

Carnapian Voluntarism and Global Expressivism: Reply to Carus

Huw Price

Affiliation: Faculty of Philosophy, University of Cambridge

Email: hp331@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

In defending so-called global expressivism I have often seen Carnap as an ally. Both Carnap's rejection of "externalist" metaphysics and his implicit pluralism about linguistic frameworks seem grist for the global expressivist's mill. André Carus argues for a third point of connection, via Carnap's voluntarism. I note two reasons for thinking that this connection is not as close as Carus contends.

André Carus's fascinating piece (Carus 2018) taught me much that I didn't know about Carnap. If I add that that is less of an achievement than it might sound, it is to acknowledge the extent of my ignorance, not to qualify my admiration of Carus's paper.

Still, the paper reminded me of a time when my ignorance of Carnap was even more profound. As Carus notes, Carnap is not mentioned in *Facts and the Function of Truth* (Price 1988), turning up for the first time in my work in Price (1997b). My views are clearly similar in the two pieces, so why no Carnap in the former?

The answer is that I knew very little about Carnap at that point, and certainly didn't know "Empiricism, semantics and ontology" (ESO). It was Michaelis Michael – then newly returned to Australia from graduate work in Princeton, where he learnt his Carnap from Dick Jeffrey and David Lewis – who first called my attention to it, sometime around 1990. I believe he did so in response to my 'Metaphysical pluralism' (Price 1992), written around 1989, which is another piece in which Carnap now seems notable by his absence.

When I first read ESO I had one of the strongest senses I can recall of encountering a philosophical fellow traveler. (Perhaps only my discovery of Simon Blackburn's work a decade earlier stands out more, in this respect.) The opportunity to put Carnap's insights to work came when I was invited to the 1997 Joint Session, and given the opportunity to choose my respondent. The organizers suggested a name or two in philosophy of physics, but I had a different target in mind. Those were the early days of what John Hawthorne and I (O'Leary-Hawthorne and Price 1996) had just dubbed the "Canberra Plan" – Frank Jackson's Lewis-inspired global programme for metaphysics. I hoped to use the occasion to present what I saw as a global alternative to metaphysics in the Canberra sense.¹

Jackson kindly agreed to join me in a symposium, and I had my opportunity to appeal to Carnap. Since (Price 1992) I had been putting Quine to work for my purposes, interpreting him – correctly, as I still think, but against the prevailing view that Quine revived Ontology with a capital "O" – as a metaphysical deflationist. To put Carnap to work I had to argue that his own rejection of metaphysics was actually untouched by Quine's famous criticisms – that in that respect Carnap and Quine were on the same page, with the difference that Carnap was at least a nascent functional pluralist. I developed this argument in several pieces (see Price 1997a, 2007, 2009)

So far as I can recall, I did not engage at all at that point with what Carus calls Carnap's voluntarism. My loss, for it is a fascinating and in some ways exhilarating idea. It would have been appealing to me then for the reasons that I had long found Rorty's views appealing. Not only is language less of a prison than philosophy usually imagines, in not

¹ I first heard about the Canberra Plan from the late Peter Menzies, then based in Canberra himself, in mid-1993. At the beginning of the Australasian Association of Philosophy Conference in Adelaide that year, Menzies and I took the opportunity to indulge a common interest in cake and coffee, while he told me the latest philosophical news from ANU. He described Jackson's generalised Lewisian approach, and I was immediately sceptical. "If that worked you could apply it to ethics", I said, thinking of this as a reductio. "Have I got news for you!", Menzies replied, and told me that that Philip Pettit would be doing exactly that, later in the conference. (Pettit was thus outsmarting me, in the sense of the Philosophical Lexicon, and in J J C Smart's home town, to boot.) Menzies and I also discussed the implicit semantic presuppositions of the Canberra programme – the way it seemed to take for granted notions such as truth and reference – and the thought that it was likely to run into difficulties if its global ambitions required it to apply its own methods to the notions on which these presuppositions relied. More than a decade later, that discussion matured into our piece "Is semantics in the plan?" (Menzies and Price 2009).

being answerable to norms that are not of our making – a relic of theistic authority, as Rorty puts it – but we can put the walls wherever we like! What could have been more appealing to a would-be philosophical rebel like me (past forty, by that point, but still wearing his hair long)?

Twenty years later, however, I'm a pillar of the expressivist establishment. While it flatters me that Carus should compare my view to Carnap's vigorous voluntarism, does the comparison really stand up? Let's turn to Carus's questions:

What exactly is the relation between global expressivism and global voluntarism? Are they different ways of articulating the same idea? Or are they in some way incompatible? (Carus 2018, MS, 26)

I would like to mark two distinctions between global expressivism (GE) and Carnap's global voluntarism (GV), at least as Carus presents it. One distinction makes GE broader than GV, the other makes it narrower. While the former may be simply a matter of presentation, the latter runs deeper.

Anarchists in lab coats?

First to the sense in which GE as I present it is broader than GV. As Carus presents Carnap, his voluntarism is a voluntarism *for science*. Carus speaks of "Carnap, looking around at what *scientists* actually do" (MS, 24, my emphasis), and of Carnap's concern with "the constructed languages that lie at the heart of the *advanced sciences*" (MS, 28, my emphasis). And he sees Carnap's programme as continuous with other reflections *on science*.

[I]f ... take Carnap's classification seriously, we recognize that most of what has been going on in methodology, philosophy of science, and philosophical history of science over the past half-century or so is part of pragmatics in Carnap's sense, pure or descriptive. (Carus 2018, MS, 11)

By my lights, however, this looks like a peculiarly blinkered conception of what we do and could do with language. Carnap comes out as the kind of free spirit who is up for anything at all, linguistically speaking, so long as it doesn't involve removing his white coat.

In my own work, I have emphasized that I take it that science may be only one of the games we play with language, and indeed that a good science of language might reveal that this is so. As I put it near the end of "Naturalism without representationalism":

Subject naturalism suggests that science might properly take a more modest view of its own importance. It imagines a scientific discovery that science is not all there is – that science is just one thing among many that we do with "representational" discourse. (Price 2004a, 199)

As I say, I take this to be a broadly (late) Wittgensteinian point.

In this sense, then, GE as I imagine it seems to be considerably broader than GV as Carus presents it (and perhaps as Carnap conceives it – as I note in Price (1997b), the possibility of a broader functional pluralism is more implicit than explicit in Carnap). But as I think

Carus would agree, this narrowness is in no way essential to GV. Much of the interest lies in the broader version.

Liberty without limits?

Now to a more serious disagreement between GE and GV. Consider this question: How does GV differ from a truly general “do whatever you fancy” kind of voluntarism? Presumably, in part, in that it is a thesis *about language*. Carnap thinks that that we are free to choose among linguistic frameworks. But what does this mean? What makes a framework – or anything at all that we might do or go in for – a *linguistic* framework?

It is not a matter of the medium, presumably, be it voice or marks on paper (or screen). We do many things with those media, and might have language confined to other media. So a nontrivial global linguistic voluntarism is going to need some conception of what it is to *be* a language, in the relevant sense.

Here we have an opening for Brandom (1994, 2002). One way to draw a line around something we might take to constitute a language is that it meet Brandom’s minimal standards for an instantiation of the game of giving and asking for reasons. If we do the draw line here, then it means we have something that we can’t be voluntarist about, on pain of not going in for language at all. (Of course, we could draw the line in another way, but it will have the same effect somewhere else – there will still be limits to our choices.)

Carus says at one point: “One clearly has to know what sort of ground one is building on before one just starts putting down some bricks!” (Carus 2018, MS, 28, end of Sect 4) Indeed, but one also needs a distinction between bricks and other sort of stuff!

This is the kind of point I had in mind, in part, in resisting Rorty’s voluntarism. A language without what I call the third norm – the one I associate with truth – would not be a language at all, in an important sense.

[I]f I am right about the behavioral role of truth, the consequences of giving up truth would be very serious indeed, reducing the conversation of mankind to a chatter of disengaged monologues. (Price 2003, 165–66)

Of course, we can be voluntarists in principle about whether to go in for language at all. But if we do opt for language, we don’t get a blank slate – anything that counts as a language comes with some basic rules and norms. (One might disagree with me about whether the third norm need be one of them, but the general point will apply nevertheless.)

I was also sceptical about Rorty’s voluntarism in a more practical sense, and I think this point, too, carries over to Carnap’s voluntarism:

[I]t is doubtful whether giving up truth is really an option open to us. I suspect that people who think it is an option have not realized how deeply embedded the idea of truth is in linguistic practice, and therefore underestimate the extent of the required change in two ways. They fail to see how radically different from current practice a linguistic practice without truth would have to be, and they overestimate our capacity to change our practices in general to move from here to there (underestimating the practical inflexibility of admittedly contingent practices). (Price 2003, 166)

As I noted, Jonathan Rée makes a point of this kind against Rorty:

[C]ontingencies can last a very long time. Our preoccupations with love and death may not be absolute necessities, but they are not a passing fad either, and it is a safe bet that they will last as long as we do. (Rée 1998, p. 11)

Carnap's voluntarism, like Rorty's, can easily seem blind to practical limitations on our choices.

These reservations leave a great deal of scope for the project Carus has in mind under the Carnapian label of descriptive pragmatics. But they don't leave room for a non-trivial *global* voluntarism. The term "global" needs to be constrained in two ways, one theoretical and one practical. An interesting version of Carnap's view must mean "global within a space of *linguistic* options", or something of that sort, in which case cashing-out "linguistic" will involve some constraints. And even with those constraints in place, many linguistic frameworks will be off the menu for us for various practical reasons.

In GE, by contrast, "global" refers in the first instance to something like "Whatever we actually do with assertoric language". The term simply marks GE's rejection of the so-called "bifurcation thesis", the claim that there is a useful distinction between fact-stating and non-fact-stating uses of declarative utterances. The scope of the generalisation embodied in the term "global" is therefore much more constrained, at any rate at first pass. It is true that the global expressivist will want to emphasise the contingency, in some sense, of the particular set of assertoric language games we actually play. But for GE the term has already done its work at this point, and there is no need to earn it by insisting on unrestricted voluntarism across possible language games.

Comparison with orthodox Representationalism

It may be helpful to situate these two disagreements between GE and GV in relation to the orthodox Representationalism (OR) that is often my main opponent. Concerning the first disagreement, Carnap's GV (as Carus presents it) lies between GE and OR. By GE's lights, GV shares with OR an unattractive scientific monism about possible subject matters, despite allowing for greater freedom with respect to that subject matter (and being far less constrained by a metaphysical conception of "the World", presumably). Concerning the second disagreement, however, GE is closer to OR, in being significantly less voluntarist than GV – in agreeing with OR that there is *something* that a linguistic framework must be doing, if it is to count as a linguistic framework at all. (GE and OR differ about what this something is, of course.)

The meaning of "function"

Turning to other matters, Carus takes me to task for not saying enough about what I mean by "function", and also suggests that I can't think that there are facts about functions. As he puts it:

Is there a fact of the matter about "function" (or about "the" function of something)? Presumably factualism about function would be no better for Price than factualism (the 1988) word for representationalism) about anything else. (Carus 2018, MS, 15)

On the latter point, I disagree. I'm free to claim that there are facts about linguistic functions in the first-order sense in which I say that there is a fact about the function of the kidney or the spleen, or about whether there is water on Mars. What I deny in Price (1988) and later work is that there is any interesting sense in which claims about the function of the kidney or water on Mars are fact-stating, whereas other claims (or apparent claims) such as those of ethics are not. As I put it above, I reject the bifurcation thesis on which such distinctions rely. However, this is quite compatible with using "fact" in its ordinary first-order sense, in ethics as well as in science.

Nevertheless, Carus is quite correct that I don't say enough about what the linguistic functions I have in mind actually are. Here Michael Williams has come to my aid, proposing an inferentialist framework he calls the "EMU", for "explanation of meaning in terms of use" (Williams, 2013, 133). Helpfully, Williams distinguishes two different notions of use, a distinction that could easily be expressed in terms of two different notions of function.

One is a synchronic "how the term is used" notion, looking to the practices and regularities that are instantiated by competent speakers – language entry and language exit rules for the term, in Sellars' terminology. (Think of this as "how the term actually functions".) The other is more genealogical and explanatory – it looks to questions about why a term with that synchronic function came to be in use, what role it plays in the lives of creatures like us. As Williams puts it, it addresses the question what the term is useful *for*.

This meta-theoretical analysis makes it clear that 'use-theoretic' explanations of meanings appeal to **two distinct notion of use**. [The first two clauses of the EMU] specify the inferential patterns that competent users of 'true' display (or the proprieties they respect) in their use of 'true'. This is use as *usage*: *how* a word is used. The usage-specifying clauses are fundamental in that they neither receive nor need any deeper *theoretical* explanation. They do, however, both invite and receive a *functional* explanation from the [remaining] clause. After all, use patterns are ten a penny: you can make them up *ad libitum*. Why, then, do we have a concept that answers to the use patterns given by [the first two clauses]? [The third clause] tells us why. [It] appeal[s] to use as expressive function: *what* a word is used to do, what it is useful *for*. (Williams, 2013, 135, emphasis in bold mine)

Both notions of use seem to map happily on to Carnap's programme, with the two caveats already noted. First, the range of answers to the latter questions that Williams and I envisage may be broader than Carnap has in mind, for the same reason that GE is in one sense broader than GV. (Williams and I are happy to remove our lab coats.) Second, some of them may be non-voluntarist answers, either because they appeal to things that are effectively hard-wired or because they turn on non-hard-wired practices that are essential to any language whatsoever, in the sense of "language" in question.

Concerning genealogy, finally, Carus thinks that I am insufficiently sensitive to the possibility that something that arises with one function may come to acquire another. In my defense, I reply that the non-representationalism of my proposal about truth and assertion explicitly recognizes a possibility of this kind. I suggest (in the spirit of a just so story) that the assertoric language game might initially arise for its value in helping a social community keep track of salient features of their physical environment, such as predators, by helping them to pool their epistemic resources. Once established, however, it turns out

to be useful for resolving other sorts of behaviorally-significant disagreements, too – so these, too, get handled in the same assertoric manner. The environment tracking function has now been lost. (Similarly, the possibility of change in function is precisely the point of my Perfect Match example in Price (2011b), Section 6.3.)

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