



Section 5. Philosophy

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THE CARNAP-HEIDEGGER DEBATE: SEEKING PRECISION, NOT "AN ATTITUDE TOWARDS LIFE"

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Abstract

This research paper explores the debate between Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Carnap starting from their meeting in Davos in 1929, epitomizing two contradictory views on the essence of philosophy, which lie at the heart of the split between Continental and Analytic philosophy. This seemingly inconsequential intellectual disputation ultimately served as a significant turning point in history, with influence extending far beyond the philosophical world into the way people think in many areas of life, including changes in fields such as literature, education, and finance.

Keywords: *philosophy, Heidegger, Carnap, analytic, continental*

Introduction

German philosophers Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Carnap met each other on March 30th, 1929, in Davos, Switzerland. At the time, Heidegger was 39, an accomplished and experienced philosopher, having published one of his most famous works, *Being and Time*, two years prior; Carnap, one and a half year his junior, had also published a few books and played a key role in the Vienna Circle, an informal, yet highly consequential intellectual society. During Heidegger and Carnap's short stroll in Davos, they agreed that understanding existence, or developing the most fundamental of metaphysics, was urgent. However, their approaches were

radically different – Carnap and his Vienna Circle were known for being the first leading supporters of the view that logical analysis is the only way to achieve certainty in the problem of existence, whereas Heidegger sought to examine the fundamental truths of being alive by exploring the awe of being human. Their divergence regarding the metaphysical question of existence, therefore, was in essence a disagreement about methodologies and what it means to do philosophy.

The debate between Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Carnap starting from their meeting in Davos in 1929 epitomizes two contradictory views on the essence of philosophy, which lie at the heart of the split between

Continental and Analytic philosophy. Yet, what might seem an inconsequential intellectual disputation ultimately served as a significant turning point in history, with influence extending far beyond the philosophical world into the way people think in many areas of life, leading to changes in fields as disparate as literature, education, and finance.

Heidegger and the Human Experience

A little less than one hundred years ago, “care” was defined by German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Almost instantly after publication, his definition almost became infamous for its dense and bewildering phrasing: “ahead-of-itself-already-being-in a world as Being-alongside entities encountered within-the-world” (Heidegger, 1927). Such seemingly impossible-to-read-or-write prose was produced by Martin Heidegger, the author of *Being and Time*, in which he showed what “being as such” means without the necessary involvement of logic. With his pride and spiritual profundity, Heidegger considered the human experience of existence as the real object of metaphysics and the foundation of the entire philosophical world. One student, after attending his lecture on his understanding of metaphysics, said, “I felt as though for a moment I had gazed at the foundations of the world” (Dresser, 2020). This was precisely what Heidegger was looking for by giving lectures – to instill astonishment by enquiring into the most basic.

Heidegger and Carnap on Metaphysics

“Event philosophy” played an integral part in Heidegger’s metaphysics. Event philosophy is the style of thinking that through contemplating about an event usually too trivial to be noticed, one can experience a moment of metaphysical wonder, thereby evoking a sense of astonishment and reaching an epiphany of the fundamental properties of being alive (Heidegger, 1999). While arguing for his event philosophy, Heidegger never actually “argued”; he valued the importance of disclosing the truth. Heidegger’s discussion on “nothing” embodies his views on metaphysics: What does it really mean when we say something like “these are the only things we investigate, and nothing more”? What is this “nothing”? Is “nothing”

something? It seems implausible to answer, because when one tries to explain by saying “nothing is ...”, it would be logically contradictory in itself as “nothing” is not anything by definition. Heidegger tried to answer these questions by observing humans’ daily conversations, the “events.” People use the word “nothing” because they already have a definition of it without having to theorize with logic. Understanding the pre-theoretical, Heidegger wrote, was the ultimate goal of philosophy; this path cannot be hindered by scientific logic, which is not sufficient for all metaphysical truths. “If science is right,” Heidegger said, “then one thing stands firm: science wishes to know nothing of Nothing” (Heidegger, 1929). According to Heidegger, a philosopher ought not to hold the same view as scientists – that is, “the thoughtless endorsement of the theoretical attitude” – since “nothing” represents something in human lives, and the experiences of humans are precisely the subject of philosophical discussions (Dresser, 2020).

Carnap, on the contrary, pointed out that Heidegger’s writings were filled with what he called “pseudostatements” – statements that are semantically meaningless. In fact, he considered most metaphysical works products of pseudostatements. Carnap was not alone in thinking this – David Hume, a Scottish philosopher who lived two centuries earlier, thought that all metaphysical works end up becoming “pseudostatements.” However, Hume did not see a problem in this; Carnap did. Carnap claimed that some metaphysical problems only appeared to be problems because of the lack of logic in the philosophers’ writings; once their abuse of language is cleaned up by logic, many dilemmas in philosophical history would be solved. Carnap and his Vienna Circle published *Principle of Verification*, a first attempt to draw a borderline between different types of pseudostatements and thus avoiding them. He did not deny, however, the existence or necessity of “illogical” writings; he admits that the longing for the astonishment at existence has always been a common theme in the lives of humankind. Non-philosophers, such as the Czech author Vaclav Havel, wrote, “I seemed to rise above the coordinates of my momentary existence in the world into a kind of state

outside time in which all the beautiful things I had ever seen and experienced existed in a total ‘co-present’” while observing the leaves from the window in prison (Vaclav, 1986). Even Russell, another devout believer of logical analysis, found such an astonishment inspirational: “There is, first, the belief in the insight as against discursive Analytic knowledge: the belief in a way of wisdom, sudden, penetrating, coercive, which is contrasted by the slow and fallible study of outward appearance by a science relying wholly upon the senses ... Mysticism is to be commended as an attitude towards life” (Russell, 1914). Carnap did find such transcendental experiences harmful or improper; his point, in actuality, is that philosophy should not pretend to be poetry, visual art, or anything else that expresses the attitudes toward human experiences. Carnap wanted philosophy to be a realm of certainty and pure logical analysis.

There existed a few perceivable problems in both Heidegger’s Continental Philosophy and Carnap’s Analytic Philosophy. If philosophy only lives for the awe-inspiring moments chased by Continental Philosophers, then can every claim not be justifiable? Can we trust philosophy to bring us to the truth? What is the meaning or value of philosophy if there are no logical regulations to protect us from nonsense? Analytic philosophy is problematic in its own ways. Analytic Philosophy seems to keep picking up on the logical flaws and theorizing about concepts, with constant refinements and no final success guaranteed. In *Tractatus*, Austrian Analytic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein “complained” that the value of solving all of the major problems in Analytic Philosophy is to eventually find out that not much new was accomplished after working tirelessly (Wittgenstein, 1921). Could this logically rigorous Analytic Philosophy ever shed light on the truly important questions about human existence?

Carnap and Heidegger’s Personal Views

Carnap and Heidegger’s disagreements on political matters and other aspects of life were not decisive factors in their philosophical debates. Admittedly, there were potential reasons for them to have a debate about politics – Heidegger devoted a considerable part

of his life to Nazism and showed his support for the Nazis openly, as opposed to Carnap who declared himself a believer of Socialism. Additionally, Heidegger was known as being uninteresting, self-important, and obstinate. Be that as it may, Carnap already started criticizing Heidegger’s views in 1932, when he famously referred to the latter as “musician without musical ability” (Carnap, 1932); Heidegger only converted to Nazism in 1933. Besides, regarding Heidegger’s personal characteristics, Carnap, as shown by his own diary, actually held a quite different view than most people – he considered him very “attractive” (Dresser, 2020). For these reasons, it was very unlikely that the debate was caused by anything other than their different views on metaphysics (the question of existence) and the methodology of philosophy. Aware of this, it is comprehensible why this debate is so crucial to the development of philosophy on a larger scale – without the involvement of personal conflicts, two philosophers can already represent a split (most splits in the history of philosophy, such as Rationalism vs. Empiricism and Schopenhauer vs. Hegel, are either the process of two groups of philosophers of similar importance to the split thinking differently or disputations between two specific views that only last shortly), the result of which we are still experiencing today.

Legacy: Analytic Philosophy and Effective Altruism

Analytic philosophy has won the disputation in most English-speaking countries, including the US. Continental philosophy, on the other hand, is generally resigned to literature scholars these days.

Before the “parting of the ways”, many philosophers were novelists or artists at the same time. Albert Camus, a French playwright, novelist, and journalist, for example, made remarkable contributions to philosophical ethics through his books such as *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger* although he never considered himself a professional philosopher. Simone de Beauvoir, also French, is known for her quote in her book *The Second Sex* which writes, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” For this reason, she is often remembered by the public, or the

non-philosophers, as a feminist activist, but less is known about her career as a preeminent philosopher. Indeed, influenced by Sartre, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, she played a crucial role in maintaining “the belief in absolute freedom of choice and the consequent responsibility” (Mussett). In the present-day world, few novelists are philosophers. This is primarily because of the difference in nature between Continental and Analytic philosophy: as explained in the earlier section, Continental Philosophers and artists share a similar interest of expressing their attitudes toward experiences, whereas Analytic philosophers are more “serious” and logical. The latter is closer to science and mathematics.

Another impact the split had had on the field of philosophy has more to do with the value of Analytic Philosophy, instead of its logical nature. In the past, philosophy was more accessible to the non-philosophers. In Sartre’s paper “Existentialism is a Humanism,” he wrote, “I have lately been told of a lady who, whenever she lets slip a vulgar expression in a moment of nervousness, excuses herself by exclaiming, ‘I believe I am becoming an existentialist.’ ... it is strange to see how much we scandalise and horrify them” (Sartre, 1946). Although Sartre was indicating that Existentialism was being misunderstood by the public here, it at least shows that philosophical ideas were widely known among the common people. Heidegger’s books, dense as they may be, were still very popular among the better-educated. By comparison, the Analytic philosophers in the English-speaking countries are more dedicated to pursuing rigor and precision. They value professionalism and are relatively passive in writing philosophy in a manner understandable by the less philosophically trained; consequently, philosophical ideas tend to get filtered down through less academic resources and affect people when they are unaware.

The Case of Sam Bankman-Fried

Beyond the philosophical world, countless are impacted by or relate closely to the single dominance of Analytic Philosophy that resulted from this pivotal debate. In November 2023, taking 8 billion dollars from his customers’ funds and using them for personal investment purposes, MIT-graduate

entrepreneur Sam Bankman-Fried (SBF) claimed that he was only going to “do more good” with the money, to a greater number of people. Despite being convicted of seven crimes including conspiracy and fraud, Sam Bankman-Fried seemed to have not seen anything wrong with what he did. “Good is good however it comes,” he said, “my goal is just to figure out how I can have the most impact on the world whatever that means” (Castillo, 2021). This reflects his firm and even radical belief in “Effective Altruism,” a view that aims to create an impact as great as possible in benefiting the broader world, the way of which can be determined by logical reasoning.

Bankman-Fried argued that he didn’t “take” the money, but instead did financial transactions to benefit more people and therefore should be legally innocent. According to him, he was just taking actions to realize the visions of Effective Altruism, the idea of which he was first introduced to in William McAskill’s philosophy lecture in MIT. McAskill himself became an Effective Altruist after reading Australian philosopher Peter Singer’s paper “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.” In this paper, Singer wrote, “if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, do it ... I mean without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself” (Singer, 1972); Nevertheless, when applying this principle to the real world, it requires a very high level of morality and considerations to judge if something meets the standard of “comparable moral importance.” In Bankman-Fried’s case, he did not make the proper judgments, at least by today’s legal standards. This was not completely contingent, however; neither was it solely SBF’s personal problem. The problem occurs partly when Singer urges philosophers to take actions while his main focus is actually to explain why the wealthy are morally obligated to give money. Failing to fill in the gap between theorizing and knowing how to take actions, Singer’s paper is a typical example of the problem modern Analytic philosophers face when attempting to apply their theories to the outside world. With a little bit of

a contingency, perhaps, a follower of Effective Altruism who took this theory distortedly (Bankman-Fried) was convicted of a fraud crime involving eight billion dollars.

Although Sam Bankman-Fried and Martin Heidegger have drastically different values and goals, they are connected by the Continental-Analytic divide and the cause-effect chain involved in it. Without the Carnap-Heidegger debate, there would have been less of an emphasis on logical precision and theorization and more of a tendency to express the nature of being; as a result, there would not have been a chance of cryptocurrency being utilized to realize the goal of Effective Altruism when philosophy is not about creating benefit at all, nor would Bankman-Fried, led astray by the gap from theo-

rization to actions, have committed the fraud crime. The case of Bankman-Fried epitomizes how the influence of this divide has expanded into many seemingly unrelated fields including finance.

Conclusion

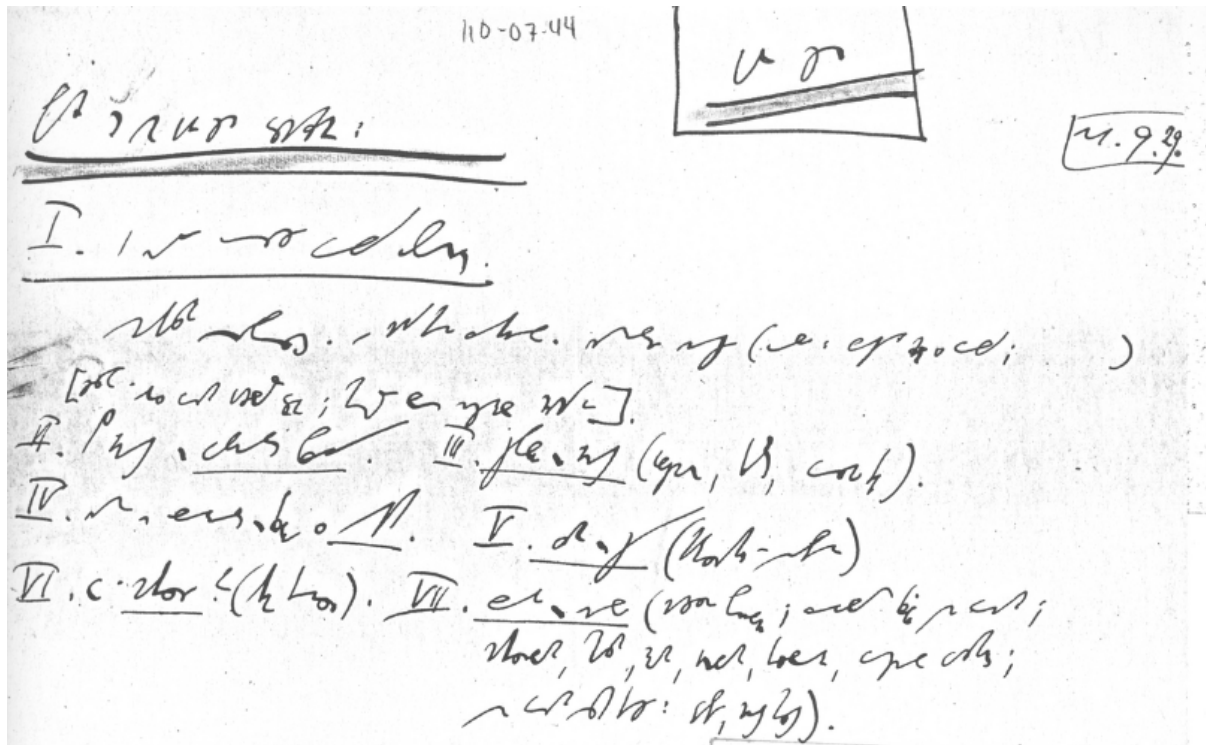
An intellectual discussion on metaphysics whose destiny may have seemed forever hidden in the ivory tower has not only changed the value and purpose of modern philosophy, but also shaped our pursuit for rigor and precision and caused the chasm between the theory and the reality of society. By investigating such a special turning point in history, we discover the unexpected weavings of history and consider similar possibilities for the future.

Appendix A



In 1929, Ernst Cassirer (left) and Martin Heidegger (right) in Davos, Switzerland. Cassirer, Heidegger, and Carnap were the representatives of the three major approaches to Kant's philosophy in the twentieth century. Like Carnap, Cassirer also emphasized logic and science (Bilkent Philosophy, 2023).

Appendix B



Carnap's handwriting in 1929, taking notes on philosophers and scientists and their books for topics including "the new scientific world view (die neue wissenschaftliche Weltanschauung)" and "meaning of life (Sinn des Lebens)" (University of Konstanz).

Appendix C



In 2021, Sam Bankman-Fried was the second youngest billionaire according to Forbes (Bertrand, 2021).

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