

**“So one cannot, e.g. say ‘There are objects’ as one says ‘There are books’”.**

**From *Tractatus* 4.1272 to Carnap, via *On Certainty* 35-37**

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**Abstract:** In *On Certainty* (1969, 35) Wittgenstein states that “There are physical objects” is nonsense. This claim is strongly reminiscent of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (4.1272) where he states that “one cannot say ‘There are objects’ as one says ‘There are books’”; and of TLP 4.1274, where he says “The question about the existence of a formal concept is nonsense”. Despite such a superficial similarity, however, the reasons why “There are (physical) objects” would be nonsense are entirely different. In the case of the *Tractatus*, they depend on the rules that govern a correct logical symbolism, on the distinction between saying and showing and presuppose an ontology of objects. In the case of *On Certainty*, in contrast, they depend on thinking of “physical object” as a means of representation – as an “inference ticket”, which licenses (and forbids) certain inferences, without any ontological import. In his 1950 paper “Empiricism, semantics and ontology”, Carnap proposes a metalinguistic reading of questions such as “Are there physical objects?”. Surprisingly, he credits Wittgenstein as a source of inspiration. If I am right, however, there is only a superficial similarity between the ideas presented in the *Tractatus*, and Carnap’s. In fact, a deeper similarity is to be found between Carnap’s views and the ones that Wittgenstein developed, at about the same time, in *On Certainty*, published only in 1969, with which Carnap could have no familiarity. Yet, even there, the divide between the two remains insurmountable, as they had entirely opposite views regarding the very possibility of there being a metalanguage and, therefore, a metalinguistic reading of the question “Are there physical objects?”.

**Keywords:** Ludwig Wittgenstein; Rudolf Carnap; ontology; language; metalanguage; internal; external; idealism; realism

### Introduction

In *On Certainty* (1969, 35)<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein states that “There are physical objects” is nonsense. This claim is strongly reminiscent of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*<sup>2</sup> (4.1272) where he states that “one cannot say ‘There are objects’ as one says ‘There are books’”; and of TLP 4.1274, where he says “The question about the existence of a formal concept is nonsense”.<sup>3</sup> Despite such a superficial similarity, however, the reasons why “There are (physical) objects” would be nonsense are entirely different. As I claim in §1, in the case of the *Tractatus*, they depend on the rules that govern a correct logical symbolism, on the distinction between saying

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<sup>1</sup> In the following abbreviated as: OC.

<sup>2</sup> TLP 1922; in the following abbreviated as: TLP.

<sup>3</sup> The official English translation of the *Tractatus* has “senseless”, but the German has “unsinnig” that is more correctly translated with “nonsensical” and indeed the official English translation of *On Certainty* translates “Unsinn” thus.

and showing and presuppose an ontology of objects. In the case of *On Certainty*, in contrast, they depend on thinking of “physical object” as a means of representation – as an “inference ticket”, which licenses (and forbids) certain inferences, without any ontological import, as I claim in §3. These ideas are somewhat prepared by some remarks about the role of samples in ostensive definitions presented in the *Philosophical Investigations*, which I survey in §2. In his 1950 paper “Empiricism, semantics and ontology”, Carnap proposes a metalinguistic reading of questions such as “Are there physical objects?” (§4). Surprisingly, he credits Wittgenstein as a source of inspiration (§5). If I am right, however, there is only a superficial similarity between the ideas presented in the *Tractatus*, and Carnap’s. In fact, a deeper similarity is to be found between Carnap’s views and the ones that Wittgenstein developed, at about the same time, in *On Certainty*, published only in 1969, with which he could have no familiarity. Yet, even there, the divide between the two remains insurmountable, as they had entirely opposite views regarding the very possibility of there being a metalanguage and, therefore, a metalinguistic reading of the question “Are there physical objects?”.

***Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “So one cannot, e.g. say ‘There are objects’ as one says ‘There are books’”**

The titular passage appears in the context of Wittgenstein’s discussion of what he calls “formal concepts”, like “object”, or “number”. Writes Wittgenstein,

4.126 [...] That anything falls under a formal concept as an object belonging to it, cannot be expressed by a proposition. But it shows itself in the sign of this object itself. (The name shows that it signifies an object, the numerical sign that it signifies a number, etc.) Formal concepts cannot, like proper concepts, be presented by a function. For their characteristics, the formal properties, are not expressed by the functions. The expression of a formal property is a feature of certain symbols. The sign that signifies the characteristics of a formal concept is, therefore, a characteristic feature of all symbols, whose meanings [i.e. the referents] fall under the concept. The expression of the formal concept is therefore a propositional variable in which only this characteristic feature is constant.

According to him, in a correct logical symbolism we cannot express formal concepts by means of functions. While we can write formulas such as  $Fa$ , where ‘F’ stands for a predicate such as “it is a book”, we cannot write formulas like  $Oa$ , where ‘O’ stands for “it is an object”. Formal concepts stand for formal properties, which are common to all referents that, according to the austere semantics of the *Tractatus*, are the meanings of formal concepts. What is common, then, to all entities that we categorize as objects? That they fall under sortal concepts, like “being a book”, “being a pen”, etc. They are therefore the values of the arguments of first-level functions. In a correct logical symbolism, therefore, they are expressed by individual constants – ‘a’, ‘b’, ... – which in turn are the only admissible values for individual variables – such as ‘x’, ‘y’  
....

This is why at T 4.1271 Wittgenstein writes “Every variable is the sign of a formal concept”. What we have just said about the formal concept “object” can be repeated for all other formal concepts, particularly for the formal concept “number”, for which, according to Wittgenstein, we will need appropriate variables in a logically perfect language.

However, if (the word) “object” is (or does) not (express) a concept, “the variable name “x” is the proper sign of the *pseudo-concept* [Scheinbegriffes] object” (TLP 4.1272, my italics). Since, in a logically perfect language, concepts are expressed by functions, if “object” is not a concept and it is rather expressed by appropriate variables, it follows that those variables cannot stand for concepts and that is why it is strictly speaking incorrect to think of “object” as a concept. At most, it is a “pseudo-concept”.

As Wittgenstein continues, (ibid.) “wherever it is used otherwise, i.e. as a proper concept word, there arise senseless [unsinning] pseudo-propositions. So one cannot, e.g. say “There are objects” as one says “There are books”.

To clarify, since in a correct logical symbolism we cannot write, and therefore say or express,  $Oa$  – “ $a$  is an object” –, we cannot even write, and therefore say or express, “There are objects”, which, following Frege’s semantic reading of existential statements should be written as  $\exists x(Ox \ \& \ x = a)$ . Notoriously, Frege had proposed to understand existence as a second-level concept, which takes first-level concepts as arguments. Thus, to say that objects exist would consist in saying that the *concept* object isn’t empty, as it is exemplified by at least one object in the domain. If, however, the very formula  $Ox$  cannot be written because “object” is not a concept and is rather represented by appropriate variables like  $x$  itself, it follows that we cannot write, and therefore say or express, what in ordinary talk we attempt to say by means of “There are objects”.

Those ordinary words, which seem to have sense, and indeed to express a deep truth about the very structure of the world, once transposed into a correct logical symbolism appear to be totally or resolutely nonsensical.

To see this, consider how the remark in the *Tractatus* continues:

Nor “There are 100 objects” or “There are  $\aleph_0$  objects”. And it is senseless [unsinning] to speak of the number of all objects. The same holds of the words “Complex”, “Fact”, “Function”, “Number”, etc.

They all signify formal concepts and are presented in logical symbolism by variables, not by functions or classes (as Frege and Russell thought).

Expressions like “1 is a number”, “there is only one number nought”, and all like them are senseless [unsinning]. (It is as senseless [unsinning] to say, “there is only one 1” as it would be to say:  $2 + 2$  is at 3 o’clock equal to 4.)

Just as is nonsensical to say that “ $2 + 2 = 4$  at 3 o’clock” since, given the meaning of “2”, “+”, “=”, “4”, no provision has been made for the idea that “ $2 + 2$ ” might not make 4 at 2 o’clock or at 4 o’clock, so we should see that it is nonsensical to say that there are objects, once we are in possession of a correct logical language, because no well-formed formula could say or express that much.

Since we cannot say “ $a$  is an object”, it is then clear why, in TLP 4.1274, Wittgenstein writes “The question about the existence of a formal concept is senseless [unsinnig]. For no proposition can answer such a question”. If a question cannot be answered, and, as we have just seen, it cannot be answered because of the features of a logically correct language, which do not allow us to write anything like “ $a$  is an object”, it is itself nonsensical.

Furthermore, given that for Wittgenstein there is no legitimate distinction between language and metalanguage, not only can “ $a$  is an object” and “There are objects” find no legitimate expression in the object language, but they also cannot be expressed in the metalanguage. Does this mean that for Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, there are no objects? Obviously, not.

As Wittgenstein continues at TLP 4.12721 “The formal concept is already given with an object, which falls under it. One cannot, therefore, introduce both, the objects which fall under a formal concept and the formal concept itself, as primitive ideas”, as Frege and Russell did, as they thought of introducing them in the metalanguage.

Thus, formal concepts are given by being given the objects. And indeed, for Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, there are – in fact, there *must* be – objects. As he writes, “objects are the substance of the world” (TLP 2.021) and “they *must* exist for our language to have meaning” (TLP 2.0211-2.0212, my italics). This is not the place to rehearse this transcendental argument for the existence of objects. Suffice it to say that the semantics of the *Tractatus* is predicated on the idea that propositions are pictures of states of affairs, which consist of names that must stand for objects so that their arrangement can represent a possible configuration of objects in reality.

Thus, while we cannot say “ $a$  is an object” or “there are objects” – either in the object-language or in the meta-language – the very existence of objects is *shown* in the fact that we have a correct logical language which contains individual constants and variables. To repeat what Wittgenstein had already said in TLP 4.126: “that anything falls under a formal concept as an object belonging to it, cannot be expressed by a proposition. But it *shows* itself in the sign of this object itself. (The name *shows* that it signifies an object, the numerical sign that it signifies a number, etc.)” (my italics).

In short, ontological questions and statements are nonsensical as such, and a correct logical symbolism allows us to see why. Yet, the very existence of such a symbolism guarantees the existence of objects. No sensible doubt about the very existence of objects can arise since to be able even to think that much we need a language which hooks up with the world and therefore we need objects. As Wittgenstein writes in TLP 6.51 “Scepticism is not irrefutable, but palpably

senseless [unsinnig], if it would doubt where a question cannot be asked. For doubt can only exist where there is a question; a question only where there is an answer, and this only where something can be said”.

Connectedly, this shows that while for Wittgenstein only empirical questions can sensibly be asked and possibly answered, “We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all” (TLP 6.52). Of course, I am not going to explore here the parts of the *Tractatus* in which Wittgenstein considers the meaning of life and mysticism. This is only to point out that whereas these latter questions as well as the ones about ontology cannot be meaningfully posed within the austere framework of the *Tractatus*, this is in no way a dismissal of their relevance.

### **Interlude – *Philosophical Investigations***

What is the relationship between the claim in the *Tractatus* that “the formal concept is already given with an object, which falls under it” and what, later, in the *Philosophical Investigations* and in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein says about ostensive definitions? In *Philosophical Investigations*, in the sections about ostensive definitions, Wittgenstein is quite clear that just by being shown an object we are *not* immediately given the formal, or categorial, or even “logical” concept under which it falls. In PI 28, he writes:

Now, one can ostensively define a person’s name, the name of a colour, the name of a material, a number-word, the name of a point of the compass, and so on. The definition of the number two, “That is called ‘two’” – pointing to two nuts – is perfectly exact. — But how can the number two be defined like that? The person one gives the definition to doesn’t know *what* it is that one wants to call “two”; he will suppose that “two” is the name given to *this* group of nuts! — He *may* suppose this; but perhaps he does not. He might make the opposite mistake: when I want to assign a name to this group of nuts, he might take it to be the name of a number. And he might equally well take a person’s name, which I explain ostensively, as that of a colour, of a race, or even of a point of the compass. That is to say, an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *any* case.

Hence, also formal (categorial or even logical) concepts need to be explained and thus it must be possible to give that kind of instruction to someone who still does not (fully) grasp them. That is, it must be possible to say “This – pointing to a physical object – is a physical object”; “This – pointing to something red, or to something green, etc. – is a color”, etc.

However, the practice of ostensively defining these formal concepts engenders a risk. Namely, if we exhibit something to ostensively define the formal concept, then it would seem that (at least one) entity of that kind would exist. So, we seem to have proved, via an exhibition, that there are physical objects, say.

Notice that in his *Proof*, G. E. Moore will do exactly that. He will first define what he means by “physical object” and then, via exhibition of specimens of it, take himself to have proved that there are instances of that category and, therefore, that there is an external world.

Indeed, insofar as ostensive definitions are possible, it would seem *necessary* that there be these kinds of entity—that is, the ones that fall under the formal concepts we are thereby defining.

Yet, we know that one of the lessons of the later Wittgenstein is that there are *no metaphysical necessities* and that if it seems otherwise, this is a reflection, or a projection of a grammatical rule, or it is a function of the role that a given object plays in the language. Let us look at the section on the standard meter in Paris, for instance (PI 50, my italics).

[...] There is *one* thing of which one can state neither that it is 1 metre long, nor that it is not 1 metre long, and that is the standard metre in Paris. — But this is, of course, not to ascribe any remarkable property to it, but only to mark its peculiar role in the game of measuring with a metre-rule. ... We can put it like this: *This sample is an instrument of the language, by means of which we make ... [length] statements. In this game, it is not something that is represented, but is a means of representation.* — And the same applies to an element in language-game (48) when we give it a name by uttering the word “R” — in so doing we have given that object a role in our language-game; it is now a means of representation. *And to say “If it did not exist, it could have no name” is to say as much and as little as: if this thing did not exist, we could not use it in our language-game. — What looks as if it had to exist is part of the language. It is a paradigm in our game; something with which comparisons are made. And this may be an important observation; but it is none the less an observation about our language-game — our mode of representation [Darstellungweise].*

The point Wittgenstein is making here is that ostensive definitions employ samples. When we say “this – pointing to a relevant sample – is a color/the metre”, we are not ascribing the property of being a color or a metre to the sample; even less a property it possesses essentially – i.e. being 1 metre long. Rather, we are incorporating the sample – the worldly entity as it were – within the language as a “means of representation”. Objects that are used in ostensive definitions are therefore instruments in our language, that we then use to carry out certain tasks, like, for instance, measuring the length of desks and bookshelves in our surroundings.

Furthermore, while in the *Tractatus* the existence of objects was necessary and shown by the very existence of a language with names and variables for them, to notice that some of them are incorporated within our language as means of representation carries no ontological commitment, in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Of course, if these samples did not exist, we could not use them as instruments in our language, but this has no more ontological import than saying that if *words* did not exist, we could not use them or have a language (like the one we have). The very existence of objects – indeed the necessary existence of objects –, which

was a core element of the *Tractatus*, is no longer shown in the functions that certain entities play in our language. Once incorporated within language as instruments, they are on par with the rest of the language: they are linguistic – or if you will, representational or representing – entities, or symbols, just materially different from written or spoken words, but not ontologically different from them, and should not be thought of as those extralinguistic entities, to which our words hook up and that guarantee the fact that the latter have a meaning.

At bottom, the criticism Wittgenstein raises against ostensive definitions targets what he now regards as their mythological interpretation – the interpretation, by the way, that was at the core of the *Tractatus*, as well as of Russell's *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (1918) – according to which they could magically connect language and thought with the world.

### ***On Certainty***

Let us now turn to *On Certainty*, where Wittgenstein talks about “a is a physical object” and “There are physical objects” only in three passages, between OC 35 and 37. Let us look at the first two (OC 35, 36):

But can't it be imagined that there should be no physical objects? I don't know. And yet “There are physical objects” is nonsense [Unsinn]. Is it supposed to be an empirical proposition? — And is this an empirical proposition: “There seem to be physical objects”?

“A is a physical object” is a piece of instruction which we give only to someone who doesn't yet understand either what “A” means, or what “physical object” means. Thus it is an instruction about the use of words, and “physical object” is a logical concept. (Like colour, quantity,...). And that is why no such proposition as: “There are physical objects” can be formulated. Yet we encounter such unsuccessful shots at every turn.

Notice that Wittgenstein is here talking about the formal concepts – that is, the pseudo-concepts of the *Tractatus*.<sup>4</sup> Yet, there are very significant differences. First off, we can now say “a is a physical object”. Of course, like in the *Tractatus* that could not mean ascribing the

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<sup>4</sup> In the *Tractatus* he does not focus on physical objects, but on objects in general and it is a vexed issue what exactly the objects of the *Tractatus* were: if mid-size dry goods, basic particles of physics, or sense data. I think we should follow David Pears' “golden rule” and not try to answer the questions Wittgenstein did not ask in the *Tractatus*: objects, whatever their ontological nature might be, had to exist, according to him, in order for our language to have meaning and since it was “apparent” to him that language did have a meaning, that showed that objects, whatever their nature might be, existed. By the time of *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein had completely abandoned that view of language and the idea that objects necessarily existed, or indeed any preoccupation with a phenomenological language. Furthermore, the main opponent in *On Certainty* is G. E. Moore, who, being a common-sense philosopher, took the existence of physical objects for granted (while he was dubious about the correct analysis of statements such as “This is a pen” (where “pen” is taken to mean the kind of physical object we are all familiar with) throughout his career. For a discussion of the problem of the analysis of such statements, see Coliva (2010, chapter 1) and Coliva 2021).

property of being a physical object to a given entity. Nor could that sentence mean that a formal or pseudo-concept “physical object” – *O* –, is instantiated. Rather, it is a piece of instruction that we give to someone who does not yet understand the words “physical object”. But what kind of instruction are we thereby imparting? Well, of course, that we may use entities like *a* to ostensively define “physical object”, but that is not all. Consider ostensively defining “physical object” by using a pen. Notice that, once we have done so, we say things such as “The pen is in the drawer, I put it there yesterday”, or “Please bring me the pen that is that drawer” and take it to be correctly assertible even if, *ceteris paribus*, we are not seeing the pen. By contrast we don’t think it is correctly assertible, *ceteris paribus*, to say “Now that I’m not seeing it, I don’t know if the pen is still in the drawer”, or “The pen might have disappeared out of its own accord”. Based on that, to ostensively define “physical object” by means of a pen, and then going on licensing and forbidding certain inferences (and verification procedures) regarding pens imparts the instruction (however implicitly that might happen) that what we call “physical objects” can exist even if they are not currently perceived, and that they do not vanish out of their own accord, etc. We are thereby imparting *rules* about the use of those words in our language, to the effect that some inferences are licensed and other ones are forbidden.

Now, when it comes to “There are physical objects”, notice that the Fregean, semantic reading is still out of the question, just like the first-order, purely ontological reading. But contrary to “*a* is a physical object”, it seems that “There are physical objects” is not itself a piece of instruction we might give to anyone, according to Wittgenstein. At most, we could think of turning it into a metalinguistic statement about the kind of language we speak. That is, one in which we license certain inferences and prohibit other ones. But just as the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* did not allow for the distinction between language and metalanguage so the Wittgenstein of *On Certainty* bars it (see §4). Thus, the metalinguistic reading of “There are physical objects” is not available to Wittgenstein. Nor is it clear that “There are physical objects” is to be (re-)interpreted as a rule of grammar. Rules of grammar, being rules, are neither true nor false, for Wittgenstein, and for such a reason, they are senseless – *sinnlos* – not nonsense – *unsinnig*. They point neither towards the true nor towards the false, but they say something about how the use of the language and which combinations of signs are allowed and which ones are forbidden. Yet, clearly, in OC 35, Wittgenstein says that “There are physical objects is nonsense [Unsinn]”. In short, it seems that “There are physical objects”, in OC, is an entirely meaningless combination of signs, just as “ $2 + 2 = 4$  at 3 o’clock” is.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, since, for Wittgenstein, grammatical rules are established by use (and not *vice versa*), while there is a use for “*a* is a physical object”, albeit a heuristic one, there seems to be none for “There are physical objects”.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Williams (2005). Notice, however, that even if one held that it is a rule of grammar, for Wittgenstein, it would not follow that that it makes sense to assert “There are physical objects”. For that would be a typical case of conflation of a rule, which is not itself an assertion and which licenses or forbids certain combinations of signs, with an assertion that purports to state how things are. Since not much ultimately hangs on that for the purposes of this paper, I will leave it at that.



Yet, Wittgenstein realizes that even though, for all he has been saying, “There are physical objects” cannot be formulated, in philosophy “we encounter such unsuccessful shots at every turn”, and wonders:

OC 37. But is it adequate to answer to the scepticism of the idealist, or the assurances of the realist, to say that “There are physical objects” is nonsense [Unsinn]? For them after all it is not nonsense [Unsinn]. It would, however, be an answer to say: this assertion, or its opposite is a misfiring attempt to express what can't be expressed like that. And that it does misfire can be shown; but that isn't the end of the matter. We need to realize that what presents itself to us as the first expression of a difficulty, or of its solution, may as yet not be correctly expressed at all. Just as one who has a just censure of a picture to make will often at first offer the censure where it does not belong, and an *investigation* is needed in order to find the right point of attack for the critic.

So what are the realist and the idealist trying to express, however badly? *On Certainty* does not say and so it can only be surmised based on the rest of that work. My hunch is that for Wittgenstein they are trying to make important – albeit only *negative* – points. On the one hand, the idealist might be pointing to the fact that inferring that the pen is still in the drawer even if we are not seeing it is an ampliative inference that goes beyond our experience and that we have and can have no proof of what might license it – that is, that there are indeed physical objects. Nor can we – in a Moorean fashion – point to such entities, after taking them to be instances of the concept of physical object, and thereby take ourselves to have proved that there are indeed physical objects. As we saw, in an act of ostension we are not predicating of the samples that they are physical objects. Nor would an idealist be impressed with this procedure; for it would be consistent with their view that we can point to the object because we are currently perceiving it and to assume that it would continue to exist even when we are not perceiving it would be question begging.

Wittgenstein would object to none of that in OC. Still, he suggests that the realist is right to think, against the idealist, that it does not thereby follow that the existence of pens, tables and chairs, is uncertain, doubtful or, more generally, problematic; or that we should not license the inference that if *a* is a physical object, like a pen, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is still in the drawer even if we are not seeing it. Why? Because, according to Wittgenstein, this is the language we do in fact speak and the form of life we do in fact have. It is what comes natural to us both in terms of our “first”, biological nature, if we are to rely on those findings in developmental psychology that show that infants from very early on distinguish objects and are not surprised to see them reappear after brief occlusions behind other objects like screens; as well as in terms of our “second” nature. That is, what becomes natural for us to say and think as a result of an upbringing within a community that speaks that way and that takes it for granted that physical objects like pens, tables and chairs continue existing (*ceteris paribus*), even if nobody is perceiving them; that engages in scientific practices, like astronomy, that are predicated on the assumption that there are objects in the universe we will never perceive; or like paleontology,

where fossils are taken to be whatever remains of physical entities, like dinosaurs, that have existed long before any human being could have been there to perceive them. Notice that for Wittgenstein this is a matter of fact, not of choice. As he puts it, “it is not as if we *chose* the game” (OC 317).

In short, while in the *Tractatus* objects (physical or otherwise) had to exist for language to have meaning and fulfill its representational function and their existence was shown in a correct logical symbolism, in *On Certainty*, “physical object” is an “inference ticket” which allows us to make certain specific inferences while forbidding other ones, to which we cannot renounce given our language, our form of life and the kind of world-picture (*Weltbild*) that we have inherited from our community, and that we pass on to children through language, teaching, and education, and on the basis of which we act, make inquiries and, more generally, live (OC 93-95, 162, 167, 233, 262). It does not, however, have any substantive ontological import: even thinking of there being (or not being) a world of physical objects presupposes use of that category and that is why both metaphysical realism and idealism are nonsensical.

## Carnap

From what we have seen so far, in *On Certainty* we get the idea that “physical object” is an “inference ticket”, that licenses certain inferences while it forbids other ones with no substantive ontological import. Moreover, we find the idea that “There are physical objects” is nonsense. Yet, “physical object” is an inference ticket we cannot renounce as is kept fixed by our form of life – with its first- and second-nature components – and by an inherited picture of the world.

It is then with Carnap that the “inference-ticket” idea is radicalized into the “metalinguistic” reading – as is called nowadays, with added elements of conventionality and arbitrariness, as well as of pragmatism, that are absent in Wittgenstein.

In 1950, Carnap published “Empiricism, semantics and ontology”. In that paper, he introduces the idea of frameworks and of internal and external questions. He writes:

If someone wishes to speak in his language about a new kind of entities, he has to introduce a system of new ways of speaking, subject to new rules; we shall call this procedure the construction of a *framework* for the new entities in question. And now we must distinguish two kinds of questions of existence: first, questions of the existence of certain entities of the new kind *within the framework*; we call them *internal questions*; and second, questions concerning the existence or reality *of the framework itself*, called *external questions*. Internal questions and possible answers to them are formulated with the help of the new forms of expressions. The answers may be found either by purely logical methods or by empirical methods, depending upon whether the

framework is a logical or a factual one. An external question is of a problematic character which is in need of closer examination. (Carnap 1950, 21-22)

“Are there books in this room?” would be an example of the former kind of question, which we ascertain through observation or sometimes testimony; whereas “Are there physical objects?” is an example of the latter one. While internal questions are unproblematic, external ones have “a problematic character”. Why so? As he writes:

*The world of things.* Let us consider as an example the simplest framework dealt with in the everyday language: the spatio-temporally ordered system of observable things and events. Once we have accepted this thing-language and thereby the framework of things, we can raise and answer internal questions, e. g., “Is there a white piece of paper on my desk?” [...] The concept of reality occurring in these internal questions is an empirical, scientific, non-metaphysical concept. To recognize something as a real thing or event means to succeed in incorporating it into the framework of things at a particular space-time position so that it fits together with the other things recognized as real, according to the rules of the framework. From these questions we must distinguish the external question of the reality of the thing world itself. In contrast to the former questions, this question is raised neither by the man in the street nor by scientists, but only by philosophers. Realists give an affirmative answer, subjective idealists a negative one, and the controversy goes on for centuries without ever being solved. And it cannot be solved because it is framed in a wrong way. (Carnap 1950, 22)

Like Wittgenstein, Carnap thinks that the question “Are there physical objects?” is “framed in the wrong way”. Yet, contrary to Wittgenstein, he does not say it is nonsensical. For Carnap finds a way of *re-interpreting* it whereby it *does* make sense and can thus be used to make a positive point, rather than merely negative ones, as we saw with Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* (§3). As he writes:

To be real in the scientific sense means to be an element of the framework; hence this concept cannot be meaningfully applied to the framework itself. *Those who raise the question of the reality of the thing world itself have perhaps in mind not a theoretical question as their formulation seems to suggest, but rather a practical question, a matter of a practical decision concerning the structure of our language.* We have to make the choice whether or not to accept and use the forms of expression for the framework in question. (Carnap 1950, 22-23, my italics)

Carnap’s intuition consists in interpreting “Are there physical objects?” as a practical (or a pragmatic) question about which language we want to speak. Furthermore, he thinks that this is indeed a matter of choice. Of course, he is aware that in the case of talk of physical objects, we don’t have the impression of having chosen it, or of being at liberty to replace it. Yet, this is an effect of habit. As he writes: “in the case of this particular example, there is usually no deliberate choice because we all have accepted the thing language early in our lives as a matter

of course” (Carnap 1950,23.). Still he thinks it remains a matter of practical decision whether we want to speak the thing-language in the following sense: “we are free to choose *to continue using* the thing language or not; in the latter case we could restrict ourselves to a language of sense-data and other “phenomenal” entities, or construct an alternative to the customary thing language ... or, finally, we could refrain from speaking” (Carnap 1950,23; my italics). So while we are “native speakers” of the thing-language, we may choose to replace it with an alternative one, or indeed with silence, should we so wish.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, for Carnap, there is no proper belief or assumption regarding the existence of physical objects. All it is accepted is a way of speaking, such that certain inferences are licensed while other ones are forbidden. As he writes (Carnap 1950, 31):

If someone decides to accept the thing language, there is no objection against saying that he has accepted the world of thing. But this must not be interpreted as if it meant his acceptance of a belief in the reality of the thing world; there is no such belief or assertion or assumption, because it is not a theoretical question. To accept the thing world, means nothing more than to accept a certain form of language, in other words, to accept rules for forming statements and for testing, accepting, or rejecting them.

Finally, the pragmatist element in Carnap’s thought becomes extremely evident in his discussion of the reasons for choosing this kind of language over alternate ones:

The decision of accepting the thing language, although itself not of a cognitive nature, will nevertheless usually be influenced by theoretical knowledge, just like any other deliberate decision concerning the acceptance of linguistic or other rules. The purposes for which the language is intended to be used, for instance, the purpose of communicating factual knowledge, will determine which factors are relevant for the decision. *The efficiency, fruitfulness, and simplicity of the use of the thing language may be among the decisive factors.* (Carnap 1950, 31; my italics)

Hence, our choice to keep (or possibly to revise) the thing-language will depend on considering whether that language is efficient, fruitful and simple given our purposes – that is, communicating with our fellow humans about mid-size dry goods in our surroundings, or engaging in the myriad activities, scientific or otherwise, in which we adopt that language and which presuppose the existence of physical objects even when unperceived.

Of course, none of these pragmatic elements is present in Wittgenstein. We don’t speak the thing-language, in his view, because it is more efficient, fruitful, and simpler than some other language we could concoct. Nor is there a choice between different languages to be made, not even in principle. Yet, this disanalogy, as relevant as it might be, is just superficial. The deeper

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<sup>6</sup> It is not clear if Carnap also allows for choosing different and *incompatible* languages. If he does not, these different languages would be merely notational variations on our thing-language, just like measuring lengths in centimeters is merely a notational variant of measuring them in inches.

one has to do with the fact that to evaluate whether our language has or lacks these virtues we would need to have another language from which to consider and speak about it. Yet, for Wittgenstein, since the *Tractatus* onwards, we cannot transcend the boundaries of our language to speak about it. Clearly, we may have different *langues* – as we may say in French –, like English, Italian, German, or even different formal systems, like classical logic, intuitionistic logic, or paraconsistent logic. And obviously there is no problem in evaluating each of them from a (somewhat) external perspective: I can say, for instance, that in German nominalizations are easier than in Italian, and I can say that in English, as I just did (or I could have said that much in German or Italian). But language – *langage*, in French – is neither this nor that particular *langue*; nor is it a formal system. At the time of *On Certainty*, language is rather the totality of the “language games”, characteristic of a particular and complicated form of life – the human one –, with an entrenched picture of the world deposited within it. If so, we cannot step outside it and evaluate it. We would have no language in which we might conduct the evaluation; and if we created it, it would thereby be incorporated within it, like any “specialized” or “natural” or “artificial” language. To really imagine an alternate language, we will have to imagine an altogether different form of life, for Wittgenstein, with altogether different practices, with a different image of the world deposited within it. And, in that case, if at all imaginable, it would turn out to be either a subset of our language or a notational variant of it; or else, it would remain literally unimaginable.

## Conclusions

Surprisingly, in the same paper Carnap credits Wittgenstein with an influence on the members of the Vienna Circle’s non-cognitive take, he shares, on the question “Are there physical objects?”, as is apparent from this “historical remark” (Carnap 1950, 32-33, my italics):

A brief historical remark may here be inserted. The non-cognitive character of the questions which we have called here external questions was recognized and emphasized already by the Vienna Circle under the leadership of Moritz Schlick, the group from which the movement of logical empiricism originated. *Influenced by ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Circle rejected both the thesis of the reality of the external world and the thesis of its irreality as pseudo statements; the same was the case for both the thesis of the reality of universals (abstract entities, in our present terminology) and the nominalistic thesis that they are not real and that their alleged names are not names of anything but merely flatus vocis. (It is obvious that the apparent negation of a pseudo-statement must also be a pseudo statement.) It is therefore not correct to classify the members of the Vienna Circle as nominalists, as is sometimes done.*

If what we have said in §1 is correct, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* did of course think that “Are there physical objects?” is nonsense, but certainly did not even remotely suggest the idea that that could be interpreted as a practical question. Indeed, while, for the reasons we saw, he

thought it impossible to state “There are objects”, in a correct logical symbolism, he thought that the very existence of objects was necessary and indeed transcendently proved by the very fact that we have a language that manages to represent. Furthermore, he thought that their existence would be shown, in a correct logical language, by there being individual constants and variables. If, moreover, what we have said in §§3-4 is correct, Wittgenstein never abandoned the view that “There are (physical) objects” is nonsense but held it for altogether different reasons in *On Certainty*. While he found a use for “*a* is a physical object” – as a piece of linguistic instruction – he found none for “There are physical objects”. The idea of “physical object” as an inference ticket would resonate with some of Carnap’s ideas in 1950, as we saw. Yet, Carnap could not have been inspired by Wittgenstein about that, as Wittgenstein was writing in that vein around the same time and his ideas were published much later (1969). The metalinguistic, pragmatist and conventionalist reading of “There are physical objects”, in contrast, did not occur to Wittgenstein, nor could have it occurred to him, since he remained opposed to the distinction between language and metalanguage throughout his life.

Of course, being inspired does not mean to find one’s ideas already present in someone else’s writings. Yet it remains a mystery, at least to *this* reader, how a strongly ontologically committed work like the *Tractatus*, and a thoroughly anti-metalinguistic attitude like Wittgenstein’s throughout his entire career, could have inspired a metalinguistic reading of “There are physical objects”. Whether one sides with or against it, that reading was very much Carnap’s own *invention*.<sup>7</sup>

## References

Carnap, Rudolf. 1950. “Empiricism, semantics and ontology.” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 4, no. 11: 20-40.

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<sup>7</sup> The connection with the ideas of other members of the Vienna Circle, like Schlick and Waismann, is much more evident, but cannot be the object of the present paper.