

McCracken Distinguished Lecture

Carnap and Quine on Ontology

Professor Gary Ebbs
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3:00 PM | Friday, March 31, 2017

530 S. Kedzie Hall

Light refreshments served just before 3pm;
discussion to follow at 4pm.

Carnap argues that traditional ontological questions are meaningless. Quine rejects Carnap's argument on the grounds that it rests on his dubious analytic-synthetic distinction. These basic facts about the Carnap-Quine debate about ontology are widely known. Unfortunately, however, several misunderstandings of the debate have taken root in the secondary literature. Symptomatic of all these misunderstandings is the claim that according to Carnap, while general ontological statements about abstract objects, such as "There are numbers," are analytic, general ontological statements about concrete objects, such as "There are physical objects," are not analytic, but synthetic. I shall argue that this claim, though superficially plausible, is mistaken—when "There are physical objects" is paraphrased in the way Carnap recommends, it is analytic. Viewed in isolation, the mistake may seem insignificant. In fact, however, it reveals misunderstandings both of the kinds of ontological questions that Carnap sought to classify as meaningless and of Carnap's strategy for showing that they are meaningless. It has also led many readers to conclude that Quine, who correctly attributes to Carnap the view that "There are physical objects" is analytic, misunderstands Carnap's views on ontology and for that reason fails to see important similarities in their views on ontology. I shall argue, on the contrary, that Quine understands Carnap's views on ontology as well as anyone and fully endorses the scientific spirit of Carnap's philosophy. Quine's criticisms of Carnap's views on ontology are integral to Quine's decades-long effort to develop what he takes to be a better explanation than Carnap's of the sense in which traditional ontological questions are meaningless.

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