The Search for the Absolute: Analytic Philosophy as an Insufficient Response to Idealism

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Contemporary Analytic Philosophy finds itself within a historical context, answering questions that have been handed to it by earlier philosophers. Specifically, contemporary Analytic Philosophy finds itself responding to the Idealists of the nineteenth century in the hope of justifying the "new science" that seems to give us so many practical benefits. In doing this, questions arise as to how contemporary Analytic Philosophy will answer the problems that Idealists struggled with. In the following, a brief overview of the Idealist enterprise will be contrasted with two contemporary Analytic Philosophers, namely Rudolf Carnap and W.V. Quine, in order to understand how the latter two deal with the philosophical problems handed to them by their tradition. Specifically, the question of universals and their relation to the absolute, and the assumption behind this concerning intuition are going to be investigated. This article will argue that the Idealist tradition raised important questions that Carnap and Quine were not able to answer. It will critique Carnap and Quine as failing to find the universal required for thought and propose an alternative pathway to finding the solution.

1. Preliminary Context

We do not find contemporary analytic philosophy existing in a vacuum, and so it will be helpful, and in a real sense necessary, to first examine the historical context. Both continental and analytic philosophy can trace their lineage to Immanuel Kant's framing of the problems facing philosophy. Having been stirred out of his dogmatic slumbers by David Hume, Kant endeavored to give an explanation of how we come to have synthetic *a priori* knowledge. He defines this as knowledge that tells us something about the world, in contrast to purely analytic truths, while at the same time not being derived from experience. His answer distinguishes between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds. The noumenal world affects our senses in a way that is then processed into spacio-temporal information that we recognize as the phenomenal world of our experience. We cannot directly perceive the real world, because we cannot get behind the veil of the phenomenal. Spacio-temporal properties are not inherent to the noumenal world, but instead are necessary for our minds to think. This synthetic *a priori* is an intuition in that it is not proven by something else. Intuition is going to

be extremely important in that each Idealist will assume that we do have such an epistemic property rooted in the absolute. Frederick Copleston explains Kant's "Copernican revolution" as being different than a common form of Idealism. Instead, "what he is suggesting is that we cannot know things, that they cannot be objects of knowledge for us, except in so far as they are subjected to certain *a priori* conditions of knowledge on the part of the subject."[1]

Kant's framework also dictates that the material for knowledge that we have to deal with is only observation. Observation is taken as the basic unit for knowing. This presents serious problems since observations are always particular. Without universals and categories, thought, and theories themselves, would become impossible. This problem was seen by F.C.S. Schiller.[2] He did not give a method for obtaining universals, but rather tried to avoid the issue by rooting the meaning of words in their social use. Meaning is established use in society. Any individual thinker that goes against the social use is mad or sick. Only great individuals, like Napoleon, can control and coerce societal usage of words (consider Roskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment").

In contrast to Schiller, the Idealists tried to explain universals with the concept of an Absolute. The problem became how to preserve individual human personality within the universal. Francis Herbert Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet reduced the human personality to "the mouthpiece of the Absolute speaking about itself."[3] In this thinking there is a clear acosmic strain, and it is unclear how this view purports to be different from Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism. In contrast to this acosmic form of Idealism, Andrew Seth Pringle Pattison "sounded the bugle call of rebellion."[4] He argued that in some sense the human personality is impervious. Even so, to the objection by Bosanquet that his position would lead to pluralism, Pattison admitted that while individuals may in fact be abstractions, so is the Absolute.

James Ward reacted somewhat differently than did Pattison to Bradley and Bosanquet.[5] He, like Pattison, stressed the "ultimacy of human personality," and admitted that "In whatever sense you say Absolute, in that sense you cannot say many."[6] This drove him to argue that we cannot begin with the notion of God, or the Absolute, but must begin with our conception of the world. He argued that because the Absolute does not transcend the world, it must be subject to the laws of the world. "Whatever implications experience may involve, it surely cannot involve that of transcending itself.

Such misled transcendence, if it have any validity, must really be immanence at bottom."[7]

In order to try and avoid the unappealing conclusions reached by each side of Idealism, Josiah Royce endeavored to construct an Idealism that would do justice to the human individual and keep the Absolute as beyond. This Absolute is so fully aware of itself that it is able to see itself as no self, but rather as a kind of self-absorber. The Absolute is able to see itself not as reality, but as appearance. In this way the many of experience are contained in the One of the Absolute. The human individual is equally real in comparison to the Absolute, yet neither is more than appearance.

G. Watts Cunningham summarizes very well the problems facing this tradition of Idealism. He argues in his book, *The Idealistic Argument in Recent British and American Philosophy*, that the entire matter can be understood very succinctly.[8] If we endeavor to understand the Absolute from "within our own experience," then we must allow some room for the human individual which is experiencing. If the other side of the coin is tried, and we conceive of the Absolute somehow apart from our experience, then it remains unintelligible to us. Neither position is palatable, and this gives the nominalist the sense that he was right all along.

It is in the above context that contemporary analytic philosophy finds itself. Observation is the only material the human individual has as the subject for knowing. Attempts to account for how observation can be anything but particular have not faired well in the eyes of the analytic philosopher. By limiting itself to experience, and accepting the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal, analytic philosophy has restricted any discussion of what transcends experience. Meaning and what is universal cannot be found in the transcendental. Because meaning and ideas will of necessity appeal to what is universal, analytic philosophy must separate meaning from ideas and instead look for meaning in use or behavior.

In light of the above history, and without wanting to consider every particular analytic philosopher, Rudolf Carnap and W.V. Quine stand out as being instances of counter-idealism in contemporary analytic philosophy which can give us a view of how this school has developed as heirs to the above history. Because of the need for universals, it is going to be especially important to see how these thinkers attempt to avoid any transcendent Absolute, while at the same time trying to give a theory, which is the kind of thing that needs universals. Both Carnap and Quine offer a brand of nomenalism, arguing that *all meaning is relative*. Carnap is going to pres-

ent us with a theory that all is language relative, thus preserving the analytic/synthetic distinction within any given language. Quine gives a similar argument, but goes a step further to argue that the analytic/synthetic is a distinction without a difference, and hence there is no real analytic. This leaves only observation and particulars.

2. Carnap

Due to the complexity of both Carnap and Quine, it will be helpful to summarize the claims that are important for the current discussion.

1)   There is no special intuition that gives us insight into the noumenal.
2)   What counts as *analytic* is relative to the framework within which one is operating.
3)   Frameworks can be established somewhat arbitrarily, and there are no rules as to how they must be established.
4)   There are no principles, such a non-contradiction, which must be in every language.
5)   All is relative, and truth is immanent.

Carnap's "The Logical Syntax of Language" provides us with a look at how he proposes to do the work of a contemporary analytic philosopher. Carnap begins his forward with the sentence "for nearly a century mathematicians and logicians have been striving hard to make logic an exact science."[9] The concern at the time was to show how mathematics is about the real world and not only about appearances (a problem inherited from Kant). Carnap is going to argue that logic cannot do this. In contrast to the Idealists noted above, the analytic is relative to frameworks, and so different frameworks could provide different analytic claims. Carnap is denying that there is some *intuition* that gives thinkers access to the world in itself.

Carnap states as his goal "to give a systematic exposition of such a method, namely, of the method of 'logical syntax.'"[10] He claims that there is a growing conviction that the study of metaphysics has no real scientific nature.[11] All truth claims are immanent to a framework, and so what one framework says is true in the realm of metaphysics may not turn out to be true in another framework. Unlike observations, which are objective in their intersubjectivity, metaphysics is often based on premises which turn out to

be true because of the laws of the language involved.

Carnap states that one of the chief aims of the book is to "eliminate this standpoint, together with the pseudo-problems and wearisome controversies which arise as a result of it."[12] The standpoint in question is the belief that any "new language-form must be proved to be 'correct' and to constitute a faithful rendering of 'the true logic'."[13] Instead, Carnap maintains that we are at liberty when it comes to which form of language we choose.[14] "Both the forms of construction for sentences and the rules of transformation (the latter are usually designated as 'postulates' and the 'rules of inference') may be chosen quite arbitrarily."[15] For Carnap this opens up a "boundless ocean of unlimited possibilities."[16]

What this does is eliminates the need for some special intuition which somehow gives us a window into the world. In this tradition Kant distinguished between pure reason (*Vernunft*) and understanding (*Verstand*), the former of which performs a regulative function on our scientific knowledge. Carnap avoids *intuition* where we get at the real world, and instead argues that any language can be used in the place of Kant's *pure reason*. There are other possible explanations of how to know the world besides the view of intuition that Carnap rejects. This view of intuition is Kant's attempt to preserve knowledge and objectivity in his distinction between reality (the *noumenal*) and reality as experienced (the *phenomenal*). And yet, even in his rejection, Carnap accepts the basic Kantian framework where the reality is known through the structures of the mind.

In order to avoid becoming lost in the realm of particulars, Carnap gives a theory of language relativity, which purports to do in the area of language what we cannot do in the realm of the real. Even so, *language* becomes for Carnap what *being* was for the earlier Idealists. There is not one way to do logic. There is not Logic, only logics. Instead of beginning with some basic logical symbols and then working from there to sentences and inferences, Carnap proposes that we can choose the rules of inference, and these will determine the fundamental logical symbols.[17] This even includes non-contradiction.[18] He calls this standpoint the "principle of tolerance," and believes that it relates to mathematics and all questions of logic.[19]

Carnap does provide us with some criteria by which we might decide which language to use. These include simplicity and pragmatism. Even so, these can be abandoned. What we end up with are frameworks that exist as islands. Any critique of a language comes from within another language, and so begs the question.

3. Quine

As with Carnap, I want to present a concise but not comprehensive list of doctrines that help identify Quine in relation to other philosophers.

1)   Holism, explained with the metaphor of a "web," or "net," where all of a person's beliefs are interconnected.
2)   Behaviorism, although perhaps only of the methodological kind.
3)   The belief that all is revisable, no idea or sentence is immune to this relativity, truth is immanent to a system.
4)   Meaning is a function of an entire system.
5)   Experience is the firing of our sense receptors—a brain activity.
6)   Simplicity, conservatism, and pragmatism, all help us pick a framework, although even these standards are revisable.

There are similarities between Carnap and Quine. One might expect this given that Quine studied under Carnap. Nevertheless, important differences emerge. We will be looking at Quine's *Pursuit of Truth*, the revised edition. In this book, he gives us a good look at his over-all view. Specifically, Quine tells us at the end of this work that: "what the indeterminacy of translation shows is that the notion of propositions as sentence meanings is untenable. What the empirical under-determination of global science shows us is that there are various defensible ways of conceiving the world."[20] This may appear similar to Carnap, and rightly so, but Quine sought to "escape both from intuition and from Carnap's linguistic conventionalism."[21] Quine, like Carnap, wants to avoid the Platonic or Kantian view of the analytic. Quine, in the earlier days, even rejected in some sense the notion of analyticity altogether. The difference appears in that Quine, unlike Carnap, does not allow for changes in a "theory" that do not count as changes to an entire "framework." Because of his holism, Quine believes that any changes constitute a change to the framework as a whole.

In order to understand this idea of holism, Quine gives us rules for revision. For Quine, we begin in the middle, because "scientific reasoning begins with a body of beliefs, the beliefs that we do in fact have."[22] We are not supposed to worry about how we got those beliefs, and they may be revised later in light of observations. This revision is governed by two rules, namely simplicity and conservatism. We want our world and life view to be simple, and so when faced with the need to revise we will do so in a way that

preserves this simplicity. Similarly, and certainly related, is that we should favor revising a few beliefs, rather than many, when we have the choice. "Any statement is open to revision, including the statements of logic and mathematics, and any statement may be retained come what may in the way of evidence, should we choose to retain it."[23] Consequently, "so-called logical laws are just further statements within the system and hence open to revision."[24] Quine's system is essentially rules for revision of beliefs in the context of maximizing simplicity and minimizing change.[25]

Quine finds problems in the notion of analyticity because, at least earlier in his career, he did not see how analyticity could be defined in behaviorist terms. For whatever reason, Carnap did not provide Quine with such a definition when asked. Quine does appear to allow for some of what might be called "analytic sentences" later in his career, but even so the crux of the matter is similar to Carnap in that these analytic sentences are not windows into the "real world."

4. Similarities Between Carnap and Quine

There are important differences between Carnap and Quine. Some of these were noted above. Even so, for our purposes here, they are very similar. The Idealists saw a need for universals, as well as for intuition, and saw that these could only be justified if there was an absolute. Carnap and Quine reject this entire project. In their rejection of intuition, these two thinkers stand together in clear opposition to the Idealists.

5. Problems for Carnap and Quine

Both Carnap and Quine have provided us with a view that reduces the notion of analyticity to framework relativity. In this they are sidestepping the problem that the Idealists mentioned above had to deal with. The Idealists needed to root their notion of intuition in some absolute. Carnap and Quine have given up on the ability to have some "window" into the "real world" and replaced it with framework relativism. Even so, concerns arise which threaten the view these thinkers present. First, there are concerns about how we can make a judgment as to what works in the pragmatic sense. Second, words still seem to stand for universals, and this will need to be explained. Third, framework relativism appears not only to create islands between each framework, but also between each thinker. These three concerns will

be looked at before any conclusion can be reached about how Carnap and Quine have dealt with the problems the Idealists were wrestling with.

Both Carnap and Quine propose that we can evaluate languages based on some pragmatic evaluation system. The problem is that what counts as *working* is as relative as meaning and therefore cannot settle questions about meaning. What *works* depends on the framework in which the evaluation is being made, and therefore pragmatic systems assume a world and life view. That is, pragmatic systems assume answers to the metaphysical questions concerning what is real. What works for a Hindu may not work for a Materialist. We cannot establish what works without first establishing what is real. Both Carnap and Quine assume an essentially naturalistic explanation of the world and reality. They assume an answer to the question "what is real?" and then use this to pick a language which as a theory ends up giving us an answer to the question of the real.

We might be tempted to solve this by saying that the pragmatic evaluation system is not something different people share, but is instead completely individual. But each individual is faced with the same problem as above. I cannot decide what works for me without first having some system in which I am operating. If I am operating within Theism then I will have a very different view of what *works* compared to another who is operating within Materialism or Hinduism. Either way, I do not start with a pragmatic system that works independent of systems and then place myself within one. What *works* is system relative. It begs the question to use pragmatism to evaluate across systems.

The second problem is that both Carnap and Quine appear to be using a universal in that they are giving us a theory. They are assuming, in some sense, that there is the kind of thing that can be spoken of as a *theory*. Can we distinguish between theory and non-theory? Between thought and non-thought? Here is the problem of the universal, which the Idealists were trying to solve. If we have only our particular experiences, we cannot claim some universal concept. The Idealists lost the individual in the Absolute, what do Carnap and Quine do? Perhaps some form of behaviorism might be employed, where terms are seen not as universals but as operators such as "and" and "or." This only works if one is willing to admit that he does not have *inner thoughts*. Systems have been devised where the inner thoughts of others are denied, but to deny one's own inner thoughts appears to be self-referentially absurd.

Third, framework relativism presents us with the problem of islands. Quine admits there are problems when it comes to interpretation between frameworks, but any problems for this kind of interpretation will be problems for interpretation between any individuals. It is not just that whole societies may have problems correctly interpreting each other's languages, individuals have no way of knowing if they are correctly understanding the other. Even so, this may not be a problem for Carnap and Quine. It would be a problem for the Idealists mentioned above, because they believed there was some real fact of the matter to be misunderstood. But for Carnap and Quine, the behaviorism noted earlier could provide a solution to this problem. All we have to work with is the behavior of other individuals, and we can interpret this in relation to our framework. There is not some one framework that we all need to share in order to be able to interact. Even so, such behaviorism is in many ways repugnant as it reduces even the individual making behavioristic claims to non-personal activities. It is not clear that such a reduction can be done, either consistently or in living one's life. The same problem confronted Bradley and Bosenquet earlier.

6. Possible Solutions

Carnap and Quine have drawn out the implications of Kant's system for meaning and language. Indeed, there is a sense in which we can say that they are more consistent in this area than was Kant. However, it does not follow from this that we should accept the relativity of meaning and rejection of knowledge about reality. Instead, their conclusions can be viewed as *reductio* arguments that can encourage us to reevaluate Kantianism. There are two considerations that will help illustrate this. The first is that the claim of ultimate relativity does not solve any significant philosophical problems, the second is that a reduction of ultimate relativity may prove to be incoherent.

First, to assert that something is relative is to assert that it stands in relation to something else. If the meaning of a term is relative to the system in which it operates, then the question is "are there more and less basic beliefs within a system?" A basic belief is one that is presupposed by other beliefs, and the most basic beliefs of a system are those that are presupposed but do not themselves have presuppositions. Meaning is relative to one's basic beliefs. Quine's holism does not exclude the reality that some beliefs are more basic than others in that he admits we have beliefs which we do

not want to give up because giving them up would require us to change a great deal. In order to understand meaning we must identify basic beliefs and how to select basic beliefs when presented with options.

By what criterion can basic beliefs be tested for meaning? If the meaning of other parts of a system is relative to one's basic beliefs, are basic beliefs relative to anything? It is helpful to note a distinction between what Aristotle might call "laws of thought," and what contemporary logicians might call "rules of inference." Rules of inference, establish what system one is working with. But the "laws of thought" that Aristotle speaks of, such as the law of non-contradiction, apply to rules of inference as well as everything else. That something cannot both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect can be used as a rule of inference but also applies to rules of inference. If the law of identity is merely a rule of inference in some systems, and does not apply everywhere, then in some systems there are rules of inference which are not themselves. It may be the case that in such a system there is no reflexive relation, or no rule of inference outlining identity, but that says nothing about whether rules of inference are themselves (whatever they are, they are what they are). The laws of thought are transcendental in that they can be applied to basic beliefs of any system but are not themselves limited to a given system.

The second consideration is that the relativity of meaning applies to languages considered at the social level, but also at the individual level. If Carnap and Quine want to hold that we do not have any criterion for judging between basic beliefs as outlined above, then it is unclear that we can ever know what any other person means. The solution to this is often pragmatism and behaviorism. The problem with pragmatism is that "what works" is relative to "what is real," and therefore "what works" cannot settle "what is real." The problem with behaviorism is that behavior has no necessary connection to meaning, as in a person acting as if they are in pain and a person being in pain. One might choose to live as if there are other minds or as if the meaning of what others are saying can be known, but one cannot give a rational justification for why this view ought to be chosen over its opposite. This can be used as a *reductio* in that if a philosophical theory ends in the inability to establish meaning then that is grounds for rejecting that theory.

This raises a false dilemma that much of contemporary philosophy operates within: Either we have a special intuition that gives us knowledge of the Absolute/reality, or meaning is a construct of the mind and therefore

relative. The first often appears in the context of those who claim that basic beliefs are simple experiences that give insight into reality (as opposed to basic beliefs are those beliefs that are logically basic—without presuppositions). The latter is common among those who emphasize the role of interpretation. This is a false dilemma in that there are other options. Minimally, if thought can be distinguished from non-thought, then we can speak about the laws of thought (that which is the basis for the distinction between thought and non-thought). Classically, these have been *identity*, *non-contradiction*, and *excluded middle*. While meaning may be relative to a worldview context, it also assumes that these laws have not been violated. This is especially true for basic beliefs since they establish the meaning context for the rest of the worldview. Furthermore, these laws of thought govern all thought, and are therefore trans-worldview.

7. Conclusion

How does this help us with contemporary analytic philosophy? The above analysis of Carnap and Quine shows that their project is simply an outworking of implications found in the Kantian tradition. This is especially interesting because many thinkers in the analytic tradition believe that they do not hold to Kantian assumptions or are not influenced by Kant. The Idealists to whom contemporary philosophy is responding have tried to answer questions that have deep historical significance. It is not clear that claiming all thought is language relative answers these problems. Indeed, if there are no trans-framework/worldview principles that can be utilized in making judgments about another's framework, there is not much sense in continuing a critique on Carnap and Quine. If there are such principles, Carnap and Quine have not given us the ability to discover them. This failure can serve as a source of motivation to rethink the Kantian framework and implications that have dominated contemporary philosophy.

Notes

¹ Copleston, Frederick. *A History of Philosophy Volume 6: Wolff to Kant.* Search Press, New York: 1994. 225.
² VanTil, Cornelius. God and the Absolute, in The Works of Cornelius Van Tel: 1895-1987. Oak Harbor: Logos Library Systems. 1999. 4.
³ " VanTil, Cornelius. Recent American Philosophy, in *The Works of Cornelus Van Til 1895-1987*. Oak Harbor: Logos Library Systems. 1999. 14.

[4] VanTil, *Recent*, 15.

[5] VanTil, *Recent*, 2.

[6] VanTil, *Recent*, 16.

[7] VanTil *Recent*, 17.

[8] VanTil, *Recent*, 10.

[9] Carnap, Rudolf. *The Logical Syntax of Language*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1959. xiii.

[10] Carnap, xiii.

[11] Carnap, xiii.

[12] Carnap, xv.

[13] Carnap, xiv.

[14] Carnap, xv.

[15] Carnap, xv.

[16] Carnap, xv.

[17] Carnap, xv.

[18] Carnap, xv.

[19] Carnap, xv.

[20] Quine, W.V. *Pursuit of Truth*. Revised Edition. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1992. 102.

[21] Creath, Richard. *Dear Carnap, Dear Van*. Los Angeles: University of California Press. 11.

[22] Creath, 15.

[23] Creath, 15.

[24] Creath, 16.

[25] Creath, 21.