

Carnap's non-cognitivism as an alternative to both value-absolutism and value-relativism

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For Rudolf Carnap a value statement is *non-cognitive* because unlike “cognitive statements” it is neither based on empirical facts nor on logical reasoning. (Schilpp 1963, 999f) There is no way *to justify* values, either on a factual or a logical basis. Values are irrational, they are chosen for entirely subjective (emotional, intuitive) reasons. This does not mean though that values are identical with emotions (or justified by emotions). Emotions only allow us to identify which values a certain person holds. Non-cognitivism is distinct, in particular, from a *pragmatist* account which takes values to be (emotional) facts. Cognitive statements, in particular, have to obtain a truth value, they are true, false, undecidable, likely, etc. By contrast, fundamental value statements do not obtain truth values at all. They just become stipulated (by a certain person or group). Truth comes into play here at a secondary level only. We might say “*p* is one of Xs values”; we might make claims about the logical compatibility of certain values; and we might make claims about the causal consequences of certain values; in all these cases we will obtain truth values, of course. That is, values (value statements) which do not obtain truth values in themselves might be embedded in several ways into the world of science and therefore into the world of statements that obtain truth values. This implies, in particular, that the fact that *p* is a value of X does not imply that *p* is true for X. Though it is true that *p* is one of Xs values, as soon as X himself is a non-cognitivist (we use the masculine form because we assume X is Carnap) he will not hold *p* to be true in any way (as a value), neither for him nor for any other person or group. Thus to take the value *p* to be true, in whatever form (as a subjective or relative truth, as an absolute truth), is a clear sign of a *cognitivist conception of values*.

The *problem of value disagreement*, understood as a problem of diverging (and often entirely incompatible) moral, political, and aesthetical intuitions, is something that moved Carnap for the whole of his intellectual career. Carnap's very first philosophical contributions were circular letters he sent to his friends in 1918, in order to find a consensus on their attitude towards war (he did not succeed, of course, since a good deal of his friends was not willing to reject war like him).¹ Next time where Carnap has been confronted brutally with incompatible value systems was the upcoming of NS, where he had to realize that some of his close friends and even parts of his family supported Hitler.² Again, after 1945 Carnap faced a similar dilemma, as most of his colleagues committed themselves to the anti-communist hysteria of the McCarthy era (and equally violently and unsuccessfully tried to get him into their camp). (Reisch 2005, 271-281, 382-384) Though the problem of value disagreement seems to have been absolutely crucial for

¹ Cf. „Politische Rundbriefe“, Rudolf Carnap Papers, University of Pittsburgh, Hilman Library (RC 081-14 to -22), “Deutschlands Niederlage: Sinnloses Schicksal oder Schuld“ *ibid.* (RC 089-72) and (Mormann 2010).

² Cf. (Dahms 2015, section 2.2) as well as Carnap's correspondence with his first wife Elisabeth and his daughter Hanneliese (RC 025-33, 025-47, 025-57, 025-59).

Carnap, after the (failed) project of the circular letters from 1918, he hardly ever turned to it explicitly in his published work. This does not imply, however, that this problem was not important for Carnap's philosophy at all. By contrast, it seems that Carnap's move to decision theory and to probability "as a guide in life" (Carnap 1947) was mainly if not exclusively motivated by that very problem.

Be that as it may. In the case of disagreement with respect to (political, ethical, aesthetical) values Carnap proposes the following solution. Other than our standards for rationality (and apart from them), political, ethical and aesthetical values are significantly diverse. In particular, two perfectly rational persons X and Y may adopt entirely incompatible value systems. X may defend social democracy and Y an elitist policy or the sharia or fascism. Suppose further that Carnap is X. What can he tell us about how to deal with Y's value system? (Note that the whole story may look quite different, if we describe it from the standpoint of Y, taken to be a moral absolutist, and again different, in the case of Y's being a moral relativist. Cf. our remarks at the end of this section.)

First of all, X certainly is an advocate of *tolerance*. (Carnap 1950; 2002, § 17) But what exactly does this imply? As long as Y's values do not harm anyone, they have to be accepted unconditionally, for X. If Y, for example, likes other kinds of music, this is a question of taste, for X, and X may discuss heatedly with Y on these topics but there is no reason for him not to accept Y's values (even if Y is unwilling to accept X's values), as long as Y does not start to violently fill X with sounds he hates etc. X's values imply that we have to accept Y's preferences, even if we are entirely unable to understand why Y thinks all that kitsch and crap being art (at least as long as Y's enjoyment of her preferences does not harm others). Even in case of Y's political and ethical preferences, tolerance is demanded. But here X's tolerance is certainly more limited. As soon as Y's political and ethical values enforce her to act in a way that becomes harmful for X or other people; as soon as Y's values lead her to actions being insolvably incompatible with X's values, tolerance comes to an end. There are several options to deal with situations of conflict that emerge here. X can try to argue against Y and to convince her to change her values; X can try to outvote her in the elections (Y might stick to her incompatible values but X and Y may still be able to coexist peacefully); in the extremity, X might be forced to imprison Y, to fight back or even to start war against her.

Although X accepts diversity (seeing himself not in a position to call everyone who does not share his political and ethical values just crazy or blind), this does not imply that the situation with respect to political and ethical values, for X, is *entirely different* from the situation with respect to rational intuitions. (Carnap 1962, 1968) Rather, it is *an empirical fact* that in the latter case we can build on a certain consensus that seems to cover all human beings, while in the former case such a consensus does not exist. However, it seems at least conceivable that even in the case of standards of rationality the situation might be different. There might be a world where a significant group of people base their decisions on a certain form of reasoning, being entirely incompatible with our standards, e.g., rejects modus ponens and inductive reasoning. Such a Graham Priest-Karl Popper world might be conceivable, but as a matter of fact it is not identical with the actual world (we take it for granted that Graham Priest and Sir Karl, in particular, never have been inhabitants of such a world).

At any rate, with respect to political and ethical values we face a situation that is much more of a mess than the world of rational standards. Here, diversity and the existence of incompatible value systems being held by significant groups is an empirical fact. But for X and probably also for Y this does not imply that intuitions become less conclusive. Though it is

certainly an aspect of Xs values that Ys values have to be taken into consideration quite seriously (even in case that Y is not willing to do same with Xs values), and that we should do what we can in order to find consensus with Y or at least to enable her to act according to her values (pretty much in the same way as we would be willing to accept the members of a Graham-Karl-world of non-deductive and non-inductive reasoning to act according to their intuitions, as far as we can) it is clearly not a part of Xs value system that Ys values and her actions as indicated by these values have to be accepted *under all circumstances*.

What we learn from these observations is that there exists a powerful way to deal with values and intuitions which is neither an *absolutism* nor a *relativism*. Moreover, it seems to me rather evident that both absolutism and relativism are devastatingly inferior to Carnap's account.

Absolutism is the idea of having absolute values out there, being accessible to intuition, logic, or scientific reasoning. This idea involves that *we* (we scientists, we Ys) have access to these absolute values and that everyone who disagrees with us fails to have such an access. Roughly, there are two varieties of absolutism to be found; first, cultural absolutism in a more traditional and more general sense, claiming the intuitions of a certain religious or cultural tradition (or even the intuitions of a charismatic leader) to be absolutely true; second, that specific form of absolutism where the culture approaching the absolute truth is science. While for the case of traditional scientific questions (i.e., questions of truth of scientific theories in the traditional sense) the latter seems to be a reasonable (though disputable and probably not quite Carnapian) option (called scientific realism), in the case of ethical, political, and aesthetical values it certainly appears to be one of the most toxic and intolerant claims a philosopher can hold. Value-absolutism is genuinely racist. (In spite of this tension, a scientific absolutism that decidedly includes absolutism with respect to moral values has been recently defended by (Boghossian 2006).)

Relativism is the idea that all value systems are equally acceptable. Roughly, the idea is that each culture has its own values and a tolerant person has to accept them unconditionally. Though we frequently find this form of relativism to be apparently defended (during heatedly all night discussions with particularly tolerant and gentle persons) it seems doubtful to me whether anyone being aware of the consequences it involves would ever be able to defend it. While absolutism seems to be equally consistent and widespread, relativism of the sort we specified here seems to be possible as a product of "illogical reasoning" alone. (Since philosophers usually try to be rational it seems to be much more plausible to me that self-proclaimed "relativists" such as Paul Feyerabend and Martin Kusch appear to be defenders of positions more closely related to the Carnapian view as defended in this paper than being relativists in the sense of the somewhat self-contradictory position just described: we hardly may find any philosopher who actually defends relativism in the sense described here.)

The framework of absolutism and relativism necessarily involves that the most intolerant value systems outdo the tolerant ones. Logically insoluble contradictions may only arise between two absolutists Y and Y' who (in a logically consistent way) defend incompatible value systems. (In that case, the fittest may survive.) However, if X' defends a value system that holds as a particular claim the *relative truth* of *all* value systems and Y defends a value system that holds as a particular claim the *absolute falsity* of *all deviant* value systems then it follows that X's value system is absolutely false (though relatively true) and Ys value system is both absolutely and relatively true. Absolute truth and falsity are certainly *stronger* than relative truth and falsity. Therefore, as soon as absolutism appears to be hold by a certain Y, relativism is being refuted.

But there is hope, after all. The very point of non-cognitivism as being defended here is that it does not take part in the battle between absolutism and relativism at all. For a Carnapian non-cognitivist moral statements receive *neither* a weak *nor* a strong truth value but *no truth value at all*. Values have consequences and are logically related in one or another way. Statements about these consequences and logical relations have truth values, of course. However, the values in themselves or their stipulations do not have truth values at all, for Carnap. They are not held as a matter *of truth* but as a matter *of intuition* alone. Thus, absolutism and relativism, for Carnap, are neither true nor false but pointless.

If absolutism and relativism would be our only options, we would be forced to choose between the pest of racism and the cholera of cultural suicide. We should adopt the Carnapian solution.

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