INTERNATIONAL AND EXTERNAL QUESTIONS

Summary: Quine’s negative characterization of naturalism as the rejection of first philosophy invites the question of why exactly he thinks that first philosophy ought to be dismissed. Having reconstructed Quine’s argument against traditional epistemology in chapter 2, in this chapter I turn to Quine’s position vis-à-vis traditional metaphysics. Prima facie, Quine’s attitude toward metaphysics seems to differ from his attitude toward epistemology. For it is often claimed that Quine saves rather than dismisses metaphysics in arguing that ontological questions are “on a par with questions of natural science” (CVO, 1951a, 211). Where Carnap rejects metaphysical existence claims as meaningless, Quine is taken to restore their intelligibility by dismantling the former’s internal-external distinction. In the present chapter, I argue that this popular view is incorrect and that Quine, like Carnap, rejects traditional metaphysics. I argue that a historically more accurate perspective on the Carnap-Quine debate should distinguish between two distinct internal-external distinctions, only one of which is dismissed by Quine. In support of my interpretation, I show that Quine, from the earliest stages of his career, defends a view on metaphysics that is in many respects similar to Carnap’s and that the later Quine, in theorizing about the nature of both truth and reference, appeals to an internal-external distinction himself; a distinction moreover which shows that Quine’s arguments against traditional epistemology and metaphysics are cut from the same cloth.¹

¹ This chapter is an adapted version of the paper “Electrons, Elephants, and Empty Sets: Quine on Metaphysics and the Internal-External Distinction” (un-
Most metaphysicists agree that we should not rest content with our ordinary ascriptions of existence. Although in everyday life and in the sciences we may freely talk about elephants, electrons and empty sets, as philosophers we must investigate whether these objects really exist. Carnap, as is well known, has argued that such philosophical questions of existence are devoid of cognitive content. In his seminal “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” (1950), he argues that the metaphysicist’s questions are meaningless when they are conceived as theoretical questions admitting of a truth-valued answer. For Carnap argues, existence claims only make sense internal to a linguistic framework and we cannot ask whether an entity is ‘real’ in an (external) framework-independent way; ‘reality’ itself is a concept internal to a framework and as such “cannot be meaningfully applied to the [framework] itself” (ibid., 207). Instead, Carnap proposes to reinterpret metaphysical questions as practical questions about which linguistic framework the philosopher ought to adopt.

Quine believes that Carnap’s strict distinction between internal and external questions cannot be maintained. According to Quine, no question is either purely theoretical or purely practical; just like one’s decision to adapt a hypothesis in the light of new experiential data, one’s decision to adopt a certain framework will be informed by both theoretical knowledge and pragmatic criteria. The question whether or not to accept a certain entity as ‘real’ therefore is a meaningful question that can be answered by ordinary scientific means. In Quine’s naturalistic perspective on metaphysics, in other words, ontological questions are “on a par with questions of natural science” (CVO, 1951a, 211)
This little stick-figure summary of the Carnap-Quine debate suggests that Quine breathed new life into the metaphysical project that was deemed meaningless by Carnap and his fellow positivists. For where Carnap rejects philosophical existence claims as meaningless, Quine seems to restore their intelligibility by dismantling the former’s internal-external distinction. Indeed, this seems to be Quine’s own perspective on his debate with Carnap:

I think the positivists were mistaken when they despaired of existence […] and accordingly tried to draw up boundaries that would exclude such sentences as meaningless. *Existence statements in this philosophical vein do admit of evidence,* in the sense that we can have reasons, and essentially scientific reasons, for including numbers or classes or the like in the range of values of our variables. (EQ, 1968b, 97, my emphasis)

When quantifying over abstract objects or elementary particles is indispensable for the formulation of our best scientific theories, Quine argues, we are to countenance these objects and particles as real. As a result, Carnap and his positivistic comrades were simply “wrong if and when they concluded that the world is not really composed of atoms or whatever” (SN, 1992b, 405).

The picture that Quine revived the legitimacy of philosophical existence claims is often defended in the literature. In his introduction to the history of analytic philosophy, for example, Avrum Stroll argues that Quine blurs “the boundary between speculative metaphysics and science, thus giving a kind of credibility to metaphysics that Carnap would never have countenanced” (2000, 209). Similarly, Nicholas Joll claims that “Quine saves metaphysics from positivism” (2010) and Stephen Yablo argues that Quine’s view, unlike Carnap’s, provides us with a
way to attach “believable truth values to philosophical existence claims” (1998, 259).²

Yet, there is something puzzling about this picture. For it does not sit well with the fact that Quine, on many occasions, does seem to argue against the intelligibility of metaphysical existence claims. Quine has argued, for example, that he is “[n]o champion of traditional metaphysics” (CVO, 1951a, 204) and that the question “what reality is really like […] is self-stultifying” (SN, 1992b, 405). On a few occasions, Quine even argues that the “[p]ositivists were right in branding such metaphysics as meaningless” (ibid.). Even more surprising from the above sketched perspective is that Quine often appeals to the very same argument Carnap gives in “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology”, viz. the argument that the notion of ‘reality’ cannot be given any sense outside the system of which it is an element. We simply “cannot significantly question the reality of the external world”, Quine argues, “for to do so is simply to dissociate the [term] ‘reality’ […] from the very applications which originally did most to invest [this term] with whatever intelligibility [it] may have for us” (SLS, 1954b, 229).

In sum, Quine’s ideas about the intelligibility of metaphysical existence claims seem inconsistent. On the one hand, Quine dissolves the Carnapian distinction between internal and external questions, thereby dismantling the latter’s “special strictures against philosophical questions of existence” (EQ, 1968b, 96). On,

² See also Murphey (2012, 14). Price (2007, 380) aptly summarizes the above perspective on the Carnap-Quine debate by claiming that Quine is traditionally regarded as “the savior of a more robust metaphysics” by driving “a stake through the heart of “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology”, […] thus [dispatching] the last incarnation of the Viennese menace”. See also Eklund (2013, 229), who suggests that the above perspective dominates contemporary debates in metaontology as well.

³ See also, for example, (SSS, 1986l, 337): “if some scientifically undigested terms of metaphysics […] were admitted into science along with all their pertinent doctrine […] [i]t would be an abandonment of the scientists’ quest for economy and of the empiricists’ standard of meaningfulness”.


the other hand, Quine speaks about traditional metaphysics as being sinful (SN, 1992b, 406) and incoherent (TTPT, 1981d, 21). Since both perspectives are present in Quine’s early and later writings, the hypothesis that he changed his mind provides no plausible solution to the puzzle.

In the present chapter, I argue that Quine’s ideas about metaphysics are consistent by showing how he can both reject Carnap’s internal-external distinction and dismiss traditional metaphysics. After introducing Carnap’s position in “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” as well as Quine’s arguments against Carnap’s position (section 3.2), I argue that the standard interpretation of Quine’s views is incorrect because it rests on an equivocation between two different internal-external distinctions, one adopted and one dismissed by Quine (section 3.3). To substantiate this conclusion, I shall defend two claims. I show, first, that the early Quine is largely in agreement with Carnap when it comes to the status of metaphysical existence claims (section 3.4) and, second, that the later Quine, in his disquotational theories of reference (section 3.5) and truth (section 3.6), makes use of something like an internal-external distinction himself. Finally, I argue that this latter internal-external distinction is strongly related to the distinction which underlies Quine’s rejection of traditional epistemology (chapter 2), and that as a result, Quine’s arguments against traditional epistemology and metaphysics are more closely aligned than is often suggested (section 3.7).

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4 In my dismissal of the received view in section 3.3 and part of section 3.4, I build on the work of Alspector-Kelly (2001) and Price (2007, 2009), who were the first to suggest that the standard conception of the Carnap-Quine debate is mistaken. Although my interpretation of Quine’s views and arguments differs somewhat from the readings offered by Price and Alspector-Kelly, my conclusions in these sections are to a large extent compatible with theirs.
3.2 INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL EXISTENCE CLAIMS

Carnap’s problems with philosophical existence claims are deep-rooted. Already in his pre-Vienna period, he considered metaphysical disputes to be “sterile and useless”. In his “Intellectual Autobiography”, he describes the origin of these anti-metaphysical sentiments as follows:

> When I compared [metaphysical] argumentation with investigations and discussion in empirical science or in the logical analysis of language, I was often struck by the vagueness of the concepts used and by the inconclusive nature of the arguments. I was depressed by disputes in which the opponents talked at cross purposes; there seemed hardly any chance of mutual understanding, let alone of agreement, because there was not even a common criterion for deciding the controversy. (Carnap, 1963a, 44)

Influenced by the early Wittgenstein, Carnap developed the view that metaphysical theses are without cognitive content, arguing that they are pseudo-sentences because they “cannot in principle be supported by an experience” (1928b, 328). Where metaphysicists will usually agree about whether or not a certain entity is real in an everyday empirical sense, they rely on a “nonempirical (metaphysical) concept of reality” when they are involved in a philosophical dispute (ibid., 340).

Although Carnap has never felt any qualms about these early arguments against metaphysics,5 he later felt the need to return to the subject and explain his position once more. Carnap wrote “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” in response to critical empiricists who objected that he referred to abstract objects without having shown that they “actually exist” and ar-

5 See Carnap’s (1950, 215) and (1963b, 870).
gued that these empiricists “[neglect] the fundamental distinction” between ordinary and philosophical ascriptions of existence (1963a, 65-6).

It is in “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” that Carnap differentiates between internal and external questions in order to capture this distinction. Ordinary questions of existence with respect to a certain entity $x$, Carnap argues, should be viewed as questions internal to a linguistic framework containing the rules for our use of the concept ‘$x$’. Philosophical questions of existence, on the other hand, are to be viewed as external questions about the reality of $x$s prior to the adoption of the framework. These latter questions are the questions that Carnap’s fellow empiricists had in mind when they wondered whether Carnap is justified in using a framework that quantifies over abstract objects without having shown that they actually exist. According to Carnap, however, such external questions are meaningless when they are considered to be theoretical and admitting of a truth-valued answer. For, and here his argument is similar to the one developed in his early work, the very concept of ‘reality’ appealed to in metaphysical questions of existence cannot be given a meaningful interpretation:

The concept of reality occurring in […] 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 system of things […] according to the rules of the framework. From these questions we must distinguish the external question of the reality of the thing […] itself. In contrast to the former questions, this question is raised neither

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6 See Alspector-Kelly (2001, 2002) for a more detailed discussion of Carnap’s motives in “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology”. Since the present chapter deals with Quine’s ideas about metaphysics, I will mostly limit myself to a discussion of Quine’s interpretation of Carnap, acknowledging that this reading might not do justice to the historical Carnap.
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. To be real in the scientific sense means to be an element of the system; hence this concept cannot be meaningfully applied to the system itself. (Carnap, 1950, 207)

Concepts, according to Carnap, only make sense in as far as the rules for their use are specified within a suitable linguistic framework. As a result, the concept of ‘reality’ itself will only make sense within a linguistic framework and hence philosophers fail “in giving to the external question and to the possible answers any cognitive content” (Carnap, 1950, 209).

Because external questions fail to be meaningful when interpreted as theoretical, Carnap proposes that we should view them as practical questions, as matters “of practical decision concerning the structure of our language” (ibid., 207). Rather than asking whether or not a certain entity *x* really exists, we should ask whether or not it is useful to adopt one or another *x*-related framework, a question that will be guided by pragmatic criteria. According to Carnap,

> the introduction of [a] framework is legitimate in any case. Whether or not this introduction is advisable for certain purposes is a practical question of language engineering, to be decided on the basis of convenience, fruitfulness, simplicity, and the like. (1963a, 66)

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7 Of course, Carnap’s argument with respect to the concept of ‘reality’ applies equally to philosophical notions that serve the same function. In their metaphysical inquiries, Carnap argues, philosophers might also talk about “subsistence” or the “ontological status” of an entity. These alternative philosophical notions, however, are also without cognitive content because philosophers have failed to explain their use “in terms of the common scientific language” (Carnap, 1950, 209).
As a result, although Carnap considers external questions to be devoid of cognitive content, such questions can still be given “a meaning by reinterpreting them or, more exactly, by replacing them with the practical questions concerning the choice of certain language forms” (1963b, 869). Carnap’s internal-external distinction, in short, becomes a distinction between the theoretical and the practical when external questions are reinterpreted as questions about whether or not to adopt a certain framework.

Quine rejects Carnap’s distinction between the internal and the external. In fact, he develops two arguments against the distinction: one in which he reduces it to the analytic-synthetic divide, and one in which he argues that both internal and external statements are partly theoretical and partly practical in nature. Quine’s first argument is largely negative. He argues

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8 Quine develops these arguments in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (1951b, 45-6), “On Carnap’s Views on Ontology” (1951a), and “Carnap and Logical Truth” (1954a, 132). In the second essay, Quine also provides a third argument against Carnap’s distinction by reducing it to a dichotomy between category and subclass questions. According to Quine, external questions are concerned with the existence of entities expressed by a category word (e.g. ‘Are there things?’ or ‘Are there numbers?’), whereas internal questions are concerned with the existence of subclasses of them (e.g. ‘Are there rabbits?’ or ‘Are there prime numbers between 10 and 20?’). He then argues that the latter distinction is trivial, because “there is no evident standard of what to count as a category” (EQ, 1968b, 92). As several scholars have noted, however, Quine’s argument here misses the mark because the distinction between internal and external questions of existence cannot be based on the category-subclass distinction; category as well as subclass questions can be asked in both an internal and an external vein. In later work, Quine is somewhat more careful in his reading of Carnap when he describes the latter’s ideas about category words (Allwörter) and the related category-subclass distinction as “an early doctrine of Carnap” (ibid., 91, my emphasis), explicitly referring only to the latter’s The Logical Syntax of Language (1934, §76), not to “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology”.

For a different interpretation of Quine’s third argument, see Price (2009, §§4-5), where Quine’s dismissal of the category-subclass distinction is read as an argument against Carnap’s idea that language can be divided into frameworks, not as an argument against the internal-external distinction. Given (1) Quine’s remark that the category-subclass distinction “underlies Carnap’s
that “a double standard for ontological questions and scientific hypotheses” requires “an absolute distinction between the analytic and the synthetic”, a distinction which he famously argues to be untenable (TDE, 1951b, 43-4). In Quine’s interpretation, the semantic rules of a linguistic framework are analytic because they are laid down by convention, whereas internal statements are either analytic or synthetic depending on the nature of the framework in question. As a result, if Carnap is correct that “statements commonly thought of as ontological are proper matters of contention only in the form of linguistic proposals”, then these philosophical existence claims can only be distinguished from internal statements by appealing to their analytic character (CVO, 1951a, 210). Quine, however, rejects the analytic-synthetic distinction because it lacks a clear behavioristic explication.

Quine’s second argument is more positive, and is based on his constructive “empiricism without the dogmas” (TDE, 1951b, §6). If, as Quine maintains, science is a unified structure whose statements face experience only in clusters such that no statement is in principle immune to revision, then all statements that are relevant to science, including Carnap’s linguistic proposals, will be guided by both theoretical and practical concerns. Just like the decision to adapt a hypothesis in the light of new expe-

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9 E.g. internal statements in the thing-language are synthetic, whereas internal statements in the number-language are analytic. See Carnap (1950, 208-9).

10 Internal statements can be analytic too of course. Quine, however, claims that he does not see why Carnap “should care about this” (ibid., 210). In any case, Carnap himself also seems to have appreciated the close relation between the internal-external distinction on the one hand, and the analytic-synthetic distinction on the other. See (1950, 215n5).
riential data, one’s decision to adopt a certain framework will be informed by theoretical as well as practical considerations:

Within natural science there is a continuum of gradations, from the statements which report observations to those which reflect basic features say of quantum theory [...] The view which I end up with [...] is that statements of ontology [...] form a continuation of this continuum, a continuation which is perhaps yet more remote from observation [...] The differences here are in my view differences only in degree and not in kind. Science is a unified structure, and in principle it is the structure as a whole, and not its component statements one by one, that experience confirms or shows to be imperfect. Carnap maintains that ontological questions [...] are questions not of fact but of choosing a convenient conceptual scheme or framework for science; and with this I agree only if the same be conceded for every scientific hypothesis.¹¹ (CVO, 1951a, 211)

Quine, in sum, dissolves Carnap’s internal-external distinction; first by showing that it relies on the untenable analytic-synthetic divide, and second by arguing that a more realistic model of theory change construes all revisions as guided by both theoretical and practical considerations. In arguing that the difference between scientific and ontological claims is only gradual, Quine therefore seems to blur the boundary between metaphysics and science, a boundary that Carnap had propagated in order to dismiss metaphysics as meaningless.

¹¹ See also (ME*, 1950b, 15): “we find ourselves saying, with Carnap: choose your ontology as proves convenient. But I think Carnap is wrong in supposing that our choice here is different in principle from, and freer than, our choice of a physical theory in the light of sense experience“.
3.3 TWO DISTINCTIONS

The question whether or not Quine’s arguments effectively undermine Carnap’s internal-external distinction has been a matter of some controversy.\textsuperscript{12} In what follows, however, I limit my discussion to a more specific, yet not entirely unrelated issue, viz. the question what type of internal-external distinction Quine aimed to undermine. I argue that we ought to differentiate between two types of internal-external distinctions and that Quine’s arguments apply to only one of them. In the sections to come, I reconstruct Quine’s position about the second distinction and argue that his views on this matter are remarkably similar to Carnap’s.

As we have seen in the previous section, Carnap differentiates three types of questions of existence depending on whether we are concerned with the metaphysicist’s theoretical perspective or with Carnap’s practical reinterpretation:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(I)] Internal questions about the reality of $x$s, asked after the adoption of an $x$-related framework.
  \item[(TE)] Theoretical external questions about the reality of $x$s, asked before the adoption of an $x$-related framework.
  \item[(PE)] Practical external questions about whether or not it is advisable to adopt an $x$-related framework.
\end{itemize}

From Carnap’s perspective these three types of questions are completely different: TE-questions are theoretical but without cognitive content, whereas PE-questions have exactly the opposite characteristics; they are meaningful questions of a practical

\textsuperscript{12} See Haack (1976, §3), Bird (1995), and Glock (2002, §5) for a critical evaluation of Quine’s arguments. Yablo (1998, §§5-7) and Gallois (1998, §2), on the other hand, yield a more positive verdict.
nature. I-questions, finally, are both theoretical and meaning-
ful.\textsuperscript{13}

Although it is generally recognized that Carnap distinguishes
between three types of questions, TE and PE-questions are of-
ten conflated under the general heading ‘external questions’ in
discussions about the Carnap-Quine debate. In itself, combin-
ing these two types of external questions is relatively innocent.
Yet some have failed to realize that Carnap’s threefold distinc-
tion implies that we cannot speak about ‘the internal-external
distinction’ in general. That is, they have ignored the fact that
“Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” contains two such distin-
tinctions, depending on what type of external question one is
talking about:

- \textbf{(I/TE)} A distinction between meaningful internal
  questions and theoretical external questions
  without cognitive content.
- \textbf{(I/PE)} A distinction between internal questions of a
  theoretical and external questions of a practical
  nature.

I/TE distinguishes between the meaningful and the meaning-
less, whereas I/PE differentiates between questions of a theo-
retical and questions of a practical nature.

Now, consider the question whether Quine was attacking
I/TE or I/PE. If one believes that Quine, in criticizing the inter-
nal-external distinction, aimed to revive the meaningfulness
of metaphysical existence claims, one clearly presupposes that
Quine was attacking I/TE.\textsuperscript{14} For if Quine had really aimed to

\textsuperscript{13} See also Eklund (2013, 237): “Carnap is actually drawing a \textit{tripartite} disti-
ction: between questions internal to a framework, questions about which
framework we should choose to employ, and the pseudo-questions—the sup-
posed theoretical external questions”.

\textsuperscript{14} See, for example Haack (1976, §3.1) and Bird (1995, §2), where Quine’s argu-
ments are evaluated in terms of their effectiveness in undermining I/TE.
breathe new life into the metaphysical project that was deemed meaningless by Carnap, he would have tried to show that the distinction between internal and theoretical external questions should not be viewed as a distinction between the meaningful and the meaningless. He would have tried to show, in other words, that Carnap’s TE-questions can be given “a clear cognitive interpretation” or can be given “a formulation [...] in terms of the common scientific language” (Carnap, 1950, 209).

Yet Quine does not seem to be concerned with anything like this at all. Rather, as we shall see, there are many reasons for thinking that he was concerned with undermining not I/TE but I/PE.15 Quine’s arguments against Carnap’s distinction provide the first reason. Recall that Quine first reduces the internal-external distinction to the analytic-synthetic divide and then argues that both scientific hypotheses and Carnap’s linguistic proposals are guided by theoretical as well as practical considerations. Now, if Quine were really aiming to undermine I/TE, then neither of these arguments would have made sense. Since Carnap rejects TE-questions as meaningless, they are neither analytic nor synthetic; an argument against the analytic-synthetic distinction therefore has no relevance if one aims to undermine I/TE. A similar conclusion can be drawn about Quine’s second argument. Quine’s claim that the distinction between the theoretical and the practical is a matter of degree, not kind, is not relevant had he targeted I/TE, since Carnap regards both I-questions and TE-questions as theoretical.16

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15 Eklund (2013) correctly suggests that Quine attacks I/PE, although he does not argue for this claim.
16 See also Price (2009, 326): “Quine’s claim is that there are no purely internal issues, in Carnap’s sense. No issue is ever entirely insulated from pragmatic concerns about the possible effects of revisions of the framework itself [...] Quine’s move certainly does not restore the non-pragmatic external perspective required by metaphysics. In effect, the traditional metaphysician wants to be able to say, ‘I agree it is useful to say this, but is it true?’ Carnap rules out this question, and Quine does not rule it back in”.

If, on the other hand, we interpret Quine as arguing against Carnap’s I/PE-distinction, his arguments begin to make sense. For the lack of a sharp distinction between the analytic and the synthetic seriously undermines Carnap’s attempt to draw a distinction between “the acceptance of a language structure and the acceptance of an assertion formulated in the language” (1950, 215). Similarly, if both scientific hypotheses and linguistic proposals are guided by theoretical as well as practical considerations, Carnap cannot uphold his claim that the two can be distinguished because I-questions are theoretical and PE-questions are practical. Quine, in this interpretation, both shows that an I/PE-distinction cannot be maintained and develops a positive theory in which the distinction between the theoretical and the practical is a matter of degree.

A second reason for thinking that Quine was concerned with undermining I/PE instead of I/TE is the way in which he describes Carnap’s external questions. In his critical papers on Carnap’s distinction, Quine consistently refers to those questions as ‘linguistic proposals’. In “Two Dogmas”, for instance, he argues that Carnap sees ontological questions as concerned with “choosing a convenient language form, a convenient conceptual scheme or framework for science” (TDE, 1951b, 45). Describing external questions in this way only makes sense if Quine has in mind Carnap’s PE-questions. TE-questions, after all, are certainly not linguistic proposals, they are theoretical questions concerning the reality of a certain class of entities.

Finally, my interpretation of Quine’s aims in rejecting the internal-external distinction is supported by the background of the debate between Carnap and Quine. I have already noted that Carnap wrote “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” in

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17 See also Quine’s (ML1, 1950c, 208), (CVO, 1951a, 210) and (CLT, 1954a, 132), where Carnapian external questions are described as a “linguistic convention devoid of ontological commitment”, as a “linguistic proposal” and as “a matter […] of linguistic decision”.
order to respond to critical fellow empiricists who had objected that he referred to abstract objects without having shown that they “actually exist”. Now, as it turns it out, Quine was one of those critics. In the late 1930s, Quine developed his criterion of ontological commitment, according to which we are committed to an entity “if and only if we regard the range of our variables as including such an entity” (LAOP, 1939a, 199). Carnap, who claimed to accept Quine’s criterion (1950, 214n3), however still maintained that his talk about abstract entities should be seen as “a practical decision like the choice of an instrument” (1947, §10). From Quine’s perspective, therefore, Carnap was dodging his ontological commitments. That is, although Carnap accepted his “standard for judging whether a given theory accepts given alleged entities” (CVO, 1951a, 205), he still did not acknowledge that he was committed to abstract objects because he viewed his “acceptance of such objects [as] a linguistic convention distinct somehow from serious views about reality (WO, 1960b, 275).

If we take this background into consideration, it becomes clear that when Quine attacked Carnap’s internal-external distinction in the early 1950s, he was not concerned with the late-

18 In his “Intellectual Autobiography”, Carnap lists Quine as one of the philosophers who rejected his way of speaking as “a ‘hypostatization’ of entities” (1963b, 65).
19 For a history of Quine’s criterion, see Decock (2004).
20 Quine’s discontent with Carnap’s position can be traced back at least to 1937, when he, in a lecture on nominalism, suggests that although Carnap succeeds in avoiding metaphysical questions by rejecting them as meaningless, he does not “provide for reduction of all statements to statements ultimately about tangible things, matters of fact”, and thereby fails to show how we can keep “our feet on the ground—avoiding empty theorizing” (N1*, 1937b). See Mancosu (2008, 28-9). See also Alspector-Kelly (2001, §3): “As Quine understands it, Carnap endorsed Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment [...] Nonetheless, Carnap did not take himself to be committed to abstract entities, and so did not take himself to be a Platonist, despite the fact that he quantified over abstract objects. Nor did he have any plan to show that such quantification can be avoided”.

ter’s claim that the traditional metaphysicist’s questions are devoid of cognitive content, i.e. with the claim that TE-questions are meaningless. Rather, his job was to argue that there is no proper distinction between the ontological commitments internal to a framework, and the linguistic conventions upon which our framework choices are based, i.e. the distinction between I-questions on the one hand and PE-questions on the other. For given Quine’s belief that Carnap dodged his ontological commitments by suggesting that one should regard his use of the framework of abstract objects as a mere linguistic convention, it was sufficient for Quine to argue that such an I/PE-distinction cannot be maintained. Indeed, when Quine first learned about the internal-external distinction in a 1949-letter from Carnap, he scribbled on the back of this letter: “When are rules really adopted? Ever? Then what application of your theory to what I am concerned with (language now)? […] Say frameworkhood is a matter of degree, & reconciliation ensues” (QCC, 1932-1970, 417). Whether or not this is consistent with Carnap’s intentions, therefore, Quine from the very beginning interpreted Carnap’s distinction as one between questions internal to a framework and questions regarding the choice of the framework itself.

In sum, Quine was not out to attack the I/TE-distinction, but was concerned with undermining Carnap’s I/PE-distinction. Quine did not aim to restore the legitimacy of metaphysics, but rather to criticize the Carnapian view that “statements commonly thought of as ontological are proper matters of contention only in the form of linguistic proposals” (CVO, 1951a, 210).21 I have argued that my interpretation is supported firstly by the nature of Quine’s arguments against the internal-external dis-

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21 Given this misunderstanding, it is not surprising that some scholars have concluded that “Quine’s criticisms leave Carnap’s central points untouched” (Bird, 1995, 41). For if Carnap’s “central point” was “the contrast between internal and external theoretical questions” (ibid., 59)—a claim that might be doubted given the background of the Carnap-Quine debate—Quine was simply not concerned with criticizing that distinction.
tinction, secondly by the way in which Quine describes Carnap’s external questions, and thirdly by the background of the Carnap-Quine debate.

3.4 QUINE ON METAPHYSICAL EXISTENCE CLAIMS

If I am right in claiming that Quine aims to undermine I/PE instead of I/TE in his critical papers on Carnap’s internal-external distinction, then a question that remains to be answered is what is Quine’s position on I/TE, i.e. on the distinction between ordinary and metaphysical existence claims. After all, the claim that Quine aimed to criticize Carnap’s I/PE-distinction does not imply anything about Quine’s views about the tenability of the I/TE-distinction. In the remainder of this chapter, I address this latter question. I argue that Quine’s position on I/TE is remarkably similar to Carnap’s and that Quine, in theorizing about the nature of both truth and reference, is committed to something like an I/TE-distinction himself.²²

Let me start by considering Quine’s views on TE-questions. From the very beginning of his philosophical career, Quine has been sceptical about metaphysical existence claims. In one of his early (1938) letters to Carnap, for example, he already characterizes “metaphysical expressions” as “devoid of denotation, truth, and falsehood” (QCC, 1932-1970, 247-8). This attitude did not change when he developed his criterion of ontological commitment. For Quine has always made clear that his criterion is concerned with questions of existence “from the point of view of a given language” (ibid., 388), or as he phrases it in “On What There Is”:

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²² I use the qualifications “similar” and “something like” here because, as we shall see, Quine does not, like Carnap, appeal to a strict criterion of significance in dismissing traditional metaphysics.
We look to bound variables in connection with ontology not in order to know what there is, but in order to know what a given remark or doctrine, ours or someone else’s, says there is. (OWTI, 1948, 15)

The traditional metaphysicist’s question of existence, in other words, falls outside the scope of his theory of ontological commitment. Questions about what a theory says there is, after all, are I-questions and not TE-questions. But where Carnap has always advertised his dismissal of TE-questions, Quine, in those early stages of his career, limited himself to brief remarks in his letters to Carnap and personal notes. Quine’s first published remarks concerning his views about TE-questions, as we shall see shortly, are from the 1950s.

Quine’s early reservations about rejecting metaphysical questions of existence are explained by the fact that he took himself to be explicating the elements of traditional metaphysics that are legitimate. Quine believed that his use of the concept “ontology” in his theory of ontological commitment had been “nuclear to its usage all along” (CVO, 1951a, 204). So although Quine, like Carnap, proposed to reinterpret the traditional metaphysicist’s questions, he did not, like Carnap, explicitly distance himself from the concepts used by those traditional metaphysicists: “meaningless words”, he claimed, “are precisely the words which I feel freest to specify meanings for” (ibid., 203).

This difference in approach is illustrated by the way in which Carnap and Quine dealt with the question of nominalism. Where Carnap rejected the issue of nominalism “as meaning-

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23 To be more precise, questions about what a theory says there is are partly I and partly PE, according to Quine, because he believes no statement to be purely theoretical or purely practical.

24 See also, for example, Quine’s letter to Carnap from May 1, 1947: “most metaphysical statements simply mean nothing to me” (QCC, 1932-1970, 410).

25 As we shall see in section 4.7, Quine in the early 1940s already held that there simply is no transcendental perspective for the metaphysician.
less because metaphysical”, Quine believed that “the problem of universals [...] can be given, an important meaning” (N2, 1946b, 9, my emphasis):

As a thesis in the philosophy of science, nominalism can be formulated thus: it is possible to set up a nominalistic language in which all of natural science can be expressed. The nominalist, so interpreted, claims that a language adequate to all scientific purposes can be framed in such a way that its variables admit only concrete objects, individuals, as values. (DE, 1939b, 708)

Carnap agreed that Quine’s reinterpretation of nominalism “is a meaningful problem” but doubted whether it is “advisable to transfer to this new problem in logic or semantics the label ‘nominalism’”, because the concept stems from the “old metaphysical problem” (1947, 43). Again, Carnap and Quine agreed about which types of questions are legitimate, but disagreed about whether or not those questions ought to phrased using the traditional metaphysicist’s concepts. Carnap believed it to be safer to introduce new concepts, whereas Quine wanted to emphasize that he was explicating those elements of the traditional metaphysicist’s question that are significant.²⁶

So although their positions seem to differ greatly at surface level, Carnap’s and Quine’s views on TE-questions were actually remarkably similar in the 1930s and 1940s. Both dismissed

²⁶See also, for example, Quine’s letter to Carnap from January 5, 1943, in which Quine talks about there being a “kernel of technical meaning in the old controversy about reality or irrelenity of universals” (QCC, 1932-1970, 295). Somewhat related, in 1947 Goodman and Quine published their joint paper “Steps toward a Constructive Nominalism” (1947). When Goodman proposed to dub the joint position he and Quine defended ‘particularism’, Quine argued in a letter (June 12, 1947) that they should stick with ‘nominalism’ because it is “a shame to disavow a noble tradition when we are squarely in line with it” (QGC*, 1935-1994). See also Mancosu (2008, 42).
traditional metaphysics but accepted Quine’s theory of ontological commitment as well as his reinterpretation of nominalism. They differed only on whether Quine’s theories were to be viewed as faithful explications of the traditional metaphysicist’s questions. Carnap, as we have seen, proposed to “replace” them with “practical questions concerning the choice of certain language forms” (1963a, 869), whereas Quine believed that there is no I/PE-distinction and hence proposed to replace them by questions about “the ontological commitments of a given doctrine or body of theory” (CVO, 1951a, 203). That is, Carnap and Quine agreed that TE-questions ought to be rejected but differed about whether to reinterpret those questions as either I-questions (like Quine)\(^{27}\) or PE-questions (like Carnap). Quine’s reticence to be explicit about his views on TE-questions has probably contributed to the misunderstanding that he was aiming to restore the intelligibility of metaphysical existence claims.

In later work, however, Quine did become more explicit about the difference between his views on ontology and the questions asked by traditional metaphysicists. He came to accept that Carnap was right in claiming that philosophers who treat questions of existence “as a serious philosophical problem […] do not have in mind the internal question” (1950, 209). That is, he explicitly recognized that there are two ways to understand existence claims: an ordinary and a philosophical one. The traditional metaphysicist, Quine argued, is not interested in questions of ontological commitment but rather wants to “inquire into the absolute correctness of a conceptual scheme” (IOH, 1950a, 79) wants to know “what reality is really like” (SN, 1992b, 405), or, in Kantian terms, “whether or in how far our science measures up to the Ding an Sich” (TTPT, 1981d, 22). In response to these questions, Quine now explicitly argues against traditional metaphysics. According to Quine, any inquiry into the absolute correctness of a conceptual scheme is “meaningless”

\(^{27}\) But see footnote 23.
(IOH, 1950a, 79) and any question about what reality is really like is “self-stultifying” (SN, 1992b, 405) and senseless (TTPT, 1981d, 22).

Yet, not only did Quine become more explicit about his position with respect to TE-questions, he also started to develop an argument against them. And just as his views on TE-questions are similar to Carnap’s, his argument against those questions is in Carnapian spirit as well. As we have seen, Carnap’s argument against TE-questions relies on the idea that the very concept of ‘reality’, which plays an important role in the metaphysicist’s question about whether a certain object really exists, cannot be meaningfully applied outside the framework of which it is an element. If we now replace Carnap’s talk about frameworks with Quine’s holistic picture of science as a “man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along

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28 Despite Quine’s use of the word “meaningless” in (IOH, 1950a, 79), there is ample evidence that he did not, like Carnap, subscribe to a strict, philosophically potent criterion of significance. See for example (POLT, 1970b, 7) and (FSS, 1995b, 48). I thank Peter Hylton for pressing this point. In fact, when we look at his personal notes, we see that Quine, as early as 1937, writes

Meaninglessness must be abandoned as meaningless—at least insofar as it might be used against metaphysics. Even supposing we would make sense ultimately of an operational criterion, this would rule out all the non-intuitionistic part of math[ematics] also. But we keep latter, because useful algorithmically for science. We discard metaphysics because useless for science. If part of met[aphysics] became useful for science, we might use it on same grounds as non-constructive math[ematics] (April 2, 1937). (PIT, 1937a, my transcription)

This idea that metaphysics is not meaningless but merely useless is something Quine held on to until the end of his career. See, for example, (NDL*, 1970d, 12-3, my transcription), where Quine argues that although metaphysical questions are “technically meaningful”, they are “pragmatically empty and need not arise”; and (HO*, 1987c, my transcription), where Quine quotes Laplace’s “Je n’ai pas besoin de cette hypothèse”, and argues that metaphysical statements are “just danglers, not contributing to joint implications of observation”.

the edges” (TDE, 1951b, 42), we get a very similar argument. In the early 1950s, Quine starts to argue that key philosophical concepts like ‘reality’ cannot be divorced from their everyday scientific applications. When the traditional metaphysicist asks us what reality is really like, Quine argues, she “dissociate[s] the [term] ‘reality’ […] from the very applications which originally did most to invest those terms with whatever intelligibility they may have for us” (SLS, 1954b, 229). According to Quine, “[t]here is no deeper sense of ‘reality’ than the sense in which it is the business of science itself, […] to seek the essence of reality” (QWVO, 1996b, 348). When the traditional metaphysicist asks us about the true nature of reality, in other words, she presupposes that we can separate the term ‘reality’ from its ordinary scientific use. According to Quine, however, this cannot be done; to give up on our ordinary interpretation of our key philosophical terms is to give up on the very intelligibility of these concepts.

Quine’s argument here depends on his holism, in this context the thesis that “the understanding of a term [cannot] be segregated from collateral information regarding the object” (CGC, 1962, 132). Holism implies that we cannot completely bracket our theory of the world when we utter a sentence containing a term that is also used in our formulation of the theory. For our very understanding of the sentence then depends on our understanding of the theory. Applied to the traditional metaphysicist’s question, this entails that we cannot ask about the true nature of reality while setting aside our scientific theory of the world:

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29 The argument first occurs in Quine’s “On Mental Entities”, where he speaks about “the ordinary usage of the word ‘real’” (OME, 1952a, 225). See also section 4.11.

30 Quine’s holism here is closely related to the wide-scoped holism we have already encountered in section 2.6, and which plays an important role in his rejection of traditional epistemology. In chapter 5, we will take a closer look at Quine’s holism.
The question about what there is, what objects there are, is for me a question to be answered within our total empirical, scientific system of the world, and not outside it […] We say in so many words, in the name of science, that there are sticks, stones, electrons, and classes […] The sentences thus uttered are part of a network that enjoys good logical relations with observation sentences that are sustained by sensory stimulation. We cannot ask better than that. (SSE, 1984c, 323)

According to Quine, then, the very idea of a TE-question is useless because it purports to make use of notions that are without clear content. The traditional metaphysicist presupposes that we can make sense of our key philosophical notions independently of the conceptual scheme we presuppose in scientific inquiry. For Quine, however, asking what reality is really like independently of our scientific system of the world is “like asking how long the Nile really is, apart from parochial matters of miles or meters” (SN, 1992b, 405). Just like our notion of ‘length’ makes little sense apart from related notions like ‘mile’ and ‘meter’ and some standards of measurement, our notion of ‘reality’ is useless when one purports to use it in a way that transcends our theory of the world and scientific standards. Hence, we are bound to rely on our scientific concepts in interpreting the traditional metaphysicist’s question: “all ascription of reality must come […] from within one’s theory of the world; it is incoherent otherwise” (TTPT, 1981d, 21).

3.5 RABBITS AND COMPLEMENT-RABBITS

Let me sum up what we have established thus far. I have argued that we ought to distinguish between two types of internal-external distinctions: I/PE and I/TE. Quine should not be viewed as aiming to attack I/TE, thereby breathing new life
into the metaphysical project that was deemed meaningless by Carnap, because he was solely concerned with undermining I/PE. In fact, Quine’s perspective on TE-questions, even in the early stages of his career, is remarkably similar to Carnap’s. Although Carnap and Quine disagree about how to reinterpret TE-questions, they both reject these questions and use similar arguments to show why they ought to be dismissed.

In the light of these conclusions, one would expect Quine to endorse Carnap’s I/TE-distinction. That is, one would expect him to recognize that Carnap was right in distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate questions of existence. Yet Quine never did; he never explicitly adopted the view that there is a sense in which Carnap’s internal-external distinction is legitimate.\(^{31}\) Quine’s reticence on this issue is probably related to his rejection of Carnap’s strict criterion of significance.\(^ {32}\)

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31 A possible exception is “Structure and Nature”, where Quine comes very close to admitting that Carnap’s internal-external distinction is to some extent correct. Having rejected the question what “reality is really like” as self-stultifying, Quine argues that “[t]he positivists were right in branding such metaphysics as meaningless”. Yet, this passage is immediately followed by the claim that the “positivists were wrong if and when they concluded that the world is not really composed of atoms or whatever” (SN, 1992b, 405). Note that Quine here first uses the term ‘really’ in an external sense and then switches to an internal reading in claiming that the world really is composed of atoms, as is indicated by his italicizing ‘really’ only in the first sentence. Unfortunately, however, Quine fails to recognize that Carnap would have agreed that the world really is composed of atoms when ‘really’ is interpreted in an internal sense.

32 See footnote 28. That is, even though Quine like Carnap dismisses traditional metaphysics, he speaks about “a blurring of the boundary” here as well (CPT, 1984a, 127-8). See also Quine’s (CA, 1987b, 144) and (QU, 1987d, 18-21, 27-9). Since Quine’s argument against TE-questions is holistic and because he only admits an empirical notion of meaning, as we shall see in chapter 5, there will also be intermediate cases in which a question has only very minimal empirical content. Quine proposes to “accept those questions as meaningful” in “interest of overall simplicity” because they “can be formulated in the same vocabulary and the same idioms that are also useful, in other combinations, elsewhere in science”. Despite this blurring of Carnap’s strict
Yet even though Quine does not explicitly admit it, he is committed to something like an I/TE-distinction. In this section and the next, I show that the later Quine implicitly makes use of some such distinction in his disquotational theories, in which he differentiates between ‘immanent’ and ‘transcendent’ notions of truth and reference. In short, I argue that in Quine’s later work, the Carnapian I/TE-distinction reappears as a distinction between the immanent and the transcendent, the distinction that also plays an important role in Quine’s dismissal of traditional epistemology.

Let me start with Quine’s views on reference. As is well known, Quine argues that there is no fact of the matter as to what our terms refer to. Reference is inscrutable, Quine argues, because for any given ontology $T$, one can mechanically construct an empirically equivalent ontology $T'$ by applying to $T$ a proxy function which maps all objects and predicates of $T$ onto, for example, their spatio-temporal complements; because both the objects and the predicates of $T$ are reinterpreted, a $T$-sentence like ‘the rabbit is sitting on the grass’ is guaranteed to be compatible with the same data as the $T'$-sentence ‘the complement-rabbit is complement-sitting on the complement-grass’ (GML, 1997b, 189).

Prima facie, Quine’s conclusions about reference seem to support the metaphysicist’s claim that there are two legitimate senses of existence. For although we are perfectly happy to talk about rabbits in everyday life, there is the further conclusion that rabbits need not really exist, because our talk about rabbits can easily be reconstrued as being about complement-rabbits, distinction, however, he is still not willing to grant metaphysics a similar intermediate position: “There are further reaches of discourse […] for which not even these claims to a scientific status can be made. One thinks here of bad metaphysics” (WWI, 1986m, 169). Presumably the reason is precisely that metaphysics cannot ‘be formulated in the same vocabulary’ as science, because the metaphysicist appeals to concepts that are divorced from their everyday scientific applications.
rabbit-stages, or rabbit-qualities, without doing any violence to our evidence:

there is [...] a curious difference between commonsense existence statements and philosophical ones that needs to be played up [...] For let us reflect that a theory might accommodate all rabbit data and yet admit as values of its variables no rabbits or other bodies but only qualities, times, and places. The adherents of that theory, or immaterialists, would have a sentence which, as a whole, had the same stimulus meaning as our sentence “There is a rabbit in the yard”; yet in the quantificational sense of the words they would have to deny that there is a rabbit in the yard or anywhere else. Here, then, prima facie, are two senses of existence of rabbits, a common sense and a philosophical sense. (EQ, 1968b, 98)

Although on the level of reference, there is no fact of the matter as to what our terms refer to, on the level of existence Quine “grants” the metaphysicist the claim “that there are for him two senses of existence” (ibid., 99). As a result, in his early work on ontological relativity, Quine seems not particularly bothered by the metaphysical claims invoked by his thesis.

In later work, however, Quine’s attitude changes. He argues that we cannot draw any metaphysical conclusion from his inscrutability thesis because the very idea of ontological relativity itself only makes sense from within our theory of the world. The metaphysicist’s claim cannot have the status of what Quine calls a transcendental conclusion, i.e. a conclusion somehow divorced from our everyday conceptual scheme. Rather, the metaphysicist’s conclusion will always be immanent because it depends on the very conceptual scheme that is presupposed in developing the thesis that reference is inscrutable:

The semantical considerations that seemed to undermine [my unswerving belief in external things] were concerned
not with assessing reality but with analyzing method and evidence. […] Those considerations showed that I could indeed turn my back on external things […] and ride the proxy functions to something strange and different without doing violence to any evidence. […] To recognize this is not to repudiate the ontology in terms of which the recognition took place.33 (TTPT, 1981d, 21)

So where the early Quine seems to accept the metaphysicist’s conclusion that there are two legitimate senses of existence, he later maintains that the metaphysicist cannot use the inscrutability of reference to justify his conclusion that rabbits are, in some philosophical sense, not real. For this very conclusion is still an immanent conclusion, presupposing the ontology in terms of which Quine developed his thesis. The metaphysicist, in other words, mistakenly treats Quine’s conclusion as a transcendental thesis, presupposing “that we can stand aloof and recognize all the alternative ontologies as true” (ibid.). She forgets that Quine’s thesis about the evidential relation between our neural input and our ontologies depends on the very conceptual scheme in which the relation is described. What appears to be a transcendental conclusion, in other words, is in fact a conclusion immanent to our epistemology.34 The very idea of a transcendental conclusion simply does not make much sense:

33 See also (RAB, 1984b, 295): “The truth of physical theory and the reality of microphysical particles, gross, bodies, numbers, sets, are not impugned by what I have said of proxy functions […] Those remarks had to do not with what there is and what is true about the world, but only with the evidence for what there is and what is true about the world. I was showing that scientific discourse radically unlike our own, structurally and ontologically, could claim equal evidence and that we are free to switch. Still we can treat of the world and its objects only within some scientific idiom”.

34 This is not to say, of course, that the inscrutability of reference becomes an epistemological thesis in the sense that we can never know whether someone is referring to rabbits or rabbit-complements. See Friedman (1975), Gibson (1986), (RRG, 1986), Peijnenburg and Hünneman (2001) and Glock (2003, 209–10). Quine’s point remains ontological: there is nothing to know.
Transcendental argument, or what purports to be first philosophy, tends generally to take on this status of immanent epistemology insofar as I succeed in making sense of it. What evaporates is the transcendental question of the reality of the external world. (ibid., 22)

Although Quine here uses a different terminology, one concerned with immanent and transcendental questions, his distinction here roughly matches Carnap’s conclusions on I/TE: only internal claims about our ontology are legitimate, any attempt to transcend our conceptual scheme and claim something about what really exists, any attempt ‘to stand aloof’, simply does not make much sense; we should not “revert to the sin of transcendental metaphysics” (SN, 1992b, 406). Quine, in sum, presupposes something like an I/TE-distinction in rejecting metaphysical interpretations of his inscrutability of reference.35

Quine’s commitment to something like I/TE via his immanence-transcendence distinction is even more explicit in his struggle with the concept of truth. Quine, as is well known, defends a deflationary theory of truth according to which our truth predicate is nothing more than “a device of disquotation” (PL, 1970c, 12). According to Quine, to claim that a sentence like ‘Snow is white’ is true, is simply to claim that snow is white: “To ascribe truth to the sentence is to ascribe whiteness to snow […] As-

35 George (2000, 14) has aptly termed Quine’s argument a linguacentristic one: “Quine has insisted that nonsense awaits if one fails to recognize that one must work from within, that one cannot leap outside language and all systems of belief to evaluate these as from a distance”. In George’s terminology, my interpretation of the Carnap-Quine debate entails that both Carnap and Quine, in arguing against the I/TE-distinction, depend on linguacentrism, or as we may might call it in Carnap’s case: ‘frameworkcentrism’.
cription of truth just cancels the quotation marks” (PT, 1990g, 80).

In many of his latest books and papers, Quine (FSS 1995b; NLOM 1995c; RE 1995d; WDWD 1999b) ponders the question whether his disquotational theory of truth is compatible with the way in which the concept of truth is used in science, and therefore, the question whether this theory of truth is acceptable from a naturalistic perspective. Quine’s musings in these papers are prompted by his observation that scientists seem to presuppose a transcendental notion of truth. That is, they seem to presuppose that truth lies beyond their theories and that their claims are true or false once and for all, regardless of whether their theories say they are true. Few, if any, scientists, for example, would accept that our planet started orbiting the Sun only a few hundred years ago when Copernicus’ hypothesis became generally accepted. Rather, they say that Copernicus discovered something about our solar system that has been true all along:

usage dictates that when in the course of scientific progress some former tenet comes to be superseded and denied, we do not say that it used to be true but became false. The usage is rather that we thought it was true but it never was. (WDWD, 1999b, 164)

In talking about falsified theories as having been false all along, scientists seem to presuppose a notion of truth that does not fulfil Quine’s disquotational scheme: even when we believed Earth to be the center of the universe, the statement ‘the Sun orbits Earth’ failed to be true. Like the metaphysicist, scientists presuppose that our best scientific theories might be really false, even if we believe them to be true. In talking about our scientific theories, in other words, we all seem to be unregenerate realists;
we all seem to believe that the question whether or not our theories are really true is a legitimate question.\textsuperscript{36}

At points, Quine seems convinced by the above argument, thereby coming close to acknowledging that transcendental questions, and hence TE-questions, are intelligible. In a response to Davidson (1995), for example, he concludes that truth “looms as a haven that we keep steering for and correcting to”, that it is “an ideal of pure reason, in Kant’s phrase”, and that although truth is immanent in most respects, it is transcendent in this one (RE, 1995d, 242). Similarly, in “Naturalism; Or, Living within One’s Means” Quine claims that “[w]e have scientists pursuing truth, not decreeing it” and that truth “stands forth as an ideal of pure reason [...] and transcendent indeed” (NLOM, 1995c, 472).\textsuperscript{37}

Despite appearances to the contrary, however, Quine does not believe the above ‘quirk of usage’ (RA, 1994d, 230) to be incompatible with his rejection of the transcendental. Quine’s commitment to the immanence-transcendence distinction is strong enough for him to seek another way out.\textsuperscript{38} The conclusion that a recently falsified hypothesis has been false all along, Quine argues, does not require a transcendental notion of truth. Accord-

\textsuperscript{36} A related phenomenon which Quine often discusses in his later papers, is the fact that whenever we contemplate hypotheses on which science will never take a stand, we still believe these hypotheses to be either true or false. We will probably never find out, for instance, whether there were an even number of grass blades in Boston Common at the inception of 1901. Still we believe that the hypothesis that there were an even number of grass leaves is either true or false. We presuppose that all assertoric sentences are truth-valued, regardless of whether we will ever be able to establish these truth-values, and hence, we seem to presuppose the idea of a transcendental truth. See (WDWD, 1999b, 165).

\textsuperscript{37} The tension here is also noted by Glock (2003, 132).

\textsuperscript{38} See, for example, his response to Burton Dreben: “the immanent is that which makes sense within naturalism, in mediis rebus, and the transcendent is not. Accordingly, truth better be immanent for me [...] too” (RA, 1994d, 230); and a letter to Bergström (February 24, 1995), where Quine playfully notes that “truth is eminently immanent” (QBC*, 1988-1996, my transcription).
ing to Quine, a disquotational theory of truth might explain this fact of usage adequately, as long as we are willing to accept that this usage reflects a theoretical choice, a choice guided by criteria internal to science. The unregenerate realism “integral to the semantics of the predicate ‘true’” (FSS, 1995b, 67), in other words, is just a reflection of a theoretical choice, a choice guided by the same standards, for example, as the choice to adopt a heliocentric world view. Just as the astronomer’s belief that Earth orbits the Sun is a consequence of her theory about the Solar System, her belief that Earth has always orbited the Sun is a consequence of her theory that the workings of the world around us do not depend on our beliefs about that world. The claim that our best scientific theories might be false is itself an immanent thesis, and hence does not conflict with Quine’s rejection of the transcendental. Our belief that the world might be different from what we believe it to be is deeply entrenched, but it is not a belief somehow divorced from our scientific conceptual scheme. The metaphysicist’s claim that our theories might not describe the world as it is in itself, on the other hand, is a transcendental claim and ought to be rejected.

40 In a similar way, Quine solves the ‘grass blades problem’ mentioned in footnote 36. According to Quine, we do not need to presuppose the idea of a transcendental truth in order to account for the fact that we believe all assertoric sentences to be truth-valued, even if we will never be able to establish the truth-value of some sentences. For we only need to presuppose the law of the excluded middle to derive from disquotationalism the thesis that all assertoric sentences are either true or false. That is, if we add the law of the excluded middle to a disquotationalist account of truth, it automatically follows that assertoric sentences are truth-valued, even if science will never take a stand on some of them:

let ‘p’ stand for a sentence to the effect that there were an even number of blades of grass in Boston Common at the inception of 1901. By excluded middle, p or not p; so, by disquotation, ‘p’ is true or ‘Not p’ is true. (WDWD, 1999b, 165)
As a result, Quine deals with transcendental notions of truth in the same way he dealt with the supposedly metaphysical consequences of his theory of reference. Just as the conclusion that reference is inscrutable, the thesis that the world might be different from what we believe it to be depends on our very theories about that world. In both cases, Quine argues that his theses are immanent to our conceptual scheme, and as such his argument against TE-questions remains valid: we cannot make sense of key philosophical concepts independently of our scientific system of the world. Just like our concept of reality, “[t]he concept of truth belongs to the conceptual apparatus of science on a par with the concepts of existence, matter, body, gravitation, number, neutrino, and chipmunk” (WDWD, 1999b, 165). In both cases, in other words, Quine remains committed to a distinction between immanent and transcendent notions of truth and reference.

3.7 CONCLUSION

Quine has struggled with the status of metaphysical existence claims throughout his career. After introducing his theory of ontological commitment in the late 1930s, he was reluctant to reject TE-questions because he took himself to be explicating the elements of traditional metaphysics that are legitimate. In later work, Quine wrestled with the supposedly metaphysical implications of his disquotational theories of truth and reference. In a sense, therefore, Quine’s rejection of transcendental perspectives in metaphysics is somewhat less stable than his rejection of the transcendental in epistemology.

The law of the excluded middle, in turn, is not adopted for metaphysical reasons. Rather, it is adopted “for the simplicity of theory it affords” (WPB, 1981e, 32). That is, the decision whether or not to adopt the law of the excluded middle is just a revisable theoretical decision as well, not a transcendental metaphysical one.
Still in the end, Quine has always maintained that TE-questions ought to be dismissed. Although Quine at first only explicitly rejected TE-questions in his notes and letters to Carnap, he later dismissed those questions in published writings as well and developed an argument that is thoroughly Carnapian in spirit. Also in his theories of truth and reference, Quine resolved his issues by explicitly rejecting metaphysical claims, this time phrasing the I/TE-distinction as one between immanent and transcendent claims. Quine’s arguments against traditional epistemology and metaphysics, in consequence, are cut from the same cloth. In both cases, Quine’s shows how traditional philosophers presuppose the viability of a transcendental perspective and in both cases he appeals to his holism to show that such a perspective cannot be had.

A further consequence of my analysis in the present chapter is that the inconsistency in Quine’s views on metaphysics, as described in the introduction, is merely apparent. Metaphysical existence claims ought to be rejected if they are interpreted as external or transcendental. They only make sense when they are reinterpreted as internal or immanent claims. Carnap and Quine are in perfect agreement on this issue. They only disagree (1) about whether transcendental claims ought to be rejected as meaningless and (2) about whether there is room for an alternative distinction, one between ordinary questions of existence and questions about which language to adopt in our inquiries. In sum, although Quine is sceptical about differentiating between questions of fact and questions of meaning, thereby dissolving Carnap’s I/PE-distinction, Quine’s perspective on the I/TE-distinction, and hence on the question whether there are really such things as elephants, electrons and empty sets, is closer to Carnap’s than has often been presupposed.