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Carnap and Quine on Sense and Nonsense

James Andrew Smith

I offer an interpretation of Carnap and Quine's views on cognitive significance and insignificance. The basic idea behind their views is as follows: to judge an expression is insignificant is to recommend it not be used in or explicated into languages used to express truth-valued judgments in inquiry; to judge an expression is significant is to recommend it be used in or explicated into such languages. These judgments are pragmatic judgments, made in light of purposes for language use in inquiry. For Carnap at least, these pragmatic judgments are non-cognitive. This basic idea is only a roughly correct statement of their views. This is because the details of the scientific languages they recommend for inquiry are necessary to understand their views and the way they understand their own views. Even so, I offer two reasons to suggest that this basic idea is worthy of our consideration today. First, it provides a conception of significance that captures the natural thought that epistemological concerns can lead us to consider expressions to be insignificant without requiring an objectionable form of verificationism. Second, if we appeal also to Carnap and Quine's pluralistic attitude toward explication, we can make a pragmatic judgment that an expression is insignificant while judging it to be significant on a distinct explication of significance fit for describing and explaining natural language.

Carnap and Quine on Sense and Nonsense

James Andrew Smith

1. Introduction

In considering the work of a philosopher on a given topic, we can ask two different questions. We can ask what I will call an *interpretation question*: what are the philosopher's views on this topic? We can also ask what I will call an *appropriation question*: are there basic ideas in the philosopher's work on this topic—ideas at least similar to the philosopher's actual views—which are defensible or at least worthy of consideration? Many philosophers today wish to answer both types of questions about the work of Rudolf Carnap. His work forms a starting point for contemporary metaontology and the currently burgeoning literature on conceptual engineering, to give two examples.¹ Contemporary philosophers engaged in such projects want to understand Carnap's work as well as consider or defend basic ideas he has to offer.

The subject of this paper is Carnap's views on the topic of cognitive significance and insignificance—alternatively, cognitive meaningfulness and meaninglessness, dropping “cognitive” when context makes things clear. I address both the interpretation and appropriation question about Carnap's views on this topic, arguing that there is a basic idea behind Carnap's views that is worthy of our consideration. I then use my reading of Carnap and this basic idea to frame interpretive claims about his pupil W. V. Quine. I argue that Quine's views on cognitive significance and insignificance share fundamental similarities to

¹See e.g., Blatti and Lapointe (2016) and Cappelen, Plunkett and Burgess (2020).

Carnap's while being consistent with Quine's rejection of Carnap's views on analyticity and Carnap's general methods for constructing scientific languages.

The basic idea behind Carnap and Quine's views is as follows: to judge an expression is insignificant is to recommend it not be used in or explicated into languages used to express truth-valued judgments in inquiry; to judge an expression is significant is to recommend it be used in or explicated into such languages. These judgments are pragmatic judgments, made in light of purposes for language use in inquiry. For Carnap at least, these pragmatic judgments are non-cognitive. Carnap specifies the languages he recommends via what he calls a *principle of empiricism*: a general method for constructing scientific languages whose non-logicomathematical terms “have some connection with possible observations” (1937b, 33). He wishes to define “significant” in application to each such language so that he is in a position to show, via cognitively significant sentences in a meta-language, that all expressions of each such language are significant in that language. Hence, there are three kinds of notions at play in Carnap's views: cognitive notions of significance precisely defined for each language and the pragmatic, non-cognitive notions of insignificance and significance *simpliciter*. I argue further that his judgments in “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” (1950b) that some metaphysics is cognitively insignificant rely on such principles of empiricism, contrary to some recent readings of that article. While this may warrant calling Carnap a verificationist, I will argue calling Carnap a verificationist can also mislead.

Quine's judgments of cognitive insignificance as I read them also require precision about what languages are or are not useful in inquiry. Languages he recommends using to express truth-valued judgments in inquiry are formulated in what he calls *canonical notation*. Similar to Carnap, he can define “significant” within a scientific meta-language in application to languages he recommends: for Quine, to be significant in a language is to be

grammatical in that language. But Quine lacks a principle of empiricism with the general recipes for constructing scientific languages that Carnap sought, given his rejection of Carnap's views on analyticity and his principles of empiricism. Nevertheless, Quine judges e is insignificant when e cannot be used or explicated into a language in canonical notation used to express theories that are "responsive" to "sensory stimulation" (1981b, 41). As I will put it, Quine uses a *context-sensitive empiricism* to specify the languages he recommends, as he lacks a general and sharp method for specifying when theories are "responsive" to "sensory stimulation".

I will suggest that the basic idea mentioned above is only a roughly correct interpretation of Carnap and Quine's views. This is because the details of the scientific languages they recommend for inquiry are necessary to understand their views and the way they understand their own views. It is important for Carnap and Quine to be precise about what languages are or are not useful in inquiry, in the ways I have sketched above and will explain below. Even so, it is an idea that is worthy of our consideration, for two reasons I will sketch in this paper. First, it provides a conception of significance that captures the natural thought that epistemological concerns can lead us to consider expressions meaningless without requiring an objectionable form of verificationism. Appropriating Carnap's words from (1950a): if we "cannot think of any possible evidence that would be regarded as relevant by" (1950a, 219) those who dispute over a thesis containing an expression e which we currently cannot explicate into our truth-valued judgments, I suggest this can legitimately ground our judgment that e is insignificant without reducing meaning to possible evidence. Second, if we appeal also to Carnap and Quine's pluralistic attitude toward explication, we can make pragmatic judgments of insignificance while allowing that many things ordinary speakers or philosophers say might also be cognitively significant in some sense of "significant". If our project is to describe and explain natural language, we may judge

an expression e is significant on a notion of significance suited for that project. If our project is to engage in inquiry and recommend language to use or not use for it, we may judge the same e is insignificant by means of Carnap and Quine's pragmatic notion. I will argue that Carnap and Quine themselves allow for this distinction in notions of significance when I address the common intuition that expressions that Carnap and Quine recommend against using or explicating are nonetheless significant (e.g., some expressions of metaphysics, what Quine calls the "humanly [in]dispensable" propositional attitude verbs in 1960, 218).

2. Carnap's Project of Scientific Philosophy

Let us start with the basics of Carnap's philosophy. In his intellectual autobiography, Carnap recalls as a young scholar finding the disputes of traditional metaphysics to be "vague", "sterile", and "useless", believing that philosophers who engage in them lack "common criteria" for deciding their "controvers[ies]" (Carnap 1963a, 44–45). This leads Carnap to place a premium on the existence of shared rules amongst participants in inquiry throughout the rest of his career. Gary Ebbs calls this *Carnap's motivating attitude*: "it is "sterile and useless" to say two investigators agree or disagree unless we see them as sharing criteria for evaluating their assertions" (Ebbs 2017a, 1).²

On account of his motivating attitude, Carnap sharply distinguishes between *theoretical* and *practical* judgments. Theoretical judgments made by inquirers at a time only take place within a system of rules they all share and use at that time to guide their assessment of those judgments. As Carnap says: "A question of right or wrong must always refer to a system of rules" (1939, 7). But inquirers can also evaluate which rules to accept. In doing so, they make practical judgments which express what fulfills or fails to fulfill their purposes in inquiry. Carnap sometimes

²See also Ricketts (1982).

construes these judgments as *recommendations* or *proposals*. Since evaluation of these proposals would take place outside of a system of rules, Carnap thinks positions taken up in discussions over a choice of rules are neither right nor wrong, neither true nor false. In Carnap's view, a choice of rules can be impractical or inadvisable but never strictly speaking wrong; a choice of rules can be fruitful or beneficial but never strictly speaking right. So, while Carnap thinks theoretical judgments are cognitive, he thinks practical judgments are non-cognitive, expressing but not stating our desires and purposes.³ When Carnap makes such judgments, they serve to express to others what Carnap thinks fits his purposes in inquiry. That is not to say his purposes are only his purposes. Many purposes Carnap has in inquiry are those prevalent in scientific practice which he shares with others, such as the purposes of explaining, predicting, and proving things about various phenomena of interest. I will say a bit more about purposes in Section 5.

What systems of rules does Carnap recommend inquirers choose? The beginning of an answer comes from Carnap's Principle of Tolerance:

Everyone is at liberty to build up his own logic, i.e. his own form of language, as he wishes. All that is required of him is that, if

³See Carnap (1963d) for his discussion of non-cognitive judgments. There, he formulates them as *optatives*: as of the form "Would that *p*". See Flocke (2020) for an interpretation of his non-cognitivism in ontology which highlights the expressive element of Carnap's recommendations. Florian Steinberger (2016) argues that Carnap recommends the scientific framework of utility theory for making decisions given our purposes. Further, as Steinberger points out, Carnap thinks some apparently pragmatic judgments are theoretical ones if they state "means-ends relationships," which Carnap says are "clearly factual" judgments (Carnap 1963d, 999). So, some practical judgments about language use Carnap makes perhaps could be paraphrased in some contexts as cognitive judgments within Carnapian languages. Carnap acknowledges this in "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology" (1950b, 213), but the text elsewhere indicates he tends to understand them as non-cognitive: see Carnap (1950b, 214, 218). So, I think it is reasonable to understand Carnap's pragmatic judgments generally as non-cognitive recommendations.

he wishes to discuss it, he must state his methods clearly, and give syntactical rules instead of philosophical arguments (Carnap 1937a, 52).

By a "logic" or "form of language", Carnap means a set of linguistic rules *L*. This set *L* includes the *formation rules*, which specify the basic expressions of a language and what expressions and sentences can be built from them, and the *transformation rules*, which specify in syntactic terms what sentences are logical consequences of sets of sentences. I follow many Carnap scholars in believing that Carnap maintains a version of his Principle of Tolerance after adopting *semantical rules* a few years later, such as in Carnap (1939).⁴ It is also useful to include certain rules for confirmation and disconfirmation of empirical statements, such as what he calls *P-rules* in (1937a). Let us call the languages including these kinds of rules *Carnapian languages*. (We can also say a Carnapian language is the set of sentences formed from application of these four kinds of rules alone). The Principle of Tolerance is best understood as Carnap's implementation of his motivating attitude—there is no right and wrong in choosing Carnapian languages, so long as the rules can be clearly stated.

It is worth noting at this juncture the key role of *analyticity*. Carnap by the time of (1956a) recommends constructing definitions of analyticity for a given language *L* (sometimes called *L-truth*) so that a sentence is analytic in *L* when, roughly speaking, "its truth follows from the semantical rules" of *L* "alone" (1). Carnap recommends we explicate the sentences of logic and mathematics, along with sentences following logically from what he calls *meaning postulates*, as analytic. (See Carnap 1952a). Sentences whose negation is analytic in *L* are *contradictory* in *L* (or *L-false* in *L*). Sentences that are neither analytic nor contradictory in *L* are *synthetic* in *L*. One reason analyticity is key for Carnap is that it allows him to explicate the idea that the sentences of logic and mathematics follow solely from the rules that we together

⁴See, for example, Ricketts (1982) and essays in Ebbs (2017c).

can use to settle our agreements and disagreements in a given context in inquiry.

Carnap is aware that scientists rarely formulate their languages using Carnapian languages.⁵ That is why Ebbs formulates Carnap's attitude so that two investigators do not agree or disagree unless *we see them* as sharing criteria for evaluating their assertions. Carnap is satisfied that scientists adhere to his motivating attitude in a given context when he thinks their words used in that context can be *explicated into* a Carnapian language. As Carnap says in (1950a), the task of explication is "replacing" an "inexact" concept with an exact one. The proposed replacement—the "explicatum"—has "explicit rules for its use", and should be "incorporate[d] . . . into a well-constructed system of scientific . . . concepts" (1950a, 3). It should also be fruitful and simple to a sufficient degree (1950a, 7). Like choosing a Carnapian language, the choice of an explication is governed by inexact practical considerations: "the question whether" an explication "is right or wrong makes no good sense because there is no clear-cut answer" (1950a, 4). While "explication" is often restricted to the task of replacing subsentential expressions with others, I will also use it in a wider sense, so that it involves replacing larger linguistic contexts with others.⁶ Since an explicatum is governed by "exact rules for use", it is contained within a cognitive language. Nevertheless, we will see that Carnap recommends understanding certain sentences as expressing pragmatic judgments, and so recommends explicating them as pragmatic judgments in a looser sense of "explication", which I call *non-cognitive explication*.

Carnap often defers to others about what language is useful for inquiry since he is obviously not a specialist in every discipline. Thus, what I have called *his* recommendations are often, in a sense, the recommendations of those to whom he defers.

⁵See for example Carnap (1952b, 432).

⁶Here I follow Ebbs (2019, 3–4), who explains the usefulness of this expanded use of "explication".

But given his work in what he would call the logic of science, he thinks in many cases he is well-positioned to make recommendations for schematic recipes for scientific languages whose details those in the scientific community are expert at filling in. Let us look at examples of these schematic recipes by turning our attention to his principles of empiricism.

3. Carnap's Principles of Empiricism

Carnap's background in logic and the empirical sciences and his exasperation at the state of traditional metaphysics leads him to emphasize the disparity between science and metaphysics starting early in his career. In the *Aufbau*, Carnap asserts that "(rational) science not only can deal with any objects but never comes to a limit, never meets with a question that cannot in principle be answered" (1928, 296). Carnap in the *Aufbau* thus expresses his view he notes in (1963a) that traditional metaphysics is sterile and useless for science. However, Carnap also notes he took "a more radical antimetaphysical position" (1963a, 18) after the *Aufbau*. He says that, "under the influence of Wittgenstein",

I came to hold the view that many theses of traditional metaphysics are not only useless, but even devoid of cognitive content. . . The view that these sentences and questions are non-cognitive was based on Wittgenstein's principle of verifiability. . . This principle of verifiability was later replaced by the more liberal principle of confirmability (Carnap 1963a, 45).

Carnap thus moves beyond merely claiming that traditional metaphysics is sterile and useless as he did earlier in his career. He in addition asserts that he came to believe that it is "devoid of cognitive content". As he puts it on the same page, traditional metaphysical theses are "neither true nor false" and "lack cognitive or theoretical meaning", and traditional metaphysical questions are "pseudo-questions" (1963a, 45). On account of this, Carnap says that he and his fellow scientific philosophers in

Vienna “tried to avoid the terms of traditional philosophy and to use instead those of logic, mathematics, and empirical science, or of that part of the ordinary language which, though more vague, still is in principle translatable into a scientific language” (1963a, 21).

Note here and elsewhere that Carnap interchanges “theoretically meaningful” with “cognitively meaningful” and “cognitively significant”, and he interchanges “theoretically meaningless” with “cognitively meaningless” and “cognitively insignificant”. In describing his views, I will drop “theoretical” and “cognitively” when the context makes it unnecessary.

Carnap’s move from the claim that much traditional philosophy is “sterile and useless” to the claim it is “meaningless” looks to be based on a “principle of verifiability” or a more liberal “principle of confirmability”. Before we can understand this move, we need to say a bit more about how Carnap conceives of such principles. Consider this remark:

It seems to me that it is preferable to formulate the principle of empiricism not in the form of an assertion—“all knowledge is empirical” or “all synthetic sentences that we can know are based on (or connected with) experiences” or the like—but rather in the form of a proposal or requirement. As empiricists, we require the language of science to be restricted in a certain way; we require that descriptive predicates and hence synthetic sentences are not to be admitted unless they have some connection with possible observations, a connection which has to be characterized in a suitable way (Carnap 1937b, 33).

The principle of empiricism is a proposal for the use of language in science. Carnap throughout his career pursued several ways of cashing out the notion of “hav[ing] some connection with possible observations”, starting with what we have seen him call a “principle of verifiability” and then liberalizing it in various ways, which Carnap in his intellectual autobiography puts under the heading of the “principle of confirmability”. For this reason, it is more accurate to say that Carnap throughout his career of-

fers multiple principles of empiricism. To explicate the idea that “synthetic sentences are not to be admitted unless they have some connection with possible observations”, Carnap seeks a definition of a relation between observation terms and sentences and theoretical terms and sentences (that is, non-observation, non-logicomathematical terms and sentences), a relation that applies to the Carnapian languages he recommends. A theoretical term or sentence is significant when it bears this relation to observation terms and sentences.

Actually, this is loosely put. The connection between theoretical language and observation language is defined for Carnap separately for each language. He does not presume we can use such definitions to define a relation applying to all languages at once. It is not best to say such definitions are *relative* to a language either, since that may suggest incorrectly there is a relation R defined with a parameter for languages, so that e bears the connection in question to e^* just in case there is some L such that e bears R to e^* in L . I will thus say the definitions of significance Carnap constructs are *one-off*. His views here compare to his views on analyticity. Carnap repeatedly emphasizes that “analytic” is definable only one-off. We cannot use a language-independent definition of “analytic” and then say that some sentences of L are analytic for that L : we must use a different definition of “analytic” for each language. (See e.g., Carnap 1963c, 921). Nevertheless, Carnap always sought general *methods* or *recipes* for characterizing the analytic sentences, methods which allow us to group together what one-off explications have in common. Compare this to Tarskian definitions of satisfaction and truth. While a Tarskian definition of satisfaction and truth does not apply to all languages on pain of contradiction, we have general methods for constructing such definitions for a given language: for example, we call a predicate in a meta-language ML a truth predicate for L if it meets Convention T. (Since Carnap’s definitions of analyticity in terms of semantical rules use Tarskian truth definitions, this is more than a comparison).

Similarly, Carnap defines the connection between theory and observation one-off and hence defines the significance of theoretical terms one-off via general methods. Let me sketch an example of such a method from Carnap (1956b) to fix ideas. Suppose we have a consistent Carnapian language which lacks theoretical terms altogether but contains some observation and logical expressions—call it L_0 . A theoretical term added to L_0 is significant if it is contained in a sentence which, when added to L_0 , forms a new language L_1 which is consistent and which implies an observation sentence that L_0 does not. A theoretical term added to L_1 is significant if it is contained in a sentence which, when added to L_1 , forms a new language L_2 which is consistent and which implies an observation sentence that L_1 does not. And so on. Theoretical terms and sentences of a given language are significant in that language when that language appears in an inductive chain of languages of the sort I just sketched.

Let us say that Carnap is in a position to establish theoretical terms of a given language are significant *according to a general syntheticity method* when he is in a position to define the significance of theoretical terms one-off according to a general method like the one just sketched. There are three other kinds of expressions Carnap takes to be theoretically significant:

- (i) Logical and mathematical sentences.
- (ii) Logical and mathematical terms, such as logical constants (e.g., “~”), mathematical relation symbols (e.g., “ \in ”), functional symbols (e.g., “+”), names (e.g., “o”), and variables and quantifiers.⁷
- (iii) Observation terms and sentences.

⁷Note some confusing terminology here: Carnap takes expressions of kinds (i) and (ii) to be theoretically significant even though they are not theoretical expressions that are related to observation expressions via a general syntheticity method. See e.g., (1963d, 999). Also, I am not aware of Carnap saying that variables and quantifiers are significant, but I think it makes sense to count them as such for the sake of convenience.

Carnap at various points in his career offers general methods for identifying these kinds of expressions and thereby indirectly provides general methods for establishing their significance relative to a language: we can count them as significant in a language in accordance with general criteria for identifying them. In sum, Carnap throughout his career offered principles of empiricism of the following schematic form:

(PE) I recommend using a Carnapian language L of the following sort: I am in position to establish in a meta-language that every expression in L is either significant according to a general syntheticity method \mathbf{O} or is of kind (i), (ii), or (iii),

where \mathbf{O} is replaced by a description of a general syntheticity method that Carnap offered at a particular time in his career. Understand principles of the form (PE) as recommendations for languages to use for a particular purpose: to express truth-valued judgments in scientific inquiry. It follows from this that, when Carnap recommends an explication e^* of an expression e , e^* will be in a language meeting (PE). Such principles do not exhaust Carnap’s recommendations for languages but provide a recommendation for a necessary condition: the condition of being in a position to show the things mentioned above. That is why Carnap says that, perhaps a hair too strongly, that it is a “proposal or requirement”: it is a recommendation for a necessary condition.

Carnap’s desire for formal precision means that the general methods mentioned in (PE) include what I will call *sharp recipes*: they provide a set of instructions, based on a small set of patterns, for constructing individual languages and explications each of which has a high degree of sharpness. We saw one example of a sharp recipe in the general syntheticity method from Carnap (1956b). Moreover, Carnap’s definitions of analyticity, and hence methods for identifying expressions of kind (i), rely upon a sharp recipe for defining analyticity for each language. Note that the notions of “general” and “sharp” (or, sometimes, “exact”) I have employed in characterizing Carnap’s views are a matter of de-

gree. Some methods are more general than others, depending upon how widely the method applies; some are sharper or more exact than others, depending upon the formal precision or clarity of what the methods provide.

4. Carnap on Sense and Nonsense, Part I

There are three notions at play in Carnap's judgments of significance and insignificance:

- (A) significance one-off for a particular language
- (B) insignificance *simpliciter*
- (C) significance *simpliciter*.

(A) is not a single notion but a set of notions, expressible via an explication in a scientific meta-language and defined via (PE):

$$\{K_1, K_2, K_3, \dots\}$$

Each K_n applies to all and only the outputs of the formation rules of languages Carnap recommends for use. Using a K_n , we can make cognitive judgments about the significance of the expressions of a language in a meta-language. But as I will now explain, (B) and (C) are best understood in Carnap's view as non-cognitive pragmatic notions.

To judge e is insignificant for Carnap is to say roughly this: "Consider all of the languages for which some K_n could be defined. There is no use or explication of e in any of those". It has to be all of them: one of the K_n could be false of e but Carnap would not judge it insignificant if another K_n is true of e . But what are "all of the languages for which some K_n could be defined"? The answer is: all languages I can construct in accordance with a recommendation of the form (PE). What they have in common is pragmatic: they are all languages which Carnap recommends. What they have in common cannot be sharply expressed within

a given cognitive language. Carnap's principles of empiricism are not sharp in the sense that they express, in sharp cognitive terms, that all languages contain expressions with such and such properties. They are sharp in the sense that they enable us to construct individual languages and explications each of which is expressed in sharp cognitive terms.

Hence, for Carnap, judging e is insignificant is pragmatic and non-cognitive. In fact, judging that e is insignificant is for Carnap pragmatic twice over when it requires a judgment that e cannot be explicated into a Carnapian language. This is because judgments of explication for Carnap are pragmatic. The same kind of point applies to expressions Carnap would wish to say are significant *simpliciter*. To say that e is significant *simpliciter* is to make a pragmatic recommendation that e be used or explicated into a language Carnap recommends for use. If e is contained in a Carnapian language, we could perhaps cognitively judge that e is significant *simpliciter* by using a one-off definition of significance for that language. Even so, we need to make a pragmatic judgment if e is not in a Carnapian language, since we must add that it is explicated into a recommended Carnapian language.

Let us turn to Carnap's views on the meaninglessness of traditional metaphysical disputes. Here is his succinct summary of his position in "My Views on Ontological Problems":

Although the three controversies [about the reality or irrealty of the external world, other minds, and abstract entities] referred to cannot be regarded as theoretically meaningful, we still can give to them a meaning by reinterpreting them or, more exactly, by replacing them with the practical questions concerning the choice of certain language forms (Carnap 1963b, 868–69).

He says he cannot "regard" certain disputes as theoretically meaningful. He then suggests giving a *reinterpretation* or *replacement* of them in terms of practical questions. To use my terminology from the end of Section 2, he is recommending a non-cognitive explication of their words. Carnap's claim that questions and sentences of traditional metaphysics fail to have

a meaning is not a theoretical claim and so, in an important sense, is not a claim at all. It is the doubly pragmatic recommendation that they cannot be explicated into a cognitive language of science Carnap recommends for use. He then recommends that traditional metaphysical questions be given a non-cognitive explication as pragmatic questions “concerning the choice of certain language forms”.

We can see Carnap’s view in more detail in “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” (1950b), ESO for short. To interpret truth-evaluable, cognitively meaningful claims about existence, he recommends that we introduce Carnapian languages he calls *linguistic frameworks* which include explicit rules for evaluating the truth of sentences with quantifiers. In particular, he recommends that we introduce variables for things of a given type—numbers, propositions, physical things, for example—and logical rules of inference governing usage of those variables (1950b, 213). In short, I will say he recommends introducing *existence rules*. A truth-evaluable claim of existence will be explicated into a sentence of the form “There is an x such that . . .”, with “ x ” replaced by a variable of a given type. Some such sentences will follow from the transformation rules, semantical rules, and existence rules of the framework alone and be analytic in that framework; some will be synthetic. In some cases, some such sentences follow from the logical rules and existence rules in a few trivial steps. For example, having introduced a variable type for numbers, Carnap explicates “There are numbers” in a framework as “There is an n such that $n = n$ ”, which follows in a few steps given logical rules and existence rules within a framework that has them.

In light of these explications, he imagines what a traditional metaphysician would say—one engaged in debates about the reality or irreality of the external world, or other minds, or abstract entities. He says, “in spite” of the presence of a linguistic framework for numbers, “the controversy concerning the external question of the ontological reality of the system of numbers

continues” (1950b, 218–19). He imagines one participant in this controversy saying: “I believe that there are numbers as real entities. This gives me the right to use the linguistic forms of the numeral framework. . .” (1950b, 219). He imagines another participant retorting that there are no numbers, and that numerals do not designate entities. He imagines that such participants might phrase their dispute over the “ontological status of numbers” or whether numbers have a “metaphysical characteristic called reality. . . or subsistence or status of ‘independent entities’ ” (1950b, 209). Of participants on both sides of the controversy, he says:

I cannot think of any possible evidence that would be regarded as relevant by both philosophers, and therefore, if actually found, would decide the controversy or at least make one of the opposite theses more probable than the other. . . Therefore I feel compelled to regard the external question as a pseudo-question, until both parties to the controversy offer a common interpretation of the question as a cognitive question; this would involve an indication of possible evidence regarded as relevant by both sides (Carnap 1950b, 219).

As I read him, Carnap’s professed inability to find possible evidence relevant to traditional metaphysical disputes is an informal way of gesturing at his proposal that traditional metaphysicians’ sentences do not meet (PE). This is the role that Carnap’s adoption of a “principle of verifiability” or “confirmability” mentioned in (1963a) plays in his judgments about traditional metaphysics.

In general, Carnap’s view is that instances of schemas like “ F s are real” or “ F s are independent entities” or their negations, as used by the philosophers Carnap imagines, cannot be explicated as existentially quantified sentences of the form “There is an x such that $x = x$ ” or their negations, where what replaces “ x ” is of the variable type for the F s. He imagines the philosophers agree to this (see ESO, 209 and 218–19). Further, he imagines that the philosophers use “ F s are real” or “ F s are independent entities”; (or their negations) to justify using (or not using) such existen-

tially quantified claims governed by existence rules. Carnap's view, guided by (PE), is that it is not useful for our purposes in inquiry to use such sentences in this way. He then suggests reinterpreting, or replacing, such sentences with pragmatic judgments expressing preferences for using or not using frameworks for *Fs*, and questions such as "Are *Fs* real?" with "Shall we use a framework for *Fs*?".

Carnap does not give us a full list of the terms he considers insignificant, simply gesturing at examples. The examples he gives suggest he has in mind certain philosophical terms commonly used in synthetic *a priori* metaphysics well-known to philosophers before and during Carnap's day. But whether or not such terms are insignificant will also depend upon the context as well as speakers' behaviors and intentions in using the term in inquiry.⁸

Recall that Carnap moves from the claim early in his career that traditional metaphysics is sterile and useless to the claim, "under the influence of Wittgenstein" (1963a, 45), that it is insignificant. As I read Carnap, this move is in effect a recognition of an identity: meaninglessness, in effect, *is* uselessness. It is *in effect* an identity, since it is not literally an identity expressed by a cognitive sentence. I suggest that the move is made under the influence of Wittgenstein because he appropriates Wittgenstein's dictum that "what can be said at all can be said clearly" (1921, 3), recommending languages governed by clearly stated rules and sharply defined expressions.⁹

One might think Carnap's argument in *ESO* does not require (PE), and that it goes like this: (a) the metaphysician is attempting to use terms such as "real" outside a language or system of rules (b) there are no cognitively meaningful uses of words outside of a language or system of rules; therefore, (c) the metaphysicians'

use of terms such as "real" is not cognitively meaningful. Amie Thomasson (2016) offers something like this argument in her "appropriation" (2016, 124) of Carnap, by arguing that asking an external question that is not understood as a practical question is an attempt to use expressions contrary to their "standard rules of use" (2016, 127). Matti Eklund (in e.g., 2013) has defended something like this reading of Carnap, interpreting a linguistic framework in *ESO* in effect just as a language and suggesting we read Carnap as understanding traditional ontological disputes as confused attempts to speak outside a language.¹⁰

These interpretations of Carnap do not adequately account for the assumptions he makes about the philosopher he imagines encountering that I outlined four paragraphs above. It is consistent with these assumptions that the traditional metaphysician attempts to use sentences of the form "*Fs* are real" or "*Fs* are independent entities" in accordance with something we might call "rules" or a "language". It is just that a set of such "rules" is not entirely identical to the set of existence rules—those governing the use of existentially quantified formulae. Further, using such sentences with such "rules" is compatible with them *also* using existence rules for quantified claims about *Fs* and then using sentences of the form "*Fs* are real" to establish such claims. A metaphysician who thinks the reality or ontological status of numbers "gives [them] the right" to use language with existence rules governing number terms or variables could try to demonstrate this right by showing that sentences such as "Numbers are real" or "Numbers are independent entities" could be used in accordance with "rules" or within a "language" to prove or support the truth of "There is an *n* such that $n = n$ ". We thus do not have good reason to accept that Carnap endorses (a) of the above argument.

To be sure, Carnap complains that traditional philosophy lacks "common criteria" for deciding its "controvers[ies]" (1963a, 44–

⁸As Flocke (2020, 530–31) emphasizes.

⁹There may be interesting parallels between Carnap and Quine's views on insignificance as I read them and Wittgenstein's heavily discussed views on nonsense. However, exploring these parallels would take me too far afield.

¹⁰See Broughton (forthcoming) for discussion and criticism of Eklund's view.

45). So, perhaps some metaphysicians simply fail to use rules. But it goes beyond the textual evidence we have to assume that Carnap thinks all metaphysicians of the sort he imagines in *ESO* do not use something worthy of being called “rules.” Moreover, Carnap’s clearest and explicit reason for thinking metaphysics is meaningless goes through (PE), and (PE) is not well understood as saying: I recommend only using rules. I have used scare-quotes around “rule” and “language” for a reason. When it comes to providing explications useful for improving and clarifying inquiry, Carnap does not provide explications of “rule” or “language”. Rather, he seeks to define specific systems of what we might informally call “rules” and “languages” for scientific purposes in line with (PE) and seeks to provide explications into them. In short: when Carnap (1950b, 209) laments that philosophers have “not given a formulation of their question in terms of the common scientific language”, note the word “scientific”.

One might reply that Carnap’s Principle of Tolerance asks us to use *clearly stated* rules. So, one might propose this reading of Carnap: if the traditional metaphysician’s words are governed by clearly stated rules, then their expressions are meaningful; if not, they are not. But Carnap gives no precise definition of “clear”. As it governs recommendations for use of language, it must for Carnap be a pragmatic, non-cognitive notion. Therefore, I suggest Carnap’s judgment that a rule is clear is nothing over and above a judgment that it is a rule he recommends inquirers can use together; a sentence is clear when its use is governed by such rules. It is useful to call such sentences and rules “clear” because of their fruitfulness for drawing inferences in inquiry and for answering our open questions. But Carnap’s demand for precision demands he cash out this fruitfulness. The textual evidence suggests Carnap cashes it out with (PE). I will defend this point more at the end of the next section.

The details of Carnap’s views have gotten pretty complex. More clarification is needed, which I provide in the next section. But there is a basic, informally expressed idea behind it:

Basic Idea: To judge an expression is insignificant is to recommend it not be used in or explicated into languages used to express truth-valued judgments in inquiry; to judge an expression is significant is to recommend it be used in or explicated into such languages.¹¹

According to Basic Idea, judgments of significance and insignificance are driven by our purposes for language use in inquiry and how we weigh them. What is a purpose for language use in inquiry? It is something which guides the choices we make or would make for using language to express our judgments about what is true or what is false, or what probable to a certain degree, and the like, made from the perspective of engagement within inquiry. (As noted earlier, some recommendations are deferred to others deemed experts). Such purposes are commonly what many philosophers would call *epistemic* purposes: purposes connected in some way with the truth, evidence, or knowledge. Some very broad purposes Carnap has are the purposes of predicting and explaining, predicting, and proving things about various phenomena of interest. Carnap wants—and many of us also want—languages which help us do at least these things well. As an example of more specific purposes and their weighing, Carnap discusses weighing expressive power against risk of inconsistency when discussing the usefulness of different logics.¹² I do not think it is necessary or wise within the scope of this paper to be more specific than this about what purposes for language use are. I hope one can see at least that our purposes for language use guide our recommendation to use or explicate some expressions, or to not use or explicate them at all. According to Basic Idea, we judge such expressions significant in the first case and insignificant in the second.

¹¹Note that, if one accepts Basic Idea, one is silent on whether or not an expression is significant if one neither recommends *e* be used in or explicated into languages used to express truth-valued judgments in inquiry nor recommends *e* not be so used or explicated.

¹²See Carnap (1963a, 49).

5. Carnap on Sense and Nonsense, Part 2

As I will argue, Carnap would take Basic Idea to be too imprecise of a statement of his recommendations. Before explaining in more detail why this is so, I will examine two reactions to Carnap's judgments of significance and insignificance that strike me as fairly common given what philosophers have written about Carnap and what I have heard said about Carnap when I have discussed his ideas with other philosophers. I am concerned to respond to these reactions not only to clarify Carnap's view further, but also because they obscure the philosophical force of Basic Idea. First:

(1) *Usages of words that Carnap judges are insignificant are significant, for they seem to be.*

Some have the impression or intuition that traditional metaphysical disputes really do make sense. For an argument that typifies this kind of thinking, consider this passage from Kit Fine:

... the fact that a notion appears to make sense is strong *prima facie* evidence that it does make sense. Indeed, the indispensability of the notions in formulating certain metaphysical issues would appear to make their intelligibility almost impossible to deny. Consider the issue dividing the "A-theorist" and the "B-theorist" as to whether temporal reality is intrinsically tensed. This is an issue that cannot be rendered intelligible without invoking the metaphysical conception of "fact" (Fine 2001, 13).

However, Carnap would say—and I think he would be right to say, for whatever it is worth—that we are owed an explanation of why the apparent significance of expressions of metaphysics used in a dispute is "strong *prima facie* evidence" of their significance. I believe Carnap would say that we need to articulate views about significance to underwrite such evidential claims. An impression or intuition that they are significant is not enough. Applying Fine's remarks to Carnap's judgments about

traditional metaphysics, we only have the start of an objection to Carnap.

There are two possibilities for those who object to Carnap's judgment that *e* is insignificant: they do so either (a) because they recommend *e* be used in inquiry while Carnap recommends *e* not be used, or (b) they fail to recommend *e* be used in inquiry. Suppose (a). I then note two things. First, they are capable of agreeing with Basic Idea but disagreeing over the case of *e*, differing with Carnap over their purposes for language use in inquiry or their weighing. Second, they are not allowed in such a case to rely merely on the fact that *e* seems significant to them. They must defend their recommendation, showing how *e* has a use in our inquiries. It is not my aim here to assess whether Carnap's particular recommendations are wrong—or, as he would put it, not fruitful. But I would note that, if we judge they are wrong or not fruitful, we have rejected Carnap's particular views as I interpret them but have not yet rejected Basic Idea. If one must go beyond one's impression or intuition about what is significant and make judgments of significance in terms of one's purposes in inquiry, one thinks about significance within the guidelines that Basic Idea sets.

Suppose instead (b). What views on cognitive significance could be used to give us "strong *prima facie* evidence", or any evidence for that matter, that such expressions are meaningful, independent of one's recommendations for use of language in inquiry?

It is not, I think, actually fruitful to answer this question head on in our attempt to understand Carnap's views. Here is why. Let us keep in mind what Carnap's aim is when making judgments of insignificance: to formulate language to use for expressing judgments in inquiry. Notice, for example, the dialectical contexts in which Carnap's judgments about metaphysicians' external questions takes place. Those contexts do not indicate he is surveying all possible uses of "real" or that he aiming to give the meaning, cognitive or non-cognitive, for "real" in this or

that natural language. Carnap is focused on particular uses of “real” a fellow inquirer uses in imagined contexts of inquiry, and Carnap imagines his own recommendations in light of the language they use. Recall also from (1963b) that Carnap’s interpretation of the philosopher’s sentences as pragmatic judgments is a reinterpretation or replacement of them. He is not taking a stance on what their sentences actually mean. He is recommending that a non-cognitive explication of them is more useful for inquiry. In general, Carnap’s philosophical project is directed at recommending scientific languages that are useful for scientific purposes, not at understanding language use as a whole.¹³ Carnap is not opposed, say, to doing semantics for natural language. Since Carnap thinks of the linguistic frameworks he recommends as explicating much ordinary usage (especially of scientific inquirers), there will be significant overlap between his recommendations and an interpretation of natural language. But capturing the meanings, or lack thereof, of expressions as used in such languages is not his aim in making judgments of significance and insignificance.

Given Carnap’s pluralistic attitude toward explication, I propose he can use “significant” and “insignificant” in multiple distinct, compatible ways. On at least one usage for these terms, he uses them to make the judgments of significance and insignificance I have outlined so far—in accordance with the three notions (A), (B) and (C) from Section 4 which Basic Idea highlights. If his project is to understand language use as a whole or to do semantics of natural language, he can use a notion of significance suitable to that purpose. There may be some *e* to which he applies “significant” on this notion but to which he applies “insignificant” on his pragmatic notion. I suggest we view these applications not as in conflict with one another, given that Car-

¹³See Broughton (forthcoming) for a defense of this last point. Here is one bit of evidence Broughton notes: Carnap in ESO says that frameworks have analytic sentences, but elsewhere he denies that “analytic” can be defined “in a historically given natural language” (1952b, 432).

nap applies “insignificant” when engaged in the distinct project of recommending language use for inquiry. Different projects can call for different tools. I suggest Carnap can think there are different projects that call for different tools—different uses of “significant” and “insignificant”.

We now can address another common reaction to Carnap’s views on significance:

(2) *Carnap’s judgments of (in)significance rely on a verificationist theory of meaning.*

Many authors state (2), or at least suggest it.¹⁴ Given the near-universal rejection of verificationism, (2) is perhaps the most influential criticism of Carnap’s judgments.

If we understand “verificationist theory of meaning” in a literal way, so that a “theory” contains only truth-valued judgments and so implies truth-valued judgments that an expression is insignificant, my reading of Carnap so far implies (2) is wrong. Carnap’s judgments of insignificance are not theoretical judgments but are pragmatic judgments and therefore lack a truth-value. Let us then assess (2) so that it does not attribute cognitive judgments of insignificance to Carnap, thereby understanding “theory” more loosely.

It is tempting to accept (2) because one might wish to take sentences Carnap thinks are insignificant instead to be false. One might say, for example, that it is false that numbers are independent entities because that implies there exists a property of being an independent entity which does not exist. Consider also abandoned scientific theories with terms that cannot be explicated into current theories that the scientific community uses in their best current work—“phlogiston” perhaps, to take a well-worn example. One might argue that, if we tie meaninglessness to uselessness, it makes theories meaningless when they are really false, leading to verificationism or something too close to it.

¹⁴See, for example, Soames (2009, 442), Wilson (2011, 175), Hirsch (2016, 117), and Bradley (2017).

On Carnap's view, I need to be able to express the falsity of any sentence within the context of some language that meets my purposes. Perhaps there is a purpose for using a past scientific term; perhaps there is not. It does not strike me as in the spirit of Carnap's work to try to sort cases on his behalf here. He would look at each case and ask us to reflect on what purposes there are for using such a term in inquiry. There are possible difficult cases where our purposes weigh roughly equally in favor of explicating a term and not doing so. In such cases, we need to make a pragmatic judgment call. He would not see how this occasional need for judgment calls undermines the possibility of making any pragmatic judgments of insignificance.¹⁵

Perhaps those tempted to lodge (2) only mean to say that Carnap's judgments of insignificance rely on (PE). So understood, (2) is likelier to be correct, although I think calling this "verificationism" is a bit misleading, as I will explain below. But *is* it correct? I highlighted that recommendations of the form (PE) are for Carnap general ways of showing that a language does not meet our purposes. But do we always or even often need (PE) to show that language does not meet our purposes? If not, we might take this as welcome, since Carnap's proposals of the form (PE) throughout his career have not been met with success.

In my view, we should doubt that Carnap would be willing to separate (PE) from his recommendations for language use in inquiry. Carnap is optimistic about our ability to provide general and sharp recipes for explicating and using methodological concepts. As Carnap (1956b, 39–40) says, he is "optimistic" about general and sharp recipes for explicating theoretical significance, as opposed to "skeptics" he mentions such as Hempel

¹⁵What about saying traditional metaphysicians' sentences containing their use of "real" or "independent entity" are meaningful but neither true nor false due to reference failure? Carnap would not recommend using a scientific language with reference failure. Carnap's semantical rules require that constituent expressions of sentences capable of having referents have referents—see (1956a, 4–6). There is thus no cognitively significant sentence that lacks a truth-value, at least on Carnap's pragmatic notion of significance.

who suggest that theoretical significance can at best be generally understood only as a matter of degree. It seems to me this optimism leads Carnap to prefer to put his recommendations in what he takes to be their best form and therefore to use (PE) to express his practical recommendation that some expressions, including those of traditional metaphysics, fail to have theoretical meaning. Given this preference, I submit Carnap would think his judgments of significance do rely on (PE), because he recommends that we seek such a principle and use it to clarify our pragmatic judgments. I cannot rule out that Carnap would make judgments of insignificance were he to accede to Hempel's skepticism. But this counterfactual is hard to assess.

We may have to leave (PE) in the dustbin of philosophical history and thereby leave what Carnap likely would recognize as his judgments of significance in that dustbin, too. But I submit that Basic Idea is a useful modification of Carnap's views as he sees them, and it is a philosophical idea worthy of our consideration. I propose Basic Idea is a pragmatic *concept* of "significance" and "insignificance", and Carnap's own recommendations in line with (PE) provide a *conception* of that concept. I do not recommend reading Carnap as seeing things this way. For one, I am not aware of any textual evidence for it. Moreover, the very concerns I lodged about separating Carnap's judgments from (PE) suggest to me that Carnap may not be comfortable with making this distinction: it suggests little to no distance in his mind between the actual recommendations he makes that amount to his judgments of significance and insignificance and a concept of significance and insignificance he applies. Perhaps Basic Idea could be seen as guiding his search for a principle of empiricism when he has not accepted one. However, once he thinks he has such a principle, he will not think of his recommendations in terms of Basic Idea.

Why is Basic Idea worthy of our consideration? I will suggest two reasons. The first is that it provides a conception of significance that captures the natural thought that epistemological

concerns can lead us to consider expressions to be insignificant without requiring an objectionable form of verificationism. Suppose we have encountered a word w that others use and that we do not think we can explicate into words we already use to express our truth-valued judgments in inquiry. We could consider expanding our vocabulary with w . To consider this option, we then pay attention to the way that others use w by looking at the contexts they offer—the sentences they use to make claims in which w figures and which they attempt to support or assess. We may, speaking loosely, call these “theories” using w . I use scare-quotes since these contexts may not form empirical theories and the “theories” may not end up being significant in the end. Suppose also that we find it hard to see any use for “theories” using w in the language we use in inquiry to say anything either true or false. Suppose our inability to see any use for those “theories” is driven by epistemic concerns—we cannot see ways of justifying, nor could we see ways of justifying, the truth or falsity of those “theories” in terms of evidence or methods we accept. And suppose further we do not have any reason to think that the “theories” are unknowable or unjustifiable because of some limitation in anyone’s ability to collect evidence for or against them. We might then put matters like this: “I cannot think of any possible evidence that would be regarded as relevant by individuals who disagree over any of the ‘theories’ using w and therefore, if actually found, would decide the controversy or at least make one of the opposite theses more probable than the other”. Speaking for myself, I would find it natural to say in such a scenario that w is meaningless or insignificant. I might say things such as: people using w are not saying anything, the “theories” using w are empty of any content, the “theories” using w are obscure to me, and so on. Basic Idea would tell us to judge w insignificant, thereby providing a non-cognitive explication of these inclinations.

I suggest this line of reasoning by itself does not invoke verificationism, or at least a form of verificationism many philosophers

are inclined to reject—one which requires defining or reducing the content of sentences we do use in terms of possible evidence. This line of reasoning does not make that additional requirement. The reasoning points out the ways in which there is no use to adding w to our languages given there is no clear way in which the “theories” using w have anything that would or could count as evidence for their truth, falsity, or probability of each. By hypothesis, we cannot find a way to explicate w into sentences we already accept. So, the “theories” using w are the only thing we could fasten onto in considering whether to use w in assertions in inquiry. Hence, if we cannot find any purpose supporting use of “theories” using w , we have no use for w in languages used in inquiry. I do not see how this requires that every sentence, or all sentences together, have its meaning reduced to possible evidence. Moreover, I supposed in the example that there was no positive reason to think the claims are unknowable either. We thus have no reason to assert the “theories” using w have an unknowable truth-value. So, I am not assuming a verificationism on which anything unknowable is not meaningful.

As the reader probably noticed, I intentionally constructed the scenario I just gave as a schematic version of Carnap’s reasoning in [ESO](#). I think that the *form* of Carnap’s reasoning in [ESO](#) which I intended to capture above is worthy of our consideration, independent of our perhaps legitimate quibbles with the “verificationism” of (PE) or the particular examples of metaphysics he considers. To emphasize this, let us recall the specific assumptions Carnap takes up in judging that some traditional metaphysical terms are insignificant. He assumes their use of terms like “real” cannot be explicated into existentially quantified sentences inside of a linguistic framework. Carnap thinks such existentially quantified sentences explicate a prevalent, useful use of “real”. Given these views, Carnap thinks he would have to thread a needle to explicate the metaphysicians’ “real” within cognitive language: he would have to find a usage that is distinct from the prevalent use of “real” within a Carnapian language

but that also matches the metaphysicians' usage enough to count as an explication of their word into a cognitive language. So, Carnap does not infer the meaninglessness of metaphysics simply from issues with its credibility or lack of possible evidence for or against metaphysical theses—this is one way in which calling Carnap a verificationist can mislead. His judgment depends in part on the details of other language he already recommends using, in light of his purposes. If there is objectionable verificationism here, it is the way Carnap proposes to restrict the languages he recommends via (PE), and not the idea that the languages we recommend affect our judgments of significance.

So, it is at least possible that, even if we do not accept Carnap's "verificationism", we will come to a similar conclusion about some terms of metaphysics as he does. To come to this conclusion, we need to reflect on what our purposes in inquiry are, in light of the language we have already found useful for those purposes. A consequence of this point is that Basic Idea shows us that raising scruples similar to Carnap's about some metaphysics while rejecting verificationism does not rule out thinking that some metaphysics is insignificant. Jessica Wilson (2011) and Darren Bradley (2017) suggest that Carnap's rejection of traditional metaphysics is based on verificationism, but that Carnap's views can be adopted, perhaps with modification, if seen as raising epistemological and not semantic problems for traditional metaphysics. But even if we do not recommend use of languages in line with (PE) and therefore are not "verificationists" in that sense, our epistemological worries about the credibility of theses in metaphysical disputes may play a role in making a judgment that such metaphysics is insignificant, in Carnap's pragmatic sense of "insignificant".

The second reason I find Basic Idea is worthy of consideration is this: the pluralistic attitude towards significance from Carnap, in combination with Basic Idea, allows us to resolve a tension that is common in our thinking about significance. Some of us have the reaction that what someone utters does not make sense after

we have carefully reflected on what they have uttered, perhaps after engaging in the type of reasoning I highlighted four paragraphs above. Nevertheless, in some such cases, we also may be inclined to say that what the other utters *does* make sense: we may note, for example, that what they utter contains common expressions of English, that their use of words does not lead to a contradiction, or that they are a rational person, or that they are an important and brilliant philosopher, or any combination of these things. If, as I suggested, Carnap allows explications of significance distinct from his pragmatic one, we might in such cases be allowed to have our cake and eat it, too. If our project is to describe or explain natural language, we might judge an expression *e* is significant on a notion of significance suited for such a project. If our project is to engage in inquiry and recommend language to use or not use for it, we might judge the same *e* is insignificant by means of Basic Idea. I say "might," since it will depend on the details of the case and the explication of significance suited to describing natural language that one offers. However, offering distinct explications of significance provides the opportunity to resolve the tension just mentioned.

Drawing out Basic Idea from Carnap's work also helps to see similarities between Carnap's work and that of his pupil W. V. Quine, to which I now turn.

6. Quine on Sense and Nonsense, Part 1

Reading Quine as making judgments of cognitive insignificance or meaninglessness is not new. For example, his comments about analyticity in both "Two Dogmas" (1951) and "Carnap and Logical Truth" (1954) strike many as evidence he thinks "analytic" and "truth in virtue of meaning" are meaningless.¹⁶ That he

¹⁶Gilbert Harman, Richard Creath, and Gillian Russell all draw this conclusion, but in different ways. See Harman (1967, 125–27 and 151), Creath (2007, 328–29), and Russell (2014, 184–86), respectively. Ebbs (2017b, 132–33) argues that Quine's critique of Carnap's notion of analyticity is an application

makes such judgments is suggested by his philosophical naturalism, on which “it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described” (1981a, 21). If reality is only described in science, that suggests there is no way of saying things about the world, true or false, outside of it. This leads us to what I call the *first pass reading* of Quine on significance: an expression is cognitively significant just in case there is an *explication* of it into the language of our best current scientific theory. Here, I use “explication” when discussing Quine’s views akin to the sense of “explication” attributed to Carnap earlier. While there may be differences between Quine and Carnap’s views on explication, it strikes me that their views are similar enough for my purposes. This broader sense of “explication” here comes closest to what Quine (1960) calls *paraphrase*.

As some further evidence for the first pass reading, consider Quine’s remarks in his discussion of empirical equivalence of overall scientific theories. Suppose we encounter an overall scientific theory which is empirically equivalent to and logically compatible with ours but contains terms that cannot be explicated into the language of our theory. If in addition that other theory is less simple and natural than ours, then Quine says we should “bar. . . from our language as meaningless” the terms we cannot paraphrase into our theory’s current language—we take these “alien terms” (1992a, 98) to be insignificant. If the theory is instead equally as simple and natural as ours, Quine takes seriously what he calls the *sectarian* position, which “deem[s]. . . the alien terms of the other theory meaningless” (1992a, 100). As he puts it in 1986a:

It is as if some scientifically undigested terms of metaphysics or religion, say ‘essence’ or ‘grace’ or ‘Nirvana’, were admitted into

of Carnap’s strategy for rejecting metaphysical notions. Jay Campbell (1996) argues that Quine thinks moral statements are cognitively meaningless, and seems to presuppose the first pass reading, especially at (1996, 391). Gregory (2019, 2020), which I will mention in Section 7, suggests that Quine takes some expressions to be meaningless.

science along with all their pertinent doctrine, and tolerated on the ground merely that they contravened no observations. It would be an abandonment of the scientist’s quest for economy and the empiricist’s standard of meaningfulness (Quine 1986a, 157).

This passage suggests a lack of explication into our scientific theory leads Quine to take a term to be meaningless. It also suggests Quine finds something appealing about “the empiricist’s standard of meaningfulness” in application to some terms of metaphysics and religion.¹⁷

I think the first pass reading is nearly correct. I will argue that seeing Quine’s judgments as sharing fundamental similarities Carnap’s views on significance yields a better reading. Let us start with Quine’s views on scientific language.

Quine recommends that we formulate our theories so that all the sentences of our theories are built out of the same kinds of grammatical elements. These grammatical elements are chosen so that all sentences are constructed in a way that makes the logical relations between them manifest and enables us to apply the results of logical theory to them. When a theory is formulated with a grammar of this sort, Quine says that it is formulated in *canonical notation*—it is formulated using predicates as well as the variables, quantifiers, and sentential connectives of first-order classical logic. Quine says his “doctrine” that his canonical notation is “a framework for theory” (title of Section 47 of 1960)

is only that such a canonical idiom can be abstracted and then adhered to in the statement of one’s scientific theory. The doctrine is that all traits of reality worthy of the name can be set down in an idiom of this austere form if in any idiom (Quine 1960, 228).

He thinks of clarity as a benefit of use of extensional languages for that canonical notation: he appeals to clarity in Chapter 5 of Quine (1960) to justify the choice of a canonical notation (see 1960, 161). In Quine’s last paper “Confessions of a Confirmed

¹⁷See also Quine (1992a, 98).

Extensionalist" (2000), he says: "I doubt that I have ever fully understood anything that I could not explain in extensional language" (2000, 500). So, Quine recommends a necessary condition for scientific language: that it is extensional and formulated in canonical notation.

However, Quine rejects some of Carnap's important recommended necessary conditions for scientific language—his recommended general methods or recipes for constructing scientific languages. Quine rejects Carnap's analytic-synthetic distinction, and so has no general characterization of languages of science in terms of semantical rules. This requires Quine to reject Carnap's pragmatism. Without Carnap's analytic-synthetic distinction, he lacks the general distinction between rules of a language we justify for practical reasons and sentences justified by theoretical reasons, the justification of which is guided by such rules. He closes Quine (1951) by saying:

Each man is given a scientific heritage plus a continuing barrage of sensory stimulation; and the considerations which guide him in warping his scientific heritage to fit his continuing sensory promptings are, where rational, pragmatic (Quine 1951, 46).

Quine believes considerations which justify choice of theory are "where rational, pragmatic". Pragmatic in what sense? These considerations are pragmatic because they are guided by a purpose. In (1953b), he says that the "purpose" of a total conceptual scheme is "efficacy in . . . prediction" (1953b, 79). Later in his career, he clarifies the notion of purpose at work here: "For me normative epistemology is a branch of engineering. It is the technology of truth-seeking, or, in a more cautiously epistemological term, prediction" (1986b, 664–65). As he puts it in (1992a), "normative epistemology gets naturalized into a chapter of engineering: the technology of anticipating sensory stimulation" (1992a, 19). So, Quine holds that prediction plays an integral role in the norms the scientific inquirer adopts and employs. Quine calls these norms "engineering" norms: we take our be-

liefs to reasonable, responsible, justified, or required according to differing extents to which they bring about, or can be used to "engineer," a system of beliefs with certain properties. And Quine summarizes all of these properties together as "predicting sensory stimulation."

We can say more about Quine's pragmatic standard by looking at how he characterizes "empiricist discipline" in "On the Very Idea of a Third Dogma" (1981b), when clarifying the "normative aspect" of empiricism (1981b, 39). He says "empiricist discipline" persists "partly in a high degree of dependence upon [observation sentences] on the part of sentences in the interior of the fabric. It is a matter of degree of responsiveness, a matter of more and less responsible science, of better and worse" (1981b, 41). Given his engineering conception of normative epistemology, Quine thinks theories are "responsible" to the extent to which they achieve the aim of "responsiveness" to sensory stimulation.

We must note how loosely Quine characterizes this aim. Although Quine offers definitions of empirical content and empirical equivalence, he lacks a general and sharp explication of cognitive content in terms of empirical content.¹⁸ Quine also denies most individual hypotheses have any empirical content, since to have empirical content on his definition is to imply at least one observational categorical—a sentence of the form "Whenever *A*, *B*" with "*A*" and "*B*" replaced by observation sentences. In light of this, he lacks a general and sharp explication of the relation between individual hypotheses of science and empirical content.¹⁹ I suggest that Quine's insistence on the importance of prediction to scientific method, its "responsiveness" to observation, is a general but loose way of summarizing the commonalities, or family resemblances, between the theories we aim to have. So,

¹⁸See Quine (1992a, 53–56).

¹⁹See, for example, his discussion of "sharing empirical content" in Quine (1995).

he lacks general and sharp methods akin to Carnap's general syntheticity methods.

There are two main reasons for the looseness of Quine's discussion of "responsiveness" to experience. First, Quine believes theories unresponsive to experience are, generally speaking, irresponsible. But there are exceptions that can outweigh this general rule. For example, Quine argues we can accept some axioms of set theory that have no application in empirical science.²⁰ Second, Quine lacks a general and sharp explication of the way in which our theories respond to experience. Quine thinks that, when our theories are falsified by observation, we respond by revising our theories. While this is a general method of science that Quine recommends that we employ, the way scientists should respond cannot be generally and sharply stated. According to Quine's holism, which revision we adopt will require balancing the virtues of simplicity and conservatism, the latter embodied by what he calls the *maxim of minimum mutilation*, which asks us to give up sentences that seem "most suspect, or least crucial, to our overall theory," up until the point where "consistency seems to be restored" (1992a, 14–15). Quine lacks a general and sharp explication of simplicity and conservatism, of what is "most crucial". The exact sense in which theories are simple or crucial can usually only be clarified within a given scientific context—within this or that scientific discipline or inquiry. As Quine puts it with J. S. Ullian in *Quine and Ullian* (1978), theoretical virtues such as simplicity and conservatism are "a matter of degree" (1978, 78) and "require us to look at the candidates for belief in multiple ways, to weigh together a variety of considerations. Decisions in science, as in life, can be difficult. There is no simple touchstone for responsible belief" (1978, 8). For these two reasons, Quine's general pragmatic standard—that theories are "responsible" to the extent to which they achieve the aim of "responsiveness" to sensory stimulation—is not a sharp one. I will label this standard his *context-sensitive empiricism*.

²⁰See Quine (1992a, 90–91).

Even given his differences from Carnap just noted, I propose Quine can still make pragmatic judgments of significance with fundamental similarities to Carnap's. Let us remind ourselves how Carnap's judgments work. There are three notions at play in his judgments:

- (A) significance one-off for a particular language
- (B) insignificance *simpliciter*
- (C) significance *simpliciter*.

(A) is actually a set of cognitive notions, each member of which is expressible via an explication in a scientific meta-language. Carnap defines cognitive significance one-off for a language in a meta-language, giving us a set of expressions in a meta-language applied to expressions of Carnapian languages:

$$\{K_1, K_2, K_3, \dots\}$$

(B) and (C) for Carnap are pragmatic and non-cognitive. To judge some expression is insignificant is to recommend it not be explicated into any language to which a member of the set above applies; to judge it significant is to recommend it be so explicated.

I noted in Section 4 that each K_n applies to all and only the outputs of the formation rules of languages meeting recommendations of the form (PE). This point about Carnap's view indicates to us how Quine can define "significant" one-off for a given language he recommends for scientific purposes: for Quine, significance defined one-off for each such language coincides with what he would call *grammaticality* in each such language—with what is syntactically well-formed in each such language. Quine thinks grammaticality can be defined in a scientific meta-language for languages he recommends for scientific purposes: he argues in (1980b, 22–23) that we can give one-off explications

of grammaticality for scientific languages formed using canonical notation. Grammaticality for such languages can be easily defined recursively, given a choice of predicates given one's scientific purposes. Quine (1980b, 22) is explicit that such explications can be given even if general (what he calls *transcendent*) attempts at behavioral definitions of grammaticality for natural languages fail. Quine (1953a) argues that behavioral definitions of grammaticality for natural languages, if feasible, would explicate "significance" for such languages. Quine denies that they are feasible, as he thinks they rely on the notion of "reactions suggesting bizarreness of idiom" (1953a, 51) that do not clearly delineate what counts as significant, as he later argues in (1970a, 7) and (1980b, 21). But Quine's definitions of grammaticality, and so of significance, for canonical notations do not require such behavioral definitions.

So, we have seen how Quine has something similar to Carnap's one-off notions of significance for scientific languages. Given my reading of Quine we have seen so far, his similarity to Carnap's judgments of insignificance is straightforward: Quine thinks *e* is cognitively insignificant when he recommends *e* not be used or explicated into a language of a scientific theory which meets our purposes—hence, *e* cannot be explicated into the language of any "responsible" scientific theory formulated in canonical notation. Further, he judges *e* is cognitively significant *simpliciter* if he recommends it be so explicated. For each language which does meet our purposes, Quine can define significance one-off for that language in terms of a recursive definition of grammaticality.

While Quine lacks anything like Carnap's (PE), Quine's context-sensitive empiricism helps make sense of his sympathetic remarks about an empiricist standard of meaningfulness: Quine's context-sensitive empiricism can play a role in a recommendation that an expression is meaningless. Given Quine's context-sensitive empiricism, theories "unresponsive to experience" are irresponsible, barring occasional weightier considerations. While not all irresponsible theories have meaningless

terms, terms of irresponsible theories that we cannot explicate into ours are cognitively meaningless. Since terms of irresponsible pseudo-science and metaphysics cannot be paraphrased into science, they will, on Quine's view, be meaningless. So, Quine has an empiricist standard of meaningfulness in this sense: an important factor in a case for the meaningfulness of a "theory" which is not responsive to experience is the fact that this "theory" is unresponsive to experience. As in Carnap's case, judgments of insignificance are not equivalent to judgments about lack of credibility or possible evidence, but epistemology nonetheless plays a role.

Perhaps, unlike Carnap, Quine thinks pragmatic judgments of significance and insignificance are cognitively significant. At one point in his career, Quine suggests that pragmatic judgments of scientific method can be explicated as scientific and hence cognitive statements about means-ends relationships, with efficacy in prediction as the end—something roughly of the form "this belief or method brings about a theory efficacious in prediction".²¹ So, perhaps Quine's recommendations for or against language use can be explicated as cognitive judgments about means-ends relationships. Regardless of the details or the tenability of this proposal, a Quinean conception of significance only requires our pragmatic grip on responsible scientific method, in coordination with definitions of grammaticality for each scientific language. This indicates that Basic Idea may not be wedded to Carnap's non-cognitivism about pragmatic judgments.

²¹"The normative [in epistemology], as elsewhere in engineering, becomes descriptive when the terminal parameter is expressed" (Quine 1986b, 665). The "terminal parameter" here is the "end" of efficacy in prediction. Recall from footnote 3 that Carnap sometimes interprets pragmatic judgments as descriptive in a way similar to Quine's proposal here, but mainly interprets them instead as an expression of one's preferences. An interesting question I will not answer is why Carnap and Quine differ here.

7. Quine on Sense and Nonsense, Part 2

To clarify my reading, I will address work by Peter Hylton and Sander Verhaegh on Quine's views on significance. Verhaegh (2018) is concerned to contrast Quine's approach to traditional metaphysics with Carnap's. While he thinks both Carnap and Quine refuse to pursue such questions, he argues that, unlike Carnap, Quine thinks "metaphysical existence claims are not meaningless but useless" (2018, 52). He concludes:

Quine... can both dismiss metaphysical existence claims and, at the same time, reject Carnap's strict distinction between science and metaphysics because he, unlike Carnap, refuses to appeal to a strict criterion of significance (Verhaegh 2018, 52).

Although Verhaegh does not remark on the passages about empirical equivalence we saw in the previous section, it is natural to extend his reading to them as well. Peter Hylton is led to say something similar to Verhaegh about such passages:

... in the case of the [empirically equivalent but less simple theory], what's doing the philosophical work is not the notion of meaninglessness but rather the decision to exclude certain terms from the scientific language (Hylton 2014, 127).

The aim of Hylton's paper is to argue for the claim that "the idea of nonsense has no significant role in Quine's mature thought" (2014, 115). Hylton provides a cumulative case for this claim, explaining how Quine rejects sharp explications of cognitive significance via empirical content or via the behavior of natural language speakers. Hylton also draws attention to Quine's view that some expressions are "humanly [in]dispensable" even though they cannot be explicated into a scientific language, which I will address soon.

Verhaegh and Hylton need not deny that Quine thinks some expressions are cognitively meaningless. They could grant that there are philosophically uninteresting uses of "meaningless"—in application, say, to ill-formed sentences, gibberish, and perhaps also usages of words that just about all philosophers could

agree commit one to incoherence or self-stultification. Aside from such cases, they think that when Quine says, or seems to say, that an expression is cognitively meaningless, he *instead* is expressing a "decision to exclude certain terms from... scientific language" or *instead* is saying an expression is "useless" within scientific language. So, we can summarize their reading as follows, which I will call HV:

HV: When Quine calls an expression *e* cognitively meaningless, he thinks either *e* is *instead* useless within a scientific language (having no use or explication within a scientific language) or *e* is a philosophically uncontentious example of cognitive meaninglessness (gibberish, etc.).

I interpret Quine differently than Hylton and Verhaegh. On my reading defended so far, contrary to HV, Quine like Carnap takes meaninglessness not *instead* to be uselessness within a scientific language but in effect *to be* uselessness within a scientific language.

To defend my reading further, consider this passage:

The very notion of object, or of one and many, is indeed as parochially human as the parts of speech; to ask what reality is really like, however, apart from human categories, is self-stultifying. It is like asking how long the Nile really is, apart from parochial matters of miles or meters. Positivists were right in branding such metaphysics as meaningless (Quine 1992b, 9).

Quine here is invoking something like Moore's paradox. It is "self-stultifying" to raise doubts about the application of a human category while simultaneously applying it, because it is self-stultifying to saying things such as: "X is real, and I wonder whether X is real". Quine seems to suggest that some metaphysics involves this self-stultification or is simply "meaningless" altogether.²² Later in the same paper, he says that one should not infer a "structuralist ontology"—that the objects we

²²For similar remarks, see Quine (1953b, 78–79).

seem to accept are “mere figments of an empty structure” (1953b, 9)—from what he calls his *global structuralism*. Global structuralism, quickly put, is the thesis that overall theories that describe the same structure as our overall theory, such as theories resulting from what Quine calls *proxy functions* that permute the extensions of our theory’s terms, are equally good as our theory. Quine believes that inferring structuralist ontology from global structuralism “would be to rise above naturalism and revert to the sin of transcendental metaphysics” (1953b, 9).

But why does metaphysics lead to self-stultification or even meaninglessness, on Quine’s view? This can give one the impression that Quine thinks traditional metaphysics is an attempt to speak outside of language, as some read Carnap as believing. But, as in Carnap’s case, I think this reading is mistaken. As Gregory (2019) shows, Quine also makes similar remarks about “transcendental” philosophy and Kant’s *Ding an sich* in Quine (1981a) and his recently published 1980 lectures *Science and Sensibility* in Sinclair (2019). (However, as in Carnap’s case, Quine does not give us a criterion for or list of the “transcendental” philosophy he has in mind). We can understand these remarks, and the one from (1992b) above, as follows. Due to Quine’s naturalism, we cannot identify or describe reality except with notions of existence and reality used within our best current scientific doctrines. So, any attempt Quine could make to explicate the metaphysician’s use of terms such as “exist”, “real”, or “really exist” into cognitively meaningful language would be to explicate them in terms of “real” and “exist” within a scientific theory. Given such an attempt, the metaphysician who attempts to suggest that there is a gap between what exists and what *really* exists makes Moore-paradoxical assertions such as “X is real, and I wonder whether X is real.” Or, alternatively, as Quine suggests at the end of the passage from (1992b, 9) above, what they utter is cognitively meaningless. The same goes for a philosopher who tries to infer a “structuralist ontology” from Quine’s “global structuralism.” Quine says that “naturalism. . . counsel[s] us that reality

is to be grasped only through a man-made conceptual scheme, albeit any of various” (1992b, 9), where “the various” include the equally good theories that describe the same structure. Within any of these various theories, we affirm the existence of objects. Therefore, given Quine’s naturalism, we are unable to say that objects are “mere figments of an empty structure.” To attempt to affirm or deny this “structuralist ontology” results in something self-stultifying or meaningless, thereby committing the “sin of transcendental metaphysics”.²³

Hence, it is given Quine’s proposals for “responsible” language use and theorizing that Quine finds such usages to be self-stultifying or meaningless. They are self-stultifying or meaningless only given pragmatic judgments about language use in inquiry. Hence, contrary to HV, such a judgment is best read neither as saying that the traditional metaphysician’s words are merely useless nor as involving a philosophically uncontentious judgment about what is self-stultifying or meaningless. So, I agree with Verhaegh in noting a similarity in Carnap and Quine’s attitude to some traditional metaphysical debates. But unlike Verhaegh, I believe Quine agreed with Carnap that such debates contain meaningless sentences.

We have seen that Quine’s proposals for “responsible” language use are made within science. According to his naturalism, “we must speak from within a theory, albeit any of various” (1981a, 19). Quine’s recommendation is that the truth-valued judgments we can make in inquiry only occur in scientific theories, which he recommends be formulated in canonical notation and be constrained by his context-sensitive empiricism. I suggest that Quine’s understanding of cognitive significance and insignificance depends crucially on these recommendations. So, as in Carnap’s case, I suggest Basic Idea does not best express how Quine thinks of his own views of significance and insignificance. It has, I hoped, helped us to see commonalities in their

²³See Gregory (2019, 2020), along with other works in Janssen-Lauret (2020).

views, and is worthy of our consideration, as I suggested in Section 5.

Now let us focus on Hylton's concern about "humanly [in]dispensable" expressions. Quine (1960) is well known for arguing that some expressions—such as some uses of propositional attitude verbs—cannot be explicated into a scientific language. Of these expressions, he says:

... in the case of believing, wishing, and the rest there is usually no such fixed point [as the actual utterance] to work from. Not, of course, that this trait makes indirect quotation humanly dispensable... Indirect quotation is here to stay, and so, for similar and further reasons, are the other idioms of propositional attitude (Quine 1960, 218).

With such passages in mind, Hylton says:

Failing to meet the standards for scientific language does not imply or even suggest that a given idiom of ordinary language is meaningless. To the contrary: Quine explicitly recognizes that excluded idioms may be indispensable for legitimate purposes other than 'limning the true and ultimate structure of reality' (Hylton 2014, 128).

By "indispensab[ility] for legitimate purposes other than 'limning the true and ultimate structure of reality'", Hylton refers to indispensability for legitimate purposes other than those that guide choices for explication of expressions into a scientific language. Hylton believes Quine takes language indispensable for these other legitimate purposes to be meaningful, even when such language cannot be explicated into scientific language.

We need a view of meaningfulness to license this claim Hylton attributes to Quine, just as in Carnap's case we need a view to license the thought that metaphysical language is meaningful independent of its usefulness for language in inquiry. As in Carnap's case, I propose that Quine can say that, whatever such a view might be, it gives us a notion of significance distinct from the pragmatic one used in inquiry. In a project to understand

linguistic behavior in general, perhaps there is reason to count expressions such as propositional attitude verbs to be significant given their use meets speakers' extra-scientific purposes. But we can at the same time take those expressions to be insignificant when it comes to our purposes for language use in inquiry. It is plausible the behavioral explications of significance I noted above that Quine discusses are offered within the former project, and not within the latter. That suggests that Quine's later professed inability to make such behavioral explications work that I noted in Section 6 does not undermine his ability to employ a notion of significance and insignificance in the project of inquiry.

While the reader may have allowed me to make this move of distinguishing notions in Carnap's case, they may be reticent to do it in Quine's case. One may claim Quine is not so pluralistic as Carnap is when it comes to explication. While this may be so, I do not think we should underestimate Quine's willingness to be pluralistic about explication. In his discussion of explication in (1960, 257–62), Quine emphasizes that multiple distinct explications of a notion can be useful for different purposes.

Moreover, I would note that there is a hint of textual evidence in favor of Quine's pluralism about significance I am suggesting. In (1970a), after rejecting explications of meaningfulness in terms of behavior or a criterion of verifiability, he says:

Is the notion of meaninglessness, like that of analyticity, to be declared meaningless? Not exactly; this declaration would be false or meaningless. But what we can say of both notions is that no definitions of them are at hand which meet the demands of users of the terms and at the same time the demands of clarity (Quine 1970a, 7–8).

As his discussion shows, the demands of the users of "meaningless" he mentions are demands for explications of meaninglessness in terms of behavior or a criterion of verifiability. This leaves open a different usage of "meaningless" than these that are not guided by such demands, such as the usage I read Quine as using. The sentence right after the above passage starts as follows:

“Besides the philosophers’ normative notion of meaningfulness there is the linguists’ descriptive notion of meaningfulness. . .” (1970a, 8). My suggestion is that he is offering a “philosophers’ normative notion of meaningfulness”—one based on his recommendations for responsible language use in inquiry—but without a sharp criterion of verifiability. That leaves room for a distinct, “descriptive notion” which does not apply to the same expressions that the “normative notion” does.

There is some evidence Quine approves of the basic details of Carnap’s “normative notion” of meaningfulness. In (1954), Quine tells the “imaginary case” of a “logical positivist” named Ixmann who “defends scientists against the demands of a metaphysician”:

The metaphysician argues that science presupposes metaphysical principles, or raises metaphysical problems, and that the scientists should therefore show due concern. Ixmann’s answer consists in showing in detail how people (on Mars, say) might speak a language quite adequate to all of our science but, unlike our language, incapable of expressing the alleged metaphysical issues. (I applaud this answer, and think it embodies the most telling component of Carnap’s own anti-metaphysical representations; but here I digress) (Quine 1954, 126–27).

Quine in his parenthetical comment seems to approve of the way that Carnap addresses metaphysical claims—he argues that certain metaphysical expressions, as far as he can tell, cannot be explicated into a language fit for our purposes in scientific inquiry.²⁴ In *ESO*, for example, Carnap recommends that the demand that we establish that numbers are “real” before using a framework is a fruitless one, suggesting such a usage lacks explication into scientific language. In saying such a scientific language is “unlike our language”, I take it Quine is referring to our natural language inexact for scientific purposes that contains words such as “real” or “substance” that may lead us to

²⁴See, for example, Morris (2020) and essays in Ebbs (2017c) making a similar point.

place fruitless demands on science. Quine, like Carnap, does not propose using scientific language in the sense of uttering or inscribing formal scientific languages frequently, as he makes clear in (1960, Section 47).²⁵ It serves to explicate our judgments in inquiry. When we let the language “adequate to all scientific purposes” explicate our judgments, we are then “incapable of expressing” the alleged metaphysical issues for the purposes of inquiry.

I do not think these last two paragraphs provide definitive textual evidence that Quine knew all along he was tracking Carnap’s notion of significance. I have provided some evidence that Quine’s own discussion of significance in some places has parallels to Carnap’s, and that Quine might have been at least dimly aware of this. The core of my argument does not rely on Quine’s awareness of Carnap’s views, whether dim or clear. My core claim about the view of significance and insignificance I attribute to Quine is this: it is a view of significance and insignificance that shares fundamental similarities to Carnap’s, that is consistent with Quine’s rejection of Carnap’s views on analyticity and his general syntheticity methods, and that helps make sense of Quine’s remarks.

I have made several interpretive claims in this paper about two different philosophers, and also have acknowledged that I am not merely engaged in interpretation. So, at this juncture, it is worthwhile to summarize the nature of my interpretation of

²⁵It would be nice if there were evidence that Quine thought this way about Carnap’s work before Quine lodged his fundamental objections to Carnap’s work. I think there is some. Quine’s description of Carnap’s project in (1954) parallels the way Quine describes Carnap’s project of logical syntax in Carnap (1937a) in his 1934 lectures at Harvard. (Quine claims that he “was very much [Carnap’s] disciple” (1970b, 41) from 1932 to 1938). There, he claims that Carnap’s claim that logic and mathematics are true by syntactic decision “shows that all metaphysical problems as to an *a priori* synthetic are gratuitous, and let in only by ill-advised syntactic procedures” (Quine 1934, 66). This suggests that Quine approved of showing that metaphysics was “gratuitous” by showing its use is contrary to what language we recommend (is “ill-advised”).

Carnap and Quine. I used Basic Idea to frame my discussion and suggested it is worthy of consideration. I suggested Basic Idea is a *roughly* correct interpretation of their views. It is only roughly correct because the details of the scientific languages they recommend for inquiry are necessary to understand their views and the way they understand their own views. I have also provided what I take to be correct interpretations of Carnap and Quine's views on significance and insignificance. There is less explicit textual basis for my interpretation of Quine than Carnap. But I believe my reading of Quine is correct at least in the following sense, which I just called my core claim about Quine's view: it is a view of significance and insignificance that shares fundamental similarities to Carnap's, that is consistent with Quine's rejection of Carnap's views on analyticity and his general syntheticity methods, and that helps make sense of Quine's remarks.

It is worth noting that some humanly indispensable expressions that Quine thinks are cognitively meaningless are useful for constructing and using scientific languages. They meet legitimate purposes in scientific practice, but not within scientific language. Later in Quine's work, he seems to warm to the idea that some *de dicto* uses of propositional attitude verbs can be translated into scientific language. But he is less sanguine about *de re* uses. In 1992a, he summarizes his view as follows:

I conclude that the propositional attitudes *de re* resist annexation to scientific language, as propositional attitudes *de dicto* do not. At best the ascriptions *de re* are signals pointing a direction in which to look for informative ascriptions *de dicto* (Quine 1992a, 71).

A few sentences above this remark, he suggests that we can "garner" empirical content for a sentence with *de re* usage such as "There are some whom Ralph believes to be spies" by "interrogat[ing] Ralph and compil[ing] some of his pertinent beliefs *de dicto*" (Quine 1992a, 71). What this suggests is that Quine thinks *de re* propositional attitude verbs can have what I will call a *cognitive role*. An expression has a cognitive role just in case it is useful

for suggesting or producing cognitively meaningful sentences. Expressions with a cognitive role may not have a use within cognitive language and so may not be cognitively meaningful, but they have a use for producing cognitively meaningful language nonetheless.

Although it is not in this paper's scope to examine Quine's views on analyticity in detail, my reading allows me to agree with those who read Quine as judging 'analytic' to be meaningless. If so, I can disagree with Hylton that "the idea of nonsense has no significant role in Quine's mature thought" (Hylton 2014, 115).²⁶ To be sure, Quine does not view searching for meaningless expressions to be one of the philosopher's main activities. But the same goes for Carnap. He says that, in the Vienna Circle, "very little time was wasted in a polemic against metaphysics. The anti-metaphysical attitude showed itself chiefly in the choice of the language used in the discussion"—that is, in the choice to use scientific language (1963a, 21). On my reading of Carnap and Quine, by not using certain language to formulate our sci-

²⁶My reading of Quine raises an interesting question about his views on analyticity that I will here quickly address; fuller investigation is beyond this paper's scope. Quine (1951, Section 4), argues that Carnap's "one-off" definition of analytic in *L* does not help us understand what "*S* analytic for *L*" is for variable *L*. I have argued that Quine does not accept the general methods for forming one-off definitions of significance that Carnap proposed, in part due to his objection to Carnap's analytic-synthetic distinction. The question, then, is whether Quine can offer one-off definitions of significance for each scientific language that are not subject to his criticism of Carnap in Section 4 of "Two Dogmas." As I read Quine, his demand for an explication of analytic for *L* for variable *L* rests on his standards for scientific explication in this case. Evidence for this point can be found in his discussion in (1953c) of definitions of truth and his remark that "the urgency of the demand for definition is proportional to the obscurity of the term" (1953c, 138) when briefly comparing truth to analyticity. I have argued that one-off definitions of significance *do* meet Quine's scientific standards for explication, since Quine thinks we can recursively define grammaticality for each scientific language and use that as a cognitive explication of significance for each language. So, I suggest his criticism of Carnap in Quine (1951) is compatible with my reading in this paper. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

entific and philosophical discussions, we thereby “show” our “attitude” that it is meaningless, since our unwillingness to use it to formulate such discussions is evidence that we think it fails to meet our purposes.

8. Conclusion

Sometimes we use “meaningless” as a pejorative, perhaps to say that something is obviously false or wrongheaded. But I submit we sometimes can and do use “meaningless” in a different way to which Basic Idea helps to clarify.²⁷ My clarification of Carnap’s judgments also indicates such a usage neither has implausible consequences nor collapses into distinct notions. Judgments of insignificance can be driven by epistemological concerns; nevertheless, such judgments are not equivalent to epistemological concerns. Judgments of insignificance are separable from judgments of falsehood, allowing for the possibility of difficult cases in distinguishing them where pragmatic judgment calls need to be made. Moreover, the pluralistic attitude towards significance from Carnap and Quine I have mentioned may allow us to resolve a tension that is common in our thinking about significance. If our project is to describe and explain natural language, we may judge an expression *e* is significant on a notion of significance suited for that project. If our project is to engage in inquiry and recommend language to use or not use for it, we may judge the same *e* is insignificant by means of Carnap and Quine’s pragmatic notion. Finally, even if Carnap and Quine would not fully endorse or employ it, Basic Idea also helps us better to appreciate the force of their judgments. It indicates it is not enough to

²⁷Consider, however, G. A. Cohen’s explication of “bullshit” (offered as an alternative to Harry Frankfurt’s explication), directed at “certain kind of nonsense” that is “by nature unclarifiable” (2002, 33). Perhaps one could use “bullshit” as a pejorative version of Carnap and Quine’s pragmatic use of “insignificant”, thereby providing an explication of “bullshit” roughly similar to Cohen’s proposal.

reject their judgments as a result of a bygone era of empiricism or a stingy theory of meaning. Unless we are applying a different notion of meaning altogether, to reject their judgments in a given case requires us to make a judgment engaged in inquiry about how best to pursue it.

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