist. If we consider just external existence claims, the second half of Le Poidevin's assessment about their non-descriptive function seems right, but the first part about their instrumental function of appears misplaced. It is true that Carnap suggests that external existence *questions*, such as 'Do numbers really exist?', may be interpreted as asking what practically recommends the framework in question, but he does not claim that existence *claims*, such as 'there are natural numbers', might be useful in calculating, predicting or classifying. This can be seen from the quotation from Carnap given above (*ESO*, 214). Carnap asserts that an external existence claim is not truth apt, and specifically it does not state any fact about the reality of entities. He also suggests that the real function of external existence claims is to express a commitment to a framework; but he does not

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attribute to them any predictive or classificatory role. By way of support for his interpretation of Carnap as an instrumentalist, Le Poidevin cites the following quotation: 'The acceptance or rejection of abstract linguistic forms, just as the acceptance or rejection of any other linguistic forms in any branch of science, will finally be decided by their efficiency as instruments, the ration of the results achieved to the amount and complexity of the efforts required' (*ESO*, 221). Here, however, Carnap does not give an instrumental role to existence claims, but proposes only that the question of whether to accept or reject a new linguistic framework in science will depend on its usefulness.

Le Poidevin's main contention is that Carnap's account could be extended to internal existence claims. Not just to, for example, 'numbers exist' but also 'there are four prime numbers between ten and twenty'. Clearly, there would have to be a compelling reason to take this step. Carnap puts forward his non-cognitive interpretation of external claims precisely because there is no framework available in which they can be evaluated as true or false. Since internal claims do, by definition, have a framework, why should Carnap deny that they too are truth apt? Indeed, it is part of the point of the internal/external distinction to show up the peculiar status of ontological questions, and expose them as pseudo-questions. On this basis, Carnap advances the non-cognitive interpretation of external existence claims. So it seems doubtful that Carnap could extend this interpretation to internal existence claims without making the internal/external distinction redundant. However, Le Poidevin uses an argument due to Bob Hale to show that Carnap must apply a non-cognitive interpretation to all existence claims if he is to maintain his rejection of ontological questions. Consider again general internal questions. These questions, it was established, admit positive but trivial answers. 'There are numbers' is entailed by any number of mathematical claims, and it is for this reason that Carnap supposes that general internal questions cannot be the ones that realists/non-realists are interested in. However, Hale argues, the triviality of the argument which takes us from a particular internal mathematical claim to the result 'there are numbers' is an epistemological matter.[17] That is, it is trivial because we know that the truth of 'there are numbers' is a consequence of particular mathematical truths without any further investigation. 'There are numbers' tells us nothing we did not know already, simply by using the mathematical framework. But it does not follow from this that the truth of 'there are numbers' does not have ontological implications. The epistemological triviality of general internal claims does not exclude their ontological importance. Since Carnap appears to admit that general internal claims are contentful, he cannot deal with them in the same way as external existence claims: to assert 'there are numbers' (as a general internal claim) commits us to the belief that *there are numbers*. Hale's point threatens Carnap's attempts to undermine the realism/non-realism debate.

Hale suggests a different line of argument that Carnap may have had in mind.

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It is that general internal claims are trivial because commitment to their truth is (in most cases) immediately guaranteed by accepting the linguistic framework of which they are a part, and to accept a framework itself involves a practical decision and not that one adopt an ontological belief. Of course, many linguistic frameworks are acquired by education rather than choice. Even so, Carnap could maintain that acquired frameworks are learned without one accepting an ontological belief about the reality of the entities that the framework discusses. But this argument leaves Carnap with the following dilemma, spelled out by Hale:

> **… *if* internal statements (e.g. 'There are numbers') are indeed in the market for *truth*, then if the decision to adopt the appropriate framework is sufficient to ensure their truth, it simply cannot be the case that that decision involves no commitment to any existential beliefs; if, on the other hand, it is held that merely deciding to adopt the framework does not suffice to ensure the truth of such general existence statements, then the argument from the (allegedly) non-cognitive character of the decision to their triviality simply collapses.**[18]

In fact, Carnap seems committed to the truth aptness of general internal existence claims, and also that they are true, since he believes that they follow trivially from particular internal claims which are themselves true. A proposition validly deduced from a true proposition is itself true. So the only way to avoid the conclusion that general internal existence claims are truth apt, and consequently face the problem of their ontological significance, is to deny that particular internal claims are truth apt. This option, which Hale notes as a possibility, is the one that Le Poidevin suggests:

> **… if Carnap is to deny that 'There are numbers' is capable of being true or false, he must also deny that the more specific mathematical statements are capable of being true or false. Now Hale says that Carnap 'can hardly deny' that internal statements about the existence of numbers are true, *because* they are consequences of more specific statements. Hale assumes, then, that these more specific statements, like 'Five plus four is nine', are true, but this is precisely what Carnap must deny if he is consistently to maintain his instrumentalist position.**[19]

If Carnap is indeed committed to this 'instrumentalist' position, then much of the force is taken out of his argument. The reason for proposing a non-cognitive interpretation of external existence claims is that we do not have a framework in which they can be evaluated. But the only reason for supposing that the non-cognitive interpretation applies to claims internal to the framework as well, is to maintain a non-cognitive account of any existence claims that may have ontological significance – and whether internal existence claims are ontologically significant is precisely the point at issue. The kind of across the board non-cognitivism that this position would involve is in any case wholly implausible. We would, at the very least, require some account of what the non-cognitive interpretation of internal claims would look like. For example, if 'God exists' is interpreted as a commitment to a religious framework, how are we to understand claims such

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as 'God is omnipotent' or 'God brought his people out of Egypt'? In fact, it may be possible to make some progress in giving a non-cognitive theory for religious discourse, and it has been attempted by, among others, R. B. Braithwaite.[20] But if Le Poidevin is right, Carnap will have to be a non-cognitivist about *all* existence claims, and give some account consistent with this of statements which entail or depend upon existence claims. A plausible non-cognitivist account of religious statements is difficult enough; it is not clear how we could even begin to give a non-cognitive account of mathematical or most scientific claims. Unsurprisingly, Carnap gives no sign of wanting to attempt to do this. His aim is, from the outset, to cast doubt on the cogency of the very narrow class of external existence claims that concern realists and non-realists, and not to advance the radical position of non-cognitivism about all existence claims.

If Le Poidevin's universal instrumentalism is not a serious option for Carnap, can he respond to Hale's argument that internal general claims have ontological significance? Recall that Carnap's reason for denying cognitive content to external existence claims was that they lack a framework in which to be asserted or evaluated. That is, these claims do not have the required context of syntactic discipline and standards of correct use that *any* statement requires to be contentful. The possession of this context of discipline and standards is, it seems, what marks the difference between statements which are truth apt, i.e. which are as Hale puts it 'in the market for truth', and those which are not. If we read Carnap as supposing that such standards and discipline are sufficient for a statement to be truth apt, then he could take the Wittgensteinian route advertised earlier: the truth of assertions made within a framework depends on whether or not they satisfy the standards which apply to them. In this case, truth is understood as an *epistemically constrained* notion. That is, the truth of an assertion is taken to be a matter of its being justifiable (under suitable conditions), or of our being warranted to assert it, or in general that the assertion has some kind of positive epistemic status. The importance of this for the current discussion is that opting for an epistemically constrained account of truth provides the basis for an effective response to Hale. For if a statement is true only by virtue of possessing some kind of positive epistemic status, then its truth raises no ontological issue.

Consider again the claim, 'there are three prime numbers between ten and twenty'. Now, on the epistemically constrained account of truth, the truth of this claim consists in our having shown it to be correct using the standards of mathematical practice, i.e. that we have proved it. For a mathematical statement to be true, in other words, it must satisfy certain criteria (correctly followed proof procedures) internal to the mathematical framework. Its truth does not depend, for example, on the statement corresponding to a fact or state of affairs in an independently existing mathematical realm. Rather, its truth is metaphysically neutral: it lends no support to mathematical Platonism. An analogous point can be made for the statements of other frameworks. The truth of religious claims can

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be conceded, discussed, agreed upon, etc., without commitment to an ontological position about the subject matter of religious discourse, provided we are working with an epistemically constrained account of religious truth. Of course, an epistemically constrained account of truth in religious discourse is not in itself inconsistent with the claim that there is an independent religious reality – *provided* that truths about that reality are just those that we are (under suitable circumstances) justified in asserting. However, it does follow that no ontological theory is required from there being epistemically constrained religious truths, and that on this account of truth Hale's objection to Carnap is not successful.

I have argued that Carnap's argument can avoid Hale's objection without the implausibility of 'instrumentalism' by using an epistemically constrained notion of truth. So it appears that Carnap is successful in giving prima facie cause for doubt that the ontological question addressed by realists and non-realists has content, or that ontological assertions do more than express attitudes towards the framework under discussion. It remains to be seen, therefore, whether realists and non-realists have the resources to respond to this argument.

Carnap's challenge

The objection that Carnap poses to the realist and non-realist is as follows: 'Unless and until [realists and non-realists] supply a clear cognitive interpretation [to their existence question], we are justified in our suspicion that their question is a pseudo-question'. (*ESO*, 209) We saw in the second section that Carnap could, with certain modifications, fend of criticisms of his argument. So the challenge in the philosophy of religion is to identify a question that captures something central to the realist/non-realist dispute, and which can be theoretically evaluated. That is, those disagreeing on the answer to this question should do so on a theoretically definable issue, and the disagreement should not collapse into either a practical issue or a triviality, as appears to the be case with the traditional ontological debate. In this section, I will propose a response to Carnap that locates the religious realist/non-realist disagreement in the question of the nature of truth in religious discourse. However, before making a case for this, there is another response to consider. This is to make the question of whether God really exists a broadly scientific consideration, to be evaluated for its probability by the standards of good evidence.

One obvious merit of pursuing the religious realism/non-realism debate in scientific terms is that to do so makes the question about God's existence not only external, since it is not asked in the theistic framework, but also contentful, because there are procedures available for answering it. This result is achieved by analysing of the question 'Does God really exist?' as 'Is God's existence a probably hypothesis?', and the latter question can be addressed by scientific argument and investigation, for example, whether God's existence is required to explain human

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evolution, or whether the evidence of 'fine-tuning' in the universe lends support to a theistic hypothesis. In effect, the question of whether God is real is replaced with the philosophically (slightly) less problematic one of whether God's existence can be upheld as a respectable scientific claim. But this interpretation of the religious realist/non-realist debate is not a satisfactory response to Carnap's challenge. It is not enough merely to specify the terms of the realism question. It is also essential that these terms are acceptable to both realists and non-realists, if the cognitive interpretation of the question is to identify an issue on which both parties disagree. To choose a scientific framework, therefore, cannot be satisfactory starting point, because the question of whether God is akin to an object is itself a point of contention between realists and non-realists.[21] Non-realists are usually critical of attempts to demonstrate or give evidence for the existence of God – not primarily because the endeavour is bound to fail, but because they regard it as misconceived to address this question in a scientific framework. As we have seen, Phillips proposes that the question of God's reality can be thought of as similar to that of the reality of physical objects. So to pursue the question of whether God exists in a scientific framework is already to have taken a position in the realism/non-realism debate: it sets up the problem in a way that excludes one kind of non-realist option from consideration. It does not, therefore, meet Carnap's challenge to supply a cognitive interpretation of the realism/non-realism question. This is not to say, however, that a defence of theism that is consistent with and perhaps supported by scientific considerations should not play an important role in the realist's argument; I believe this *is* the case, and will explain why shortly. The point is rather that it should be possible to understand what religious realism consists in, and where it differs from non-realism, independently of the question of whether God exists in the spatiotemporal framework. It may be *because* of realist convictions about theism that the religious realist regards it a worthwhile project to argue for the existence of God, but not the other way around.

One way of approaching the problem, is to make the starting point of disagreements between religious realists and non-realists the question of the nature of the truth predicate that is operative within religious discourse. This possibility was implied in the earlier discussion of general internal questions. Recall that Hale's objection to Carnap was that if a general internal statement such as 'numbers exist' is true, then even though its truth is epistemically trivial it still raises an ontological question as to what makes the statement true. Moreover, Carnap can hardly deny that such statements are true, since he argues that true particular internal statements entail them. Le Poidevin's radical solution was to say that particular internal claims are not truth apt, but we saw that this would give rise to more serious difficulties. It was proposed instead that Carnap could argue that internal claims are truth apt, and that many of them are true, provided the truth for which they are apt is epistemically constrained. For a statement to be true, in this sense, is for it to satisfy certain standards of correctness which justify

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our asserting it. To concede that statements are sometimes true, in this sense, therefore, does not commit one to an ontological theory about the entities that they describe. So one way to develop a realist account of the theistic framework is to argue that the truth predicate operative in the framework is *not* epistemically constrained.

If truth in the theistic framework is not epistemically constrained, then true internal existence claims cannot be considered 'ontologically neutral' (to use Hale's phrase), and may reasonably be thought to have substantive ontological implications. These implications could be spelled out in an ontological realist theory. For example, if the truth of statements in the religious framework is not determined just by what the standards of the framework justify us in asserting, then it seems prima facie plausible to hypothesize that it is because some aspect of religious reality exists independently of our epistemic practices (i.e. our methods of investigation, justification, etc.). This realist theory would not itself be vulnerable to Carnap's objection that it is contentless, because it has an explanatory role: it accounts for what *makes* religious statements internal to the theistic framework true, given that their truth is not simply a matter of the satisfaction of internal standards of correctness. If, instead, truth is epistemically constrained in the religious framework, there is no need for a realist hypothesis to explain how religious statements come to be true. So it appears that from an account of the nature of truth in the religious framework, we are in a position to give a realist or a non-realist theory that meets Carnap's challenge.

In addition to providing a basis for defending religious realism/non-realism, it can also be seen that the account of truth in the theistic framework that one adopts may also have implications for one's attitude towards the question of whether God's existence is consistent with and justified by scientific considerations. If truth in the theistic framework is epistemically constrained, then there is no reason to suppose that any truths in the theistic framework should be upheld in any other unrelated framework. The fact that certain statements may be warranted within the theistic framework is no basis to suppose that those statements should also be warranted in science, which has different standards of justification. If, however, statements are true in the theistic framework for reasons other than (or in addition to) the satisfaction of internal standards of warrant in the theistic framework, then we may suppose that whatever it is that conveys truth on the statements may be detectable in other contexts. For example, if the statement 'God exists' is made true by the fact that there is an independently existing entity, then it is plausible to suppose that this fact may be required in providing the best explanation of phenomena discussed in non-theistic frameworks. There are grounds, therefore, for someone who supports a realist account of truth in the theistic framework to be more sympathetic towards evidence-based arguments for the existence of God.

I will conclude this section by considering two potential difficulties with this approach. One concern arises from doubts about the adequacy of epistemically

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constrained theories of truth. The reason for sorting out a theory of religious truth prior to advancing a realist or non-realist account of God's existence, is that to do so gives a justification or a basis for accepting or rejecting ontological claims, without which they would be open to Carnap's argument that they lack content. However, if epistemically constrained analyses of truth are not cogent, then this line of defence is not available to the non-realist. Of course, it cannot be that the truth of a statement consists simply in our entitlement to assert it on the basis of current available evidence. Hume's Indian prince was fully entitled to assert that water does not turn to ice, but that would not make the statement 'water does not turn to ice' true. So 'entitled' must be defined in a suitably rigorous way, and more sophisticated accounts of truth are available. For example, according to Hilary Putnam, 'truth is an *idealization* of rational acceptability. We speak as if there were such a thing as epistemically ideal conditions, and we call a statement ''true'' if it would be justified under such conditions.'[22] More recently, Crispin Wright has proposed that truth could be understood in terms of 'superassertability', which he defines as 'durable satisfaction of the discourse's internal disciplinary constraints'.[23] Wright's account, in particular, does not admit easy counter-examples, though its satisfactoriness is still very much a live debate.[24] However, the realist's best option is to show that truth in the theistic framework exhibits features which show that it is not epistemically constrained, rather than to rely on some real or prospective refutation of these theories. For, even if epistemically constrained accounts of truth are in some way incoherent, the theory that religious discourse supports a realist truth predicate is still something that needs to be established.

A second problem is that semantic realism/non-realism and ontological realism/non-realism are logically independent theories. For example, if truth in the theistic framework consisted in just our being warranted to assert theistic claims, that does not entail any ontological position on God's existence. This has led some philosophers – notably William Alston[25] and Michael Devitt[26] – to argue that semantic considerations should play at most a minor role in determining the ontological issue. To argue this assumes a degree of clarity about the ontological alternatives which Carnap's argument gives grounds to doubt. However, even if we temporarily put aside this argument, it does not follow that a semantic theory should not have a real bearing on the plausibility of realism or non-realism. For example, religious non-realism will be in serious difficulties if truth in the theistic framework is not epistemically constrained and if, say, there are statements in it the truth of which obtain independently of any evidence or reasons that could in principle be supplied within the terms of the framework. For, as we have seen, this raises a legitimate ontological question: What is it that confers truth on such religious statements? It seems that religious non-realism will not have the resources to answer this question. Conversely, a realist theory would require very extensive (and improbable) modifications before it could accommodate the fact

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that religious truth is epistemically constrained. It would need to explain how and why religious reality is such that truths about it must be determined by our epistemic practices. It may be that an epistemically constrained account of truth in religion does not logically rule out religious realism, and likewise for a realist account of truth and religious non-realism. But these theories of truth can cause sufficient problems for the respective ontological theories to make them highly implausible.

Conclusion

The question about the nature of truth is a familiar one in philosophy of religion, though it is only occasionally connected with discussions of realism. A notable exception is Paul Helm, according to whom 'it is … a realist, non-epistemological conception of truth which lies behind the entire faith seeking understanding enterprise as initiated by Augustine and Anselm'.[27] On this account, claims made about the world can be true or false independently of human decisions and theories.[28] The problem identified by Carnap is to define the terms of a debate in which a philosophically substantive argument between realist and non-realist can be enjoined. It was seen that this challenge can be met with due attention to semantic considerations. The upshot is that it is incumbent on religious realists and non-realists to provide an account of the nature of truth in religious discourse, or provide some other explanation of how to frame the realism question. In practice, relatively little progress has yet been made with this question in philosophy of religion. However, if Helm is right, then semantic religious realism does at least have an excellent precedent.[29]

Notes

1. In R. Carnap *Meaning and Necessity*, 2nd edn (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1956), henceforth *ESO*.
2. A linguistic framework is an area of discourse consisting of terms, expressions, rules of syntax governing the use of terms and expressions, and standards of correctness for statements made in the terms of the framework.
3. W. V. O. Quine 'On Carnap's views on ontology', in *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* (New York NY: Random House, 1966).
4. Graham Bird 'Carnap and Quine: internal and external questions', *Erkenntnis*, **42** (1995), 41–64.
5. Stephen Yablo 'Does ontology rest on a mistake?', *The Aristotelian Society supplementary volume*, **72** (1998), 229–261.
6. Neil Tennant *The Taming of the True* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).
7. Robin Le Poidevin *Arguing for Atheism* (London: Routledge, 1996), henceforth *AA*. See also Le Poidevin 'Internal and external questions about God', *Religious Studies*, **31** (1995), 485–500, henceforth *IE*.
8. I discuss Wittgenstein's views in detail in 'Wittgenstein and realism', *Faith and Philosophy*, **17** (2000), 170–190.
9. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Zettel* G. E. M. Anscombe, G. H. von Wright (eds), tr. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), 413–414.
10. See also John McDowell 'Non-cognitivism and rule-following', in *idem*, *Reason, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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11. As indicated, his argument could be set out using the looser notions of a 'language game' or a 'discourse'. These assume only that language is in some degree rule governed, and that it is possible to distinguish areas of language on the basis of the concepts used and the practices engaged with. It does not imply that these distinctions are rigorous, that they could be straightforwardly identified, or easily articulated. Nor does it imply that discourses or language games are objective features of language – they simply enable classification.
12. I will, as a matter of convenience, focus on the theistic framework and the question of God's existence.
13. Norman Malcolm 'Is it a religious belief that ''God exists''?', in John Hick (ed.) *Faith and the Philosophers* (New York NY: St. Martin's Press, 1964), 13.
14. D. Z. Phillips *Wittgenstein and Religion* (New York NY: St Martin's Press, 1994), 51.
15. *Ibid*., 45.
16. The assertion could alternatively be understood as scientific, and its truth could then be assessed in terms of the empirical evidence in its favour; this is an important position to which I will return in Section 3.
17. R. Hale *Abstract Objects* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).
18. *Ibid*., 8.
19. *IE*, 494.
20. Though Braithwaite's ideas have received very limited acceptance.
21. For a recent survey, see Roger Trigg 'Theological realism and antirealism', in Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (eds) *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).
22. Hilary Putnam *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 55.
23. Crispin Wright 'Truth in ethics', in Brad Hooker (ed.) *Truth in Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 11.
24. See William Alston *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Neil Tennant 'On negation, truth, and warranted assertibility', *Analysis*, **55** (1995), 98–104.
25. *Ibid*., ch. 2.
26. Michael Devitt *Realism and Truth*, 2nd edn (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), ch. 7.
27. Paul Helm *Faith and Understanding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 71. See also Brian Hebblethwaite *The Ocean of Truth*: *A Defence of Objective Theism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
28 Helm *Faith and Understanding*, 54.
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