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978-0-521-86227-1 - Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought: Explication as Enlightenment

A. W. Carus

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## CARNAP AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY THOUGHT

Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970) is widely regarded as one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century. Born in Germany and later a US citizen, he was a founder of the philosophical movement known as Logical Empiricism. He was strongly influenced by a number of different philosophical traditions (including the legacies of both Kant and Husserl), and also by the German Youth Movement, the First World War (in which he was wounded and decorated) and radical socialism. This book places his central ideas in a broad cultural, political and intellectual context showing how he synthesised many different currents of thought to achieve a philosophical perspective that remains strikingly relevant today. Its rich account of a philosopher's response to his times will appeal to all who are interested in the development of philosophy in the twentieth century.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521862271](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521862271)

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First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978 0 521 86227 1 hardback

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*For  
Howard Stein*

Let us be prepared to set aside the habits of our own day and to honour the past as a treasure of neglected and forgotten, but still living, possibilities. There is no other way to escape the indignity of the despotism inflicted by our provinciality in time, no other way to regain the freedom only history can afford. We had let ourselves be convinced that history is useless. Much too late it began to dawn on us how narrowly this confines our horizons, how our growth is stunted when we seek nothing in history but contradiction or reinforcement, instead of frolicking carelessly and selflessly in its meadows, led only by curiosity.

Emil Staiger (1949)

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## *Preface*

Mathematicians, unlike the rest of us, have retained something of the original Enlightenment spirit, thought the novelist Robert Musil; they provide examples of a spiritual daring that has otherwise fallen by the wayside. ‘We others’, Musil regretted, ‘have let our courage drop since the time of the Enlightenment. Some small bungle was enough to get us off the track of reason, and we now let every soft-headed visionary denounce the projects of a d’Alembert or a Diderot as misguided rationalism.’ We are apt to plead the cause of feeling against the intellect, forgetting that we inhabit an intellect-constructed world (Musil 1913a). By ‘we’ he meant Central Europeans of the early twentieth century, but his warnings are no less relevant to our own times. ‘We must be on our guard, above all’, he wrote, ‘against all yearnings for the de-complication of literature and life, for Homeric or religious warmth, for uniformity and wholeness’ (Musil 1913b).

The western philosophical tradition began with the idea that insight or knowledge about the nature of things could somehow be applied by human beings to the shaping of their lives. For Plato, the paradigm of such knowledge or insight was geometrical proof. The applicability of knowledge, particularly *de rerum naturae*, to life was equally important for many others in antiquity, including non-Platonists such as Lucretius. This philosophical ideal reawoke in late medieval Europe, and was partly responsible for the creation of modern science in the seventeenth century. But Newton’s achievement transformed our knowledge about the nature of things, as well as our conception of knowledge. This transformation has been described in many ways, and there is much controversy about which of these ways is best. But from at latest 1687 or so, knowledge became irrevocably theoretical. A gap opened up between knowledge and the shaping of individual human lives, a gap that has grown steadily wider over the centuries since then. The old philosophical ideal of applying knowledge to the shaping of practical life seemed doomed to irrelevance. Its vigorous revival by the Enlightenment led only to the Romantic reaction, whose most persuasive

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argument was the obvious gap between the desiccated world portrayed in our increasingly technical knowledge and the rich intuitive awareness in which we live our actual lives (the *Lebenswelt*, as philosophers like to call it when dwelling on this contrast).

This gap between knowledge and life split the thinking world into two warring camps, which have gone by many names; ‘Enlightenment’ and ‘Romanticism’ were among the early examples. Each side tried to bridge the gap between knowledge and life, to bring them back together, but from different ends, in different directions. One side insisted on *life*, and sought either to disqualify the new kind of knowledge from serious relevance for life, or to tame it somehow, to bring it within the ambit of practical and intuitive life, in the manner of Goethe and Schelling. The other side insisted on the new *knowledge*, rather, and required life to adjust; this was the stance of Diderot, the *Encyclopédiste* Enlightenment, and the positivist tradition. In various ways, nineteenth- and twentieth-century western intellectual life hinged on the conflict between these two stances.

This book is about one brief but important episode in this conflict – the attempt to revive a radical version of Enlightenment in Central Europe between the wars. The acknowledged philosophical leader of this movement, Rudolf Carnap, was long portrayed in philosophical history as a technocrat who cared only about knowledge and not about life. Recent work is discrediting this view. Still largely unknown, however, is the strategy Carnap proposed in his later years for overcoming the gap that has split the thinking world since Newton (or before). Carnap’s proposal, while firmly anchored in the Enlightenment tradition, was strikingly new. It is also quite different from anything that has occupied the philosophical lime-light during Carnap’s time or since. The purpose of this book is to describe that proposal, to make it more explicit than Carnap did, and to bring it back into philosophical discussion. To motivate that proposal, the book will focus primarily on the path by which Carnap got there himself – it will examine his early career, from his student years in Jena before the First World War to the inter-war years in Vienna and Prague, up to his departure for the United States in 1936.

Central to the story is a dialectical relation between two kinds of conceptual system, the evolved systems of intuitively available concepts interwoven with ordinary language, and the constructed systems of scientific and mathematical knowledge. The story proceeds in two main stages. In the first stage, Carnap moved steadily toward the rejection of all vestigial inherited ordinary-language concepts, and sought to code all genuine knowledge within a fully explicit logical system. This idea reached its high point during

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Carnap's Vienna years (1926–31). It was epitomised in the Vienna Circle project of 'rational reconstruction', in which evolved concepts of ordinary language were to be progressively replaced by the well-defined concepts of a logical system. This project began to fall apart around 1930, under a number of external influences and internal controversies. The Circle split into 'left' and 'right' wings. Carnap was able, in 1931–2, to rescue a form of 'rational reconstruction' on a completely different basis, rejected by the 'right' wing but embraced by the 'left', that was set forth in his *Logical Syntax of Language*, published in 1934. The present book focuses largely on Carnap's development to that point.

However, it does so from a later viewpoint. For the story has a second stage that begins in 1934, when a *contrary* motion set in. Carnap's conception of the relation between evolved and constructed languages became less rigid. The absolute break between the two was softened and relativised. Even in the *Syntax* itself, ordinary language had been conceived as a system of rules, though too complex to be readily codified. It was thus a 'calculus' of the same basic kind as constructed languages. The trend toward sharp distinctions that had characterised the development to 1934 gives way to a pragmatic recognition of the dynamic character of *both* ordinary language *and* constructed systems, and the dialectical relation between them. This change of view brought about the replacement of 'rational reconstruction' by the conception of 'explication' central to the present book. Unlike rational reconstruction, explication no longer envisaged one-way replacement of the ordinary, intuitive world view by a scientific one, but a dialectical interchange between the two kinds of system. Our practices and our values reside within an intuitive *Lebenswelt* that can be progressively improved, whose quality can be raised piecemeal through explicative replacement of its concepts by constructed ones, but we decide what replacements to undertake from the overall standpoint of the *Lebenswelt*, our practical concerns and our values.

In reconstructing this story, I have benefitted greatly from the recent revival of interest in Carnap and logical empiricism among analytic philosophers. This book aims not only to assemble what others have done over the past decade or two (particularly Richard Creath, Michael Friedman, Warren Goldfarb, Thomas Mormann, George Reisch, Alan Richardson, Thomas Ricketts, and Thomas Uebel) into a connected story, but adds an archival dimension of unpublished materials that greatly benefit the coherence of that story. The book attempts a synthesis of the work done so far, adding an overall motivation and sense of direction that perhaps makes more sense of the parts. In doing so it adopts a perspective more decidedly aligned

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with the later Carnap. This perspective derives largely from one of Carnap's students, Howard Stein. It was his class on Carnap at the University of Chicago, twelve years ago, that first set me on the path resulting in this book, and he has given me the benefit of his vast learning and his penetrating insight ever since. He read several versions of many chapters, including the entire penultimate draft, and forced me to rethink countless basic issues. I am very grateful to him for his obstinate unwillingness to tolerate sloppy thinking or imprecise language. Whatever merits the book may have are due above all to his continued interest in it over a long period. Michael Friedman was unfailingly generous in supplying comments and discussion on a wide range of issues, despite often disagreeing with my conclusions (even sometimes my premises). He also read many versions of this book over many years, and his thorough reading of the penultimate version saved me from many errors. And Steve Awodey, my co-author in a series of papers about Carnap and Gödel, played a critical role in helping me to understand the full ramifications of the basic logical issues involved at several key junctures of the story told here. Readers of those papers will recognise a number of motifs from them in Chapters 7–9 below. It is doubtful whether I could have got the story completely straight, in those chapters, without the help of a subtle but ruthlessly sceptical logician. Erich Reck read through the entire final version at lightning speed, though with his customary thoroughness, and made a number of very helpful last-minute suggestions, leading me to correct a number of possibly misleading formulations. I am grateful more generally for discussions and correspondence about the subjects of this book, over the past twelve years, with all those named above in this paragraph as well as Michael Beaney, Graham Bird, Jacques Bouveresse, Bernd Buldt, Tracy Dennison, Gary Ebbs, Greg Frost-Arnold, Daniel Isaacson, Gottfried Gabriel, Daniel Garber, Clark Glymour, Peter Hylton, Richard Jeffrey, Leonard Linsky, David McCarty, Sheilagh Ogilvie, Chris Pincock, Michael Potter, Eric Schliesser, Barry Smith, Michael Stölzner, William Tait, Hanneliese Carnap Thost, Pierre Wagner, Gereon Wolters, and Sandy Zabell. Audiences at a number of institutions where parts of chapters were given as papers, at various stages, have helped with questions or objections, especially at the Universities of Chicago, Indiana, Jena, Manchester, Oxford, Paris, Pittsburgh, Purdue, Stanford, and Vienna. The students who attended a class on Carnap, jointly taught with Steve Awodey at the University of Konstanz in the summer semester of 2003, helped similarly. Research assistance at various stages by Melissa Feinberg, Leslie Hudson, and Myra Awodey facilitated the seemingly endless process of composition. Two anonymous

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readers for Cambridge University Press made a number of useful suggestions that have greatly improved the book. I owe a particular debt to Professor Juha Manninen of the University of Helsinki for his aid in obtaining a copy of Carnap's letters of the late 1920s and early 1930s to Eino Kaila. I am also grateful to the staffs at the Archives of Scientific Philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh and the Special Collections Department at the University of California at Los Angeles, especially Brigitta Arden, Charles Aston, Gerald Heverly, Lance Lugar, and Jeff Rankin, as well as to Brigitte Parakenings of the Philosophisches Archiv at the University of Konstanz Department of Philosophy. Their unfailing helpfulness and their detailed knowledge of the holdings in their respective archives has made it possible to use those documents far more extensively and efficiently than I could have done unaided. Finally I thank the people at Cambridge University Press, especially Hilary Gaskin, Jodie Barnes, and Ann Lewis, for their heartwarming demonstration that for all the hand-wringing about its imminent disappearance, the traditional standard of competent workmanship in academic publishing stubbornly retains its niche in our world.

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## *Note on the style of citation*

Carnap's works are listed in Part II of the Bibliography along with all other published sources, but are cited in the text by date only, without Carnap's name. All other authors are cited by name and date. Unpublished sources are cited by abbreviated individual document name (e.g. 'ASP 1929a'), keyed to the list in Part I of the Bibliography, where full document locations, headings, and dates (where available) are given. Transliterations from Carnap's Stolze-Schrey shorthand are my own, though I have consulted those done by others where they were available. All translations from German are also my own. Where published translations are available, these are added to the relevant bibliographical reference, and referred to after the citation of the original, following the letters 'PT' for 'published translation' (e.g. 'Helmholtz 1878a, p. 235, PT p. 354'). Note that some quotations from Carnap's unpublished English-language writings (especially the unabridged original version of his autobiography) come from texts that were never edited by a native English speaker, and are often somewhat clumsy or even incorrect in their usage. Carnap would not have liked this, but no other option seemed feasible. My attempts to edit these passages soon came up against the question of where to draw the line, and it seemed better to leave them completely unedited than to make arbitrary ad hoc decisions about particular passages in isolation, and in the absence of general guidelines discussed and agreed by a group of informed scholars.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The unabridged autobiography itself will be subject to such a process and published, before long, in the *Full Circle* series (Open Court Publishing Company) edited by Steve Awodey.